

## *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 XLIV -- The Adventure of the Red Circle

## The Adventure Of The Red Circle--In Which I Am Hoist On My Own Petard!

I guess this is my own fault.

After all, I wrote at great length in my pieces on **A Study In Scarlet** and **The Valley Of Fear** of my disdain for the *novella-length digressions* in the stories. Did we really need 6 or 7 chapters of background to truly understand the background and motives of our killer and/or victims?

Which brings us to **The Adventure Of The Red Circle**.

Now *here* is a story which could have used a few more lines explaining exactly what was going on.

Don't get me wrong--Red Circle is a *fine* story, a good **Holmes** mystery. It is a story, however, where some of the answers seem to come a bit too easily, and without proper explanation.

Now, part of this is because of the story's structure. **Sir Arthur Conan Doyle** has Holmes drawn into the mystery because of a landlady who is creeped out by an unusual border, which leads to the much more serious case.

It's a *clever* conceit. But the problem is, as a result, we never meet **Gennaro Lucca**, and we never meet **Guisepppe Gorgiano**. The killer and the victim are known to Holmes and *Watson* only third-hand (and therefore to the reader only *fourth-hand!*), the story told by in patches by people who only know parts of the story. And considering that the largest parcel of background comes from **Emilia**, who is hardly unbiased, we get a very haphazard and distorted look at the entire story.

As a result, we're left with definite *gaps* in the story. The reader is left with no idea what actually happened at keys points in the tale, of how certain characters got from point A to point B.



Now, these are not "*plot holes*" in the sense that "*Hey, this thing couldn't have happened!*" Most of the questions Red Circle leaves us with can be fairly easily answered, at least potentially so, with a teeny bit of imaginative elbow-grease. But should the reader *have* to do so much of the heavy lifting for themselves? Especially when a couple of sentences or paragraphs, or even the use of Gennaro himself in the story, could have cleared so much up?

Amongst the more fundamental questions he have:

**A) What, exactly, was Gennaro doing in London for 10 days?**

**Mrs. Warren** states that her mysterious lodger had been there for 10 days when the story begins, and it continues the next day. That's 11 days, and we know that for ten of those, it was really Emilia in the room.

So what, exactly, was occupying Gennaro all that time?

Emilia tells us that "*he wished to be free that he might communicate both with the American and with the Italian police.*" But we're never given an explanation of *why* he's communicating with them, especially the Italians.

Communicating with American police may make sense...he left them evidence against Gorgiano before he fled. He could be giving them more information. Or he could be following up on the status of their hunt for Gorgiano. He might even be working on some kind of *immunity* deal in exchange for testifying against the other members of the Red Circle.

But why communicate with the *Italian* police? Well, Gennaro was a "*sworn*" member of the Red Circle in Italy before he left for the United States. Perhaps he was trying to ascertain his legal status, to see if he and his wife could return. Perhaps he was also trying for immunity in exchange for evidence in his homeland.

Still, even in the pre-international telephone era, why was this taking *11 days*?!? What *else* was he doing with his time? And why, if he was so certain the red Circle would be pursuing him, didn't he contact the *British* police?!?

**B) How innocent was Gennaro?**

When he met Emilia, she believed that he "*had neither money nor position.*" But we know from his later confession to her that he even then a member of the Red Circle, and the "*secrets of this brotherhood were frightful.*" Who knows what crimes Gennaro had already committed by the time he and Emilia had fled to America?

Gennaro was drawn--*forced?*--back into the Red Circle in America. Emilia's tale is vague, and we can't really tell how long Gennaro was a participant--days? Weeks? Months? During that time, how many "*rich Italians*" had fallen prey to the Circle's extortion and violence?

It wasn't until Gorgiano assaulted his wife and threatened his benefactor that Gennaro decided to inform the police and flee. How many *other* crimes did he carry at least partial responsibility for?

And did his benefactor even survive? Emilia tells us that Gennaro "*had given our benefactor full warning of this danger, and had also left such information for the police as would safeguard his life for the future.*"

The clear implication of this is that **Castalotte** survived. Yet this is only the version of events told to Emilia, by her possibly guilty husband. The **Granada** adaptation comes right out and says that Castalotte and his invalid partner were *murdered* by Gorgiano! So Gennaro's warning to the police and Castalotte failed--if it was even given.

Again, this is all very difficult to evaluate, as Sir Arthur doesn't make Gennaro present in the story *for even one moment*. We have nothing to judge him by except the testimony off his terrified wife--and much of that information is merely tales that she wasn't even a witness to herself!

Was Gennaro involved in the Red Circle to a much greater degree than he let his wife know? Is that the reason for the two weeks of negotiations with American and Italian police? And could it be that his killing of Gorgiano is *not* the self-defense Emilia would have us believe? We can never truly know...

### **C) Who exactly was *Leverton* of the *Pinkerton Agency* working for?**

The Pinkertons, although a private detective agency, *did* do work for the government. Indeed, until 1893, the U.S. Department Of Justice essentially outsourced "the detection and prosecution of those guilty of violating federal law" to the Pinkertons. So, depending on when you date this story, the Pinkertons could be working for the federal government in tracking down Gennaro. And even after that date, they still could have been employed by state or local governments who lacked the resources to pursue felons fleeing to Europe.

Yet, if Leverton was fulfilling a government mission, why did he have *absolutely no idea about* Gennaro and his wife? Lucca (supposedly) informed the authorities of Gorgiano's operations, and currently was in contact with the American police. Why, then, did Leverton know nothing of him? For someone who "**KNOWS**" of fifty murders that Gorgiano is responsible for, he seems oddly uninformed about the (attempted?) murder that led the ruffian to run to England.

Of course, the Pinkertons also did lots of private work, often for large businesses. Did some of the businesses victimized by the Red Circle's protection racket hire the Pinkertons to do what the police could not--find Gorgiano and put a stop to him? Castalotte, even, if he survived?

Or perhaps Leverton was just working on his own, seeking the reward for himself...

**D) How in the \*\*\*\* did Gorgiano find Mrs. Warren's boarding house?**

Let's review our timeline. On Day 1, Gennaro and Emilia arrive in England, with a "*few clear days which our start had given us*" ahead of Black Gorgiano. In the evening, they make their switch--Emilia goes into the boarding house, and Gennaro never returns there.

That's how security conscious they were--Gennaro didn't even trust *letters* being delivered there. Emilia *never* left the room. They communicated through ads in the "*agony*" column--but there was never anything there to indicate where Emilia was.

*So how did Gorgiano find her dwelling?*

We can guess easily enough how they found Gennaro. Maybe some Mafia thugs just spotted him tooling around London. [**PRO-TIP:** when the first thing anyone describes about you is your thick black beard, you might want to *shave that off* if you want to be incognito.] Gennaro was also in touch with police in New York and Italy, and as this is the Mafia we're dealing with, it's certainly possible that some *bent coppers* passed information to Gorgiano, such as the time his cables were sent, etc.

But that doesn't explain why two Italian gentleman turned up watching the boarding house, as Gennaro *wasn't* there, and there was nothing to indicate that he was. He hadn't been there in days, *long* before Gorgiano arrived! (Or had he? Certainly he wanted to keep tabs on Emilia, so perhaps he had the bad habit of hanging around, **On The Street Where You Live** style, and was spotted? That would prove Gennaro considerably dimmer than Holmes supposed, as "*The man cannot come near the woman, or he will guide their enemies to her.*")

And if they *did* think that he was staying there, why did the goons wait eleven days--*11!!*--to try to snatch him?!? Surely, this wasn't *the first* time **Mr. Warren** left the house, was it? Why wait so long?

And then, somehow, at the end, the Red Circle figured that Gennaro was in his hidey hole in the house on **Howe Street**. *How?* Surely, even if they recognized his messages in the personal ads, they couldn't narrow down his location from "*High red house with stone facings.*" "Again, did they find him by chance and follow him? Why was all of their attention focused on this block to begin with?

In the Granada version, it was an Italian immigrant who took a special interest in helping his countrymen who sent Gennaro to that boarding house. Gorgiano went to him, and *tortured* the information

out of him. Certainly something of the kind could have happened here: they torture the man, he gives them the location, they kidnap the wrong fellow, but figure that Gennaro must be close by, and spot him going into the signal house. But Doyle gives us absolutely *no* indication that this is what occurred...

**E) Where the \*\*\*\* did Gennaro go?**

He warns Emilia by signal of grave danger. he is attacked by Black Gorgiano, whom he kills in self-defense. And then...he *vanishes*!!

You would think that his *first* instinct would be to head for the boarding house, to make sure that Emilia was safe. Or when he saw her in Scotland Yard custody, he would rush in, declaring her innocence, taking all the heat himself, etc.

Yet there's *not a trace* of him. Was he wounded in the fight, perhaps even dying somewhere hidden? Gorgiano had at least two confederates--what happened to *them*? Did Gennaro fall prey to them? Did he know that his killing of Gorgiano wasn't really self-defense, so he fled?

Of course, Holmes could have suggested putting ads in the **Daily Gazette's** agony column, or perhaps sending candle singles in cipher from Emilia's windows. But he was too eager to go to the opera.

As I said, all of these questions are fairly easily answerable. It's just that Sir Arthur didn't seem *all that interested* in providing us these answers. Despite Holmes' paeans to "*education*" and "*seeking knowledge*," he doesn't seem particularly interested in seeking that knowledge here. Despite saying, "*and yet one would wish to tidy it up*," he does absolutely *no* tidying. Nor does Watson seem concerned. Is Gennaro ever found? How does the trial come out? What happens to the couple? What happens to the Red Circle members still at large? The mystery may be over, but the story isn't, and the audience is *frustrated* by the lack of closure.

So, unlike my criticism of a couple of the Holmes novels, this is a case where I wish Sir Arthur had given us *just a little bit more* information to work with. Not chapters' worth--but an additional paragraph here or there could have easily addressed the concerns.

So, my bad. Sorry. I shouldn't have said that Sir Arthur needed to wrap up this type of story more quickly. *Mea culpa*.

**OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:**

\*\*Once again Holmes claims to be *too busy* to deal with a new client. This time, however, it really is very insulting:

"...nor do I understand why I, whose time is of some value, should interfere in the matter. I really have other things to engage me." So spoke Sherlock Holmes and turned back to the great scrapbook in which he was arranging and indexing some of his recent material.

Sorry, ma'am, your troubles aren't as important as my *scrapbooking*. Sheesh.

\*\*Apocryphal case alert: "You arranged an affair for a lodger of mine last year," she said--"Mr. Fairdale Hobbs." "Ah, yes--a simple matter.

\*\*Mrs. Warren seems a bit *high-strung* to be a landlady, no?

Granted, her mysterious tenant's behavior is a bit unusual. But "*I can't sleep for fright*"? Really? "*To hear his quick step moving here and moving there from early morning to late at night, and yet never to catch so much as a glimpse of him--it's more than I can stand*"? "*It's more than my nerves can stand*"? "*This is out of all reason*"?

Yes, it did turn out to be a fairly serious matter. But at this point, it's nothing more than *eccentricity*, and the landlady acts as if **Freddy Krueger** is staying in her house!! On can only imagine how upset she would be if she had a boarder who was actually troublesome...

\*\*You could rent a room *without giving your name, or references*? Those were the days, I guess. He did pay cash in advance. But just try to get a room somewhere today without a credit check and ID, and see how far you get...

\*\*Gennaro, on the £10 he handed the landlady: "*You can have the same every fortnight for a long time to come if you keep the terms.*"

"For a long time to come? *How long*, exactly, was Lucca planning on having his wife holed up there? Or was he lying, and just using the prospect of a long-term payday to entice Mrs. Warren to agree to his terms?

\*\*Give *credit* to Mrs. Warren: bringing the notes, matches and cigarette stubs along with her was good thinking, and showed she had a healthy understanding of Sherlock's capabilities.

\*\*Holmes on the doctor's facial hair: "*Why, Watson, even your modest moustache would have been singed.*"

So Watson has a "*modest*" soup-strainer? Of course, a "*modest*" moustache by Victorian standards was likely *pretty large* by our standards...

\*\*Holmes to Mrs. Warren, outlining his view on privacy:

*After all, you have nothing to complain of. You have received your rent, and he is not a troublesome lodger, though he is certainly an unusual one. He pays you well, and if he chooses to lie concealed it is no direct business of yours. We have no excuse for an intrusion upon his privacy until we have some reason to think that there is a guilty reason for it.*

So this is the *limit* to Holmes' desire to snoop: if you're not hurting anyone and not breaking a law, you can do as you will...that sounds like a lesson certain lawmakers and busybodies need to learn.

**\*\*Holmes on newspaper "agony columns":**

*"Dear me!" said he, turning over the pages, "what a chorus of groans, cries, and bleatings! What a rag-bag of singular happenings! But surely the most valuable hunting-ground that ever was given to a student of the unusual!...Bleat, Watson-- unmitigated bleat!*

Of course, if this story took place today, there would be *no shortage* of ways for Gennaro to contact Emilia privately (not to mention the "*lady with a black boa at Prince's Skating Club,*" "*Jimmy,*" or "*the lady who fainted on the Brixton bus.*") Twitter, Facebook, email, Skype...not to mention just having cell phones!

But as we've discussed, "*back in the day*" newspaper personal columns were probably the *only* way to reach a mass audience cheaply and relatively clandestinely. You could try telegrams, but no doubt Gorgiano's men were watching such places.

Then again, if they found Gennaro's messages--perhaps a bit of a leap, as they would have to figure out *which* newspaper, and then which messages were from him--they might have posted someone to watch the newspaper offices...could *that* be how they found Gennaro, when he went to place his personal ads?

**\*\*Publishing the key to your cipher in the personal ad was *pretty stupid*. Seriously.**

*"The path is clearing. If I find chance signal message remember code agreed--One A, two B, and so on. You will hear soon. G."*

Are we to believe that Emilia could not remember this simple children's cipher without having to tell it to the entire world? And why risk your enemies finding it?!?

**\*\*Deductive reasoning from amateurs:"**

*"And you connect this attack with your lodger?"*

*"Well, we've lived there fifteen years and no such happenings ever came before."*

Oh, Mrs. Warren, correlation does not equal causation...Still, she *was* right. Perhaps she would have made a fine detective, if her nerves were better...

**\*\*Much has been made of the cipher used, because the Italian alphabet, according to many, has *no* J and no K (not to mention no W, X or Y):**

Now, Holmes did not know initially that the coded message was in Italian; he didn't figure that out after the first word was repeated three times. Therefore, the argument goes, his translation of every letter after I should have been off by two letters! T wouldn't be the *twentieth* letter! **ATTENTA**, should have been read by Holmes as **AVVEPVA!**

But perhaps it's not as clear *cut* as that. Italian, like most other languages, absorbs foreign words, and sometimes that requires adopting other letters, as well.

The J, K, etc., are presented as additional letters, adjuncts to the "*regular*" alphabet!! How else can you talk about koalas wearing jeans whilst using walkie-talkies on their yachts?

Some charts even work those letters into the Italian alphabet in our familiar English order.

I'm certainly not enough of a historical linguist to know if these letters were known, let alone accepted and integrated, to the Italian alphabet in the **1890s**. But this is not as cut-and-dried example of a Doyle error as many portray it...

**\*\***Meanwhile, if Emilia's English was good enough to understand English-language personal ads, why not use English for your *cipher messages* conducted via candle flash? Indeed, since you're being tracked by Italians, it seems more reasonable to give your warnings in English.

**\*\***Holmes: "*Ah, yes, Watson--severely practical, as usual!*"

Hmm, usually Holmes chides Watson as being *unpractical*, and fanciful, and sentimental. One suspects that his "severely practical" here might be slightly sarcastic!!

**\*\***When Holmes has the solved the outlines of the mystery, Watson wants to know why he continues with the case:

*"Why should you go further in it? What have you to gain from it?"*

*"What, indeed? It is art for art's sake, Watson. I suppose when you doctored you found yourself studying cases without thought of a fee?"*

*"For my education, Holmes."*

*"Education never ends, Watson. It is a series of lessons with the greatest for the last. This is an instructive case. There is neither money nor credit in it, and yet one would wish to tidy it up."*

That's a nice thought, from a man who initially rejected the case because he would rather cut and paste newspaper articles!

**\*\*Gregson!!** "*Journeys end with lovers' meetings.*" Sadly, this will be our *last* case with the Inspector.

**\*\***Wait, a **Scotland Yard** inspector *AND* a top Pinkerton agent are staking out the house--but they *never noticed* the signals? And heard *no sounds* from what must have been a death struggle from a room facing the street? Certainly, this was not Gregson's finest hour.

**\*\***Holmes praises Leverton as "*the hero of The Long Island cave mystery.*"

Some have cited this as an error, as there are apparently *no* caves in Long Island.

This is perhaps technically true, but modern news stories tell us that "at least a half-dozen large caves within a day's drive of Long Island are open to the public." It wouldn't be surprising that some caves near Long Island earned the mystery its title.

Also, there are plenty of Long Islands around besides the most famous one in New York. That includes **Long Island** in the **Bahamas**, which apparently has an extensive system of caves. It's not hard to imagine Leverton chasing down some miscreant there.

And of course, it could just be an *ironically named* mystery:

*Holmes: He's the hero of the Long Island Cave Mystery!*

*Watson: But there are no caves in Long Island!!*

*Holmes: Precisely! That is the mystery!!*

**\*\*Gregson**, it turns out, would have made a *fine* rule-breaking American detective:

*Leverton: "What do you suggest, Mr. Holmes?"*

*Holmes: "That we go up at once and see for ourselves."*

*Leverton: "But we have no warrant for his arrest."*

*Gregson: "He is in unoccupied premises under suspicious circumstances," said Gregson. "That is good enough for the moment. When we have him by the heels we can see if New York can't help us to keep him. I'll take the responsibility of arresting him now."*

Ah, the equivalent of pulling over someone suspicious looking for a broken tail light!

Gregson would fit right in on an episode of (American) **Law & Order!**

**\*\*Watson**, on the *virtues* of the English police:

*Our official detectives may blunder in the matter of intelligence, but never in that of courage. Gregson climbed the stair to arrest this desperate murderer with the same absolutely quiet and businesslike bearing with which he would have ascended the official staircase of Scotland Yard. The Pinkerton man had tried to push past him, but Gregson had firmly elbowed him back. London dangers were the privilege of the London force.*

Scotland Yard: *dumb but brave!!* Sheesh, no matter so many felt ill at ease working with Sherlock-- Watson did a great job by himself of publicly disparaging them!

**\*\*Emilia**, upon seeing Gorgiano's bloody body:

*Then I heard a sudden sharp intake of her breath, and she sprang into the air with a cry of joy. Round and round the room she danced, her hands clapping, her dark eyes gleaming with delighted wonder, and a thousand pretty Italian exclamations pouring from her lips. It was terrible and amazing to see such a woman so convulsed with joy at such a sight.*

Terrible and amazing is right, doctor.

Not the sudden relief from months of terror won't make you do funny things...but really, this is kind of behavior that makes you and your husband look *guilty* in the eyes of the police!

*\*\*Emilia: "But once as I looked through my window, I saw two Italians watching the house, and I understood that in some way Gorgiano had found our retreat."*

So, *how did she know they were Italian?* Some style of dress or hair that only Italians wore, and no one else in England?

*\*\*Once again, foreign quarrels settled on British soil. It's well past motif, and even beyond cliche at this point.*

I mean, c'mon, can't British citizens commit crime against other British citizens anymore? Or perhaps all of the stories are representative (perhaps subconsciously) of an English *xenophobia* of the era--"*all foreigners are trouble!*"

*\*\*This is the most closure we get from this story:*

*"I don't know what your British point of view may be, but I guess that in New York this lady's husband will receive a pretty general vote of thanks." "She will have to come with me and see the chief," Gregson answered.*

*"If what she says is corroborated, I do not think she or her husband has much to fear.*

At least The Valley Of Fear gave us *a sentence* telling us the outcome of the self-defense trial. C'mon, Sir Arthur, don't leave us hanging for over a century!!

*\*\*Holmes: "By the way, it is not eight o'clock, and a Wagner night at Covent Garden! If we hurry, we might be in time for the second act."*

Or, you could find Gennaro, find the other Red Circle members, and actually *finish the case...*

**Brian Keith Snell**

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