

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

His Last Bow Adventure XLI -- The Adventure of Wisteria Lodge

The Adventure of Wisteria Lodge--Just One More Thing, Sir!

The Adventure of Wisteria Lodge leaves me lukewarm, for a number of reasons.

The first is that our heroes seem *terribly detached* from anything in the mystery.

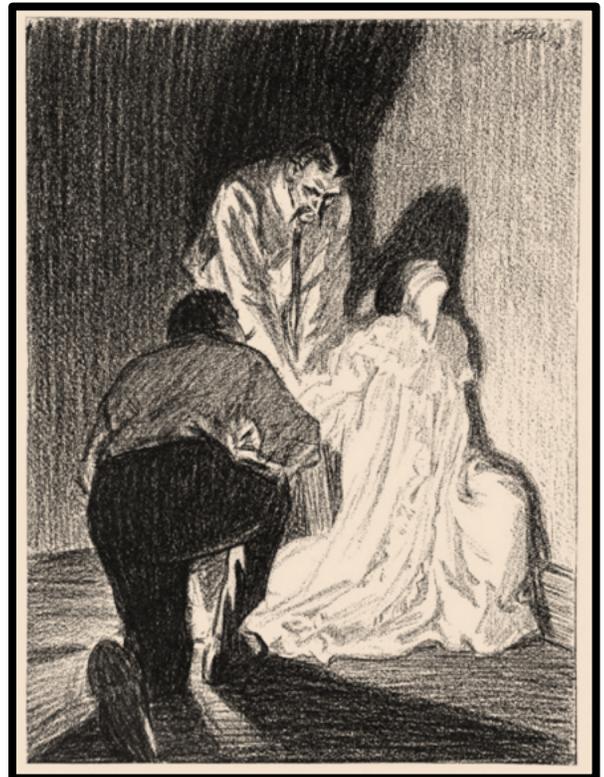
An interesting client, **Mr. Scott Eccles**, comes to **Baker Street** with a quandary. The police burst in, wishing to question him, as it turns out that quandary has evolved into...*a murder!!* And as Scotland Yard leads him away for a formal statement, Scott Eccles declares, "*Certainly, I will come at once. But I retain your services, Mr. Holmes. I desire you to spare no expense and no pains to get at the truth.*"

We never hear from him again. He may be the client, but **Holmes** and **Watson** seem to feel no obligation to communicate at all with him after this.

We never meet the victim while he's alive--not so unusual in a mystery short story, after all. But we *never* meet the killer, either--Holmes apparently has a brief conversation with him, off-screen as it were, but Watson is never in his presence, so neither are we. There is no battle of wits, just a description of a guy who may or may not be involved.

After "*day succeeded day*," we're really *no* closer to solving the mystery. Sherlock has no idea who Henderson really is, and no evidence to justify any action. It seems likely that Holmes' inactivity would continue, were it not for his certainty that a woman was being held captive.

So, we're ready for some positive action, finally--a break-in, with the threat of arrest and disgrace awaiting our heroes.



And then...*the house is empty, everyone has left!* No confrontation, no stealth rescue...*nothing*. Holmes and Watson *never even leave their room!*

Well, surely, they rescue the lady? Uh...nope. That's done by a character we haven't met yet, off-screen: "*They've gone, Mr. Holmes. They went by the last train. The lady broke away, and I've got her in a cab downstairs.*"

Oh, OK, then.

It almost seems as if **Sir Arthur Conan Doyle** is deliberately trying to tease us in this story. We have an interesting premise for a mystery. He quickly removes the client, never shows us the victim, never has us meet the villains, and has our heroes uninvolved in rescuing the damsel. The villains even get away scot-free! What the *hell* kind of Sherlock Holmes story is this? And don't get me started on the offensive racial stuff...

So there's one thing, and one thing only, that makes Wisteria Lodge particularly noteworthy: **Inspector Baynes**.

What an interesting creation!! At last, a police detective who is a *worthy challenger* for Sherlock Holmes!! One who is not a dolt, who has the imagination that Holmes so often demands, one who implement plots as clever as the Great Detective!

Baynes doesn't sound like much, based on Watson's initial description, except for one crucial detail: "*The country detective was a stout, puffy, red man, whose face was only redeemed from grossness by two extraordinarily bright eyes, almost hidden behind the heavy creases of cheek and brow.*"

Ah, the smart fat man. A **Nero Wolfe**, a **Frank Cannon**, a **Fatman** with no **Jake**! And you can tell how smart he is, because Watson never brings up the "*grossness*" again, instead focusing on Baynes' demeanor and intelligence.

I'll admit, that same demeanor had me thinking of TV's **Lt. Columbo**. The detective who doesn't look like much of a threat, the polite mien, the deferential attitude to those who think themselves superior while making the slow and steady progress, solving the case despite people taking him too lightly.

Most amazing is the instant respect that he and Holmes seem to have for each other. Other inspectors we've might have bristled when Holmes declared that they had missed some clues. Not Baynes: "*The country detective chuckled. 'I thought I had squeezed all the juice out of it, but I see there was a little over,' he said.*" No jealousy or resentment, as you'd get from many a pompous Scotland Yard git, but a verbal bow of respect!

And it is a *mutual admiration society*, as Holmes congratulates Baynes: "*I must congratulate you, Inspector, on handling so distinctive and instructive a case. Your powers, if I may say so without offence, seem superior to your opportunities.*" High praise, indeed, from the bedeviller of police detectives!

Most interest is the little *competition* the two detectives set up between themselves:

"You have a theory then?"

"And I'll work it myself, Mr. Holmes. It's only due to my own credit to do so. Your name is made, but I have still to make mine. I should be glad to be able to say afterwards that I had solved it without your help."

Holmes laughed good-humoredly. "Well, well, Inspector," said he. "Do you follow your path and I will follow mine. My results are always very much at your service if you care to apply to me for them."

It's a competition that Baynes wins handily, in my opinion. The country detective is the one who comes up with the Holmes-like plan to capture the missing chef, and succeeds. Yet Holmes doesn't see it:

"I have looked into this case with some care, and I am not convinced that you are on the right lines. I don't want you to commit yourself too far unless you are sure."

"You're very kind, Mr. Holmes."

"I assure you I speak for your good." It seemed to me that something like a wink quivered for an instant over one of Mr. Baynes's tiny eyes. "We agreed to work on our own lines, Mr. Holmes. That's what I am doing."

"Oh, very good," said Holmes. "Don't blame me."

"No, sir; I believe you mean well by me. But we all have our own systems, Mr. Holmes. You have yours, and maybe I have mine."

"And you think you have evidence that he murdered his late master?"

"I didn't say so, Mr. Holmes; I didn't say so. We all have our little ways. You try yours and I will try mine. That's the agreement."

Holmes shrugged his shoulders as we walked away together. "I can't make the man out. He seems to be riding for a fall. Well, as he says, we must each try our own way and see what comes of it. But there's something in Inspector Baynes which I can't quite understand."

It's interesting that Holmes can't see *his own methods* in another detective, and doesn't realize that the trap for the chef was really a trap for the true villain.

Baynes also figures out that **High Gable** is the source of all the mischief, apparently at the same time as Holmes. And while Holmes' hireling manages to rescue the girl (without Sherlock's knowledge, or help), Baynes is the one who figures out that **Henderson's** true identity is **Don Murillo**. Exactly how he manages to do that is *unexplained*--but the country detective somehow has traced all of the ex-dictator's movements since his exile!! All Holmes managed during this time was to look up some information on voodoo that was completely irrelevant to the case.

No, it's a solid victory for Baynes here, as Holmes manfully acknowledges: Holmes laid his hand upon the inspector's shoulder. *"You will rise high in your profession. You have instinct and intuition," said he. Baynes flushed with pleasure.*

One fascinating detail is how much Baynes' prospects have been limited by his posting in Surrey. Despite Sherlock telling us how much scarier the countryside is in **The Copper Beeches**, it seems that there's not enough spectacular crime in rural areas for a police detective to get noticed and advance:

Inspector Baynes's small eyes twinkled with pleasure. "You're right, Mr. Holmes. We stagnate in the provinces. A case of this sort gives a man a chance, and I hope that I shall take it." That puts a copper in the absurd position of almost rooting for sensational murders to solve.

Yet it's not as if Baynes' became smart overnight--he obviously was *always* this smart. But his tame beat, and no doubt partially his looks, kept him from bigger things. No wonder he latched onto this opportunity, and refused to take help from Holmes. This might have been his *only* real chance to prove himself! A spotlight murder, the attention of Scotland Yard, the esteem that would come when colleagues learned he had solved a case better than the great Sherlock Holmes...this was his chance to get out of the "*minor leagues*," and he was taking it!

Why, oh why, did we *never* see Baynes again? He is so much more interesting than most of the other police that Holmes has worked with!

I suppose that it would be a too difficult a balancing act to pull off much more often: A detective as smart (or smarter) than Holmes? How would that sell, when one of the reasons people love Sherlock Holmes is they love to see the "civilian" sticking it too stuffy bureaucratic "official" police? And how, in a short story, do you provide many cases that can equally challenge *both* men, without making one or the other look the sidekick? Two smart detectives might spoil the broth, as it were.

But in a story where Doyle seems to be doing everything possible to distance the readers, Inspector Baynes stands out. It's too bad that he was destined to become Doyle's *forgotten detective*.

OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:

***"How do you define the word 'grotesque'?" "Strange--remarkable," I suggested. He shook his head at my definition. "There is surely something more than that," said he; "some underlying suggestion of the tragic and the terrible."*

Perhaps. But the examples he goes on to cite as having started as "grotesque at the outset...yet deepened into the criminal"--**The Red-Headed League**, or the **Five Orange Pips**--weren't particularly tragic or terrible, especially poor **Jabez Wilson**. Baffling? Perhaps? Odd? Sure. But *grotesque*?

Most modern definitions of the word include the concept of something "*repulsive*" or "*distorted*" or "*unnatural*." One might think that **The Hound Of The Baskervilles**, or **The Speckled Band**, might be more accurately be described as "grotesque."

Then again, perhaps our use of the word has shifted somewhat since the early 20th century...

**Is Holmes jabbing Watson with his "*Watson, we must look upon you as a man of letters...*"? He does, after all, preface it with "*I suppose*." And he immediately disagree with Watson on the one thing he need a man of letters for...

**Accurate observation of gender differences by Holmes, or sexism? "*Oh, man, of course. No woman would ever send a reply-paid telegram. She would have come.*"

**Apocryphal case: "*you know how bored I have been since we locked up Colonel Carruthers.*"

Another evil colonel. What is it that turns *so many* colonels evil (at least in the **Canon**)? Frustration at not being able to move up any higher?!?

**Watson making Holmes-worthy deductions:

His life history was written in his heavy features and pompous manner. From his spats to his gold-rimmed spectacles he was a Conservative, a churchman, a good citizen, orthodox and conventional to the last degree.

Not the hardest or deepest deductions in the world, of course. But it shows that Watson does, indeed, know his flatmate's methods.

**Maybe insulting a guy before you hire him is bad form...

Private detectives are a class with whom I have absolutely no sympathy, but none the less, having heard your name--"

No wonder Sherlock never got back to him in the story...

**"*Come, come, sir,*" said Holmes, laughing. "*You are like my friend, Dr. Watson, who has a bad habit of telling his stories wrong end foremost.*"

So, what end *should* they be written from? From the solution backwards?!?

Unless, of course, Sherlock is critiquing the massive historical digression in **A Study In Scarlet** (and later in **The Valley Of Fear**). In which case we agree, putting 60 pages of flashback at the *end* of your mystery is indeed "telling stories with the wrong end foremost."

Look!! It's **Inspector Gregson!! He vanishes very *quickly*, though...Did we really need him to make the introduction of Baynes?

The "*police burst in wanting to question someone just as they're about to tell Holmes his story*" shtick is, of course, a reprise from **The Norwood Builder:

"Wait a bit, Gregson," said Sherlock Holmes. "All you desire is a plain statement, is it not?" "And it is my duty to warn Mr. Scott Eccles that it may be used against him." "Mr. Eccles was going to tell us about it when you entered the room. I think, Watson, a brandy and soda would do him no harm. Now, sir, I suggest that you take no notice of this addition to your audience, and that you proceed with your narrative exactly as you would have done had you never been interrupted."

A lot of people want to argue that Holmes has a legal degree, or at least extensive training. However, these instances would certainly argue *against* Holmes ever having been a lawyer. He's more interested in hearing the story, no matter who it's in front of, than in protecting his client from the possible legal repercussions of making a statement in front of the police--in both cases, a statement that Holmes has no idea of what the content of the statement will be!

***Scott Eccles: "I am a bachelor," said he, "and being of a sociable turn...[Garcia] spoke perfect English, was pleasing in his manners, and as good-looking a man as ever I saw in my life...In some way we struck up quite a friendship, this young fellow and I. He seemed to take a fancy to me from the first, and within two days of our meeting he came to see me at Lee. One thing led to another, and it ended in his inviting me out to spend a few days at his house..."*

Some have suggested that this language hints that Scott Eccles was gay, and his stay at Wisteria Lodge was intended to be of a romantic nature.

I'm not saying that's not possible (nor do I have any problem with that). But we later learn that Garcia was attempting to establish an alibi by providing a witness of impeccable character:

He is the very type of conventional British respectability, and the very man as a witness to impress another Briton. You saw yourself how neither of the inspectors dreamed of questioning his statement, extraordinary as it was.

Given the prevailing attitude of authorities at the time, choosing a homosexual lover for that role would likely prove *counter-productive*. Nothing would shatter the police's trust in Scott Eccles' statement quite like "oh, you're one of them! How do we know you're not covering for your lover? Etc."

The **Granada** adaptation gives the men a clearer reason to get together--they're cartography buffs. At least Scott Eccles is...Garcia is probably just pretending as a pretext to build their friendship...

****Another graphic death:**

"His head had been smashed to pulp by heavy blows of a sandbag or some such instrument, which had crushed rather than wounded...He had apparently been struck down first from behind, but his assailant had gone on beating him long after he was dead. It was a most furious assault."

Is it me, or has the Canon been getting *bloodier* and *more graphic*? Keeping up with post-Victorian styles and morals? Presaging the pulps? Or just Sir Arthur feeling his oats?

The voodoo stuff is pretty much **pointless. It has, ultimately, absolutely **nothing** to do with the mystery. Any number of excuses could have been made for the cook to want to come back. With the blood and the animal sacrifice and the fetish, it all seems to be sensationalism, not to mention probably a tiny bit racist--"*ignorant savages can't leave their voodoo charms behind!*"

Granada wisely ignored the voodoo angle all together in their adaptation.

**Speaking of a *Columbo-like* mystery:

The attempt, whatever it may be, is to come off, we will say, before one o'clock. By some juggling of the clocks it is quite possible that they may have got Scott Eccles to bed earlier than he thought, but in any case it is likely that when Garcia went out of his way to tell him that it was one it was really not more than twelve. If Garcia could do whatever he had to do and be back by the hour mentioned he had evidently a powerful reply to any accusation. Here was this irreproachable Englishman ready to swear in any court of law that the accused was in the house all the time. It was an insurance against the worst.

The TV series *Columbo* used a similar gimmick--a villainous actor (played by **William Shatner!**) slipped his friend a mickey while they were watching a baseball game on TV. Then he taped the game with his VCR--incredibly new and expensive and rare technology at the time--while he ran out to commit the murder. When he got back, he rewound the tape, woke his buddy up, and said "You fell asleep for a minute there--but it's still only the third inning!"

**Poor Watson tries to make a deduction:

"The man was a Spaniard. I suggest that 'D' stands for Dolores, a common female name in Spain."

"Good, Watson, very good--but quite inadmissible. A Spaniard would write to a Spaniard in Spanish.

The writer of this note is certainly English."

D'oh!! Poor Watson...

**One of the more uncomfortable bits of the story is the vile racism against "*half-breeds*" and "*mulattos*."

Look, I understand that black people probably weren't the most common sight in rural Victorian England, and persons of mixed race probably even less so.

But it is simply *inconceivable* how someone of mixed race could appear *terrifying* or *frightening* to grown men. We're talking different skin tones, not the Frankenstein Monster. Yet **Constable Walters** acts like he's seen a creature from Hell:

The devil, sir, for all I know. It was at the window...Lord, sir, what a face it was! I'll see it in my dreams, but it shook me, sir, and there's no use to deny it. It wasn't black, sir, nor was it white, nor any colour that I know but a kind of queer shade like clay with a splash of milk in it. Then there was the size of it--it was twice yours, sir. And the look of it--the great staring goggle eyes, and the line of white teeth like a hungry beast.

But we can't write it off as just the ignorance of a country bumpkin policeman--Watson himself describes the cook as a "*man of most remarkable appearance--being a huge and hideous mulatto, with yellowish features of a pronounced negroid type.*"

Sweet Jesus, what a pile of racist nonsense. For shame, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle--*for shame.*

****Inspectors have very high standards for constables--no metaphors allowed!**

"Out I ran and through the shrubbery, but thank God there was no one there."

"If I didn't know you were a good man, Walters, I should put a black mark against you for this. If it were the devil himself a constable on duty should never thank God that he could not lay his hands upon him."

****John Watson clearly hasn't kept up with his medical training: "At first, as I examined (the fetish), I thought that it was a mummified negro baby, and then it seemed a very twisted and ancient monkey. Finally I was left in doubt as to whether it was animal or human."**

Sheesh...it's a good thing all the voodoo stuff was completely irrelevant. No **CSI: Baker Street** from Watson!

****Watson making good observations again:**

I could tell by numerous subtle signs, which might have been lost upon anyone but myself, that Holmes was on a hot scent. As impassive as ever to the casual observer, there were none the less a subdued eagerness and suggestion of tension in his brightened eyes and brisker manner which assured me that the game was afoot.

****Holmes: "I say 'criminal' because only a man with a criminal enterprise desires to establish an alibi."**

Really? That's hardly true, is it? I can come up with many reasons a man might want an alibi without the involvement of a "criminal enterprise." Wanting to hide an affair, wanting to hide one's involvement in a legitimate business dealing (to keep competitors from knowing you're involved, e.g.), etc.

****Holmes describing "Henderson" a.k.a. Don Murillo:**

I managed to see him on a plausible pretext, but I seemed to read in his dark, deepset, brooding eyes that he was perfectly aware of my true business. He is a man of fifty, strong, active, with iron-gray hair, great bunched black eyebrows, the step of a deer and the air of an emperor--a fierce, masterful man, with a red-hot spirit behind his parchment face. He is either a foreigner or has lived long in the tropics, for he is yellow and sapless, but tough as whipcord.

Sapless?

****So, why didn't "Miss Burnett" kill Don Pedro herself?**

She's been with the household for quite awhile; she knows which room he sleeps in each night. Heaven knows there may have been ample opportunity to poison him, or kill him in his sleep.

Instead, despite having as strong a motive as everyone, she has to wait for a man to sneak into the house in a complicated plan and kill him for her.

If she was a fervently set on revenge as her speeches would have us think, she should have cut out the middle man and done the job *herself*.

It's more Victorian sexism, it would seem...

****Sherlock describes the time limit on the female libido: "Miss Burnet, an Englishwoman of forty or thereabouts...I may add that Miss Burnet's age and character make it certain that my first idea that there might be a love interest in our story is out of the question."**

So, forty year old women can't take on lovers, or have secret rendezvous for making love. Good to know.

****Holmes and labor relations: "For the rest, his house is full of butlers, footmen, maidservants, and the usual overfed, underworked staff of a large English country house."**

I suggest Holmes take a job serving the gentry, on call 24/7 and subject to the whims of the master, and see how long he feels *underworked* and *overfed*...

****John is less than eager for a bit of burglary, even though a woman's life might be jeopardy:**

It was not, I must confess, a very alluring prospect. The old house with its atmosphere of murder, the singular and formidable inhabitants, the unknown dangers of the approach, and the fact that we were putting ourselves legally in a false position all combined to damp my ardour.

****Wait--how exactly *did* Baynes find out Henderson's true identity? Did he recognize the deposed dictator from old newspaper photographs or drawings?**

We have to give Baynes full credit for actually solving the mystery while Holmes is off checking out books on voodoo from the library. But the story doesn't give us one lick of information as to how Baynes pierced Murillo's disguise, or how he tracked his previous movements through Europe.

****Sadly, this is still a thing 100 years later:**

He had made his name as the most lewd and bloodthirsty tyrant that had ever governed any country with a pretense to civilization. Strong, fearless, and energetic, he had sufficient virtue to enable him to impose his odious vices upon a cowering people for ten or twelve years.

****A fierce condemnation of first world complacency from Burnet:**

What does the law of England care for the rivers of blood shed years ago in San Pedro, or for the shipload of treasure which this man has stolen? To you they are like crimes committed in some other planet.

Again, all too true today...

****Ah, once again England is the battleground for the settling of foreign grievances. Seriously, the government should consider setting aside some sparsely populated area and establishing a **Murderworld** or **Thunderdome** or whatever--if all of these foreigners insist on using your country to get their revenge, at the very least you can *charge them admission and participation fees...***

****The villains get away? Shades of **The Greek Interpreter**, or The Five Orange Pips or **The Resident Patient** or...**

****Baynes claims to be certain that the murdered Marquess of Montalva was really Don Murillo from a printed description? "A printed description of the dark face of the secretary, and of the masterful features, the magnetic black eyes, and the tufted brows of his master."**

Really? We will learn in *The Valley Of Fear* the danger of taking identifications from vague physical descriptions...

****A final Columbo-like note: "*Our difficulties are not over,*" he remarked, *shaking his head. "Our police work ends, but our legal work begins."***

I always wondered easy it was to convict those murderers Columbo caught once they lawyered up and recanted their confessions. The chain of reasoning the ruffled detective put together was frequently pretty damn far from actual evidence, and unlikely to convince a jury beyond a reasonable doubt.

The same, of course, can be said for many Holmes mysteries. There's a huge leap between solving a crime and convicting someone of it.

We can imagine that a *Law & Order: Baker Street* would be filled with motions to suppress and other legal complications...

Brian Keith Snell

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