

## *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 XXXIV -- The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton

## The Adventure Of Charles Augustus Milverton--The Boba Fett Of The Canon!!

Amongst some **Star Wars** fans, there are those who seem to hold the bounty hunter **Boba Fett** to a level of esteem unjustified by any of his accomplishments (in the movies, at least).

Sure, Fett *looks* cool, and his ship, while resembling nothing more than a flying iron, is kind of *badass*.

But he doesn't really *do* much of anything, really. Sure, he manages to follow a crippled **Millennium Falcon**. But he doesn't capture the rebels--he calls the **Empire** to come and do all the actual heavy lifting. And the only time he actually fights in the movies, he is accidentally beaten by a guy who can't see what he's doing, and dies in a particularly inglorious fashion.

Still, despite that paucity of accomplishments, there are those who elevate the bounty hunter as the *paragon* of a dangerous guy, someone who is so cool it becomes legendary.

Which brings us to **Charles Augustus Milverton**.

In some respects, it seems as if Milverton, like Boba Fett, has achieved a status in the **Canon** *incommensurate* with his actual menace.

When it came time for **Granada** to adapt the story, they made it into a "*feature-length special*," double the usual length, renaming it **The Master Blackmailer**. The third series of **BBC's** modernization, **Sherlock**, roughly adapted the story for its season finale, making "**Charles Augustus Magnussen**" the big bad.

That seems like a lot of attention for what is, honestly, not too great a **Sherlock Holmes** story.

Oh, it's a fine enough story, but once again Sherlock is the **Dunsel Detective**--if Holmes never became involved in events, everything would have turned out *exactly* the same. The unnamed noblewoman would have turned up at exactly the same time, and would have killed Milverton in exactly the same way. (It is



unclear what would have happened to all of the blackmail material had Holmes not been there to burgle the safe and burn the letters.

Would the police have taken them as evidence? Did Milverton have an heir or lawyer set up to continue his schemes after death, or send everything on immediately as a "*poison pill*"?)

And, it must be said, Holmes himself does not come off too well in this story. He makes *no* feats of deduction, and does little detecting--his great plans to defeat Milverton are to mug him and burgle him, rather than outwit him. Seriously, Holmes thought Milverton would have the letters on his person? Sherlock comes off as rather a *cad* for the callous manner of his wooing and dumping of the maid **Agatha**. And the reader is given pause by the fluid ethics on display by detective, where Sherlock finds ways to justify all manners of felony, and even condones premeditated murder as "*justified private revenge*." So not really Holmes' finest hour on display here.

So it must be the *villain* that causes this story to receive the expand-to-full-movie-and-season-ending-blockbuster status. And, in that case, well...Boba Fett.

Charles Augustus Milverton is referred to once or twice as "**one of the most dangerous men in London**"--if true, that's quite a come down from **Moriarty** and **Moran**. He is venal and vile, to be sure, a despicable ruiner of lives. But for all that, he's not a particularly *clever* villain. He doesn't *outwit* Holmes (mainly because Holmes doesn't show much wit in this tale), so much as behave exactly as any other blackmailer should. Except that he shows a stunning lack of home security--Holmes' plan would have worked, had he not been interrupted (unless Milverton had a back-up stash of copies elsewhere?), and the "master blackmailer" allowed an unknown person to walk into his back door, which results in his death. Sure, it's a nice irony that his greed results in his own murder. But there's no reason that this hadn't happened earlier, if this is indicative of the carelessness with which he sets up secret rendezvous. So he is hardly a master villain, and hardly worthy of his reputation as the most dangerous man in London.

So what is the allure? Part of it is surely that Milverton is clearly based on a real person: **Charles Augustus Howell**. Howell was an art dealer who had a reputation--which was never proven--as a blackmailer of the rich and famous. He also died a *lurid* death--he was found dead outside a pub, his throat cut and a sovereign coin shoved in his mouth! Amazingly enough, his death was ruled natural causes--tuberculosis--with the throat cutting allegedly coming after death. So, conveniently for many in authority, there was never an inquest, or a serious investigation! Some of the intrigue of Howell's life and demise clearly carried over to the thinly veiled surrogate **Sir Arthur Conan Doyle** used as the villain in his story.

There is also the (*slightly guilty pleasure*) element of seeing someone stick it to the upper classes. Blackmail is not a victimless crime, of course. But let's be honest, the poor are usually not the victims of

extortion. It is the Victorian wealthy class and the nobility, who put so much emphasis on discretion and honor yet are caught in what would be perceived as indiscreet and dishonorable acts, who Milverton goes after. Admit it, audiences *love* to see the upper crust caught in hypocrisy and brought low, and have a sneaking admiration for the gentleman who can pull it off. It also helps that we never actually *meet* any of Milverton's victims until the very end--Doyle makes it *all tell, no show*, and that makes it difficult to empathize with the victims whose lives are shattered by the blackmailer.

Holmes' continual flogging of Milverton as some master craftsman of crime obviously played a role, as well. If our hero is continually thwarted and stymied by this guy, and is as vile as Holmes tells us, well, then he's *got* to be a badass, right?

Again, total Boba Fett. Nothing Milverton does is really any more or any less than any other blackmailer would do. It's just that, as victims are obviously reluctant to come forward and testify, blackmail is a difficult crime to catch and prosecute. Even for the world's greatest detective. Doyle does a good job of laying out the difficulties.

But the reason Milverton is hard to stop is inherent in the crime itself, *not* the perpetrator. He is no Moriarty-level intellect. He keeps his blackmail ammunition in a visible safe, in his estate without much security, in a room that he invites perfect strangers into. He's smart enough not to carry incriminating letters with him when he goes to negotiate, and he's wise enough to actually follow through with some of his threats, rather than merely go for the quick buck. But he's not some kind of genius.

And when he dies? Milverton doesn't look like the most dangerous man in London when an angry widow just walks into his home (by his invitation!) and empties her gun into him. It's hard to conceive of that happening to Moriarty.

So Charles Augustus Milverton. An average villain in a sub-par Holmes story, whose reputation has been somehow inflated to far above his actual accomplishments. Boba Fett, man...*Boba Fett*.

#### **OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:**

**\*\***Despite my feeling that this is not a great *Sherlock Holmes* story, it is a *good* story, very well-written. Doyle's prose is particularly free and fanciful, full of clever turns and insightful metaphors. And the story, while not much of a mystery, does a wonderful job of examining the society and power relationships of Victorian England.

**\*\***In the story, all of Milverton's victims seem to be women. Perhaps this is because ladies were perceived as far more likely to hold on to "*imprudent*" correspondences. More likely, it is a sign of Victorian

gender hypocrisy: a man's peccadilloes are just "*boys being boys*," forgivable if tawdry. But a lady having dalliances before marriage? For *shame*, there can be no greater dishonor!!

The Granada adaptation ameliorates this a bit, by showing us the case of the disrupted marriage of the **Honourable Miss Miles** and **Colonel Dorking**, only mentioned passingly in Doyle's story. Milverton is blackmailing the colonel for homosexual affairs, and Dorking kills himself after his fiancé learns the truth.

\*\*The story also touches upon some "*class warfare*" issues. Holmes says that Milverton receives the bulk of his blackmail material from "*treacherous valets and maids*." We see Milverton negotiating with (whom he thinks is) one of these: "*If the Countess is a hard mistress, you have your chance to get level with her now*."

The Granada adaptation really plays up this aspect, with down-trodden and poorly-treated servants taking the opportunity (and the cash) to stick it to their wealthy, oblivious masters.

Of course, emphasizing this also has the effect of making most of Milverton's targets look *deserving* of his treatment--they're being punished for their sins against the serving class!

\*\***Watson** announces at the beginning of the tale the great lengths he's going to protect the identities of everyone involved. He will "*conceal the date or any other fact by which he might trace the actual occurrence*."

Yet people *still* try to place the story chronologically, by Watson's description of the "frosty winter" and other weather.

John Watson is no fool. If he's hiding the date, changing names, and "concealing **any** other fact," isn't it just possible that he is dissembling about the season and weather, as well, to throw people off the track, and to protect identities?

\*\*The story can now be told, says Watson, because the "*principal person concerned is beyond the reach of human law*." Most people take it to mean that the unidentified **Noble Lady** has passed on, and therefore can no longer be punished for murdering Milverton.

Others have tried to argue that it refers to **King Edward VII**, who had taken the throne a few years before the story was published, and as monarch of the Empire was now "beyond the law's reach."

Certainly, Edward's reputation as a bit of a playboy, carouser and adulterer meant that he was possibly vulnerable to blackmail. It is hard, though, to see where he would fit as any of the characters that we know Milverton was squeezing. Was Watson being *hyper*-discreet, leaving Edward's tale out all together?

\*\*This story, of course, is the main source for Holmes' legendary contempt for blackmailers. He argues that they are worse than murderers:

[H]ow could one compare the ruffian, who in hot blood bludgeons his mate, with this man, who methodically and at his leisure tortures the soul and wrings the nerves in order to add to his already swollen money-bags?

Well, Milverton was a deliberate ruiner of lives, and caused the Noble Lady's husband to die of "a broken heart" (and in the Granada adaptation, his extortions caused strokes and suicides). So, if you want to argue that he is worse than someone who kills once in the heat of passion, you might have a case.

Then again, in the Canon we have seen a man try to murder his step-daughters (and succeed with one of them) for their inheritance; a criminal group terrorize and murder several innocent people just to obtain some papers; a thief murder a bank guard and stuff his body in a safe; a man send his romantic rival to die a horrifying death (or at least, so he hoped); a vicious sailor murdering a rescued castaway for his stock certificates; two cads torture a man for weeks so that he'll sign over his sister's wealth (no doubt so they can marry and kill her); a man train a vicious beast to attack people on the moor for simple greed; and so on and so on.

So is Milverton a snake? Is he a right \*\*\*\*\* who deserves his fate? Sure. But I'm *not* ready to say that he's worse or more dangerous than any of those blackguards

\*\*Not to belabor the often odd-seeming standards of Victorian morality, but were the ladies of the day expected to be virgins *emotionally* as well as physically? Holmes insists that *Lady Eva's* letters were "*imprudent, nothing worse,*" and insists that there no possible harm in them. Milverton counters that the letters were "*sprightly--very sprightly*"--whatever the \*\*\*\* that means--and that the Earl would immediately call off the marriage one he saw them.

"*Sprightly*"?!?! Was this some Victorian form of sexting via the mail?!? Seriously, was it *really* a scandal that a woman had been in love at a prior time in her life? Of course, it's possible that Lady Eva was not entirely honest with Sherlock about the content of those letters when she hired him, perhaps out of embarrassment. Still, grow up, **Earl Of Dovercourt** and all you other males calling off weddings and the such!

The **1965 BBC** adaptation does try to make Lady Eva's situation a little more relatable to modern standards. They had it that Lady Eva was having her correspondence with the "*impecunious young squire*" take place after she had already met the Earl. Also, it turns out that she was a bit of a *self-plagiarizer*, using much the same language and phrases in both her letter to the squire and her letters to her fiancé. So, yeah, the Earl might have been OK to be upset in that case.

\*\*Watson picked up a chair to attack Milverton with, *after* he revealed that he was armed!! Good show, John!!

\*\*It is very hard to be comfortable with Holmes' treatment of Agatha the maid, especially as the information she provided turned out to be wrong--or at least inapplicable on the night they chose to burgle Milverton. "*It was a most necessary step*" my butt! And Holmes' justification boils down to, "*Oh, well, she'll get over it.*" Callous and cruel.

\*\*I love the language Doyle uses as Watson contemplates the consequences of Sherlock getting caught breaking and entering:

*I had a catching of the breath, and my skin went cold at the words, which were slowly uttered in a tone of concentrated resolution. As a flash of lightning in the night shows up in an instant every detail of a wild landscape, so at one glance I seemed to see every possible result of such an action--the detection, the capture, the honoured career ending in irreparable failure and disgrace, my friend himself lying at the mercy of the odious Milverton.*

This was not, as some have contended, Watson being cowardly--his fear is for his *friend's* safety and reputation. And the situation is different from **The Speckled Band**, where Watson quickly and readily agreed to help Holmes invade **Stoke Moran**. In that case, while they did sneak in, they were let in and invited in by a legal resident of the house; nor did they intend to steal anything, as they did in this case. Had they been caught then, the legal jeopardy Holmes faced was much less.

\*\*Holmes persuading Watson that his course is moral is another bit of good writing from Doyle, as Sherlock gets Socratic with his friend:

*I suppose that you will admit that the action is morally justifiable, though technically criminal. To burgle his house is no more than to forcibly take his pocketbook--an action in which you were prepared to aid me."*

*I turned it over in my mind. "Yes," I said, "it is morally justifiable so long as our object is to take no articles save those which are used for an illegal purpose."*

*"Exactly. Since it is morally justifiable, I have only to consider the question of personal risk. Surely a gentleman should not lay much stress upon this, when a lady is in most desperate need of his help?"*

\*\*John Watson: the staunchest of allies:

*"You are not coming."*

*"Then you are not going," said I. "I give you my word of honour--and I never broke it in my life--that I will take a cab straight to the police-station and give you away, unless you let me share this adventure with you."*

A friend indeed.

\*\*Another nifty line: "*With our black silk face-coverings, which turned us into two of the most truculent figures in London, we stole up to the silent, gloomy house.*"

\*\*This was supposedly a terribly chilly time of year. So when Holmes broke in through the greenhouse, cutting away a "circle of glass"--did his actions kill all the "*exotic plants*?" More criminal charges against our duo...

\*\**"In the corner, between the bookcase and the wall, there stood a tall, green safe, the firelight flashing back from the polished brass knobs upon its face."*

As I mention above, surely a hidden safe would have been better, especially as so many people knew that Milverton had to be keeping all of his blackmail material there. Then again, perhaps C.A.M. was such an over-confident fool, that he felt an ostentatious display of an "impregnable" safe made his victims feel more hopeless...

\*\*Holmes says that he would have made a fine criminal, but it is *Watson* who seems to be most enjoying the lifestyle:

*I thrilled now with a keener zest than I had ever enjoyed when we were the defenders of the law instead of its defiers. The high object of our mission, the consciousness that it was unselfish and chivalrous, the villainous character of our opponent, all added to the sporting interest of the adventure. Far from feeling guilty, I rejoiced and exulted in our dangers.*

\*\*When Holmes opens the safe, he takes time to grab the lantern and try to find the bundle of letters being used to torment Lady Eva Blackwell. Was he not planning on helping all of the *other* victims? Was he going to *leave* all of the other letters? If not, why bother to try and sort through them when time was at a premium?

Did Milverton's death inspire Holmes to help all of his victims? Or, with the household being roused by the gunfire, did he simply have no more time to sort through all the material, so he just burned everything?

\*\*John Watson, man of action! If Milverton noticed the safe being ajar, well...

*I had determined that if I were sure, from the rigidity of his gaze, that it had caught his eye, I would at once spring out, throw my great coat over his head, pinion him, and leave the rest to Holmes.*

\*\*The Noble Lady's husband died of a "*broken heart*?" Really? He was *that* traumatized by his wife's indiscretions? (The Granada adaptation at least made it a stroke...)

\*\*The Noble Lady grinding her heels in the face of Milverton's corpse is such a wonderfully perfect detail...

\*\*Many have asked, how did the Noble Lady get away?

Presumably, *the same way she got in!*

Holmes and Watson were being pursued, so they had no choice but to climb the six-foot wall. But that's *not* the way they entered ("through the gate") when they had ample time. And the Lady had a bit of a head start on our duo in her flight, as Holmes stopped to burn everything. So she would have had time to leave via the gate.

Surely no one believes she had to climb a six-foot wall to get into the grounds, right? Milverton was expecting her--*the gate wouldn't have been locked!*

\*\*The reasons given for not interfering with the Noble Lady as she murders Milverton--"*that it was no affair of ours, that justice had overtaken a villain, that we had our own duties and our own objects...*"--sound like a weak rationalization from a good man trying to justify allowing another man to be murdered in front of your eyes.

\*\*Holmes made several trips to the fireplace with "*two arms filled with bundles of letters.*" Just how many people was Milverton blackmailing? He had "eight or ten similar cases" to Lady Eva, and Holmes told us that the blackguard had plenty of more information that he would wait to use until the right moment.

\*\*Ah, yet *another* case where **Lestrade** would have been completely wrong--he would have caught the burglars, but not the killer, had he known how to follow the clues without Holmes' help.

Surely the mark of a heel being ground into Milverton's face should have been a clue that another party--doubtless female--was involved. Oh, Lestrade...

\*\*The under-gardener's description, which "might be a description of Watson": "*a middle-sized, strongly built man.*"

Let's hope Hollywood remembers this whenever they cast another Holmes production and decide to make Watson older, and portly.

It is nice to notice, by the way, that Watson's wound(s) were doing so well that he could take part in such an energetic evening's work.

\*\*Holmes' defense of vigilante justice:

*I think there are certain crimes which the law cannot touch, and which therefore, to some extent, justify private revenge.*

We seen Holmes taking justice into his own hands before, but usually it was the opposite side of the coin--allowing guilty parties to go free because he felt that they had suffered enough, or were unlikely to commit more crimes.

But to sign off on private murder as *justified*? Even if Milverton deserved to die, who is Holmes to determine that? He's a detective, and a brilliant one, but perhaps this might make some reconsider whether he should be the sole arbiter of people's fates, as it's rather a **Death Wish** approach to law and order.

*\*\*Holmes: "My sympathies are with the criminals rather than with the victim, and I will not handle this case."*

Of course, Holmes was trying to justify not taking the case so Lestrade wouldn't become suspicious. But we have been told earlier of a case Holmes didn't take, to clear a party he knew to be guilty. We have lots of listing of apocryphal cases Holmes did take. Just as interesting, I think, would be a list of the ones he didn't take, and the reasons given...

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**March 01, 2015**