

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 XXXVIII -- The Adventure of the Missing Three-Quarter

The Adventure Of The Missing Three Quarter--It's Not About The Sports, Silly

An awful lot of people seem to think that **The Adventure of The Missing Three Quarter** is a mystery about sports (sorry, British fans--"sport."). That it's really just **Silver Blaze**, with a missing human in place of a missing horse.

And it's easy to see where folks might get that impression. The title of the story is a rugby term. **Cyril Overton's** initial telegram to **Sherlock Holmes** is couched in sports terms, and his introduction to Holmes is a long paragraph of sport jargon impenetrable to anyone not an avid rugby fan. Overton treats Holmes like a naive shut-in at his lack of awareness of the state of the rugby world.

The mystery is framed for us in terms of the build-up to the crucial "*big game*." One of the potential motives thrown about is the possibility of gamblers wanting to surreptitiously influence the outcome of that game.

And so, perhaps understandably, much of the commentary about this story seem focused on the rugby. They talk about whether or not a three quarter would really be needed to perform the tasks Overton describes; they discuss when and when the game would likely take place; they try and deduce the year from the score **Watson** gives; they discuss what kind of gambling there might have been; they discuss the (rapidly dying) amateurism of rugby. Even famed American sportswriter **Red Smith**, who infamously accused Holmes of chicanery in rigging the race in **Silver Blaze** for gambling profits, chimes in on this story: Holmes *obviously* dragged out the investigation so **Staunton** would miss the game, and Holmes could profit by wagering on **Oxford**!



But the sporting aspect is merely *a distraction*, a setting, and not what **Sir Arthur Conan Doyle** wanted to write about.

Note that in the course of the mystery, Holmes never once interviews *any* of Godfrey Staunton's teammates. He never talks to *coaches* or *players* on the other team. He never looks into the gambling aspect at all, never seeks out any of the wagering that was reputedly going on. He tells Watson that the game and/or gamblers are not likely explanations for the disappearance. We're given the score of the Big Game as a casual afterthought 2/3 of the way through the story, and the sporting aspect is *never mentioned again*.

This story would have been *exactly* the same had it been about a student vanishing before a big exam, or a nobleman vanishing before an important parliamentary vote. The sporting aspect is merely the window dressing, the *aspic* holding together the true ingredients of our story: *love versus class obligations*. Or to put it more sadly, how far a fine young man would go to hide his true love in order to secure an inheritance--*love versus money*.

It's quite a sad tale, actually. Staunton meets, and marries a woman "*as good as she was beautiful and as intelligent as she was good*." Sadly, though, she was "beneath his class." And despite the fact that "*no man need be ashamed of such a wife*," Staunton was certain that the marriage would cause his uncle **Lord Mount-James**--one of the richest men in England!-- to disinherit him. So Godfrey and his pal **Dr. Armstrong** conspired to keep the whole marriage secret--they told no one at all of the marriage, and kept the poor (*unnamed!*) girl in a "lonely cottage," apparently to be visited by her secret husband only when he could get away.

The story is sad and tawdry on a number of levels. You love your wife, but are so afraid of losing an inheritance, you keep her secret? Godfrey was "*not fond*" of his uncle, and would never go to see him "*if he could help it*"--yet he was still eager to left in the will of the man he so disliked. It's cruel to say so, but it is difficult to avoid feeling that the lad loved the possibility of the money *more* than he loved his wife.

The class issues are disturbing to modern ears, as well. The girl was the daughter of a "*landlady*," certainly middle class--but she was still considered beneath him? I'm never clear on the practices of British nobility, but Godfrey Staunton is never referred to by title. Is he noble? He is Lord Mount-James' only heir--would the title pass to him?

Allow me here, if not a full exoneration, than a least a *partial defense* of Mount-James. He is a miserly ***** , to be certain. But we never hear *him* say that poor marriage by Godfrey would lead to disinheritance. The Lord "*knew little*" of his nephew's private life, and certainly had no knowledge of this wedding. We only have the assertion of Dr. Armstrong that "*it was quite certain that the news of his marriage would have been the end of his inheritance*." Yet it clear that Armstrong didn't know Mount-James that well. He assumes that Holmes was hired by the noble skinflint; but as we saw when we met Mount-James, the

nobleman cared *not a whit* about his nephew's life, and declared that he wouldn't spend a farthing to find Godfrey when he was missing--it seems certain that he would never have spared the pounds for private detectives of his own volition. So we only have a third-hand assumption of someone who was in no position to know that Godfrey's wedding would have resulted in disinheritance.

Nonetheless, the fact that Godfrey Staunton and Leslie Armstrong so believed that the three quarter would be deprived of his rightful bequest--and the fact that the unnamed wife was willing to play along with the farce--is indicative of the *stranglehold* that such class considerations had on the behaviors and imaginations of the people of the era. The certainty that any relationship which threatened class boundaries would be punished led to terribly unhealthy actions--the denial of love, the hiding and suppressing of emotions (and relationships)--elaborate hypocrisies that were almost certainly worse than the "*crimes*" they were designed to hide.

Still, as much as a victim of the social structures of the time as Godfrey was, I don't think we can completely absolve him of blame, can we? I would certainly like to think that, were I faced with such a choice, I would say, "*To **** with the bequest,*" and publicly marry my true love. I hope that I would, anyway. Yet Staunton was so afraid of the truth getting out, that even when his wife was terribly ill, "*he had to go to London to play this match, for he could not get out of it without explanations which would expose his secret.*"

Yet why the lust for that money? Staunton may have been "*of modest means,*" but he was a Cambridge student, which indicates he likely had *some* opportunities ahead of him. If he was as good at rugby as Overton averred, the days of professionalism in the sport were very close, and he should have made a fine living. He had wealthy friends (Dr. Armstrong lived in "*a large mansion*"), who were willing to help him conceal the wedding--wouldn't they have been likely to help him had Mount-James disowned him? He had a "lonely cottage"--surely he could have just as easily afforded the same if his secret were revealed. And he could afford a medical bill for thirteen guineas paid to his friend the doctor.

We know precious little about Staunton and his finances, so we shouldn't be *too* judgmental. But at least on the surface, we could read this tale as the story of a man who loved his wife, but was too enchanted by the possibility of great wealth to be happy with her and a more modest income.

[In fairness, it's certainly possible that the unnamed wife was *just* as interested in the inheritance, perhaps even more so than Staunton. The entire scheme may have even been her idea, for all we know. Another reason not to judge Godfrey too harshly based upon the little information we're given.]

So, no, The Adventure Of The Missing Three Quarter had *nothing* to do with rugby, despite everyone's focus upon that aspect of it. The story is, instead, a love tragedy. It is a **Romeo And Juliet** story where a secret wedding is made not to protect the young people from a family feud, but to ensure a large estate. It is a story where fear of being discovered marrying outside of one's class leads to unnatural acts, and end in tragedy (although we cannot say that hiding the wife away caused her tuberculosis, having to keep her hidden away in a remote cottage, unvisited by actual practicing physicians --"Armstrong is not really a doctor in practice."-- surely didn't aid in any possible recovery). It is the tales of a young man so obsessed with keeping a bequest from a man he barely knew and couldn't stand, that he had to forgo most of the experience of living with the woman he loved.

And that's a lot more important than any rugby game, now matter how big.

OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:

****Obviously, the "*marry outside your class*" could still apply today, although it's a much more subtle phenomenon these days. So if anyone wanted to do a modernization of this story, perhaps they could have Staunton in a secret gay marriage. I do know people who have been disowned for such relationships, sadly...**

****While my knowledge of rugby is precisely nil, I feel confident in saying that if your chances of victory depend *entirely* on one player being present, you might want to do a better job of recruiting (and coaching).**

****I am not one of those who suggests that the team is more important than anything, that a player should somehow grin and bear it through personal emergencies rather than miss the big game.**

But still, when he left to go be with his dying wife, he should have at least left a note, or sent a telegram, or something. People were depending upon him, and the "*vanish without any word for three days*" really isn't acceptable. Even a "*Sorry, personal emergency, gotta bail--sorry*" note would have been better than no word at all.

****So, if Lord Mount-James *did* decide to disinherit Staunton over his marriage, to *whom* would the money go? It's hard to see someone as miserly as him leaving all his fortune to charity...**

****I don't usually play this game, but a case could be argued that Doctor Armstrong was the true villain of the piece.**

Holmes praises his intellect and his skill, comparing him with Moriarty!

Perhaps that comparison was more apt than we know. We've already seen that 100% of what we know about the potential of Mount-James disinheriting Staunton came *from Armstrong*, and we've discussed how that seems to be a complete misreading of the miser: Mount-James cared little for Godfrey's private life, and seems terribly unlikely to have hired private detectives to investigate him.

Well, what if the concern for that bequest came *from Armstrong*? What if the whole idea to keep the wedding secret came from Armstrong? The "keep your wife in a secret cottage near me, and live a secret double life" idea--what if it were an idea by Armstrong to manipulate his "intimate" friend? To make Godfrey more dependent upon him, so when Mount-James died, Armstrong's newly rich best friend could fund his literary and scientific endeavors? Maybe Armstrong wasn't as wealthy as he seemed, and...

That might explain why, at the end, Armstrong so readily gave in to Sherlock's request to trust him, which Armstrong had so strongly ignored before--with the wife dead, and the marriage over, there was no longer a threat of Staunton being disowned.

Nah, I don't really believe that.

**Red Smith's *calumny* against Holmes, tongue-in-cheek or not, cannot go unanswered.

As he did for Silver Blaze, Smith accuses Sherlock of "stage-managing" these cases so that Holmes could make a bundle gambling on the event. He argues that Holmes "slow-footed" the investigation--being put off by a "*windy bluff*" from Armstrong, and tricked when he should have been able to follow the carriage easily--until after the Cambridge-Oxford match was over, so Holmes could use his knowledge that Staunton would be absent to place wagers on Oxford.

Hogwash.

The first thing to note is Holmes complete lack of knowledge on the sport--he doesn't even understand the most basic terminology of rugby. Yet he's supposedly able to suddenly have enough mastery of the sport to make intelligent bets based on one piece of information from a doubtless sincere but possibly overreacting coach?

Second, *unlike* in Silver Blaze, where Holmes insisted that the owner keep the horse entered, in this case Holmes insists that Overton assume that Staunton won't be coming back:

I should strongly recommend you to make your preparations for your match without reference to this young gentleman. It must, as you say, have been an overpowering necessity which tore him away in such a fashion, and the same necessity is likely to hold him away.

In other words, unlike Silver Blaze, the word would quickly get out that Godfrey would not be playing, and the odds in favor of Oxford would have quickly risen, *negating* any advantage that a man hoping to take advantage of the three quarter's absence. If Holmes was indeed planning to make a mint gambling on this case, he went about it in completely the wrong way.

Finally, even had Holmes made Armstrong break down with the truth, or successfully followed him the next day, *Staunton would not have played!* Holmes himself declared this, and the sight of Staunton prostrate before the corpse of his wife should make that very clear. Godfrey would not have left his dying wife to play in the game. Holmes' investigation, slow or not, made no difference whatsoever in what would have happened in the game.

Stalling the investigation made would have been pointless--Holmes could have easily made those alleged bets before leaving London, and the outcome would have been the same.

That's what you get when try to look at Missing Three Quarter as a sport story, and try to use it to commit character assassination against the Great Detective. You come off looking like an idiot who hasn't even read the story...

****Watson:** "*We were fairly accustomed to receive weird telegrams at Baker Street.*"

Alright, there's a book I would read: "**Come At Once: Telegrams Received At 221B Baker Street.**"
Somebody get to work on this, please.

****Watson** worried about the lack of business recently:

I knew by experience that my companion's brain was so abnormally active that it was dangerous to leave it without material upon which to work. For years I had gradually weaned him from that drug mania which had threatened once to check his remarkable career. Now I knew that under ordinary conditions he no longer craved for this artificial stimulus, but I was well aware that the fiend was not dead but sleeping, and I have known that the sleep was a light one and the waking near when in periods of idleness I have seen the drawn look upon Holmes's ascetic face, and the brooding of his deep-set and inscrutable eyes.

This is the first we've heard about Sherlock's drug use in quite awhile. It's interesting, because none of Watson's prior descriptions of Holmes' habit sounded this *dire*. "Threatened once to check his remarkable career"?

Is Watson exaggerating here...or had he been downplaying how bad things were in earlier tales?

****Apocryphal case:** "...there was Henry Staunton, whom I helped to hang..."

**Cyril Overton does a *great* job of trying to make Holmes feel ashamed for not knowing more about sports: "*Why, Mr. Holmes, I thought you knew things.*" "*Good Lord! Mr. Holmes, where HAVE you lived?*"

Of course, everyone thinks that everybody else should be familiar with their favorite activity. I can imagine a modern story with a client pillorying Holmes for not being more familiar with **Game Of Thrones**...

**I really don't have any dog in the "*did Sherlock go to Oxford or Cambridge*" arguments.

But from my disinterested viewpoint, this story sure make it look like Holmes isn't terribly familiar with Cambridge. He tells Watson that they are "*stranded and friendless in this inhospitable town.*" And he doesn't seem to be terribly familiar with the geography of the area.

If you went by this story alone, you might have to conclude he was an Oxfordian.

**Holmes, as per usual, picks out the important clues of the case, whilst everyone else focuses on trivia. Sherlock evaluates each theory in terms of the visit from the unknown man and the telegram:

...this young man saw a formidable danger which approached him, and from which someone else could protect him. 'US,' mark you! Another person was involved. Who should it be but the pale-faced, bearded man, who seemed himself in so nervous a state? What, then, is the connection between Godfrey Staunton and the bearded man? And what is the third source from which each of them sought for help against pressing danger? Our inquiry has already narrowed down to that."

And Watson proves that he is indeed becoming *more adept* at the detective's methods, as he notes that all of the potential theories fail to take the telegram into account.

**"Holmes: "*As you have no doubt frequently observed, Watson, the impression usually goes through-- a fact which has dissolved many a happy marriage.*"

A lesson to all adulterers--don't write in pencil, and throw away the blotter paper!

**It seems that telecommunications companies in the Victorian era weren't any better at protecting clients' data from snoopers, As Holmes rather effortlessly gets the original telegram from the station office. "*There is so much red tape in these matters...*" Not for Sherlock Holmes!

Indeed, he has obviously put a large amount of thought into ways to beat the system: "*I had seven different schemes for getting a glimpse of that telegram...*" You're a regular **NSA**, Sherlock!

**Watson's first description of Lord Mount-James:

...a queer little old man, jerking and twitching in the doorway. He was dressed in rusty black, with a very broad-brimmed top-hat and a loose white necktie--the whole effect being that of a very rustic parson or of an undertaker's mute...

One delicious detail highlighting his stinginess: "*I came round as quickly as the Bayswater bus would bring me.*" One of the wealthiest men in England, and he took the public bus instead of a cab...

******Watson seems very impressed by Leslie Armstrong:

...a thinker of European reputation in more than one branch of science...the square, massive face, the brooding eyes under the thatched brows, and the granite moulding of the inflexible jaw. A man of deep character, a man with an alert mind, grim, ascetic, self-contained, formidable...

******This is the *second story in a row* to discuss other private detectives. Clearly, they were far more prominent in 1904 than 1886. And they didn't seem to have too fine a reputation, according to Armstrong:

Where your calling is more open to criticism is when you pry into the secrets of private individuals, when you rake up family matters which are better hidden, and when you incidentally waste the time of men who are more busy than yourself.

Of course, Armstrong did have a bit of a stick up his butt, so it's not clear that the general public would share that opinion.

Then again, given the famous British reserve and expectation of privacy, private dicks may not have been well thought of by the general public. Yet, people had to have somewhere to turn when Holmes turned down their case and the police weren't interested...

******Armstrong says he recognizes Holmes' name, but does not really seem that *familiar* with the detective's reputation:

"I have heard your name, Mr. Sherlock Holmes, and I am aware of your profession--one of which I by no means approve."

"In that, Doctor, you will find yourself in agreement with every criminal in the country," said my friend, quietly.

"So far as your efforts are directed towards the suppression of crime, sir, they must have the support of every reasonable member of the community, though I cannot doubt that the official machinery is amply sufficient for the purpose."

As we have seen, of course, and as has been well reported in the press, Holmes has been quite celebrated for solving cases which "the official machinery" is not "amply sufficient." But perhaps Dr. Armstrong has been far more focused on his lectures and treatises...

******Holmes, the great cover-up specialist: *"I have already told you that I can hush up that which others will be bound to publish."*

Except, of course, when Watson publishes it...

****Given that Armstrong calms the **** down as soon as Sherlock says "I am not employed by Lord Mount-James, and that my sympathies in this matter are entirely against that nobleman," one wonders why Sherlock didn't bring that up *far earlier*.**

Dr. Armstrong dropped off a note to Holmes. Perhaps a simple reply not-- "*I don't work for Mount-James*"--could have spared us a lot of running around.

Then again, it's possible that Armstrong finally relented because the marriage no longer existed to cover up. It does seem an awfully quick 180 degree turn by him, though.

****Pompey!!**

My friend Dawn hates Sherlock Holmes, but she likes dogs. So this picture is for her.

****Stylistically, we have a return to earlier Holmes stories, with an incredibly abrupt ending, leaving us no information whatsoever about what happens to our characters in the future. What becomes of Staunton? Does he rejoin the team? Does the wedding become public knowledge? Does he get the estate?**

Would it have killed you to give us an extra sentence or two, Sir Arthur?

Brian Keith Snell

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