

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 XLVI -- The Adventure of the Dying Detective

The Adventure Of The Dying Detective--In Media Res!!

It seems that the inevitable fate of many a mystery series is, well, a *stultifying sameness*.

As fans demand the same hero returning over and over again, the author churns out a novel (or more!) each year starring their dauntless detective. But at some point the spark seems to go out, the innovation is gone, and each story differs from the last only in the particulars of the crimes being investigated. Soon, Author E. Writer takes on a "co-writer" for the 23 novel about Detective Dick Investigator. And creativity is gone--who needs it, when every novel is guaranteed to debut on the best-seller list?

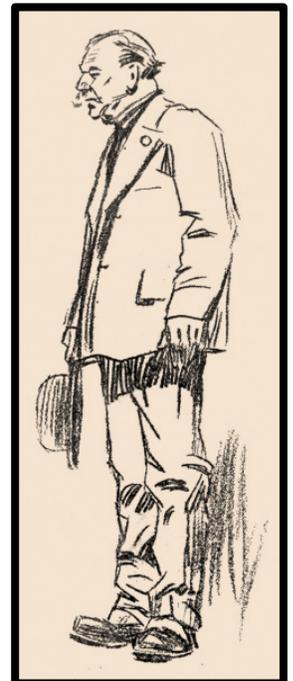
Which brings us to **The Adventure of The Dying Detective**.

Obviously, **Sherlock Holmes** stories are just that, and not novels. And surely the economics of the publishing racket of the day were a bit different.

Still, **Sir Arthur Conan Doyle** did have a gravy train going with Holmes, as fans eagerly awaited every word written about him. And given Doyle's famous *ambivalence* about his literary reputation being tied to the character, well, you have a recipe for authorial coasting. Who could have blamed Doyle if he just kept cranking out the same old same old?

But lordy, *look* at The Adventure Of The Dying Detective.

Sir Arthur completely breaks the Holmes formula here, giving us a completely new story structure for the Great Detective!! No, this is not *another* story that starts with Holmes and **Watson** lounging around **221B Baker Street**, with Sherlock showing off in some way, until a client or the police show up asking for help. Instead, at the outset, we're not even sure that we have a *mystery*! For the first time in quite a while, Doyle sets the story in the days of (one of?) Watson's marriage. And instead of a telegram from Holmes inviting Watson to join in on a new case, a third party--**Mrs. Hudson!**--seeks out the god doctor, as...*Sherlock Holmes is dying!!*



Think about how this must have seemed to contemporary readers! Once already, with no warning, Sir Arthur had *killed* off Sherlock Holmes. And now here he was, dying!! Without our hindsight that there were a good many tales left, readers at the time had to seriously consider the possibility that it was happening *again!* (Of course, in the second paragraph, Watson tells us that this story was set at least a couple of decades in the past, so readers could have *grokked* early on that this was a feint. But how many were that knowledgeable about the concept of continuity back then?)

Of course, there *was* a mystery here, and a good one. But Sir Arthur lets the information in tiny dribs and drabs, perhaps missed by the reader amidst Holmes' "delusional rantings." "*His nephew, Watson--I had suspicions of foul play and I allowed him to see it. The boy died horribly. He has a grudge against me,*" sneaks in Holmes, between voicing serious concerns about oysters taking over the world.

And some of Holmes' behavior can certainly be seen as suspicious...but it can also easily be read as part of a mania resulting from his sickness. In retrospect, it's obvious what his game is with Watson--but the first time you read the story? The reader may be suspicious, but without the knowledge that more stories are coming? The uncertainty must have been *maddening!*

Starting the story *in media res*, and keeping the reader as uniformed as Watson, was a master stroke. It's doubtful that the story would have worked nearly as well had we started at the "*beginning.*" For proof of that just go watch the **Granada** adaptation.

You have to feel pity for Granada--it's a fairly short story, and not a lot happens. As presented on the page, it would be hard to fill your *50+ minute timeslot* with this tale.

So I can understand their attempt to pad out the time by actually presenting much of the background that's only alluded to in the actual story. But, to be honest, they *waaaaay* overdo it. It's *35 1/2 minutes into a 51 minutes show* before we get to the point where the print story starts--Mrs. Hudson fetching Watson in a panic! *35 minutes!!*

And, sadly, what they present, while well made, *undercuts* all of the tension that Doyle so masterfully presents in the original. We meet **Victor Savage**, who wishes to leave his job as director of the family bank to become a poet (!). Victor believes that opium will "*open his senses*" to improve his writing, and his cousin (*not* uncle, as in the original) **Culverton Smith** encourages that habit. Victor's wife goes to Holmes for help, but as no crime has been committed, there's not a lot he can do. Smith uses an infected mosquito (!) to dose Savage with a tropical disease as he lounges spaced-out in an opium den Smith helped him find.

(Do you sense that we're getting *waaay* too much detail here?)

Victor Savage has quite a lengthy *getting sicker and ultimately dying sequence* whilst playing children's games with his rich guests. *Very* lengthy. And Holmes and Watson are very certain that Smith is responsible for

Savage's death, and vow both to Smith and his widow that justice will be served. Oh, yes, because of the will under which Savage inherited his house and wealth, it all reverts to his cousin Smith should he die, and we have quite the *lengthy* subplot with the callous Smith *evicting the widow and her children and dogs*. Remember, all of that was implied with one word in the original, so why not flesh it out to 8 or 9 minutes of screen time?

I'm too harsh here, as the Granada version is well made. But it completely *eviscerates* the tension and drama that the original provided, and indeed makes Watson seem particularly stupid. You can't have your co-star off screen for the first 35 minutes, of course, so Granada has the good doctor present for the entire case. Watson is convinced that Smith has used his expertise to kill Savage, and vows *loudly and publicly* to prove Smith's guilt and restore the widow to her rightful property. So when Holmes finally falls "*ill*" in this version, Watson has been involved with this case from the very beginning. He *KNOWS* who Culverton Smith is; he is convinced that Smith uses biological warfare to kill his victims; he has vowed to bring Smith to justice. So for John to believe, even for a second, that Holmes' disease is just a coincidence isn't *believable*. And for Watson to accede to Holmes' insistence on bringing Smith to Baker Street for treatment is simply not credible, given what the story has set up.

And, of course, the viewer is in the exact same position. By starting *in media res*, the written story creates doubt in our mind, and leaves us clueless as to Smith's role until much later. The Granada version, by insisting on giving us lots (and *lots*) of background, destroys that doubt, ruins that suspense, and makes the final reveal inevitable, instead of a surprise.

For the record, no, I don't know what I would have done if I were Granada in adapting this story.

But let's get back to the original story. 40-some stories into the **Canon**, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle is still *experimenting* with storytelling techniques, still innovating. This story comes right after **The Bruce-Partington Plans**, considered by many to be one of the best Holmes stories. Coming soon would be **His Last Bow**, which would completely break the mold in a different way.

Yes, by the time we get to Casebook, we will discuss whether or not some stories show that Doyle had entered a "*contractual obligation*" phase.

But right now, in the stories collected in His Last Bow, Doyle was not *content* to just put out the same old same old. Although not always 100% successful, his stories show that he still believed there was a lot of life left in the old detective. He was creative in theme and structure, and was still striving to tell new mystery stories in new, innovative ways. And the Dying Detective does that in spades.

OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:

**The elephant in the room that everyone talks about is how *cruel* it was for Holmes to trick Watson this way. (Few complain that it was cruel to trick *Mrs. Hudson* that way, however...) They also complain about the nasty way Holmes denigrated Watson and his medical skills.

I am less down on Holmes about this than others. After all, allowing Watson to believe that he was dying for a few hours was far *less* cruel than allowing him to believe that you were dead for three long years.

Watson himself, despite declaring himself "*bitterly hurt*," took most of the rantings to be a result of Holmes' delirium, and he didn't allow it to slow his attempts to help his friend.

Holmes has deceived Watson many time, before and since, and I feel that the good doctor understands, as long as it is in the service of justice. And there is no other way the case could be cracked this time!

Declaring that Watson has no talent for "*dissimulation*" is, in and of itself a compliment to Watson, and Holmes apologizes most profusely (for Holmes, at least). And he goes on to praise Watson medical skills: "*Do you imagine that I have no respect for your medical talents? Could I fancy that your astute judgment would pass a dying man who, however weak, had no rise of pulse or temperature? At four yards, I could deceive you.*"

So, is Holmes guilty of being a jerk? Sure, but it's for a good cause, and the pain is short-lived.

**Of course, Watson probably *should* have sussed that something was up. Holmes' insistence that Mrs. Hudson fetch only Watson belied any later comments he made. The "dying" man's "*tiger-spring*" to beat Watson to the door was certainly suspicious. And Holmes demand that Watson "*convey an impression*" of the detective's condition to Culverton Smith, and that Watson secretly return first to Baker Street, were pretty good tips that Holmes was enacting a plan.

Still, it is to Watson's credit that he was so concerned with his friend's condition that he gave no thought to the fact that this might be another scheme of Sherlock's.

**This story does little to buttress Holmes' reputation as a detective.

We have a murder, and an attempted murder, and Holmes cannot come up with a *scrap* of evidence--apparently not even enough to justify a warrant!!

In fairness, forensic science and medicine were still decades away from being able to do things like run DNA profiles of bacterium and compare them, which would likely be necessary in this case to convict Smith.

Still, we are left with a situation where Holmes doesn't so much solve the case, as trick the murderer into confessing. It was a pretty large *gamble*--how could Holmes be so sure that Smith would come to gloat over his deathbed? "*Knowing his vindictive nature, I was perfectly certain that he would come to look upon his*

handiwork...It was clear to me, however, that by pretending that he had really succeeded in his design I might surprise a confession."

Still, it is a large leap that, no matter how "vindictive," Smith would come to Holmes, and would actually confess.

******The story also makes one thing perfectly clear: if Culverton Smith *doesn't* foolishly try unnecessarily to murder Holmes, he gets away *scot free*. Holmes couldn't prove Smith had killed Savage, which certainly means the police had *no* chance. Had Smith merely shut his mouth and endured Holmes' accusations, he would have gotten away with the murder. But he let himself be goaded, and by attempting to kill Holmes, he provided the evidence--and the confession--himself. *Idiot!*

Even had he succeeded in killing Sherlock, it almost certainly would have made Culverton Smith *more* vulnerable to the police, not less so. Smith admits that his nephew dying of an obscure tropical disease (in London--in November!) which he happened to be an expert on was a "*singular coincidence*." Did Smith really not understand that having his accuser die of the exact same thing would not make the coincidence theory completely untenable--particularly if there was no outbreak amongst the denizens of **Rotherhithe**? That even the most pig-headed **Scotland Yard** inspector would have to act, had Holmes died as planned? Perhaps Smith was so arrogant he thought that he could still baffle the police...

******Holmes has come far from needing a roommate to afford the Baker Street flat!

On the other hand, his payments were princely. I have no doubt that the house might have been purchased at the price which Holmes paid for his rooms during the years that I was with him.

That certainly makes it seem as if "*long-suffering*" Mrs. Hudson was doing quite all right for herself.

******Watson on Holmes and the ladies:"...*he had a remarkable gentleness and courtesy in his dealings with women. He disliked and distrusted the sex, but he was always a chivalrous opponent.*"

You know, for all that's been made of Holmes' alleged *antipathy* towards women, we've really seen very little of it--certainly not much worth then his general antipathy towards *everyone*! Most of what we know of Holmes' "*misogyny*" comes from Watson's descriptions, not anything that Holmes himself has said. Everything we've actually heard Sherlock himself say has said is no more dire than any male who mutters "*Women...*" after an exasperating encounter with the mysterious opposite sex.

So, Watson, what have you been keeping from us?

******"...*in the second year of my married life...*"

Granada again pretends that Watson *never* married, and never left Baker Street, which means that have to go through unconvincing contortions (*making rounds in the country?*) to explain how Sherlock had been deathly ill for three days without the doctor knowing.

******And the **Academy Award** for best make-up goes to...*"His eyes had the brightness of fever, there was a hectic flush upon either cheek, and dark crusts clung to his lips; the thin hands upon the coverlet twitched incessantly, his voice was croaking and spasmodic."*

******Say what you will about Watson, he is a *selfless* physician, willing to risk his own life:

"Contagious by touch, Watson--that's it, by touch. Keep your distance and all is well."

"Good heavens, Holmes! Do you suppose that such a consideration weighs with me of an instant? It would not affect me in the case of a stranger. Do you imagine it would prevent me from doing my duty to so old a friend?"

And he is also willing to swallow his ego and recommend "better" doctors, even when Holmes insults him:

But if you have no confidence in me I would not intrude my services. Let me bring Sir Jasper Meek or Penrose Fisher, or any of the best men in London. But someone you MUST have, and that is final. If you think that I am going to stand here and see you die without either helping you myself or bringing anyone else to help you, then you have mistaken your man."

This also shows that Watson, whatever the state of his practice, has been keeping up with his profession, and knows who the "best men" are. He also just "*happens to know*" that the greatest living authority on tropical disease is in London now. Watson is reading the papers and following his profession--how many general practitioners would have known *that?!?*

******Holmes tries to show Watson his "ignorance":

"Shall I demonstrate your own ignorance? What do you know, pray, of Tapanuli fever? What do you know of the black Formosa corruption?"

Much has been made of this, as commentators have tried to identify the disease Culverton Smith use to kill Savage and tried to use on Holmes from these descriptions, to match some *real* disease to **Tapanuli fever** or the **black Formosa corruption**.

But remember, at this point, Holmes was *trying to fool* Watson, and deliberately *lying* to him. He is trying to convince Watson that this is a case *far outside* his medical knowledge. Wouldn't it be just as likely that Holmes' might just make up some obscure disease names, to ensure that Watson wouldn't say, *"Oh, yes, I saw a case of this when I was briefly in India!"* (And if the cause of Savage's death had been mentioned in the newspapers, perhaps Watson would have familiarized himself with it, in case a case came into his practice!)

After all, the absolute best way to "*prove someone's ignorance*" to them is to make shit up...that way they can be guaranteed not to know!

*******"I have learned so much during some recent researches which have a medico-criminal aspect."*

Great. Now I want a whole season of **Sherlock Quincy, Medical Examiner...**

****Watson channeling Hamlet:** *"Of all ruins, that of a noble mind is the most deplorable."*

****Inspector Morton,** I hope you enjoy your cameo in the Canon!!

(Somewhat more seriously, I'm certain that Holmes went with this unknown inspector because the sight of one of Holmes' *better-known* police collaborators hanging about might have made Culverton Smith suspicious, had he been having Baker Street watched...)

****Doyle** loves to play his villains as physically deformed, as if their evil is so vile that it must manifest in their appearance:

I saw a great yellow face, coarse-grained and greasy, with heavy, double-chin, and two sullen, menacing gray eyes which glared at me from under tufted and sandy brows. A high bald head had a small velvet smoking-cap poised coquettishly upon one side of its pink curve. The skull was of enormous capacity, and yet as I looked down I saw to my amazement that the figure of the man was small and frail, twisted in the shoulders and back like one who has suffered from rickets in his childhood.

****The villain Smith** trying to draw a *parallel* between himself and Sherlock Holmes: *"He is an amateur of crime, as I am of disease. For him the villain, for me the microbe."*

****Smith:** *"There are my prisons," he continued, pointing to a row of bottles and jars which stood upon a side table. "Among those gelatine cultivations some of the very worst offenders in the world are now doing time."*

Well, this wouldn't happen in 2015. A civilian household keeping a vast array of *"biological weapons?"* At the very least you could easily get a warrant now, based on Watson's description, and more likely you'd have **Homeland Security** and *MI-5* and whatever all over the place in about 20 seconds.

****Holmes:** *"But I have reasons to suppose that this opinion would be very much more frank and valuable if he imagines that we are alone."*

Yet *still* Watson doesn't get what's going on...

****Culverton Smith** certainly has his villain smack talk down: *"You can forget it or remember it, just as you like. I don't see you in the witness box. Quite another shaped box, my good Holmes, I assure you."*

Man, we love to hate this guy. What a great villainous creation from Sir Arthur...

****Culverton Smith:** *"The fellow who came for me--I've forgotten his name--"*

You forgot Watson's name? All right, now it's war!

****Holmes** invents method acting: *"The best way of successfully acting a part is to be it," said Holmes.*

****Smith** thinks that Holmes really doesn't have him:

"Now he will pretend, no doubt, that I have said anything which he may invent which will corroborate his insane suspicions. You can lie as you like, Holmes. My word is always as good as yours."

Smith obviously has a *poor* idea of the respect the police and courts have for Mr. Holmes' opinion, if he believes "my word is as good as yours."

****Of course, it's not down to *just* Holmes' word, as was the detective's plan all along.**

But that begs a bit of the question: of how much *value* was Watson's word, in corroborating Holmes'?

After all, Watson was Holmes' *former flatmate*, and *avowed friend*. He also had a vested interest financial in Holmes' being right, given that he was writing up and publishing Holmes' adventures. A skilled defense barrister could really knock the *stuffing* out of any of Watson's testimony, on the grounds that he irretrievably biased in favor of the detective.

Throw in the notion that Watson was a medical man who had been thoroughly *lied to and deceived* by Holmes, and was unable to tell that Holmes was not ill, and the cross-examination of John Watson might not be a very pretty thing...

****I haven't designed many death-traps, but Culverton Smith's spring box seems like a very *uncertain* thing to me. How can you be sure that the intended victim opens it with his hands in the right position to receive the "*sting*?" How can you be *certain* that the skin is pierced, that blood is drawn? Or that your tropical disease withstands the rigors of being transported outside, during a *chilly November*, during a postal delivery?**

The Granada adaptation used a more *reasonable* method---the box was full of tobacco, and sharp spikes lined the bottom, so when the victim reached in to fill his pipe, he would cut himself.

****"*Malingering is a subject upon which I have sometimes thought of writing a monograph.*"**

And it would of great use to those of us seeking to get out of work for a long weekend...

****Holmes as (justifiably) paranoid: "*My correspondence, however, is, as you know, a varied one, and I am somewhat upon my guard against any packages which reach me.*"**

I'm sure a 21st century Holmes would need radiation detectors, sniffer dogs, and who knows what else...

Brian Keith Snell

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