

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 Return of Sherlock Holmes Adventure XXX -- The Adventure of the Dancing Men

The Adventure Of The Dancing Men--Who Is To Blame?

The Adventure of The Dancing Men is a case where **Sherlock Holmes** fails.

Yes, the villain is soon caught. But the client who hires him is killed, and his wife attempts suicide. Justice is obtained, but the tragedy likely could have—*should have*—been prevented.

But many commentators focus solely on Holmes' failures. That is understandable, because Sherlock is the hero, and heroes aren't supposed to screw up like that (or, **Sir Arthur Conan Doyle** isn't supposed to write the story in a way that Holmes fails unnecessarily).

Yet leaving the spotlight *exclusively* on Sherlock is perhaps, in this case, giving him too much of the responsibility for the outcome. In *Dancing Men*, there is enough blame to go around.

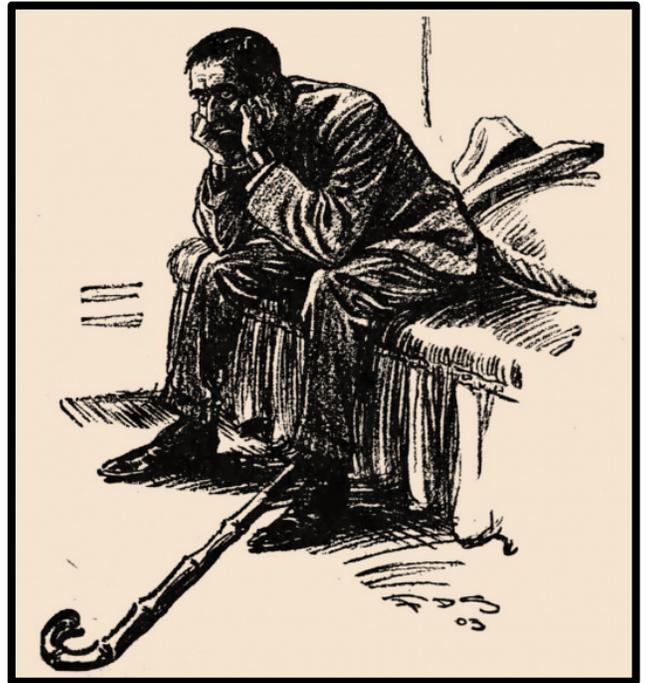
So let's examine how all of the characters in this story had opportunities to keep the "*brighter ending*" that **Watson** had hoped to give his readers.

SHERLOCK HOLMES: His client dies. That's enough to say that he has failed.

The real question is: what could he have done to prevent that dark outcome? *Plenty*, I think.

In fairness to the great detective, none of the coded messages that they had intercepted had been threatening, especially if we acknowledge that the knowledge of stalkers and their psychology in Victorian times was lacking, if non-existent. We do have to grade Holmes a bit on the curve for his era.

Still, the fact that the victim of the stalking was "*terrified*" and "*being killed by inches*" should have had him on a higher alert, even if the messages were, on their face, not overtly threatening. Holmes, of course, had to have deduced by this point that **Elsie** knew far more of these symbols, and the person leaving them,



than anyone else—and *her* mortal fear should have carried a greater weight with him, and convinced him that he needed to go to **Riding Thorpe** to get to the bottom of the matter before it escalated. We never learn the reason that Holmes couldn't go "*for a day or two*"—probably another case—but this obviously should have been a higher priority for him. What turned out to be a two-day delay proved fatal to **Hilton Cubitt**.

As to that two-day delay, there really was *no* reason to wait so long for the reply from **Hargreave**. Holmes had already deduced the suspect's name and location from the code, and by his own admission "*had every cause to think that there was some criminal secret in the matter.*" That should have been ample justification to proceed to Norfolk to take up matters there. The cable could certainly have been forwarded to him there once it arrived, and there was little information that it included that could have justified delaying action.

The *most egregious* error Holmes made was waiting until the next morning to go to Norfolk after he had deciphered the "*Prepare to meet thy God*" message. After reading the message, he asks Watson when the next train is, Watson says the last one has left...and Holmes just shrugs his shoulders and says "We'll go tomorrow."

What?!?

Obviously, Holmes could not have known that the tragedy would occur that very night. But this isn't a simple matter of hindsight. Sherlock, again by his own admission, realized that "*the rascal was proceeding from persuasion to threats,*" and that "*he might very rapidly put his words into action.*" Certainly that justified swift action, as did Holmes declaration that Cubitt was trapped in a "*singular and dangerous web.*" When Holmes says that it is "*even more essential that we should not lose an hour in letting Hilton Cubitt know how matters stand,*" there simply **no excuse** for waiting until the next morning.

What options did the detective have? Some have suggested that he and Watson take one of the mail trains, which ran later. Perhaps he could have hired a "*special,*" a direct express, as **Moriarty** did in **The Final Problem**. I'm not familiar enough with British railway policy of the time to know how feasible either of these plans could be.

But in the name of all that is holy, **WHY DIDN'T HOLMES SEND A TELEGRAM?!?!?** [Sorry, but that really needed emphasis.] Throughout the **Canon**, Sherlock would send a wire at the drop of a hat. But here, in a situation where "they should not lose an hour in letting Cubitt know," Holmes doesn't appear to even *consider* the possibility of sending the squire a telegram of warning. Holmes could also have telegraphed the Norfolk police—surely a cable from Sherlock Holmes would have roused attention, and gotten at least a cursory police presence at the house to deter **Slaney**. Or a message to **Lestrade** or other **Scotland Yard** official that a dangerous American villain was lurking in the area would likely have produced some response.

For that matter, what about *telephones*? Holmes never seemed fond of the device, but they certainly existed in 1898. And even if the Cubitt's didn't have a phone on their property, someone in Norfolk must have—the police, the city council, someone.

Even Cubitt's I plan "*to put half a dozen of my farm lads in the shrubbery, and when this fellow comes again to give him such a hiding*" would have been better than doing nothing until Holmes arrived, and might have prevented the tragedy. But Holmes *negligence* in finding ways to contact Cubitt that evening prevented even those measures from being taken.

I'm usually the last one to harangue the **Great Detective** about his failures. But when he shows up the next morning saying "*I came in hope of preventing [the crime],*" he really does deserve a bit of a slap. No telegram, no prior contact with the authorities—inexcusable. "We'll go first thing tomorrow morning" is a *steep* and *devastating* mistake from Holmes, the greatest of his career.

HILTON CUBITT: Holmes' failure, sadly, wasn't the only one here. Cubitt's vain pride and "*honour*" also earn a share of the blame.

Elsie extracts a promise from him—*the day before their wedding!*—to never ask her about her past. He agrees to that, and up to a point, it is to his credit that he keeps his promise.

But when the woman you love is clearly "*frightened to death,*" with "*terror always lurking in her eyes,*" that the situation is "*killing her by inches*"—it is time to break the promise. When you value your own honor in not breaking a promise more highly than your wife's safety, your priorities are *seriously* askew.

Cubitt boasts of his family honour constantly: "*there is no better known family in the County of Norfolk,*" "*there is not a man in England who ranks his family honour more highly than I do,*" "*our pride in our unsullied honour.*" That's dangerously prideful, and it merely increases the jeopardy they are in. (In fairness, others in the region share this opinion—the station master is distressed at the apparent murder/suicide,: "*Dear, dear, one of the oldest families in the county of Norfolk, and one of the most honoured.*")

The obsession with family honour prevents him from taking any other stopgap action. He won't report the "dancing men" to the police, "*for they would have laughed at me.*" When Elsie suggested that they travel, he disdainfully answers, "*What, be driven out of our own house by a practical joker? Why, we should have the whole county laughing at us.*" Despite his worries, he is far more concerned with how others will perceive him, than with ensuring the safety of his wife.

His certainty that they would be laughed at outweighs his fears that his wife might be in danger.

He's willing to try to dodge the promise—"*I am justified in taking my own line*" of investigation—but that's simply being too clever by half.

And if he is willing to violate the spirit of his promise to Elsie, than he should be willing to take the next step and freaking **ASK HER**. “A promise is a promise” is a tautology, not a matter of honour.

It might be a difficult conversation, but if you seriously believe that your wife in some jeopardy, you have to be willing to sit down and say, “*Elsie, I know I made you a promise, but clearly something has you in mortal terror, and you have to let me help you. Your well-being is more important to me than any pledge.*” Or something to that effect. The approach might fail, but you’re really no worse off. And if it works, if she tells you, then you can take steps to protect her, and stop Abe Slaney. But that *can’t* happen until you swallow your pride and take a tiny hit on your honour by breaking an unfair promise.

And to *hell* with whether or not the police or the whole county laughs at you. Letting such concerns come ahead of the safety of your family is simply wrong. The true honour comes from ignoring personal discomfort and the opinions of others, and doing everything to protect your wife despite those concerns.

Cubitt’s “*honour*” may have stayed intact, but a fat lot of good that does a dead man.

ELSIE CUBITT: We never “*met*” Elsie, so it may unfair to discuss her in this manner. And I also wish to tread carefully, because I don’t want to “*blame the victim.*”

Being the victim of a stalker is a terrifying thing, even if they didn’t have that term yet. I had to deal with a vaguely similar situation (albeit much less serious), and I have the barest understanding of the psychological toll that can take on a person. Elsie was truly in terror, both for herself and her husband.

But Elsie, *you should have told someone*. Keeping everything to yourself, and hoping it would all go away, was obviously the *worst* thing you could have done.

Of course, *shame* has been a large motivator in the Canon. People would rather face indefinite time in prison than admit that they made money by begging. People would rather throw away their families than admit they’d once been married to a black man. The fear of shame, the fear of others finding out the truth, can lead people to do amazingly foolish and dangerous things. And for a woman marrying a man obsessed with his family’s reputation, it might have seemed important to Elsie to hide the fact that her father was a gangster.

Yet as **The Yellow Face** showed us, such fears are often unwarranted—the people we care about can be *forgiving* and *tolerant*, and our secrets being revealed need not be the end of us. So while it may be facile to suggest that Elsie should have gotten over her fear, and shared her past with her husband, it’s also likely true.

Once Abe Slaney showed up in Norfolk, however, it became *imperative* that Elsie should have shared her life story with her husband. The knowledge that a violent criminal was after her is not something that should have been hidden from him—and withholding that information ultimately lead to his death.

And when the shame and fear of being found out caused her to invite Slaney to meet her at their home, and attempt to bribe him to leave...well, there was *no* probability that that plan was going to work, and she should have known that. Knowing Slaney as she did.

I don't want to be too hard on Elsie, particularly as her suicide showed that she clearly felt immense guilt about what happened. And as I've said, being in a situation like that can impair your ability to make rational decisions.

But the truth remains, more than anyone else in the story, Elsie had it within her power to prevent the tragedy from happening.

Of course, Abe Slaney bears *ultimate* responsibility for the death of Hilton Cubitt.

So, yes, this case was Sherlock Holmes' *greatest failure*—but there is plenty of blame to go around.

OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:

**Don't think that I wasn't tempted to write this entire entry in the dancing men code. But life is too short...

**More great moments in roommates: Holmes is "*brewing a particularly malodourous product.*"

Do the neighbors in 221A ever complain?

In **The Norwood Builder, I joked about Watson being a "*kept man*," because--at Holmes' insistence, and with Sherlock's behind the scenes machinations--Watson had to quit his job and movie in with Sherlock.

I was just joking.

But in this story we find out *Holmes keeps Watson checkbook locked in his locked drawer*, and Watson can't get it without asking Holmes for the key!!!!

Seriously, this is starting to sound very sinister. Do we need to have an *intervention*, John? Are you safe? Can you talk freely?

**Watson seems to have an *enormous* man-crush on Hilton Cubitt. Amongst his descriptions of the man: "*He was a fine creature, this man of the old English soil--simple, straight, and gentle, with his great, earnest blue eyes and broad, comely face.*"

Then again, after being virtually held prisoner by Holmes, I can imagine that any guest would look wonderful to Watson...

**For a lot of people, myself included, *The Dancing Men* is the first introduction to cryptography.

That doesn't, however, mean it gets *everything* right.

Some of that is due to apparent printing errors--the same symbols are used for different letters in early editions--and some of that is because Holmes makes some *wild-*** assumptions* that really aren't warranted (even if they turn out to be right).

When referring to the message Elsie left for Slaney, for example

Now, in the single word I have already got the two E's coming second and fourth in a word of five letters. It might be 'sever,' or 'lever,' or 'never.' There can be no question that the latter as a reply to an appeal is far the most probable, and the circumstances pointed to its being a reply written by the lady. Accepting it as correct, we are now able to say that the symbols stand respectively for N, V, and R.

Many others have noted that _E_E_ has a whole *ton* of possible solutions in English. Holmes seems to quickly, and without justification, assume that the third letter *must* be V and the fifth R, and uses this to deduce the first. You would only make those assumptions if you *already* knew the answer...or if you had had some other information that you hadn't shared with Watson.

**Another lesson of the Canon--*never get involved with an American woman. Irene Adler, Hatty Doran, Elsie Patrick*: they're nothing but trouble.

**Cubitt tells us that Elsie made him give her his promise that he would never enquire about her past *the day before their wedding!!*

Aside from bordering on emotional blackmail, this begs the question--had Cubitt *never* asked her about her past before? *Nothing?* "So, where in America are you from" never came up? He never once said, "Tell me about your family"?? Heavens, *why* are you marrying her without even the least curiosity about her?

Then again, perhaps Hilton *had* asked, and was politely rebuffed or distracted by Elsie each time. Although you'd think that such behavior would have made him suspicious.

Or perhaps that's just how they rolled in Victorian England--respected squires just married foreigners who completely hid their backgrounds every day...

That was a fair task Holmes set for his friend Hargreave at the **NYPD. All Holmes knew is that Slaney was from America...so when he cabled Hargreave for information on Slaney, did Hargreave have to turn around and cable people in the police departments of *every major American city*? This was pre-internet & email! No wonder it took Hargreaves two days to send his response.

**Holmes obviously hates it when he thinks that someone is playing his own game against him.

When he and Watson arrive in Norfolk...

...the station-master hurried towards us. "I suppose that you are the detectives from London?" said he.

A look of annoyance passed over Holmes's face.

"What makes you think such a thing?"

I read that as Holmes thinking that someone has played his own deduction/identification trick on him for once. Why else would Holmes be "*annoyed*" here?

****Inspector Martin** a fine enough chap. You'd expect a local inspector to be jealous or resentful of Holmes' intrusion into his case, fearful that the detective might interfere, or poach credit, or even blow the case.

Not Martin, though. He is *instantly* in awe of Holmes, and graciously steps aside to let the detective run the investigation.

Still, I find sad Martin's closing remark to Sherlock: "*I only hope that if ever again I have an important case,*"

If ever again I have an important case?? Is Norfolk really that slow? I feel bad that Martin almost seems to *expect* a career of little interest, minor affairs unworthy of discussion.

******In the rush to criticize his failure to act sooner, many ignore Holmes' *expert recreation* of the crime from the evidence. His skills are at a peak here.

******An open question, though, is *why* Elsie would close the window before attempting to kill herself. It seems, at best, a clumsy attempt by Doyle to make it a "*locked room*" mystery. An attempt which was hardly worth the effort, as Holmes deduced that there must have been someone outside the window in about 3 seconds. So why go to the effort, when it ultimately means one of your characters had to act in a very odd manner to make it work?

Then again, given the shock and grief she must have been experiencing, perhaps an odd and unexplainable act makes as much sense from her as anything else.

******Holmes' has some curious thoughts about powder marks, at least by modern standards:

"The absence of [gunpowder marks on her hands] means nothing, though its presence may mean everything," said Holmes. "Unless the powder from a badly fitting cartridge happens to spurt backward, one may fire many shots without leaving a sign.

Of course, most modern mystery stories will tell us *the exact opposite*--that firing a gun inevitably leaves traces of gunpowder on the shooter's hand, no "badly fitting cartridge" required.

Such traces often may not have been detectable by Victorian science, so we'll have to give Sherlock a pass. Or have **Law & Order** and **CSI** been lying to us for years...?

***"If there is an afternoon train to town, Watson, I think we should do well to take it, as I have a chemical analysis of some interest to finish, and this investigation draws rapidly to a close."*

One would think that, after his monstrous failure to prevent the crime, that Sherlock would be a little less cocky about the certainty of catching Slaney.

***It is, however, a remarkably efficient arrest: "Then the door opened and the man stepped in. In an instant Holmes clapped a pistol to his head, and Martin slipped the handcuffs over his wrists. It was all done so swiftly and deftly that the fellow was helpless before he knew that he was attacked."*

***Slaney fits the profile of the obsessive stalker, mistaking possessiveness and desire for love. "I had the first right to her"?*

Holmes has a stern remonstrance for the villain:

"She broke away from your influence when she found the man that you are," said Holmes, sternly. "She fled from America to avoid you, and she married an honourable gentleman in England. You dogged her and followed her and made her life a misery to her, in order to induce her to abandon the husband whom she loved and respected in order to fly with you, whom she feared and hated. You have ended by bringing about the death of a noble man and driving his wife to suicide. That is your record in this business, Mr. Abe Slaney, and you will answer for it to the law."

"There were seven of us in a gang in Chicago??" **The Chicago Seven?!?!?

***We're left wondering about Elsie's father, the crime lord. Slaney refers to him more than once in the past tense. Is he *dead*? How did he die? What did he think of Elsie's leaving? Or did she not flee until he was dead? Did he truly pledge her to Slaney? Perhaps Slaney killed him in a quarrel over his daughter?*

***Watson tells us that Slaney was condemned to death, but "*mitigating circumstances*" led to his sentence being commuted to penal servitude--presumably for life?*

Watson says that one of those mitigations was "*the certainty that Hilton Cubitt had fired the first shot.*"

Really? *Certainty?*

Holmes determined that the two shots were fired "*almost at the same instant.*" But we only have *Slaney's* word for it that Cubitt fired first.

Slaney first admits only that "*If I shot the man he had his shot at me, and there's no murder in that.*" It's only after Holmes calls on him to confess fully to save Elsie that Slaney expands his story to "*he fired and missed me. I pulled off almost at the same instant, and down he dropped.*" But perhaps the self-serving word of a notorious gangster shouldn't be enough to earn mercy from the court?

Given the facts that we know aside from Slaney's claim, it seems *just as likely* that Slaney fired first, and a wounded Cubitt fired as he was hit, the injury causing him to miss badly and hit the window sill. After all, *by*

his own admission, Slaney drew first, holding up his gun to scare Cubitt off. Are we to believe that, having already drawn, the Chicago criminal was outshot by the simple Norfolk squire?

Of course, it's also possible that Elsie had recovered by the time of his trial, and her testimony confirmed Slaney's.

**Elsie "still remains a widow, devoting her whole life to the care of the poor and to the administration of her husband's estate." A sad end to a tragic tale.

Brian Keith Snell

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