

## *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 XXXIX -- The Adventure of the Abbey Grange

## The Adventure of The Abbey Grange--Judge, Jury and Executioner?!?

**The Adventure Of The Abbey Grange**, of course, is the source of one of the more famous **Sherlock Holmes** quotes: "*The game is afoot!*"

As it turns out, Abbey Grange is also the story that makes us ask whether or not Sherlock Holmes is treating justice *too much* like a game.

We have seen thus far many stories where Holmes does not turn in the perpetrator. In **A Case of Identity**, there was no crime committed, and Holmes also decided that it would be far too icky to tell his client that she was wooed by her own stepfather. In **The Boscombe Valley Mystery**, the murderer was dying, and Holmes made sure that he left a signed confession so no innocent party would be convicted. In **The Blue Carbuncle**, Holmes hadn't been hired by the police, and chose to show holiday-inspired mercy to an inept thief who seemed unlikely to break the law again. In **Beryl Coronet**, Holmes allowed a blackguard to flee in order to protect his client--as well as one of England's "*highest, noblest, most exalted names*"--from scandal. In **Copper Beeches**, Holmes did not turn in **Rucastle** for kidnapping--perhaps because his victim had escaped and eloped, perhaps because the detective thought getting mauled by a dog was punishment enough.



In **The Naval Treaty**, Holmes allowed **Joseph** to flee, in order to get the papers back, although he *did* wire Scotland Yard about him--but not until the next morning. In **The Priory School**, Sherlock was persuaded by a very wealthy man to allow the villain to get away ("no, really, he's leaving the country and will reform!!").

He lied to the police about his knowledge of the murder of **Charles Augustus Milverton**, because the blackmailer had it coming (and to turn in the mysterious lady would have incriminated he and **Watson** for burglary!).

So, there have been plenty of times when Holmes has substituted his own judgement for that of the official legal system. It's hardly a rare occurrence.

Whether it is because he feels the criminal has been punished harshly enough, or in order to best protect his client, Holmes has shown little compunction about covering up the truth, and allowing criminals to go.

Holmes tells Watson that "*Once or twice in my career I feel that I have done more real harm by my discovery of the criminal than ever he had done by his crime. I have learned caution now, and I had rather play tricks with the law of England than with my own conscience.*" Perhaps **Sir Arthur Conan Doyle** should have shown us one of those stories, where Holmes turning in the crook did "more harm than the criminal deserved." As a reader, I'd like to see something concrete to justify Holmes' decision to use his "*right of private judgement*" so often.

Personally, I find the "*protect someone from scandal*" excuse fairly flimsy. If the "highest, noblest, most exalted name" in England did something so ridiculously stupid--pawning a national treasure!!--perhaps it is in the best interest of the nation to let that news become public, especially when the stupid act results in sordid consequences. If the **Duke of Holderness** aids and abets murderers and kidnappers to hide the fact that he has an illegitimate son, well, maybe it is *better* that the truth comes out, so no one will trust him with public office again. If a government clerk (who got his post through nepotism) is careless enough to leave an important secret treaty on the desk of his unlocked office while he goes to get coffee--well, maybe he *should* have to resign his office in disgrace.

In Abbey Grange, the problem is perhaps a *bit* more tangled. In this case, Holmes is not protecting his client--he was brought in by **Inspector Hopkins**. So in this instance, by covering up the murders, he is actually acting against his client's wishes and interests.

And yet, if we believe the story spun by **Croker**--a *huge* if, to be sure--certainly he and **Lady Brackenstall** are certainly more deserving of mercy than many of the other criminals Holmes has chosen to let off the hook.

That fact, though, makes it all the more curious *why* Holmes might circumvent the police and courts. If their story is true, Croker certainly has a very strong case for self-defense, or even justifiable homicide, in defense of Mary. And as for Mary, if Croker is found not guilty, it would be difficult to convict her of being an accomplice. Both still might face some type of obstruction charges--lying to the police, tampering with

evidence--but given that they killed man and covered it up, that's hardly *too* large an inconvenience to suffer, is it? And surely the woman who declared that "*this English life, with its proprieties and its primness, is not congenial to me*" is not afraid of some scandal, especially when the fact of Sir Eustace's behaviour was already "*known to everyone.*" If it is so obvious that a jury would acquit, why does Holmes feel the need to "take a great responsibility" upon himself?

And when you throw in the possibility that "*innocent*" people--the **Randall** family of burglars--were being framed for murder, well, that adds to the scales on the side of telling Inspector Hopkins everything, doesn't it? **Theresa**, Mary and Captain Croker had no way of knowing that the "*Lewisham gang*" had fled to America (or did they?). By basing their false tale of murderous burglars on a *real* group of people, they quite deliberately put the Randalls in jeopardy of facing the gallows for a crime these criminals didn't commit. No matter how sympathetic you are to the conspirators, that kind of recklessness with the lives of others should not--*cannot*--be condoned. In my view, at least, the selfishness of the "*Abbey Grange Gang*"--the willingness to put others in jeopardy of capital punishment to cover their own, supposedly lesser, crime--suggests that they don't *deserve* to have the affair covered up by Holmes.

It should also be noted that perhaps we should *not* trust the veracity of Croker's story. When you reread the story, you realize that *100%* of the evidence Holmes finds, and the *100%* deductions he makes, are of events *after* the murder. There is not one shred of evidence to support the captain's version of events--that he came in (through the window!!) for a platonic goodbye, that **Sir Eustace** then came in and attacked first. There is nothing to support this tale besides the testimony of the conspirators themselves, who have already proven less than trustworthy.

Some commentators have suggested that Lady Brackenstall was really a very clever murderess. Some go so far as to suggest she made up the stories of abuse, stabbing herself with hatpins to make her husband look like a cad. With this she lured Captain Croker to keep seeing her, and to come to her "*defense.*" Or perhaps Mary and Croker were having an affair, and this was an attempt by them to remove her husband from the picture. These strike me as too clever by half--a frame, wrapped around a carefully cultivated lie to bring forth if anyone saw through that? Still, *none* of these possibilities are ruled out by *any* of the evidence that Holmes gathers. Perhaps, then, Sherlock should not be so quick to extend his mercy and subvert the law.

Finally, Holmes himself seems less than firmly resolved to keep the police away from the truth. He tells Hopkins where the silver was, and tries to convince the inspector to accept the theory that it was a blind. This could *only* have led to the conclusion that Lady Brackenstall's tale was not true, had Hopkins had the sense to use it. Holmes declaration at the end of the tale--"*I have given Hopkins an excellent hint and if he can't avail himself of it I can do no more*"--does not sound like the attitude of a man who is convinced that he is morally

right in this matter. It sounds more as if he is playing a game, rolling the 12-sided die for the fate of all involved.

Ironically, with his constant 'testing' of Croker--"*and you ring true every time*"--Holmes is doing *exactly* what he accuses Watson of doing--reacting to emotional responses, instead of real evidence and justice!

By our modern times, we're used to vigilantes in fiction, those who take the law into their own hands. Heroes who decide who should be punished, and who shouldn't. In this, as in so many other ways, Sherlock Holmes was a pioneer.

But Holmes was *not* omniscient. In this very case he nearly "*committed the blunder of [his] lifetime.*" One would hope that he would be far less cavalier in letting thieves and murderers roam free, more cautious in protecting the rest of the public from potential future crimes. Discretion is one thing; whimsical "sentencing," is not what we expect from someone who is playing judge and jury.

When Sherlock Holmes covers up major crimes to protect reputations or avert scandal, he forfeits a bit of his moral authority. When he treats dispensing justice like a game, "*playing tricks with the law*"--"Hey, if Hopkins picks up on it, you're arrested, if not, *c'est la vie!*"--he loses the audiences trust a bit.

The game is afoot--but too often, it's because Holmes let them go himself.

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

\*\*One theory that haven't seen get a lot of play is that maybe, just maybe, Theresa the maid is not an innocent in all this.

If you recall, it was *Theresa* whom Jack Croker first encounters in England, and it is from *her* that he learns of Brackenstall's (alleged?) cruel treatment of Mary. It was Theresa's tales that "*nearly drove him mad.*" It was from Theresa that Croker "*learned the ways of the household.*" It was no doubt Theresa who arranged the initial meeting of Jack and Mary, if not all of them.

And when it came to the cover-up, well, "*Theresa was as cool as ice, and it was her plot as much as mine.*" Pretty telling, that.

Theresa hated Sir Eustace, especially after he threw a decanter at her head (if that happened). Her mistress stood to become quite wealthy should anything befall him. And she seems to have been a prime mover in getting all our players to the same place at the crucial time. Was *she* trying to mastermind a justifiable homicide?!?

*\*\*"Watson, you are a British jury, and I never met a man who was more eminently fitted to represent one."*

Well, hold on now, Sherlock. Not that Watson isn't quite the wonderful chap. But he is your best friend and biographer, and always seems inclined to believe *whatever* theory you put forth. Somehow I don't think that he can be impartial in any matter where you're playing both judge and prosecutor.

Indeed, Watson may very well not be impartial when it comes to Lady Brackenstall, either. Some have commented that Holmes might have been hoodwinked by her charms. But read Watson's description of their first meeting, and you tell me if you think he could be a fair "jury" for her:

*Seldom have I seen so graceful a figure, so womanly a presence, and so beautiful a face. She was a blonde, golden-haired, blue-eyed, and would no doubt have had the perfect complexion which goes with such colouring...*

*Vox populi, vox dei?* Watson seems a little too smitten, methinks, to make that conclusion.

*\*\*British editions spelled the captain's name "Crocker;" American versions went with "Crocker."*

*\*\*Again, the message come through loud and clear: don't marry someone from one of the colonies. America, Australia...their women are nothing but trouble!!*

*\*\*More great imagery from Sir Arthur's pen:*

*The first faint winter's dawn was beginning to appear, and we could dimly see the occasional figure of an early workman as he passed us, blurred and indistinct in the opalescent London reek.*

"The opalescent London reek"?? Such delicious stuff...

*\*\*As Holmes and Watson peruse Hopkins' note on the train: "We are moving in high life, Watson, crackling paper, 'E.B.' monogram, coat-of-arms..."*

Wait a minute!! Did Hopkins *post a letter on Sir Eustace's own stationery*, rather than send a telegram? Wouldn't the latter have been faster (especially after midnight?) If the former, didn't Hopkins have any paper of his own to write on?

Purloining the stationery of a murder victim, Hopkins? That is...well, *unseemly*?

*\*\*Holmes declares that "Hopkins has called me in 7 times." Assuming he's not counting this very incident, we've seen 3 of those cases (if you consider Hopkins referring a client to Holmes in **The Missing Three Quarter**)...what were the *other* 4 cases? Tell us, Watson!!*

*\*\*Once again, Sir Arthur has fun using Holmes to critique Watson's writing. So Doyle is actually having his most famous creation mock his own writing!*

*I must admit, Watson, that you have some power of selection, which atones for much which I deplore in your narratives. Your fatal habit of looking at everything from the point of view of a story instead of as a*

*scientific exercise has ruined what might have been an instructive and even classical series of demonstrations. You slur over work of the utmost finesse and delicacy, in order to dwell upon sensational details which may excite, but cannot possibly instruct, the reader."*

We'll see Sherlock's own writing up of his cases soon enough, and see how well his critique bears up...

*\*\*Mary: "I was brought up in the freer, less conventional atmosphere of South Australia, and this English life, with its proprieties and its primness, is not congenial to me."*

Well, the English don't *condone murder*, if that's what you mean...or meeting with strange men who come in through your window in the middle of the night...

More seriously, it would be of interest to hear *which* proprieties and primnesses were not so congenial to her. She's certainly prim enough to condemn her husband's drinking...

*\*\*"Sir Eustace was a confirmed drunkard. To be with such a man for an hour is unpleasant. Can you imagine what it means for a sensitive and high-spirited woman to be tied to him for day and night?"*

Well, that's a bit of a *humble brag*, isn't it? Calling herself *sensitive and high-spirited*?

But more seriously, was none of this evident *before* the marriage? There were 6 months between their meeting and the wedding. Did he never get "half-drunk" during their courtship or engagement? Did he hide it? Did he manage not to burn dogs or throw glassware at servants or stab people for the whole period? Did he abstain from liquor whenever he was going to be with he for half a year?

*\*\*Mary again: "It is a sacrilege, a crime, a villainy to hold that such a marriage is binding. I say that these monstrous laws of yours will bring a curse upon the land--God will not let such wickedness endure."*

Doyle was a strong advocate for reforming these draconian divorce laws, and this certainly sounds like a bit of proselytizing for changes.

*\*\*Sir Eustace was said to have come at the burglars "with his favourite blackthorn cudgel in his hand."*

His *favourite*? He had *more than one* blackthorne cudgel? He had them ranked?

*\*\*When the mystery begins to look like an open and shut case, Watson notes that Sherlock begins to look like "an abstruse and learned specialist who finds that he has been called in for a case of measles would experience something of the annoyance which I read in my friend's eyes."*

Is this Watson snidely attacking specialists, too annoyed with their higher studies to help the commonplace ill? Maybe even Sir Arthur sticking it to his own profession?

*\*\*Holmes, examining the ground outside the windows where the burglars allegedly came in, and where Jack Croker did actually center from: "There are no signs here, but the ground is iron hard, and one would not expect them."*

Again, remember when Holmes gave Hopkins *crap* for such a lackluster analysis of the ground in **Black Peter**?

*My good Hopkins, I have investigated many crimes, but I have never yet seen one which was committed by a flying creature. 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..*

So, detective, heal thyself?!?

**\*\*Self-analysis from Sherlock:** *"Perhaps, when a man has special knowledge and special powers like my own, it rather encourages him to seek a complex explanation when a simpler one is at hand."*

Watson should have shown us such a tale, at some point. Holmes coming up with an amazing theory of the crime, and it turns out to be pretty simple...

**\*\*Holmes again, on why you should never take seemingly innocent but out-of-place details lightly:**

*Every instinct that I possess cries out against it. It's wrong--it's all wrong--I'll swear that it's wrong. And yet the lady's story was complete, the maid's corroboration was sufficient, the detail was fairly exact. What have I to put up against that? Three wine-glasses, that is all. But if I had not taken things for granted, if I had examined everything with the care which I should have shown had we approached the case DE NOVO and had no cut-and-dried story to warp my mind, should I not then have found something more definite to go upon? Of course I should.*

In other words, don't let "eyewitness" testimony influence you too much, especially when they might be lying...

**\*\*Interesting fact about Victorian burglars:** *"As a matter of fact, burglars who have done a good stroke of business are, as a rule, only too glad to enjoy the proceeds in peace and quiet without embarking on another perilous undertaking."*

See, that's why they never get rich. Do a job, lay around and live off the proceeds...then you're broke again, and have to go back into action.

Don't be *layabouts*, you potential burglars out there! Keep working until you have a sufficient nest egg! Burgle more often--every night if you must!--so you can take an extended vacation!

**\*\*Holmes explains why the three wine glasses matter so much:**

*But if I have hit upon the true explanation of this one small phenomenon, then in an instant the case rises from the commonplace to the exceedingly remarkable, for it can only mean that Lady Brackenstall and her maid have deliberately lied to us, that not one word of their story is to be believed, that they have some very strong reason for covering the real criminal, and that we must construct our case for ourselves without any help from them.*

Yet, Holmes ultimately does construct his case with help from them, and believed the (second) story the conspirators gave, even though "*not one word of their story is to be believed*"! And he took Jack Croker's tale as *verbatim* truth, without a shred of evidence!

**\*\*Both Theresa and Jack seem pretty sure that Mary wed Sir Eustace just for the money.**

Theresa: "*He won her with his title and his money and his false London ways.*"

Jack: "*Well, why shouldn't she marry whom she liked? Title and money--who could carry them better than she?*"

I'm not saying at all that it justified any of the abuse. But seriously, if she didn't like the prim and proper English ways, than marrying a noble for his title and money isn't a recipe for happiness.

**\*\*Description of Jack from his shipping company: "[A] wild, desperate fellow off the deck of his ship--hot-headed, excitable..."**

This is the guy you promote to captain?

Still, if this was his reputation, perhaps it means that Mary and/or Theresa *knew* he could be easily goaded into violence, and thus was the perfect patsy to set-up for a "*crime of passion*."

**\*\*"I believe you are a man of your word, and a white man, and I'll tell you the whole story."**

Oh, Captain Jack, you racist **\*\*\*\*\***.

**\*\*Sir Eustace "called [Mary] the vilest name that a man could use to a woman."**

Admit it, you're *dying* to know what that could be, circa 1897...

**\*\*Croker describing the end of the fight: "Then it was my turn, and I went through him as if he had been a rotten pumpkin. Do you think I was sorry? Not I!"**

Wow. And this was the guy Holmes decided was worthy of mercy and a cover-up? If you want mercy from *me*, you probably should revel in needlessly graphic descriptions of your victim's death...

**Brian Keith Snell**

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