

## *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 XXXVI -- The Adventure of the Three Students

## The Adventure of The Three Students--The Adventure Nobody Cares About

There is something to be said for virtually every **Sherlock Holmes** story. Some interesting tidbit, some wonderful character, some clever bit of deduction, some keen observation on the cultural and societal forces of Victorian/Edwardian England, some unique bit of information and characterization for Holmes or **Watson**, some delicious dialogue. Almost every story in the **Canon**, even if not 100% successful, gives the reader (and blogger!) something to attach to.

And then there's **The Adventure of The Three Students**.

I don't mean to be harsh, as Three Students certainly isn't a *bad* story. And, since each and every Holmes story seems to be somebody's favorite, I'm sure the tale has ardent defenders who will tell you that it is their favorite. And more power to them--**IDIC** and all that.

Yet I find Three Students incredibly hard to connect with. And I think most people agree with me. Three Students is one of the few Holmes tales which has *never* seen a screen adaptation (at least none that I can find reference to).

Approximately *90%* of the discussion by commentators centers around trying to discover whether the university it takes place

at is **Cambridge** or **Oxford**. The rest is devoted to discussing whether the mystery is really an elaborate hoax that **Soames** (and Watson?) are playing on Sherlock, or how preposterous and unlikely the events of the story are. Very few, it seem, like Three Students *as a story*.

Why is this story so, well, *meh*? First and foremost, to me at least, are the titular 3 academics. In a story titled the Adventure Of The Three Students, we *never meet* two of them, and the third doesn't get so much as a line of dialogue until the last two pages of the tale. To be clear: **Miles McLaren** is never seen--his



"rude" voice is only heard through a door--and he never interacts with Holmes and Watson. After he is first mentioned by Soames, he's never even referred to by name again in the story!

The Indian student, **Daulat Ras**, also has *no dialogue* the entire story, and no interaction with our heroes, save Watson's mention after the fact that Ras "*looked at them queerly.*"

And finally, there is **Gilchrist**--who is never even given a first name! Again, while we're told *of* him, we don't meet him until near the end, and even then we get nothing but accusing looks and a "*storm of passionate sobbing.*" It isn't until after Holmes recounts his version of events that young Gilchrist utters a single word.

So when your story is titled *The Adventure of The Three Students*, and the three of them are but the *flimsiest rough drafts* of sketches of actual characters, your story is probably going to lack a little bit of oomph. When the reader doesn't meet any of the three students, it's very hard to work up some level of caring about which one might be guilty.

Now, that's not necessarily a crippling defect. In our last story, **The Six Napoleons**, we don't meet **Beppo**, he has no last name, and doesn't utter a single line of dialogue. But *Six Napoleons* has something that *Three Students* lacks--**Sir Arthur Conan Doyle** doesn't make this much of a mystery, really. So little does he seem to care about the other students, that he doesn't really bother to try and make them serious red herrings. *Every* bit of evidence points to Gilchrist, and Holmes seemingly has the case solved about 5 minutes in. Anything that doesn't point to Gilchrist, Holmes dismisses instantly. Absent some surprise twist--which this story doesn't have--there really is no other way it could end than for Gilchrist to have been the culprit.

And the story lacks either the stunning twist--*the murder victim is actually alive, framing someone!*--or the outré and intriguing set-up of the mystery itself--*why is someone smashing busts?*--that can make even milder mysteries much more entertaining. The entire plot follows a very straight and narrow outline: somebody peeked at the exam questions. It has to be one of these three people. Look it's the one whom all the evidence pointed to! It's such a straightforward mystery--*no* surprises or reversals along the way--that the denouement is lacking the energy of a typical Holmesian resolution.

Another thing the story lacks are serious stakes of any kind. Now, we don't need to have murder--or even an actual crime of any kind--to make for a good mystery. But even in Sherlock Holmes stories without real crimes, there is some semblance of high stakes, of consequences to someone we've met. Who is the missing fiancé? Can a marriage survive some unknown deceit? But there is nothing of that kind of import here. A student cheated. If the truth comes out publicly, there will be a huge scandal. But since we never meet the students, it's hard to *care* how a controversy might affect them.

Might Soames or **Bannister** be fired for incompetence? The issue is never brought up, and again, it seems hard to work up much sympathy. Why should we care if this "hideous scandal throws a cloud" on the university?

(Part of that, it must be said, is due to Watson's discretion. By so diligently covering up the identity of the school, he blunts our ability to care about the results)

We might have more empathy for the low-stakes scandal, but Doyle fails to give us entertaining characters who might be hurt. Again, the contrast with Six Napoleons is pretty stark. That story was *filled* with interesting characters--the journalist more concerned with getting a story than the murder on his doorstep, the shop keeper who saw anarchists everywhere, the doctor who was a Bonapatre-o-phile...not to mention **Lestrade**. Three students, however? We've already discussed how the titular characters have no characterization. The only other players on our stage are Soames, the tutor, and Bannister, the butler. Neither one does or says anything that makes them interesting, or even different on some level from the same *archetypes* in any other mystery story: the nervous school official and the loyal butler.

As for Sherlock himself, he seems *grumpy and mean*. He goes out of his way to insult Watson on more than one occasion, as well as Soames. He's short and dismissive with any suggestion that doesn't lead to Gilchrist--and why not? He solved the mystery five minutes in! And given that Holmes himself dismissed the possibility of someone just walking into the room when the proofs were there as "an unthinkable coincidence," it seems a poor show indeed that his solution *relies just as much on an even more unlikely set of coincidences*--that someone tall enough would happen to wander by and look in the window while the proofs were there at exactly the same time the key had been left in the door. Not so *unthinkable* a coincidence when it's your solution, eh, Sherlock? And let's not forget the even still more unlikely coincidence that Bannister had been Gilchrist's father's butler, and ended up being a butler in the exact same building that Gilchrist stayed in while at university! Heavens!

And Holmes displays *no* great feats of deduction in Three Students. He is given straight clues with only one interpretation. There is no drama or surprise in his surmises, except perhaps for the pencil--but that proves to be a complete dead end, of no relevance in solving the case.

And once again, speaking of solving the case, Sherlock is *utterly irrelevant* to the tale's outcome. Had he not been summoned by Soames, Gilchrist had still been counseled by Bannister, had still written his letter confessing, and had already taken the job with the Rhodesian police. Had Holmes never become involved in the mystery, than the outcome would have been *exactly the same!* That, as I've remarked in the past, is *never* the sign of a good Holmes mystery.

I shouldn't be too harsh. Three Students is by no means a bad story. But it is so by the numbers, so lacking in the depths of characterization and period and details that make other Doyle stories so appealing, that it seems *tepid* and *lifeless* compared to other stories in the Canon. Which is why it is the story so few seem to care about.

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

\*\*As I mentioned above, tons and tons (*and tons*) of commentary and argumentation has been dedicated to the question as to which university this story took place at, and whether that gives us any clues as to which of the schools Holmes attended.

I'm absolutely *agnostic* on the matter--I neither know nor care. It's not just that I'm not at all familiar with Cambridge or Oxford. If there story were set in America, I don't know that it would make a whit of difference if it were set at **Harvard** or **Yale**. I just don't think that, for the most part, knowing where someone went to college necessarily tells you that much about their character. (I am perfectly willing to admit that they may have been prevailing attitudes in Victorian England about what unique attributes a person who matriculated at each school might have. Then again, that was surely a stereotype at best, and a useless cliché at worst.)

Well, few agree with me, obviously, as many folks have spent *forests* worth of pages debating which school the three students attend. The funny part is, they do this despite the fact that Watson quite *explicitly* says that he's going to disguise *all of the details* so that the reader cannot possibly tell:

*It will be obvious that any details which would help the reader exactly to identify the college or the criminal would be injudicious and offensive. So painful a scandal may well be allowed to die out. With due discretion the incident itself may, however, be described, since it serves to illustrate some of those qualities for which my friend was remarkable. I will endeavour, in my statement, to avoid such terms as would serve to limit the events to any particular place, or give a clue as to the people concerned.*

Yet every commentator decides that either Watson is a liar, or incompetent, because they proceed to *ignore* his admonition, and dissect every detail as if the doctor wasn't actually trying to disguise things.

Indeed, at the end of that very first paragraph, **William S. Baring-Gould**, in the first **Annotated Sherlock Holmes**, gives us a footnote suggesting that Watson has already given up the game, because Oxford at the time was a city, while Cambridge was only a town.

In other words, one of the greatest Holmes scholars decided that Watson, despite his promise to disguise things, *didn't even make it through **the very first sentence** of his story* without failing in his purpose.

*Hogwash.*

\*\*One interesting point, both from Watson and the panicked Soames, is the supposition that the revelation that a student tried to cheat damage over the entire school. "*There will ensue a hideous scandal, which will throw a cloud not only on the college, but on the university,*" says Soames.

That is an *odd* supposition. Why would the university be found at fault because a *student* tried to cheat? Was it their fault for admitting a young person who proved later to have questionable ethics?

If the scandal became public, would the populace of England say, "*Oxbridge admitted a cheater! The rogues! I'll never send my sons there!*"

Certainly, there have been cases where colleges have helped students to cheat, usually in order to maintain some athletic eligibility. But this isn't *that* type of scandal. Why should the university itself experience any disapprobation in this case? (Unless, of course, you wanted to blame them for Soames' and Bannister's incompetence) If such a case happened today, barring any finding of gross negligence on the school's part, the blame would go to cheating student (and his parents who raised him so poorly).

So perhaps this story does indeed give us some glimpse of the Victorian moral structure--*any dishonour stains the whole institution*, no matter who was involved, or what the circumstances.

\*\*Thus, given that climate, it makes sense for Soames to seek out Sherlock Holmes. He tells Holmes that "*your discretion is as well known as your powers...*"

Well, we've seen that, in several cases. But should it *really* be "well known?" Does everyone in England know that Holmes will let scoundrels escape, and bury secrets for those he deems worthy? How can those deeds stay secret, then? If everyone *knows* Holmes is using his discretion, hasn't he (or Watson) been indiscreet in letting that knowledge out? Won't everyone just look at each of his clients, and speculate--perhaps even deduce--what scandal say, the **Duke of Holderness** is covering up?

Once Holmes has a reputation as a "*man of discretion,*" his involvement itself would seem to become indiscreet...

\*\*Apocryphal case: "*Sherlock Holmes was pursuing some laborious researches in early English charters--researches which led to results so striking that they may be the subject of one of my future narratives.*"

Sadly, that story was never told.

\*\*Holmes is *very* brusque with Soames: "I am very busy just now, and I desire no distractions..." This is what, the **4th** time in the stories in **Return** that he's tried to turn away clients because he's just too busy?

\*\*Sherlock, it seems, is sort of like me when I'm forced to spend time away from my stuff...

*My friend's temper had not improved since he had been deprived of the congenial surroundings of Baker Street. Without his scrapbooks, his chemicals, and his homely untidiness, he was an uncomfortable man.*

Like me, Holmes needs to be in his nest.

**\*\***Many have complained that Soames' choice of material for the translation exam--**Thucydides**--is far *too basic* and *too well known* to make an adequate test for an expensive scholarship. I have no real comment to make, as it is all Greek to me.

Perhaps Watson was altering details to hide the truth? Was the subject even Greek?!? Was Soames a tutor of some other subject, and Watson just altering details to protect his identity and reputation?

**\*\***Soames defends the integrity of his butler: "*Bannister--a man who has looked after my room for ten years, and whose honesty is absolutely above suspicion.*"

Well, we have obvious reasons to question Soames' ability to judge character. He was completely *wrong* in his assessment of which student might be capable of stealing the exam. And obviously, even though it was for honourable reasons, Bannister does *outright lie to their faces*, so his honesty cannot and should not have been "above suspicion."

**\*\***The **Fortescue** scholarship is apparently quite a hefty one: "*A large sum of money is at stake, for the scholarship is a very valuable one, and an unscrupulous man might very well run a risk in order to gain an advantage over his fellows.*"

Shouldn't, then, Holmes' investigation at least considered who *needed* the money to continue their education the most? We know nothing about Maclaren and Das' financial situation. We do know that Gilchrist's father lost his fortune playing the ponies. That would certainly seem to suggest some monetary need on Gilchrist's part, and should have been one more reason to suspect him.

**\*\***Speaking of dad, the lad's father is "*the notorious Sir Jabez Gilchrist.*" With a name like that, of course he's notorious!!

**\*\***"Sherlock posits a theory to Soames: "*the man who tampered with them came upon them accidentally without knowing that they were there.*" Soames agrees, and Holmes gives an "enigmatic smile," because he has already dismissed this possibility as an "*unthinkable coincidence.*"

Well, as I mentioned above, it seems to be *just* as unthinkable coincidence that the only student tall enough to see through the window just happens to walk by for the brief time that the proofs were unattended, and that was also at the exact same time the butler just happened to leave the key in the door.

I can't conceive over why that *far more complex* coincidence should be any more unthinkable to Holmes...

\*\*Holmes is rather cheeky to Watson throughout the story. **Insult #1**, as he suggests that Watson not come along with them: "*Not one of your cases, Watson--mental, not physical. All right; come if you want to.*"

Sherlock? Watson has come along on many, many of your "mental" cases.

\*\*Holmes solves the mystery pretty much right away: "*Holmes halted and looked earnestly at the window. Then he approached it, and, standing on tiptoe with his neck craned, he looked into the room.*"

After that, by his reasoning, *only* someone as tall or taller than himself could have seen through the window. So all that's left is to find out the height the students!

In other words, *every bit* of the rest of the investigation is a waste of time.

\*\*Remember the crap Holmes gave **Inspector Hopkins** in **Black Peter** for not examining the ground carefully enough outside of the crime scene? "*As long as the criminal remains upon two legs so long must there be some indentation, some abrasion, some trifling displacement which can be detected by the scientific searcher.*"

Yeah, well, Holmes *himself* doesn't seem that diligent in this case: "*We stood at the entrance while Holmes made an examination of the carpet. 'I am afraid there are no signs here,' said he. 'One could hardly hope for any upon so dry a day.'*"

So much for the claim that there must *always* be some indication which can be detected.

Perhaps Holmes was just jerking Hopkins around...?

\*\*Much is made of the pencil shaving found at the scene:

*The pencil was not an ordinary one. It was above the usual size, with a soft lead, the outer colour was dark blue, the maker's name was printed in silver lettering, and the piece remaining is only about an inch and a half long. Look for such a pencil, Mr. Soames, and you have got your man.*

Well, not so much.

Despite visiting all the stationers shops in town; despite an elaborate ruse to trick the students into showing their pencils; despite the declaration that this pencil was so unique that it must reveal the thief...despite all of this, nothing is found out about the pencil, and it plays *no role whatsoever* in the outcome of the story.

*Sigh.*

\*\*A second insult to Watson, when Holmes is frustrated that Soames cannot seem to follow his reasoning:: "*Watson, I have always done you an injustice. There are others.*"

Oh, what a *nasty* left-handed apology: "you're not the only one who is stupid!"

\*\*The ironic part of that bit is that Sherlock gets that same bloody clue *backwards*!!

*What could this NN be? It is at the end of a word. You are aware that Johann Faber is the most common maker's name. Is it not clear that there is just as much of the pencil left as usually follows the Johann?"*

Well, no. If the **NN** were shaved off, then everything following NN would *already* be gone from the pencil!! **JOHA** would be left on the pencil, *not* **FABER**.

Of course, if you don't know precisely where the wording is on the pencil originally, you can't tell how much pencil is left.

So the one original deduction Holmes makes in the story is, well, *wrong*. And it is useless in solving the mystery, as we've seen above.

\*\*One good bit of dialogue, as Sherlock pressures Soames to pick whom he thinks is the most likely malfeasor:

*Soames: "One hardly likes to throw suspicion where there are no proofs."*

*Holmes: "Let us hear the suspicions. I will look after the proofs."*

\*\*Astute Holmes, noticing when people behave oddly:

*Where were you when you began to feel bad?"*

*"Where was I, sir? Why, here, near the door."*

*"That is singular, because you sat down in that chair over yonder near the corner. Why did you pass these other chairs?"*

\*\*Bannister, whose honesty is "beyond suspicion": *"I don't believe there is any gentleman in this university who is capable of profiting by such an action. No, sir, I'll not believe it."* Of course, at this point, Bannister knew for a *fact* that a gentleman did attempt to profit by it. So, straight, bald-faced lie.

\*\*Does Watson really not understand that this was just a ruse to find the pencil?

*Holmes was so charmed with one of them that he insisted on drawing it in his notebook, broke his pencil, had to borrow one from our host and finally borrowed a knife to sharpen his own. The same curious accident happened to him in the rooms of the Indian...*

The doctor shows no trace of understanding that this is a ploy. This is definitely a *retrograde* writing of the character, as most of the stories in Return show Watson well able to keep up with most of Holmes reasoning, and to recognize Holmes laying his traps.

\*\*We're told by both Watson and Soames how "*rude*" and "*foul-mouthed*" MaClaren is:

*...nothing more substantial than a torrent of bad language came from behind it. "I don't care who you are. You can go to blazes!" roared the angry voice. "Tomorrow's the exam, and I won't be drawn by anyone."*

This is foul language? "*You can go to blazes*"?? Heavens, hide the children!!

\*\*A *third* insult of Watson? Holmes suggest that Watson will get them evicted: "*What with your eternal tobacco, Watson, and your irregularity at meals, I expect that you will get notice to quit, and that I shall share in your downfall.*"

I'm more forgiving of this one, as the context makes it clearly *playful* banter, and the paraphrase of **Shakespeare** a sentence earlier shows Holmes was being more puckish than rude.

\*\*The clue of the little lumps of clay may--just *may*--give away the game on the school's identity. It turns out, from several sources, that such stuff was used to line the jump pits at Cambridge, but not Oxford.

So closed case? Maybe. Unless, of course, Watson *knew* that, and he threw in that "*clue*" to mislead readers.

See what a trial it can be to come to firm conclusions when you have an unreliable narrator?

\*\*More Holmesian private justice: "*If this matter is not to become public, we must give ourselves certain powers and resolve ourselves into a small private court-martial.*"

\*\*Ah, the classic "make the perp think his cohort has confessed when he really hasn't so the perp will give himself away ploy":

*The unfortunate young man staggered back, and cast a look full of horror and reproach at Bannister. "No, no, Mr. Gilchrist, sir, I never said a word--never one word!" cried the servant. "No, but you have now," said Holmes.*

Works every time.

\*\*It is terribly *convenient* that Gilchrist has an alternate job already lined up. Did the Rhodesian police *regularly* go about offering positions to undergraduates at Camford and Oxbridge?

\*\*Again, the story would have ended exactly the same had Holmes never been involved:

"I have a letter here, Mr. Soames, which I wrote to you early this morning in the middle of a restless night. It was before I knew that my sin had found me out."

\*\*The *most* unthinkable coincidence of all? "Time was, sir, when I was butler to old Sir Jabez Gilchrist, this young gentleman's father." What are the odds of that--a butler leaves the service of a bankrupt gentleman, get a new position at a major university, and that gentleman's son just happens to go to that same university--and lives in the very same building?

Of course, one could argue that Bannister kept track of young Gilchrist, and pulled some strings to get him in (or to get himself closer once Gilchrist were admitted). Then again, the servant class usually didn't have that *many* strings to pull...

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