

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 XXXVII -- The Adventure of the Golden Pince-Nez

The Adventure Of The Golden Pince-Nez--How NOT To Adapt A Holmes Story!!

I have nothing but sympathy for those trying to adapt stories from one medium to another. There are a *near-infinite* number of choices that must be made--what to include, what to discard, what to expand upon, what to elide past, how to stretch or squeeze to fit the available time slot. It's a thankless, difficult task, and adapters rarely get enough credit.

Adaptation can be especially tricky when it comes to **Sherlock Holmes** stories. 80% of the tales, it seems, begin with Holmes or **Watson** sitting around **Baker Street**, when a client or policeman comes in to make a *huge exposition dump*. Not necessarily the most engaging thing to put on film, so adapters have to be clever to avoid the first third of their show merely being talking heads. There's also the problem of



Watson being a humble narrator--many of the written adventures have him being nearly silent, with all of the best lines going to Holmes. Making Watson an actual character in an adaptation requires a bit of work. Add in the fact that some of **Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's** short stories do not seem to have enough content to fill 50+ minutes, and you'll see that adapting the **Canon** is usually much more involved than "just filming the story."

That being said, there are a number of missteps that can clearly be labeled missteps, clear mistakes that detract from the adaptation and make it *far weaker* than the original story. Which brings us to **The Adventure Of The Golden Pince-Nez**.

The **Granada** adaptations, by and large, do an excellent job of translating the Canon to the small screen. But--as is almost inevitable in doing so many stories--sometimes they make choices that are *baffling*, that seem (to me) to actually hurt the story they're trying to portray.

And in Golden Pince-Nez, they seem to make *every* bad choice possible, turning what is a nice little Holmes mystery into a sloppy show that diminishes the detective and takes away the most intriguing part of the mysteries.

Granada starts with an *odd* cold open. Now, it is not unusual for them to have taken the murder or burglary from a story, and show that as the opening scene. That's usually defensible--it makes a gripping, interesting way to bring the viewer into the story, and breaks up the potential monotony of talking heads merely dumping exposition about the crime at Baker Street.

But in this case, Granada makes an awful decision. They choose to start with a scene of tsarist police bloodily breaking up a protest in Russia, and show **Anna** being arrested, and show a close-up of her glasses.

Why they do this is inexplicable, at least to me. The fact that this story is (once again) the result of foreign intrigues come London is *kept hidden from the reader* until the very end of the story. When Anna declares, "*He is not an Englishman. He is a Russian,*" the reader is surprised. The viewer *is not*, because they have already been told that the story involves Russians, and no one else in the story can credibly be Russian. Why *spoil* the big reveal with the opening Russia scene?

Furthermore, by focusing on Anna and her glasses in that opening, Granada has sort of spoiled the mystery. No matter how many red herring suspects with pince-nez glasses they trot out, they've already told the viewer that the mystery must revolve around *this* woman, and a Russian connection!

The next problem is not entirely Granada's fault. **Edward Hardwicke** was unavailable to play Watson for this episode. Well, of course Sherlock needs someone to talk to, so they chose to have **Charles Gray** reprise his role as **Mycroft** for the story.

In and of itself, that is a practical and wise decision. And they do add a nice bit where Sherlock and Mycroft play "*dueling deductions*" over the pince-nez. However, for reasons that I once again do not understand, they decide to have Mycroft steal Sherlock's thunder in the episode, and have *him* solve the mystery!

In the original story, Holmes has already deduced that the killer must be concealed behind one of the bookcases. So he smokes "*cigarette after cigarette*"--a "great number," in his own description--and sprinkled the ash all over the floor. Why? So that when Anna came out during his absence, Holmes could tell from the disturbed ashes exactly where her hiding place was.

But in the Granada version, Sherlock does *not* know where Anna is hiding. He smokes one cigarette, as a courteous guest. *Mycroft* makes the deduction, and he surreptitiously spreads *his snuff* all over the floor.

Later, he hands Sherlock his empty snuff case, telling his brother that he might find it useful--and it is only *later* that Sherlock realizes what Mycroft has done, and what it means! While Mycroft is the smarter brother, surely we're not tuning in to watch *him* solve crimes instead of his brother!

Another problem the Granada production has is to tar the character of **Willoughby Smith** for the purpose of providing a string of red herrings.

We're told from the first that the vexing part of the case for **Inspector Hopkins** is that there was "*no motive...no reason on Earth why anyone should wish him harm.*" His investigation of Smith's background show that the young man "*had nothing against him*" with "*no weak spot in him at all.*"

This isn't some minor point. Given the limited availability of physical forensics available in the day, "*motiveless*" crimes could be very difficult for the police to solve. In terms of the fiction, this is why they needed Holmes to come help them. And it's the basis of the beginning of Holmes' deductive chain--the lack of motive, along with the choice of weapon, told him that the murder was *not* planned, and that Smith was an innocent bystander in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Granada, however, decided that they had to throw lots of red herrings out there, to make us believe that there *was* motive to murder Willoughby Smith. First, they tell us that he was pitching woo and pledging eternal love to the young maid, **Susan**. Not only that, but he was *cheating on her*. He was making time with, and actual proposed to, local suffragette leader **Abigail Crosby** (who was created out of whole cloth for the adaptation). Susan witnessed this, supposedly giving her motive to murder Smith. And we also see Smith being disdainful of the suffrage cause, and *striking* Abigail when she refused to stop her activities. So now she had a motive to murder him. And Crosby had a pair of pince-nez!!

We get to waste *a great deal of time* in the Granada version with Hopkins having to interview these two ladies, trying to get them to admit they committed the murder. This is foolish on two levels. First of all, because they opened the story in Russia, the audience *knows* that the killing and the glasses had to have something to do with foreign intrigue. So we know that these people had *nothing* to do with the killing--*you've already told us that!!*

Secondly, this makes Inspector Hopkins' earlier investigations look shockingly *incompetent*. After declaring that there was not any possible motive, and not a single possible spot against Smith, who "*knew nobody in the neighbourhood*" and "*existed only for the work,*", the production tells us Smith was actually **a two-timing woman-beater (who hates suffrage, to boot!)**. How could Hopkins have *possibly* missed all of that? By changing Smith's character so radically, this adaptation undermines any faith we might have had in Hopkins as a student of Holmes' methods!

Granada also changes **Professor Coram's** motivations, once again bafflingly, and not for the better. In Russia, he and Anna were "*reformers--revolutionists--Nihilists!*" When a police officer was killed, he turned on his comrades, confessing to save himself and get a great reward.

But there was another reason--Anna had a *boyfriend* in the Order. Anna describes **Alexis** as "*the friend of my heart. He was noble, unselfish, loving--all that my husband was not.*" I think we can take that as **Victorian** code for having an affair of the heart, at the very least. And the implication seems clear that jealousy of the older husband for the relationship between his much younger wife and her work buddy that caused him to hide exculpatory evidence and "*tr[y] hard to swear away the young man's life.*" That makes sense--he wanted Alexis imprisoned or killed as retaliation for whatever was going on between the non-violent revolutionary and his wife.

So it is truly odd that Granada changes Alexis from "the friend of Anna's heart" ...to *her brother!* Well, that *removes* the jealousy motive (unless we're implying that something pretty icky was going on, at least in **Sergius'** mind). So, why, exactly, would he lie and conceal evidence to keep Alexis unjustly in jail? Did Coram bear a *grudge* against Alexis for some reason? We get absolutely *zero explanation*--Anna's exposition is essentially the same in the adaptation as in the novel--except that Alexis is now her brother, and Sergius stole the diary and letters for no particular reason.

Finally, and not of such great consequence: in the adaptation, a member of the **Brotherhood** comes in through the skylight and slays Coram in the very last scene! In the story, he survives, as far as we know. Anna had *promised* not to betray his secret, and there is no indication that Holmes or Hopkins did so. Yet in the Granada version, an extremely *scruffy* Nihilist is seen spying on the professor throughout the story. Did Anna tell them, despite her promise? Had they been following her during her search for her husband? Certainly, it's not too significant a change, but it does serve to *weaken* Anna's character. Now, we must conclude that either she was a *liar*, or so *foolish* that she didn't realize she was indeed sentencing Sergius to death. She is stripped of some of her agency, and her nobility that made her so appealing next to the craven professor.

So what do we have? Several *small* amendments to the story, which in a mere listing may not seem much. But upon closer examination, and taken cumulatively, they *seriously* weaken the tale. The surprise reveal of the mystery is ruined. Sherlock is made to look an inferior detective. The mystery of a motiveless crime is eliminated by trying desperately to create red herrings, and in the process turning Willoughby Smith into a *monstrous cad*. Coram loses his motive to keep Alexis imprisoned. And Anna is made to look weaker by her inability to keep her pledge not to betray Coram.

As I said above, adaptation is *hard*, and I don't expect one to adhere slavishly to the original. But in almost every *unnecessary* decision they made this time, director **Peter Hammond** and screenwriter **Gary Hopkins** decided *poorly*, and as a result, they did little justice to The Adventure of The Golden Pince-Nez.

OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:

******Kvetching about the Granada version aside, this is a *pretty good* tale.

Sure, with over a century of mystery hindsight, the "*victim wasn't really the target*" may seem a little trite today. But at the time it was a pretty good gimmick.

Holmes is in top form, not allowing himself to be distracted by false theories and irrelevancies, and seeing what should have been obvious to Hopkins very quickly.

And of course, there's all the smoking...

******Admit it--when you first saw the title of this story, you had absolutely *no idea* of what a pince-nez was, let alone a golden one. I admit my ignorance...

******Watson tell us of "*three massive manuscript volumes which contain our work for 1894.*" Three massive volumes!! And you've given us only a dribble, Doctor! *Get writing!!*

******This story is the *mother lode* for those fascinated by references to apocryphal stories:

I see my notes upon the repulsive story of the red leech and the terrible death of Crosby, the banker. Here also I find an account of the Addleton tragedy, and the singular contents of the ancient British barrow. The famous Smith-Mortimer succession case comes also within this period, and so does the tracking and arrest of Huret, the Boulevard assassin--an exploit which won for Holmes an autograph letter of thanks from the French President and the Order of the Legion of Honour.

We've seen several other references of cases that Holmes has done for the French government in this period...did they have him on retainer?

******Watson (& Doyle!) waxing poetic about the weather:

It was strange there, in the very depths of the town, with ten miles of man's handiwork on every side of us, to feel the iron grip of Nature, and to be conscious that to the huge elemental forces all London was no more than the molehills that dot the fields.

Sir Arthur *never* gets enough credit for Watson's descriptive narration, and the wonderful turns of phrase used so often.

**A slam on journalism, as Hopkins disdains the paper's coverage: *"Well, it was only a paragraph, and all wrong at that, so you have not missed anything."*

Given what we know of the case, how much *could* they have gotten wrong? Did they name the wrong victim? The wrong address? Did they spell Hopkins' name wrong, so he's in a snit?

Hopkins describing who lives at **Yoxley Old Place: *"was taken by an elderly man, who gave the name of Professor Coram."*

Well, that's an odd turn of phrase. You usually wouldn't say *"this person gave his name as X"* unless you *were* already suspicious that that wasn't his real name, would you? If someone asked you who lived at 221B Baker Street, you probably wouldn't say, "Well, he gave the name of Sherlock Holmes."

Did Hopkins already *suspect* that Coram was an assumed identity? Nothing else in the story would suggest that. Was that phraseology more common back in 1894? Or did Doyle accidentally *tip off* the story's twist?

***"At first the maid thought that young Smith was already dead, but on pouring some water from the carafe over his forehead..."*

Was that standard first aid procedure in the day? To pour water on the face? Not checking for a heartbeat, staunching the bleeding, elevating the wound? Nope--throw water on their forehead!

And if she thought Smith was dead, why was she pouring water on his face, anyway? *An emergency baptism?!?*

**Honest confession--when I first read the story, I was *certain* that Professor Coram was faking being an invalid. And he sometimes went out dressed as a woman. That would explain Smith's dying words: *"The professor, he murmured--'it was she.'"* It would also explain how the killer "got away"--it was the professor, and he just went back into his room.

Yeah, I was wrong. But you have to admit, it was a fairly cool theory...

**Holmes continues to poke at Hopkins' competence fairly mercilessly: *"What did you do, Hopkins, after you had made certain that you had made certain of nothing?"*

Perhaps that is actually a sign of Holmes regard for Hopkins potential--he holds the young man to a higher standard...

Then again, perhaps Hopkins **IS a terrible detective:

There were some papers of importance in the cupboard, but there were no signs that this had been tampered with

But there had *obviously* been some tampering--the scratch on the metal was fresh, and the flecks of varnish were still present, which means the scratch had to have happened after the last time the maid dusted--just a quarter hour before the murder! *How* could Hopkins have missed this?!?

Really, if Hopkins truly considered himself a student of Holmes' methods, then based on this outing, he's not going to get a very good grade.

**Holmes description of Anna, based merely on her glasses:

Wanted, a woman of good address, attired like a lady. She has a remarkably thick nose, with eyes which are set close upon either side of it. She has a puckered forehead, a peering expression, and probably rounded shoulders. There are indications that she has had recourse to an optician at least twice during the last few months. As her glasses are of remarkable strength, and as opticians are not very numerous, there should be no difficulty in tracing her.

As many have pointed out, just because the glasses are relatively expensive, it does not *automatically* translate that the owner is currently well-to-do.

Especially given the evidence that the owner had gone to the trouble to repair them (twice) rather than replace them. Compare, for example, the case of **Henry Baker** and his precious hat in **Blue Carbuncle**...

**Holmes again instantly seeing what others should have seen long before he became involved: "*The idea of murder was not in her mind, or she would have provided herself with some sort of weapon, instead of having to pick this knife off the writing-table.*"

**Watson's description of Coram:

I have seldom seen a more remarkable-looking person. It was a gaunt, aquiline face which was turned towards us, with piercing dark eyes, which lurked in deep hollows under overhung and tufted brows. His hair and beard were white, save that the latter was curiously stained with yellow around his mouth. A cigarette glowed amid the tangle of white hair, and the air of the room was fetid with stale tobacco smoke.

Watson almost makes him out to be **Gandalf**: "*He was, indeed, a weird figure as he turned his white mane and his glowing eyes towards us.*"

**Watson says that Coram had "*a curious little mincing accent.*" Obviously he was trying to hide his native Russian accent.

It should be noted that "*mincing accent*" was a fairly common usage at the time, usually referring to the perceived "sing-song" accents of East Indians and other Asians attempting to speak the Queen's English. Some speech books of the day also referred to Cockneys as having a "mincing accent."

**So, Professor Coram smokes. A lot. An awful lot:

He sends me a thousand at a time, and I grieve to say that I have to arrange for a fresh supply every

fortnight.

If we take that as literally true, that equates to *more than 70 cigarettes per day!!* If he sleeps 8 hours a day, that's more than 4 cigarettes per hour, all day long!

Even if we allow for casual conversational rounding, and perhaps self-deprecating exaggeration, that's still one hell of a lot of cigarettes. And they're all *unfiltered!!*

****The smoking, of course, allowed Holmes' ploy with the ashes:**

I observed that he was smoking with extraordinary rapidity. "I am a connoisseur," said he, taking another cigarette from the box--his fourth--and lighting it from the stub of that which he had finished consuming cigarette after cigarette.

Here's the thing, though--were there *no ashtrays* in those days? I mean, even if he's your guest, wouldn't you notice/mention that a guy is just dumping the ash from a dozen cigarettes all over your carpet?

Or was that the accepted practice in the household? The maids must have a lot of fun cleaning the place...

****Coram's description of his maid: "Susan is a country girl," said he, "and you know the incredible stupidity of that class."**

Of course, Coram is trying to get the detectives to ignore the girl's evidence, so he has ample motive to try and get them to discount what she heard.

Still, it's amazingly rude. I guess reformed Nihilists can *still* be obnoxious class snobs...

****Wonderful observation/deduction by Holmes: "Ah! But it kills the appetite." And yet he ate all of his meals...**

****Tipping the cigarette case is an old ploy that Holmes has used as a distraction many time before. Tipping over the vase in the Reigate Squires is another example...**

****Watson on Anna 's first appearance:**

Her face, too, was streaked with grime, and at the best she could never have been handsome, for she had the exact physical characteristics which Holmes had divined, with, in addition, a long and obstinate chin. And yet, in spite of all these disadvantages, there was a certain nobility in the woman's bearing--a gallantry in the defiant chin and in the upraised head, which compelled something of respect and admiration.

Yet Watson doesn't do very well as a doctor here. Despite obvious signs that she's under some fairly serious distress, it is Sherlock, not John, who notices something is amiss: *"I fear that you are far from well."*

Even when she *"had turned a dreadful colour, the more ghastly under the dark dust-streaks upon her face,"* Watson doesn't seem able to perceive that something is seriously wrong, let alone attempt to diagnose her malady.

**Once again, foreign intrigues have come to London to settle matters in a deadly fashion. Seriously, why the hell did Britain ever allow immigrants in, given all the trouble they cause in the Canon?

**OK, here's the *big* problem with our mystery.

The sequence of events: Anna sneaks into the house and steals the letters & diary. Willoughby Smith stumbles in while she's doing it, and she accidentally kills him trying to escape. She accidentally flees down the wrong corridor, and ends up in the professor's room.

She threatens him--"hide me or I'll tell the Brotherhood where you are." He complies, going to great length to hide her.

But couldn't Anna have cut out *all* those middle steps? Rather than the break in and the struggle and the hurried misguided flight, couldn't she have just openly gone to the professor to begin with, and said "give me the letters or I'll tell the Brotherhood where you are"? We've already seen that he was *terrified* of that outcome, and gave in to that threat even when it meant concealing a murderer. Wouldn't he have given in just as quickly if she had called on him during business hours, and made the same threat? No burglary or murder needed!!

Sure, she thought, "*Yet I was sure that, with his revengeful nature, he would never give it to me of his own free-will.*" But he did give in to you, because of a simple extortion. Why wouldn't he have done the same initially?!?

**The second failed secretary being a *private detective* hired by Anna is rather a delicious detail, don't you think? It's too bad Doyle passed up on the opportunity to have Holmes comment on the quality/foibles of the contemporary "private detectives."

Still, we must ask, as he was already in the household, and had already made an impression of the key, why did the gumshoe decide that "he would not go further"?? Fear of breaking the law? He had already obtained for her an impression of the key and a floor plan and a diary of the household's movements, *in full knowledge* of what Anna intended to do with them. This private detective is surely guilty of being an *accessory* to the burglary. So why cop out before the actual theft?

Anna should have gone to Holmes instead of a private firm. He likely would have been sympathetic to her cause, and we've seen that he has fewer qualms about bending the law when he perceives that justice is at stake...

**Anna has, I think, a *remarkably naive* view of how the Russian government would react to these papers:

He wrote forever dissuading us from such a course. These letters would have saved him. So would my diary, in which, from day to day, I had entered both my feelings towards him and the view which each of us had taken.

Does **anyone** believe they would have commuted Alexis' sentence with this information? "Oh, he was a Nihilist who wanted to overthrow the Tsar, but he *opposed* violence--he wanted to bring down the royal family with peaceful means! We have no problem with *that* kind of free political expression! Let him go!"

I'm just saying, oppressive regimes usually *aren't* so reasonable when it comes to releasing dissidents.

Also, isn't it possible that those papers could end up implicating others who were involved in the Brotherhood but hadn't been caught? Just giving them to the Russians, without some serious study and perhaps editing, might not be wise.

Watson doesn't tell us the outcome of giving the letters and diary to the Russian embassy. But I'll wager that it wasn't a good outcome.

****Why did Anna bring poison?**

I understand why she killed herself when she did--she didn't want to face the gallows or another long prison term.

But did she plan on getting caught?

There have been a couple of radio adaptations of the story, and in those she either shot herself or threw herself in front of a train. Obviously, just as not bringing a weapon showed she didn't intend to be an assassin, in those versions not bringing the poison showed she hadn't planned on dying.

We have to wonder--did she plan to poison Sergius?

Poisoning his precious cigarettes, for example?

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