

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

Adventure XVII -- The Hound of the Baskervilles

The Hound of the Baskervilles – The World’s First Scooby Doo Mystery!!

OK, it may not be the first.

But you have to admit, **The Hound of The Baskervilles** sure sets the template for the cartoon series.

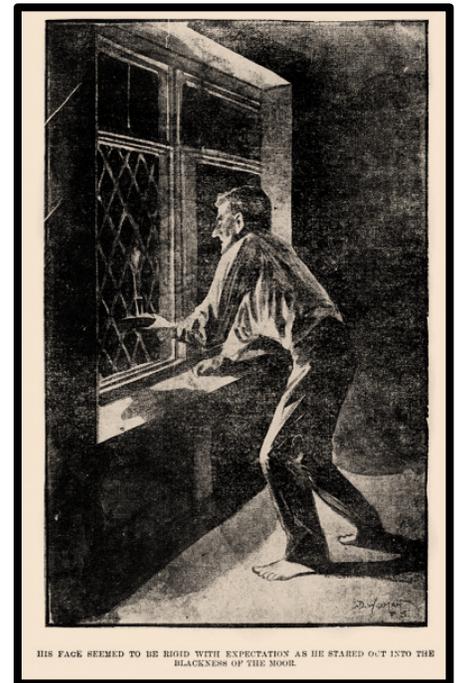
The disguised criminal using local legends and faux supernatural means to scare folks away and achieve his wicked financial goals? That's a **Scooby Doo** story!

Sherlock Holmes even sets a trap for the bad guy, using ~~Shaggy~~ **Sir Henry Baskerville** as bait to draw out the killer and catch him!!

Seriously, all that's missing is Watson ripping away a rubber mask from Stapleton while the killer mutters, "I would have gotten away with it, too, if it weren't for those meddling detectives!"

Trivial comparison, I know. Unlike a Scooby Doo episode, this case involved actual murders, and adultery, and heavens knows what other offenses. But on a very fundamental level, the greatest Holmes story and most of the Scooby Doo cartoon series share something very important: a rejection of fear and superstition, and a high regard for the powers of skepticism and reason.

Better writers than I have already discussed why Scooby Doo is a bastion of secular humanism, and why it is a cartoon about rejecting fear and embracing thinking as a way to solve problems. (Seriously, that's a wonderful piece by **Chris Sims**...go read it!) Well, the same applies to Sherlock Holmes. It's telling that one of his most famous quotes is about rejecting the impossible and finding the truth.



And this story employs that same template. Everyone on the moor--even the reputed man of science, **Dr. Mortimer**--believes to some extent in the legend of the **Baskervilles** and the supernatural origins of the **Hound**. Yet throughout, both Holmes and Watson, even when puzzled, reject the alleged demonic origins of the beast. There are facts, there is evidence, and *that* is how this case will be solved.

Indeed, Holmes states several times that if the Hound is supernatural, then there is absolutely nothing that they can do:

"Of course, if Dr. Mortimer's surmise should be correct, and we are dealing with forces outside the ordinary laws of Nature, there is an end of our investigation."

"I have hitherto confined my investigations to this world. In a modest way I have combated evil, but to take on the Father of Evil himself would, perhaps, be too ambitious a task."

And he chides the credulous Mortimer: *"I see that you have quite gone over to the supernaturalists."*

Even Watson rejects the supernatural: *"[I]f I have one quality upon earth it is common sense, and nothing will persuade me to believe in such a thing. To do so would be to descend to the level of these poor peasants, who are not content with a mere fiend dog but must needs describe him with ****-fire shooting from his mouth and eyes."*

Yet Holmes understands all too well how villains may use the trapping of the supernatural to increase their power over the gullible: *"An ordinary schemer would have been content to work with a savage hound. The use of artificial means to make the creature diabolical was a flash of genius."*

And such extraordinary claims for the mystical and magical merely means that they require extraordinary scrutiny: *"The more outré and grotesque an incident is the more carefully it deserves to be examined, and the very point which appears to complicate a case is, when duly considered and scientifically handled, the one which is most likely to elucidate."*

Don't get me wrong. I'm *not* against the use of the magical or supernatural or alien in fiction. I'm down with the **X-Files**, I was into **Buffy The Vampire Slayer** before most of you, I read **Doctor Strange**.

But Sherlock Holmes is not the right venue for such stories.

Sure, he's public domain now, so anyone can do what they want with the character. And I can understand the well-nigh irresistible temptation to get Sherlock, in pastiches, involved with "contemporary" supernatural characters: **Dracula**, **Frankenstein**, **Mr. Hyde**, **The Invisible Man**, etc.

Yet Sherlock Holmes is *not* **Kolchak The Night Stalker**. **Sir Arthur Conan Doyle** had Holmes declare this himself in no uncertain terms, several times, in his most famous story. Holmes' powers are logic and deduction. He succeeds with his mind, not stakes and holy water; he uses his reason, not supernatural paraphernalia. His greatest enemy is not some lord of the undead--he's a math teacher with really good

organizational abilities! And in this story, the entire district is terrorized, not by a beast from ****, but by a dog in a (pretty good) Halloween costume.

Yes, I appreciate the *irony* that later in his life, Sir Arthur embraced spiritualism and the like. But that never crept into his Holmes stories, as even with his conversion, Doyle realized the strength of his character still lied in rejecting the unknowable. Even while he was promoting alleged fairies and mediums, Sir Arthur still had his hero debunking vampires and the like.

We already have plenty of *other* heroes who can fight the things that go bump in the night. Sherlock is there to battle for justice and fight human predators. To have him truck in the spirit world turns his greatest weapon into his greatest weakness.

To ~~steal~~ paraphrase from **Chris Sims**, "*there should never, ever be even a trace of the supernatural*" in Sherlock Holmes. Except, of course, from villains trying to use fear of the supernatural to scare people away from the haunted amusement park, and having Holmes expose their humbug.

OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS

There is *no* question that **The Hound Of The Baskervilles is the greatest by far of the Holmes novels, and has a strong argument to being the best Holmes story, period.

One of the difficulties in the short story format for mysteries is that the length can make it difficult to give the reader a sufficient number of suspects to make the case truly mysterious. It can be tough to give enough space to "*red herrings*" to make them more than minor distractions. It can be tough to create a sense of place and time, and give enough attention to all of your lead characters.

Of course, structuring something the length of a novel has its own difficulties as we saw in **A Study In Scarlet** and **The Sign Of Four**.

But Doyle obviously learned his lessons from those earlier novels, and used the extra space in Hound to make the story *breathe*. We have a diverse cast, and a plethora of suspects. He gives us any number of theories and possibilities. Instead of mere red herrings, we have fully developed and fully investigated subplots. The fact that Doyle could devote *an entire chapter* to following three investigative "threads" that came to nothing is a testament to the virtue of having more space to tell the story.

And while there may be some minor inaccuracies in the flora and fauna presented, Sir Arthur manages to infuse the story with the essences of the alien moors, making the landscape itself a living character in the mystery.

The Hound Of The Baskervilles is one of those things that have become a cultural icon, and you begin to subtly dismiss it as over-popular and over-exposed. But then you reread it, and you're swept away into a Gothic mystery in a desolate land, and you remember that the book deserves every iota of its reputation. Dang good book, is what I'm saying.

** Hounds is the *most* filmed of the Holmes stories, with over 20 versions (of which I watched 5 five preparation for this post, including a Russian version!)

But no one *ever* gets the Hound quite right.

I'll grant you, it's not fair to judge black & white productions, let alone pre-CGI or other pre-special effects versions by modern standards.

But could any film depiction hope to ever compete with what Watson's description conjures in our minds?

*A hound it was, an enormous coal-black hound, but not such a hound as mortal eyes have ever seen. Fire burst from its open mouth, its eyes glowed with a smouldering glare, its muzzle and hackles and dewlap were outlined in flickering flame. Never in the delirious dream of a disordered brain could anything more savage, more appalling, more ****ish be conceived than that dark form and savage face which broke upon us out of the wall of fog.*

Keep trying, Hollywood (and Russia, and England). Someday, you'll get it right.

** It's no wonder Holmes declared he needed to catch Stapleton "*red-handed*." It must be difficult to prosecute a man for scaring another to death, even if you had the evidence. Even if you could establish the Hound belonged to Stapleton, and he knew of **Sir Charles** heart condition, it seems to me that it would be difficult to prove intent in a court of law--Stapleton could always argue that the Hound merely got loose, and it was an accident. Ditto for **Selden's** death.

Yet Holmes' plan *in no way* catches Stapleton red-handed!! They never see him *with* the Hound, let alone releasing it; they never see him at the scene of the attack on Sir Henry!! The whole ruse of putting Sir Henry at risk provides **zero** evidence against Stapleton!! Fog or no fog, there was no chance the ploy could lead to Stapleton's conviction. So, yes, Sherlock. this is "a reproach to [your] management of the case."

Fortunately, the spurned and tortured **Beryl** was able to fill in many of the holes for them; but Sherlock had no way of knowing that she would turn on her husband!

** On the other hand, this was hardly the "*refined*" murder plot Holmes declared it was.

Counting on your big dog to scare someone to death seems *dacey*, at best--certainly heart conditions are not so nicely predictable.

And yes, if Sir Charles hadn't dropped of fright, the Hound might well have killed him--but that almost certainly would have meant an *end* to Stapleton's schemes! An *actual physical dog* attacking the gentry--rumors of supernatural origin or not--would surely have lead the police the scour the area thoroughly, and using their own bloodhounds (and following the howling on the moor) they would likely have found the Hound! And certainly, they would have been on greater alert, making impossible for Stapleton to bring it back and forth between the **Grimpen Mire** and his outhouse when it came time to attack Sir Henry!!

******This is a wonderful solo outing for Watson, showing the good doctor in his *finest light*--not just an unquestioning toady for the great detective, but an equal partner.

The decision to have Holmes absent for the middle third of the book must have seemed surprising, but it really gives Watson a chance to shine as an investigator in his own right. He discovers the **Barrymores** providing succor to Selden. He wheedles information about **Laura Lyons** from Mortimer, and tricks **Frankland** into revealing what he knows about the stranger on the moor. Watson certainly does show he is "*developing the wisdom of the serpent*," and Holmes is not at all insincere when he declares, "*I must compliment you exceedingly upon the zeal and the intelligence which you have shown over an extraordinarily difficult case.*"

This is **my** Watson--a dedicated friend and follower, but no mindless acolyte. He's able to reason and improvise for himself, while remaining true to his charge. He won't let superstition and local insularity stand in his way. He will observe and probe and push and finagle to get information. He is indeed the man who has lived with Sherlock Holmes for years, and learned a great many lessons.

Of course, that *requires* any adaptation to have a strong Watson. Which is why the **1939 Basil Rathbone** version fails. I don't want to be a typical **Nigel Bruce**-basher, but even his staunchest defenders would have to concede that his Watson is a reactive, not a pro-active character, there more to make Sherlock look smart than for any merit of his own. So in this version, Watson does *not* discover Barrymore signaling the escaped convict--Baskerville does. Watson does not track down the mysterious other person on the moor--Holmes *leaves him a note, telling him when and where to meet!* Watson conducts *no* investigations of his own, and as a result the movie sags greatly in the middle; and when Holmes makes all of his revelations at the end, they seem to come out of thin air, because Watson has laid none of the groundwork for us.

******A number of commentators have gone to lengths to suggest that Dr. Mortimer is somehow a villain, and that he is involved somehow in Stapleton's crimes.

Well, that theory fails the very first test of "*does this make sense?*": Why would Mortimer engage Sherlock Holmes, then?!?

If Mortimer *doesn't* hire Holmes, it seems unlikely that he ever would have become involved--Sir Henry, having lived across the pond, doubtless knew little of the detective, and wouldn't have thought to hire him on his own.

So, if Mortimer were in on it, *why* would he invite certain doom by bringing Sherlock Holmes into the affair? What was there to gain? If you suggest, like some, that Mortimer was in on it, but intended to eliminate his erstwhile partner (Why? *How* would that benefit him?), that also makes no sense--Stapleton *already* knew Mortimer went to Holmes, having followed him. So it would be pretty clumsy betrayal, which had absolutely zero consequences in the story.

Others also argue that, as an "*expert*" on atavism, Mortimer *should* have recognized Stapleton's face on the painting of Hugo, and therefore he must have known, and was covering for the murderer! The fact that he is supposed to be an expert in *two* discredited sciences (don't forget the phrenology!) seems to rather *lessen* our opinion of Mortimer's intelligence and observational skills, rather than bolster it. And let us not forget Holmes' initial deductions, that Mortimer was *unambitious and absent-minded*, and "*little more than a senior student*." Mortimer's eagerness for a supernatural solution--which could only serve to drive Sir Henry away, and prevent Stapleton from killing him--is perhaps the last nail in the coffin of any scientific acumen he is supposed to possess.

No, Mortimer may be a bit of a *twit*, but I can't see him as a bad guy here.

**I'm not sure why Holmes' assumes that Stapleton perished in the mire.

After all, the manservant **Anthony** "*disappeared*" after the case, and was presumed to have fled the country. But Holmes had observed Anthony crossing the mire, presumably to care for the Hound. Is it not just as likely that *he* was the one who fled there with the boot, and not Stapleton? Certainly such a fiendishly clever villain as Stapleton would have no trouble setting up Anthony to die in his place, while he took some other escape route, and established yet another identity.

It's also likely that Stapleton had yet another path away from the tin mine established--he was nothing if not an *over-planner*.

Of course, Holmes' *not actually capturing the villain* had become quite a contemporary trend in Doyle's Holmes stories. **Moriarty** (and we later learn, his top lieutenant) escape Holmes' net, and his body was never found in **The Final Problem**; we never saw **Joseph Harrison** actually caught in **The Naval Treaty**; the villains escape in **The Greek Interpreter** (only to die by other hands abroad); the killers escape the country in **The Resident Patient**, and are presumed to have died in a shipwreck...it's little wonder that Holmes boasted that he let the police take credit in so many of his cases, as he was having *spectacularly little luck* at actually bringing the criminals to justice!

**Sadly, the female characters in Hound do not come across terribly well, as they all descend into illegality to protect or serve the men in their life.

Mrs. Barrymore is willing to risk her (and her husband's!) freedom, not to mention the lives of everyone nearby, to protect her brother, the escaped psychotic killer.

Laura Lyons is *besotted* with Stapleton, and despite her suspicions, is willing to cover up what she suspects to be murder in order to protect him--until she finds out that he is married.

As for Beryl Stapleton, yes, she was clearly abused. And we might never know the full extent of her participation in her husband's crimes: he stole "a considerable sum of public money;" there was some scandal at the school he ran; he is suspected by Holmes of committing "four considerable burglaries" in the area, including a murder; and of course, two murders and an attempted murder with the Hound.

Whatever her culpability, she *certainly* had a large amount of guilty knowledge. She was willing to twice change to an assumed identity, and to pose as the unmarried sister to her husband. There can be no rationale for that aside for something illegal.

And yes, she apparently refused to serve as a lure for Sir Charles, and had to be tied and beaten to keep her from protecting Sir Henry. But she did know of the Hound, and where he kept it, and helped him mark a safe pathway through the Mire. And she certainly *did* have opportunity to specifically warn Sir Henry--they found time for secret assignations so he could pitch woo to her, but she only gave him the vaguest generalities about danger. There's not a lot of redemption in her lack of action.

And given her declaration that "I could endure it all, ill-usage, solitude, a life of deception, everything, as long as I could still cling to the hope that I had his love," well, that's pretty much a statement that she would have continued to support Stapleton had he been faithful. Again, there is very little mitigation here.

So, not a great feminist novel.

This story is set *before* **The Final Problem, which is a nice little loophole allowing Doyle to tell more Holmes stories without actually bringing the character back to life.

It's not exactly a *new* conceit--Watson never presented his tales to us in chronological order before. But what is interesting is that there is *nothing* in the story--not a line from Watson, not an "*editor's note*," not an aside, nothing--that actually *says* this story comes before **Final Problem**. Instead, Doyle relies on his readers to do their own math based upon a vague reference--1884 was "*five years ago*"--and compare to the date given in Final Problem, 1891.

If Sir Arthur were adamant about keeping Sherlock dead, you would think that he would have made the point more *strongly* in the text that this was a pre-death story, and not a resurrection (and perhaps he did, in contemporary interviews and articles). But barely a year after this novel was finished being serialized in The Strand, Doyle did indeed bring the detective back.

Many have said that "*public pressure*" as a result of the novel "*forced*" Doyle to bring Holmes back to life. Yet resurrection wasn't automatically necessary--he could have kept setting Holmes stories in "the past." But he chose to bring the detective back to life, instead. I like to think that Hound Of The Baskervilles was Doyle, despite protests to the contrary, coming to grips with the fact that he actually missed his greatest creation, and it spurred him to go the full nine yards and bring him entirely back.

****Admit it: when you first read about the note from a woman signed "L.L.", you immediately thought about Lois Lane--right? Right?!?**

****It is interesting, from a socioeconomic standpoint, to read from the local newspaper's death notice for Sir Charles:**

In these days of nouveaux riches it is refreshing to find a case where the scion of an old county family which has fallen upon evil days is able to make his own fortune and to bring it back with him to restore the fallen grandeur of his line.

Of course, we're told by *many* different people how important it is that a Baskerville occupy the ancestral seat, and spend all his money supporting everyone else who lived there.

Relying on local wealthy nobles to trickle down their wealth certainly wasn't a sustainable economic model, as history would come to show. It is telling that Sir Charles had to make his money *elsewhere*, and then come back home. Depending on minor nobility's largesse as a means of economic sustenance would be impossible in a couple of generations...

****That said, there's a very real reason the region *needs* a wealthy baronet to support the local area. The Grimpen region seems like something out of **Diana Rigg-era Avengers**: everyone is independently wealthy but has no real job, and is focused on *balmy hobbies* instead of doing anything productive.**

Frankland is frittering away his fortune on frivolous lawsuits and amateur astronomy. Stapleton runs around the moors with a butterfly net, a "*naturalist*" with no visible means of support. Mortimer is the local physician, but he spends all his time digging up neolithic bones and obsessing on phrenology. Laura Lyons has a job as a typist, but only because she is forced into work by her husband abandoning her and her father cutting her off.

No wonder the region was in dire straights. Except for servants, *no one had a bloody job!*

**His time in America and Canada haven't made Sir Henry immune to some *ridiculous class snobbery*. While speculating on the possible guilt of the Barrymores, Baskerville notes, "At the same time, it's clear enough that so long as there are none of the family at the Hall these people have a mighty fine home and nothing to do."

Yes, because that's a motive the servant class often uses for murdering their masters and scaring away successors--they're lazy.

Total Scooby Doo reasoning there, Sir Henry.

**Holmes is right to declare that "*I am not sure that as a conscientious detective my first duty is not to arrest the whole household.*" Shielding Selden is questionable, not only legally but morally. Aside from subverting justice, they are endangering the entire countryside by letting a heinous murderer run loose. And Barrymore's excuse--Selden wouldn't hurt anyone, as he would only be acting against his own interests--expects rational decision making from a killer whose sanity was questioned by the courts.

The fact that Sir Henry and Watson's concerns are allayed by the fact that the Barrymores are smuggling him to South America is *hardly* ennobling.

Apparently, their concerns that he might hurt someone don't apply to anyone he might hurt in a Latin American country.

And Watson's ultimate argument? "*If he were safely out of the country it would relieve the tax-payer of a burden.*" Oh, John...

The **Granada** adaptation avoids this problem, by revealing Selden had had "surgery" (presumably some form of lobotomy) that left him "*as harmless as a child.*" So they weren't really passing on a problem to South America, right?!?

Obviously **Lestrade has come far in Holmes' estimation from the days of Study In Scarlet: "*He is the best of the professionals.*"

Why, then, did Holmes go on to work with some *other* Inspector in wrapping up the Moriarty gang, the greatest case of his career? Why not work with the best of the professionals, rather than some anonymous inspector never heard of before or since?

"At the same instant Lestrade gave a yell of terror and threw himself face downward upon the ground."

Oh, yes, *that*. You blew your audition there, Inspector.

**Watson:

"One of Sherlock Holmes's defects--if, indeed, one may call it a defect--was that he was exceedingly loath to communicate his full plans to any other person until the instant of their fulfilment.

Partly it came no doubt from his own masterful nature, which loved to dominate and surprise those who were around him."

Yes, Sherlock was a definite showman. I myself am a bit of a victim of the impulse.

But in this case, it almost got someone killed...

**Some have objected to the fact that Stapleton stole the boots from Baskerville's hotel, instead of waiting until he came to Dartmoor, and stealing them from his home.

It seems to me that it would be easier to bribe a hotel chambermaid or valet, or to sneak in and do it yourself, than it would be to sneak into a home staffed by loyal servants, try and find where the boots are, and take them then. (And given Stapleton's apparent svengali-like influence over women, he may not have had to even actually bribe anyone) Especially since Baskerville Hall was in a remote region where comings and goings were watched like a hawk by nosy people with telescopes, where everyone would recognize you, and local attention is heightened by the very rumors and superstitions that you yourself have started.

On that very matter, Holmes seems to have done a complete 180 on his opinion in **Copper Beeches, where he averred that the countryside was far more dangerous and frightening than the big city:

*The pressure of public opinion can do in the town what the law cannot accomplish. There is no lane so vile that the scream of a tortured child, or the thud of a drunkard's blow, does not beget sympathy and indignation among the neighbours, and then the whole machinery of justice is ever so close that a word of complaint can set it going, and there is but a step between the crime and the dock. But look at these lonely houses, each in its own fields, filled for the most part with poor ignorant folk who know little of the law. Think of the deeds of ****ish cruelty, the hidden wickedness which may go on, year in, year out, in such places, and none the wiser. Had this lady who appeals to us for help gone to live in Winchester, I should never have had a fear for her. It is the five miles of country which makes the danger.*

Now, rather than the relative safety of a tightly packed population, Holmes believes:

I have ample evidence that you are being dogged in London, and amid the millions of this great city it is difficult to discover who these people are or what their object can be. If their intentions are evil they might do you a mischief, and we should be powerless to prevent it.

Given the timing, you have to wonder if the **Jack The Ripper** killings changed his mind. Or, more likely, Doyle just forgot what he had written a decade earlier.

** Holmes declares that he has had "five hundred cases of capital importance." In Final Problem, he tells us that he has had over a thousand cases. Presumably, then, half of his cases were (relatively) more trivial. It would be curious to see where he draws the line...

** And speaking of apocryphal cases, we get a bundle here. Holmes himself mentions **Wilson's** "*little case*," where he saved the good name (and perhaps the life) of the district messenger manager. He also mentions "*that little affair of the Vatican cameos, and in my anxiety to oblige the Pope.*"

And Watson name drops two subsequent cases of the utmost importance: "*the atrocious conduct of Colonel Upwood in connection with the famous card scandal of the Nonpareil Club;*" and "*he had defended the unfortunate Mme. Montpensier from the charge of murder which hung over her in connection with the death of her step-daughter, Mlle. Carere, the young lady who, as it will be remembered, was found six months later alive and married in New York.*"

** **£740,000** was quite a fortune back in those days, roughly equivalent to \$85 million in modern funds. Perhaps Sir Henry *could* support all of Devon County, at least for awhile...

** The excuse that Holmes uses not to accompany Watson to Grimpen is "At the present instant one of the most revered names in England is *being besmirched by a blackmailer.*"

This was just a ruse, of course, but it is telling. We have seen, and will see again, that Holmes really, *really* dislikes blackmailers. He considers it believable that he would let a potential murder take place rather than delay stopping a blackmailer.

And, honestly, wouldn't "one of the most revered names in England" have besmirched their *own* name, and the blackmailer is merely revealing that? No, to Holmes, the blackmailer is a craven scoundrel (worse than a murderer, he will say later), and the person who committed the "*besmirchable*" act to be completely blameless.

Not that I'm defending blackmailers, and there probably wasn't an actual case here, as Holmes hopped the very next train to Dartmoor. Still, I think you need to realign your priorities a bit, Sherlock.

** The school Stapleton ran was said to have closed because of an "*epidemic.*" Yet Holmes tells us that "*the school which had begun well sank from disrepute into infamy,*" and the "Vandeleurs" "disappeared."

Disrepute and infamy seem an odd way to describe a school hit by an illness. And some have speculated that perhaps there was some sexual scandal, perhaps involving Stapleton and the students.
Ewww.

** "*There are seventy-five perfumes, which it is very necessary that a criminal expert should be able to distinguish from each other...*" Oh, Sherlock, what would you do in the 21st century? There are far more than that just on this list of celebrity-branded fragrances; and this list of "notable" perfumes since 1900 lists several hundred. And then there are the Axe body sprays...

****** Laura Lyons says she went to Sir Charles for help because "*I had learned that there was a prospect of my regaining my freedom if certain expenses could be met.*"

The obvious assumption was that she needed the funds to pay for divorce proceedings. But, given the wastrel nature of her husband, perhaps he was extorting her, demanding a large sum of money to agree to (or not contest) the divorce.

Or maybe she was hiring a hitman...

******The 1959 Hammer version of Hound is just plain nuts. I'm just saying.

Brian Keith Snell
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