

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 XXXII -- The Adventure of the Priory School

The Adventure Of The Priory School--The Nobility Really IS Different!!

One of the things I love most about the **Canon** is the glimpse it gives into the culture of another era (and for the non-British reader, into the culture of another country). Through 4 novels and 56 short stories, **Sir Arthur Conan Doyle** takes us through all strata of Victorian society, from the most humble servant to the most exalted master, from the most vile criminals to the noblest, most illustrious people in the land.

Sometimes, though, these cultural differences can make their characters seem, to a modern reader (at least, a modern American reader), like *aliens*.

Which brings us to **The Adventure of The Priory School**.

We Americans are taught to admire--and yes, to occasionally laugh at--the famous (and obviously stereotyped) British reserve, the "*stiff-upper lip*," the "*keep calm and carry on*."

But if we're to believe Doyle's tale of the aristocracy, the English upper-upper class could take emotional repression to levels a **Vulcan** would be jealous of.

Arthur, Lord Saltire, has been missing for *three days*--either run away or kidnapped--as has one of the teachers at the Priory School. For almost anyone normal human parent, this would be a cause for almost unendurable agony, and the parent would do almost anything--and many would strike the almost--to get their child back.

Yet time and time again in this story, we're told that Arthur's father, the **Duke of Holderness**, insisted on less effective means being used to find his son--and even that at times he blocked important avenues of investigation. Why? Because the Duke was *uncomfortable discussing his private life, and feared public scandal*.



Again--his son was missing, and he surely seemed as he were more concerned with his personal reputation than finding the child.

Dr. Huxtable tells us that they Duke tried to keep it out of the papers. When **Holmes** chides him for what has so far been a "*deplorably handled*" investigation, Huxtable admits it, but blames that on the Duke: "*His Grace was extremely desirous to avoid all public scandal. He was afraid of his family unhappiness being dragged before the world. He has a deep horror of anything of the kind.*" A deeper horror and unhappiness than possibly losing his son forever?

When describing the Duke's relationship with his son, Huxtable paints what surely seems to be an unflattering picture: "*His Grace is never very friendly with anyone. He is completely immersed in large public questions, and is rather inaccessible to all ordinary emotions. But he was always kind to the boy in his own way.*"

Rather inaccessible to ordinary emotions? Kind the boy in his own way?

When they arrive in **Mackleton**, the Duke's private secretary, **James Wilder**, upbraids Huxtable for involving Sherlock Holmes: "*His Grace is particularly anxious to avoid all public scandal. He prefers to take as few people as possible into his confidence.*" Admittedly, we will find out that Wilder has an ulterior motive for wanting to impede the investigation. But he is making this objection in front of the Duke, who does not refute the characterization of himself as a man who puts a higher priority on avoiding scandal than find a missing heir.

The Duke even agrees that the realm's greatest detective shouldn't have been involved without prior consultation. As Holmes is already there, the Duke is wise enough to make use of this resource. After a brief discussion, though, the Duke leaves, even though Holmes clearly has more questions:

It was evident that to his intensely aristocratic nature this discussion of his intimate family affairs with a stranger was most abhorrent, and that he feared lest every fresh question would throw a fiercer light into the discreetly shadowed corners of his ducal history.

So "*intensely aristocratic nature*" means being so repressed that you're willing to risk your son's death rather than be frank with the one man most likely to find him? Unfathomable!

And when Holmes solves the mystery, and the Duke has learned that his illegitimate son has kidnapped his heir, and placed him in the care of a murderous blackguard, what is his primary concern? Arthur's safety? Punishing Wilder?

Nope. "*I appreciate your conduct in coming here before you spoke to anyone else,*" said he. "*At least, we may take counsel how far we can minimize this hideous scandal.*" Minimizing the scandal. That's what is uppermost in the Duke's mind.

And even though the Duke knew that Wilder was a cad, he kept him around, in part, because of "*his power of provoking a scandal which would be abhorrent to me.*" When the Duke discovered where his son was, he did not rush to him immediately, "*because I could not go there by daylight without provoking comment.*" Oh, heaven forbid that anyone comment.

Am I being too harsh on the Duke? A tad, perhaps. Walk a mile in another man's shoes and all that.

Yet if I were to be smart-alecky, I might suggest that if the Duke found public attention that abhorrent, *he should have not lived a public life.* No one forced him to be First Lord Of The Admiralty, or hold other cabinet posts. Of course, he might have felt that to be a duty to Queen and Country and all that. And I could suggest that if the knowledge that he had a child out of wedlock with someone of low status was too damaging to bear, well, don't have out of wedlock sex with such a person. Again, too cruel of me to say that--*life happens*, right? And I might suggest that if the woman you loved more than life itself couldn't marry you because you're a Duke, well, stop being a Duke. Nobility has abdicated for love before, and since. Oh, but to give up the 3 homes and 250,000 acres and mines and money? Heavens, no.

The worst part is, the consequences of any "public scandal" would be *completely inconsequential.* The Duke isn't currently part of the government--he's "the late Cabinet minister." So it's not as if he could lose his job. He couldn't be fired from being Duke (could he?). Up until he learns the truth, none of the "scandal" that would be revealed was in the least illegal. So the only real consequence of any of this becoming public would be a brief bout of personal embarrassment. Yet the Duke fears this so much, he's willing to risk his son's safety, and shield murderers and kidnappers. Amazing.

Through the Duke of Holderness, Doyle paints a ****ing portrait of aristocracy-- and **Watson's** comments would imply that it applies to most of the nobility. A *savage repression* of emotion, a *fanatical fear* of scandal and dishonour, a lack of attachment to loved ones--all covering up an emotional immaturity and a willingness to flout social laws, as long as no one finds out.

The nobility really *are* different than you or I.

OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:

So, has the Duke *never* read **King Lear? Keeping your illegitimate son around your to watch your legal heir get ready to inherit everything really isn't a good game plan.

**When, *exactly*, was Wilder going to make his demands? The boy had been missing three days before Holmes arrived, and the police were nowhere near the truth.

The Duke said that Wilder hadn't made any demands yet because "*events moved too quickly for him, and he had not time to put his plans into practice.*"

How much time did he need? What was he waiting for?

**Had I written this six months ago, I'm sure that I would have made some "*Dr. Huxtable*" jokes.

That would be terribly inappropriate now, of course. Let us instead mock his given name, **Thorneycroft**. Really? *Throneycroft*?

It is a real name, jokes aside, albeit nearly extinct. This website tells us that there is exactly **1** person in the entire United States with that name...lucky guy. There are, however, 111 people with Thorneycroft as a surname.

**Goofy name aside, what a *great* entrance!!

...and then he entered himself--so large, so pompous, and so dignified that he was the very embodiment of self-possession and solidity. And yet his first action, when the door had closed behind him, was to stagger against the table, whence he slipped down upon the floor, and there was that majestic figure prostrate and insensible upon our bearskin hearth-rug

**More apocryphal cases: "*I am retained in this case of the Ferrers Documents, and the Abergavenny murder is coming up for trial.*"

Of course, as a consequence of those cases, Holmes initially claims that, once again, he is unable to take up a new case from a desperate client. This has been a growing problem since his return from the **Hiatus.

In **Norwood Builder**, Holmes opined, "*London has become a singularly uninteresting city since the death of the late lamented Professor Moriarty.*" Yet in the three subsequent stories, Holmes has declared himself far too busy to take on new cases immediately, and Watson spoke of the hundreds of cases which he had in the period. And he obviously wasn't too busy for the Ferrers Documents and the Abergavenny murder.

Given that someone died as a result of this "*I'm too booked up*" attitude (in **Dancing Men**), we have to wonder what Holmes' priorities were at that time.

**Many have questioned Sherlock taking the reward offered by the Duke, to which I have three responses.

First, Sherlock has *often* taken rewards. Indeed, we're told in **Final Problem**, for example, that rewards for cases he took on for the Scandinavian royal family and the French republic have left him so well off that he could retire if he wished. So, no, taking payment or rewards from well-to-do clients is nothing new for Sherlock.

Secondly, if we look at the fact that Sherlock seems compelled to take more cases than he can handle in this period, a supposition suggests itself: after three years of wanderings during the Hiatus, and after

surreptitiously buying Watson's practices, perhaps Holmes was now *broke*, and needed the money. Quite possibly his "*I am a poor man*" at this end of this story isn't a jest...

Finally, we must say the Duke certainly *wasn't* deserving of being one of Holmes' "charity" cases. His behavior was fairly *reproachable* after his son's kidnapping. And throughout the story, His Grace throws around the weight of his checkbook, trying to buy his way through problems. When the red herring gipsies are arrested, Huxtable declares that "*either the fear of the law or the Duke's purse will certainly get out of them all that they know.*" Holderness pretty unsubtly tries to bribe Holmes and Watson to keep quiet about the outcome of the affair, offering to pay them twice the promised reward if the details "*go no farther.*" And when Holmes says "*but I have no doubt that your Grace could make [Hayes] understand that it is to his interest to be silent,*" it's pretty clear that Holmes is certain the Duke will once again be wielding his wallet to buy his way out of the mess. Given all of that, I can't see how anyone can reproach the detective for speaking to the Duke in the only language he seemed to be able to communicate in.

**Note the story's constant emphasis on Arthur being the "*only*" son and heir. Heck, that fact is brought up *three times in the first five pages* of the story! Doyle is setting us up for the twist at the end, and doing so quite well--you really only notice that point being hammered home upon re-reading.

**Except for once near the end, Arthur is *always* referred to as Lord Saltire, not by his given name. Even his father feels inappropriate calling him by his given name: "*But I feared so much lest he should do Arthur--that is, Lord Saltire--a mischief...*"

This is probably just the American in me, but it is difficult to imagine a ten year-old boy constantly being called "Lord Saltire." Do even his school chums have to call him that? How can a teacher be stern with him when he has to use terms of nobility to even say his name?

The mysterious German master **Heidegger-- a man with "*great references, but silent and morose.*" How did he get those great references, then? Perhaps in Germany, silent and morose is a *compliment*?

Just as curious: if he was silent and morose, and "*not popular with the masters,*" how did **Aveling** become so knowledgeable about Heidegger's bicycle tires? If Heidegger were aloof and uncommunicative, would he have told a fellow teacher about his tires? Was Aveling a cycling enthusiast, and knew the tires *everyone* at the school used?

**Interference from the Duke or not, the police certainly ran a terrible, *terrible* investigation. There was a sighting of a man and a boy on a train--surely not an *uncommon* occurrence--and they completely stopped the investigation, assuming that had to be the missing people?!? One of the closest buildings is a business *owned by a man known to have a grudge against the Duke*--and they never bothered to even question him? After three days, no one had looked for tracks or a bicycle in the moor? Pathetic.

Sherlock does a lot of **Columbo in this story, giving the "*just one more question*" bit both to Huxtable and the Duke, and stretching that one question into several in each case.

**More evidence of the Duke's emotional aloofness to Arthur: the house only a couple of miles away the school...yet the Duke writes letters? No visits? No weekends at home?

**Watson's description of the Duke:

He was a tall and stately person, scrupulously dressed, with a drawn, thin face, and a nose which was grotesquely curved and long. His complexion was of a dead pallor, which was more startling by contrast with a long, dwindling beard of vivid red, which flowed down over his white waistcoat with his watch-chain gleaming through its fringe.

Very odd and attention-drawing look for a man so concerned with image and public perception...

**His Grace wrote "*twenty or thirty letters*" that one day?!? What a demon...just imagine him in the era of voice mails and texts and emails!

**The map that Sherlock shows Watson is *a total spoiler!!*

It reveals the locations of the tire tracks *before* Holmes and Watson set out and discover them! It shows the location of Heidegger's body--*before we ever know that he is dead!!!* Kind of ruins any suspense there...And if Holmes and Watson are studying this map, how can they be surprised when they find the tracks and corpse?!? (Yes, I'm being an idiot, but the point remains, this was a poorly designed map to insert at this point in the story)

Still, it makes you wonder if there is a shop selling *spoiler ordinance maps* in every town. That certainly would make many a mystery easier to solve...

**The story does lag a bit in the *long and terribly unexciting* search of the moors. Part of the problem may indeed lie with the map, as we wait (and wait) for our duo to discover the things that the map has already revealed to us. The amazingly long discussion of bicycle treads and tire depths doesn't help...

**Why would Heidegger have climbed down ivy in pursuit of Arthur? Surely, it would have been quicker and safer for a grown man to take stairs? Or was he in the habit of climbing out his window, and already knew that the vines could support his adult weight?

Sherlock's exchange with **Reuben Hayes exchange is a classic:

I suppose you haven't such a thing as a carriage in your stables?"

"No, I have not."

"I can hardly put my foot to the ground."

"Don't put it to the ground."

"But I can't walk."

"Well, then hop."

Mr. Reuben Hayes's manner was far from gracious, but Holmes took it with admirable good-humour.

"Look here, my man," said he. "This is really rather an awkward fix for me. I don't mind how I get on."

"Neither do I," said the morose landlord.

Comedy gold.

In light of that exchange, which makes Hayes likeable and interesting, we really need to have more of Hayes' story explained. *"I was head coachman once, and cruel bad he treated me. It was him that sacked me without a character on the word of a lying corn-chandler."* Aside from the issue of what the ** is a *corn-chandler*, we should be told--what did the "lying corn-chandler" accuse him of? Is this story true? False? Exaggerated? Does Hayes have a legitimate grievance against *"the Dook,"* or he just a typical ne'er-do-well blaming everyone but himself for his own misfortune?

Still, Hayes seems to have ended up OK, as inn-owner, right? He was better off than a lot of folks. Too bad he's going to the gallows...

Great name, **The Fighting Cock.

No, I'm not being dirty-minded (at least, not any more than usual)! There is an American bourbon called Fighting Cock, and that's all I could think of each time the name came up. Occupational hazard of working in a liquor store, I guess...

**I glad Watson's (*several?*) war wounds were aggravated by Sherlock climbing on his back to peek in a window...

**Holmes certainly *can't resist* being the showman, and teasing his victims: *"I accuse YOU. And now, your Grace, I'll trouble you for that check."* Great moment.

**Still ,that does make it ironic that Holmes is completely taken aback by the revelation that Wilder is also the Duke's son. I really hope that Watson never lets him forget how flummoxed he was at that moment.

**A great discussion between Holmes and Holderness about the morality and legality of Wilder's culpability for Heidegger's death.

The Duke: "But James knew nothing of that. You cannot hold him responsible for that. It was the work of this brutal ruffian whom he had the misfortune to employ."

Holmes: "I must take the view, your Grace, that when a man embarks upon a crime, he is morally guilty of any other crime which may spring from it."

The Duke: "Morally, Mr. Holmes. No doubt you are right. But surely not in the eyes of the law. A man cannot be condemned for a murder at which he was not present, and which he loathes and abhors as much as you do."

Leaving aside the question of whether Wilder really abhorred the murder, or was just trying to save his own skin, the Duke is *clearly* wrong about the legalities involved. Britain at the time recognized the doctrine of "*felony murder*," which held that everyone involved in the commission of a felony was to be held liable for any killings that occurred during that felony, whether they were directly involved in the act or not.

The reader will have to decide for themselves whether an eminent statesman would know that, or if he was being willfully ignorant in order to protect his unworthy son. Or perhaps he just thought the law shouldn't apply to his kin...

****Holmes (quite rightly) has a quite *stern remonstrance* for Holderness's shockingly unbalanced behavior towards his sons:**

"Even more culpable in my opinion, your Grace, is your attitude towards your younger son. You leave him in this den for three days...What are promises to such people as these? You have no guarantee that he will not be spirited away again. To humour your guilty elder son, you have exposed your innocent younger son to imminent and unnecessary danger. It was a most unjustifiable action."

Preach on, Sherlock.

****Many commentators have objected that, since Hayes is facing the gallows, there was really no way that the Duke "*could make him understand that it is to his interest to be silent.*"**

Of course there is a way. There may be no way to save Hayes from execution. But given how free the Duke is with throwing his checkbook at problems, Holmes surely understood that the Duke could promise that Hayes' family would be taken care of, no doubt with a large sum of money, if Hayes kept quiet about the full circumstances of the crimes. Assuming, of course, that Hayes cared about such things. *The man on death row bribed to keep silent/lie so his family will benefit* is a staple of crime fiction.

****Holmes is right to rebuke the Duke for aiding in Hayes' flight, which made him an accessory to the murder. But then, Holmes agrees to keep quiet about Wilder being allowed to go Australia to "seek his fortune" (and no doubt with a healthy starting fund supplied by his generous father)?!?!**

Who is the accessory *now*, Sherlock? And after all of your lecturing, does this in any way sound like *justice* for the blackguard Wilder?

****Even if Wilder's continued presence was the source of the marital difficulties between the Duke and **Duchess**, somehow I doubt removing him will automatically make things better. After she hears the account of this week, and the Duke's role in it, can you *really* believe that she would just come back all smiles**

and forgiveness? That the viper her husband allowed into their home kidnapped her only son; that he placed her child with a low murderer; that the Duke hindered the investigation in the name of "avoiding scandal;" that the Duke learned the truth but allowed his son to be held for three more days; that the Duke paid to help the murderer attempt to escape, and paid to let Wilder get away unpunished?? *None* of this seems like a foundation for reviving a failed marriage.

Assuming, of course, that the Duchess finds out about most of this. You have to wonder what was in that letter the Duke wrote to her. Probably *very little* of the truth, I'm thinking...

**Brian Keith Snell
February 01, 2015**