

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 Casebook of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure LII – The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire

The Adventure Of The Sussex Vampire--The Giant Rat Of Sumatra!!

One of the more fascinating aspects of any continuing fictional enterprise is the sheer amount of what we *don't* know, but *want* to know.

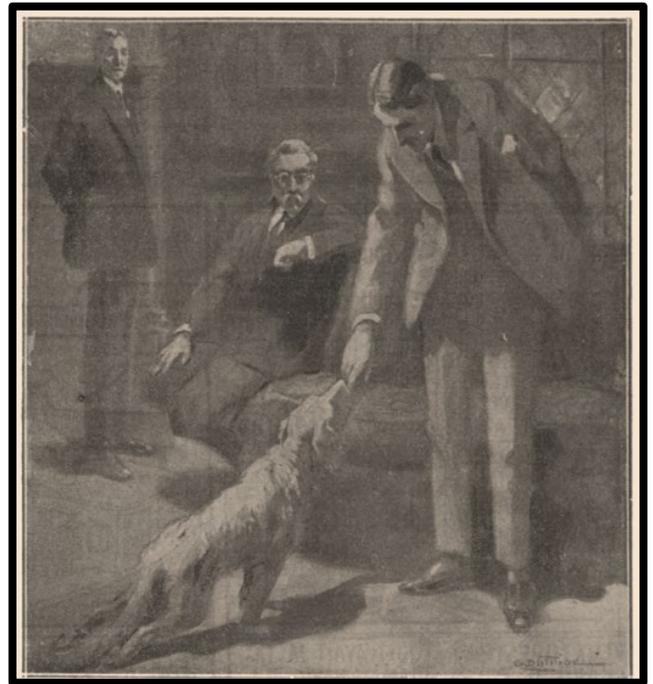
Even in a series that has had hundreds of episodes, all the background *cannot* be filled in--yet the reader or viewer has an *insatiable* demand to know. What was **Picard's** first command, the **Stargazer**, like? The **Doctor** left **Amy** and **Rory** behind for months--what adventures did he have then? No matter how many adventures we're given, the audience craves *more*.

Which brings us to **The Adventure of The Sussex Vampire**.

Sussex Vampire is a treasure trove of the "apocryphal stories," the untold stories that **Watson** or **Holmes** keep referring to, that sound so fascinating.

Holmes turns to the V section in his index. And what does he find?

Victor Lynch, the forger. Venomous lizard or gila. Remarkable case, that! Vittoria, the circus belle. Vanderbilt and the Yeggman. Vipera. Vigor, the Hammersmith wonder.



And that's just *some* of the V's!! (And if I ever start a band, it will be called **Vigor The Hammersmith Wonder**. And no, we will *never* play **Hammersmith**.)

In fairness, **Watson** tell us that the Index isn't *just* old cases, as they are "*mixed with the accumulated information of a lifetime*." So sure, maybe some of those were just news stories **Holmes** kept clippings on. But aside from "**The Voyage Of The Gloria Scott**," which we know was an actual case, the "*gila lizard*" was a "*remarkable case*," as well. And we have a mix of the seemingly prosaic--"*Victor Lynch, the forger*"--with the

interesting, macabre, or just plain baffling. Vittoria the circus belle? Vanderbilt and the Yeggman?!? Vigor, the Hammersmith wonder?!?!? How can we *not* be fascinated by those "titles," and crave to know more?

Of course, the capstone is perhaps the most infamous apocryphal case of all, as the law firm references a job Holmes once did for them:

"Matilda Briggs was not the name of a young woman, Watson," said Holmes in a reminiscent voice. "It was a ship which is associated with the giant rat of Sumatra, a story for which the world is not yet prepared."

Oh, come on now! No matter what you think of the Sussex Vampire, you want that story to be put on the back burner immediately, and have Holmes tell us all about **Matilda Briggs and The Giant Rat Of Sumatra!!** (Sounds like a great title for a YA book!!) A mysterious ship!! A giant rat?!? A story for which the world is not yet prepared?!?! *Why* aren't we prepared?!?! It's a hundred years later--we're **** well prepared *now!!* **OMG**, tell us now!!!!

Do you see what a little off-hand reference can do to us? Because we love or Holmes and Watson, because we want to know everything about them, these tantalizing tidbits that *Sir Arthur Conan Doyle* loved to pepper his tales with are alluring, engaging, frustrating, and *absolutely brilliant*.

Why does this seem so unique to the Sherlock Holmes **Canon**? Well, first of all, Doyle did it *A LOT*. There were 60 stories and novels. Depending on how you count them (is an off-hand mention actually a unique case?), there are over 100 "*unreported cases*" mentioned in those stories. **Over 100!!!!** [Click here for a list of the most colorful-sounding 61 of the untold tales.](#)

Think about that--61 (and probably dozens more) apocryphal cases!! That's double what we already have!! You could make *an entire alternate Canon* out of those!!!

Even when other fictive universes do something like this, the *named-dropped off-screen apocrypha* rarely seem substantial enough to justify a whole episode. If they have a good enough idea, the creators will actually use it, and make the story. Eventually, **Hellblazer** had to explain what happened at **Newcastle**. Not Doyle! He would take these wonderful concepts--*Bert Stevens, the mild-mannered murderer*--and just leave them laying around for us!! "*Merridew of abominable memory*"? What does that even mean?!? Other series wouldn't just drop something like that--they follow up, if for no other reason than "*fan service*."

But the amazing, frustrating, *novel* thing was, Doyle almost never followed up. **The Adventure of The Second Stain** was, maybe, an exception--twice Watson told of "*the story of the second stain*," each time sounding like a completely different case...and then he actually gave us a tale with that title, that seemed in most ways to contradict two prior references.

Other than that, though? *The Vatican cameos? The bogus laundry affair? The peculiar persecution of John Vincent Harden? The repulsive story of the red leech?* Doyle was tossing off multiple story ideas nearly every month--*and then not using them!!*

And that's another thing--these seemed like ideas for *actual* stories, for the most part. A lot of times, when other genre series do something like this, it's just tidbits of personal information: Why was **Spike** called **William The Bloody**? **Han Solo** making the **Kessel Run**? They're character-building tidbits, valuable in and of themselves. Yet there's usually not an entire story there...but Watson and Holmes were name-dropping entire cases, and telling us how *remarkable* they were! Indeed, most of the apocrypha has been used as the basis for pastiches--each often several times!

We're not satisfied with the weekly, or monthly, adventures of our various heroes. We want to think that they're like us--"something is happening every day"--and better than us--"something *INTERESTING* is happening every day"! That's why we have literally *thousands* of novels (of varying canonicity) for **Star Trek** and **Star Wars**, for **Doctor Who** and for **Buffy**, for **Monk** and for **Columbo**--because fans are hungry for more, more, *more* of their heroes.

But perhaps Doyle realized that, as **Spock** said, having is not so pleasing a thing as wanting. After all, actually seeing **Kirk** cheat and beat the **Kobayashi Maru** was not nearly so entertaining as our imaginations made it, was it? Maybe Doyle was right to just tease us, because could the actual case of *Wilson the notorious canary-trainer* ever live up to our imaginations? How could the story of *the depth which the parsley had sunk into the butter* ever be as wonderful as we story we created in our own minds? If Doyle had ever sat down to write **The Darlington Substitution Scandal**, maybe it would have turned out to be as poor a story as **The Mazarin Stone**!

Perhaps, then, it's for the *best* that Sir Arthur never wrote *The Adventure Of The Giant Rat Of Sumatra*. Perhaps it's in the perfect form already, in our *minds* and *imagination*s, each of us with our own personal version of what happened aboard the Matilda Briggs.

Naaaaah. Someone get me a time machine. I'm going make to force Doyle to write the **** story!!

OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:

**Sussex Vampire is a fine story, but it does have a *glaring* problem: A large story element is a *virtual repeat* from two stories earlier.

In both this story and **Thor Bridge**, a wealthy white man travels to South America, woos and weds a woman from there, brings her to England, and only then realizes that they have nothing in common, and feels that he's falling in love with her, despite her hot "tropical" love for him:

This gentleman married some five years ago a Peruvian lady the daughter of a Peruvian merchant...The lady was very beautiful, but the fact of her foreign birth and of her alien religion always caused a separation of interests and of feelings between husband and wife, so that after a time his love may have cooled towards her and he may have come to regard their union as a mistake. He felt there were sides of her character which he could never explore or understand. This was the more painful as she was as loving a wife as a man could have - to all appearance absolutely devoted.

Granted, there were two years between the publications of these stories, so it perhaps wasn't as noticeable contemporarily. But reading the stories consecutively, it's a *blindingly obvious and annoying rerun*.

Why did Sir Arthur resort to the *exact* same set up so soon? Why return the "*white guy marries Latin American woman and cools in his ardor but she loves him more*" motif, with just one story between? Was this a pressing phenomenon in Britain of the 1920s (or maybe the 1890s, when the stories were likely set), with wealthy men taking foreign wives and then regretting it? Did Doyle know a couple like this, and was sending someone a coded "*message*," or even a rebuke? Was he running out of ideas?

Given the similar setups, we have to consider the *ethnic/gender stereotypes* being portrayed. White males are portrayed as, if not misled, then at least temporarily *bewitched* by exotic foreign women. It's only after marriage and returning to normal, stable England that they realize that their love was merely based on physical passion, and they have "*nothing in common*." Ah, but the hot. "*tropical*" love of the woman will not fade, and is regarded by the rich white man as "immature" or overly passionate.

Is Doyle *perpetuating* these stereotypes, or *critiquing* them? Is he warning against taking foreign wives, are suggesting that the men are ninnyes for "*falling out of love*" with their brides while the women remain devoted?

I honestly don't have the answers.

**There are differences, of course. Certainly, in this story, the wife does *not* use her own suicide to frame a rival for murder. Indeed, she goes to ridiculous lengths to keep from accusing anyone. And she's only referred to as "tropical" once!

But did you notice...***the wife is never named in this story at all***? Not even *once*?!? She's not even referred to as "**Mrs. Ferguson**"!! She is *always* referred to as "my wife" or "your mistress" or "the woman." ***We do not know her name***!! A pivotal character, the accused "vampire," the woman who saved her child's life...*has no name*.

That's extraordinarily careless of Doyle, to leave such a strong character completely nameless throughout the entire tale. Wasn't anyone *editing* his work at this point?

Of course, the baby is also never given a name. It's always referred to "the baby" or "my child."

What an odd household, where 1/2 of the inhabitants (not counting servants, of course) can only be called by, "*Hey, you!*"

***Holmes, introducing the best lawyer letter ever: "For a mixture of the modern and the mediaeval, of the practical and of the wildly fanciful, I think this is surely the limit."*

It is a masterpiece of British understatement:

Re Vampires

SIR: Our client, Mr. Robert Ferguson, of Ferguson and Muirhead, tea brokers, of Mincing Lane, has made some inquiry from us in a communication of even date concerning vampires. As our firm specializes entirely upon the assessment of machinery the matter hardly comes within our purview, and we have therefore recommended Mr. Ferguson to call upon you and lay the matter before you.

Wonderful. And the echoing of it at the end, in Sherlock's reply, is most gratifying.

***We've discussed it before, but this story quite distinctly summarizes Holmes' skepticism, and disdain for any "supernatural" cases.*

"But what do we know about vampires? Does it come within our purview either? Anything is better than stagnation, but really we seem to have been switched on to a Grimms' fairy tale."

"Rubbish, Watson, rubbish! What have we to do with walking corpses who can only be held in their grave by stakes driven through their hearts? It's pure lunacy."

Ever practical Watson, even though more open-minded, doesn't accept the supernatural. Perhaps there are more prosaic causes that are misinterpreted as the work of the undead?: *"The vampire was not necessarily a dead man? A living person might have the habit. I have read, for example, of the old sucking the blood of the young in order to retain their youth."*

Yet Holmes rejects it out of hand: *"But are we to give serious attention to such things? This agency stands flat-footed upon the ground, and there it must remain. The world is big enough for us. No ghosts need apply."*

"The idea of a vampire was to me absurd. Such things do not happen in criminal practice in England."

This seems a pretty strong of principal, without any loopholes. But that doesn't stop people from writing stories where Holmes does indeed pursue vampires and things that go bump in the night. Some have gone so far as to suggest that **Van Helsing** was *actually* Holmes in disguise, and **Dracula** was actually **Moriarty**!! Sigh...

I think we know what Sherlock himself would say about these efforts.

For what it's worth, most chronologists set Sussex Vampire *before* **Bram Stoker's famous novel was published, so vampire legends would not have been quite so prevalent in the consciousness of Holmes and Watson. Had the story been set later, Holmes likely wouldn't have needed to grab his index to look up obscure foreign references to vampires.

**As we've noted before, it seems as if all houses in England at the time--especially estates of the wealthy--had names: *"I know that country, Holmes. It is full of old houses which are named after the men who built them centuries ago. You get Odley's and Harvey's and Carriton's -- the folk are forgotten but their names live in their houses."*

**Holmes didn't always give credit for the sources of his vast knowledge: *"It was one of the peculiarities of his proud, self-contained nature that though he docketed any fresh information very quietly and accurately in his brain, he seldom made any acknowledgment to the giver."*

The letter from **Ferguson: *"It concerns a friend for whom I am acting."*

It's comforting to know that even Victorians used this dodge. *"Well, doctor, my friend has this problem..."*

Holmes, of course, has no patience for such stumbling shyness:

"Your case!"

"We must not let him think that this agency is a home for the weak-minded. Of course it is his case...It is simpler to deal direct," said Holmes

**Holmes perhaps betraying Doyles' attitude on over-hasty marriages abroad: *"I gather that you did not know your wife well at the time of your marriage?" "I had only known her a few weeks."*

Holmes seems somewhat disapproving here. Perhaps Doyle *is* being critical of men sweeping foreign women off their feet, uprooting them from their homes, and then *"falling out of love"* when the first blush of physical passion finally fades.

**So, to Ferguson at least, Catholicism is an *"alien religion"*?!?

I'm presuming that, coming from Peru, she is Catholic--so perhaps I'm just as guilty of stereotyping as anyone speaking of her *"tropical"* passion.

But surely Catholicism is not *so* completely *"alien"* to Ferguson's (presumed) Protestantism? Was her religion a surprise to him? Who married them?

Or did his concerns about her religion emerge only after the passion cooled (and she had borne him a child)?

***More from Ferguson and his fading ardor: "He felt there were sides of her character which he could never explore or understand. This was the more painful as she was as loving a wife as a man could have -- to all appearance absolutely devoted."*

Well, you could try, oh, I don't know, **actual conversation?** Try talking to your wife?!? Building a relationship on communication?!? (Maybe start by *finding out her name?*)

Jesus, this guy pisses me off.

***Even if you don't buy the vampirism idea any more than Holmes did, there certainly is strong reason to be suspicious about Mrs. Ferguson's behavior:*

Twice the wife was caught in the act of assaulting this poor lad in the most unprovoked way. Once she struck him with a stick and left a great weal on his arm...she saw her employer, the lady, leaning over the baby and apparently biting his neck. There was a small wound in the neck from which a stream of blood had escaped. The nurse was so horrified that she wished to call the husband, but the lady implored her not to do so and actually gave her five pounds as a price for her silence...he saw his wife rise from a kneeling position beside the cot and saw blood upon the child's exposed neck and upon the sheet. With a cry of horror, he turned his wife's face to the light and saw blood all round her lips. It was she -- she beyond all question -- who had drunk the poor baby's blood.

This provide ample reason for concern, surely.

So it *strains credulity* that the wife cannot be bothered to make *any* explanation whatsoever of her behavior. The entire story is over if she just speaks up. But instead she chooses to remain silent about the fact that someone is trying to murder their baby!

"She would not even speak. She gave no answer to my reproaches, save to gaze at me with a sort of wild, despairing look in her eyes. Then she rushed to her room and locked herself in. Since then she has refused to see me."

Even when an outsider, who wouldn't be heartbroken at the news about Jack, tends to her, she can only babble in vague generalities: *"No. No one can help. It is finished. All is destroyed. Do what I will, all is destroyed."*

Holmes explanation: *"She saw it made and saved the child's life, and yet she shrank from telling you all the truth, for she knew how you loved the boy and feared lest it break your heart."*

And she confirms this: *"How could I tell you, Bob? I felt the blow it would be to you. It was better that I should wait and that it should come from some other lips than mine."*

I can sympathize with her dilemma. BUT SOMEONE IS TRYING TO MURDER YOUR BABY! And she was willing to tell the nurse, so her insistence on silence was hardly absolute. Why not tell Watson? Why wait until Holmes has figured out the whole story to come out and confirm it?

Silly, *silly* plot device.

**Sherlock on Watson: *Holmes looked at me thoughtfully and shook his head. "I never get your limits, Watson," said he. "There are unexplored possibilities about you.*

**Watson on the sad physical ravages of aging:

There is surely nothing in life more painful than to meet the wreck of a fine athlete whom one has known in his prime. His great frame had fallen in, his flaxen hair was scanty, and his shoulders were bowed. I fear that I roused corresponding emotions in him.

**Ferguson: *"How am I to go to the police with such a story?"* Well, SOMEONE WAS TRYING TO MURDER YOUR BABY!!!! I would think that, no matter what the explanation, protecting your offspring would be big enough a priority to act.

Seriously, I rather like this story, but this whole Victorian *"I can't bear to cause the one I love any upset, and I can't bear the weight of any potential scandal"* emotional repression is really driving me nuts...

**Obviously, Bob Ferguson has no idea what a 15 year old boy is really like:

"Yet you say he is affectionate?"

"Never in the world could there be so devoted a son. My life is his life. He is absorbed in what I say or do."

Obviously, adolescence in Victorian England wasn't the same as in modern America (or England). But we'll see how odd a duck Jack is soon enough.

**Of course, Holmes has *already* solved the mystery by the end of the first meeting: *"He would certainly seem to be a most interesting lad. There is one other point about these assaults. Were the strange attacks upon the baby and the assaults upon your son at the same period?"*

He knows, all right.

**However, Holmes upbraids himself for jumping the gun by rushing to conclusions: *"One forms provisional theories and waits for time or fuller knowledge to explode them. A bad habit, Mr. Ferguson, but human nature is weak. I fear that your old friend here has given an exaggerated view of my scientific methods."*

Even without a *real* vampire, **Cheeseman's seems a fine setting for a Gothic tale: *"An odour of age and decay pervaded the whole crumbling building."*

******Inside Cheeseman's: *"There was hung a fine collection of South American utensils and weapons, which had been brought, no doubt, by the Peruvian lady upstairs."*

Wait--so Peruvian brides bring *weapons collections* as their dowry?!? Weapons *still coated with poison?!?! And display them on the walls?!?*

Not to disagree with Watson, but it seems at least as likely that the collection is Robert Ferguson's, picked up in his business travels to Peru. That would increase the irony of his providing what he no doubt thought of as mere trophies being used to kill his infant son...

******The paralyzed dog provides the final confirmation that Holmes needs.

But it's also the take-off point for a lot of criticism of the story, as countless people insist that curare would not leave a lingering paralysis in the dog.

But these people need to read the story more carefully. Holmes did not say it was curare. His exact quote was "curare *or some other devilish drug.*"

"Some other drug." *Ahem.*

******Watson as medical man: *"On the bed a woman was lying who was clearly in a high fever. She was only half conscious, but as I entered she raised a pair of frightened but beautiful eyes and glared at me in apprehension."*

So was she actually *physically* ill? Or was it an emotional breakdown? It has been awhile since we've seen "*brain fever,*" where extreme emotional duress provoking dangerous sickness.

Watson seems to go with the brain fever possibility: *"I took her pulse and temperature. Both were high, and yet my impression was that the condition was rather that of mental and nervous excitement than of any actual seizure."*

Of course, we could also speculate that her health problems may have been caused by *accidentally ingesting the poison* sucked out of the baby's neck...

******Watson, appealing Ferguson's case to the wife: *"He is full of grief, but he cannot understand."*

Her reply: *"No, he cannot understand. But he should trust."*

Hold on, Ma'am..*YOU* don't trust *him*! You refuse to tell him one syllable of the truth. Sheesh...

******The father is always the last to know...

To modern eyes, at least, the descriptions of **Jack** are fairly unsettling, and even back in 1924 the reader must have gotten the sense that there was something not quite right about the lad:

He was a remarkable lad, pale-faced and fair-haired, with excitable light blue eyes which blazed into a sudden flame of emotion and joy as they rested upon his father. He rushed forward and threw his arms round his neck with the abandon of a loving girl. "Oh, daddy," he cried, "I did not know that you were due yet. I

should have been here to meet you. Oh, I am so glad to see you!" Ferguson gently disengaged himself from the embrace with some little show of embarrassment...

"Jacky has very strong likes and dislikes," said Ferguson, putting his arm round the boy. "Luckily I am one of his likes." The boy cooed and nestled his head upon his father's breast. Ferguson gently disengaged him.

Again, this is a 15 year old boy...

**Unlike earlier stories, where the very *physical appearance* of someone of mixed ethnicity was a justifiable cause for horror, Watson approves of the unnamed baby: "*a very beautiful child, dark-eyed, golden-haired, a wonderful mixture of the Saxon and the Latin.*"

Quite a contrast from early pictures of horrifying race mixing, as in **Wisteria Lodge**...

Holmes admits that he solved the case before even getting out of his chair at **Baker Street:

"*It has been a case for intellectual deduction, but when this original intellectual deduction is confirmed point by point by quite a number of independent incidents, then the subjective becomes objective and we can say confidently that we have reached our goal. I had, in fact, reached it before we left Baker Street, and the rest has merely been observation and confirmation.*"

**"*Did it not occur to you that a bleeding wound may be sucked for some other purpose than to draw the blood from it? Was there not a queen in English history who sucked such a wound to draw poison from it?*"

This is a reference, although likely apocryphal, to **Eleanor of Castille**, who allegedly saved **Edward I's** life during a Crusade by sucking a wound he received from a poisoned knife.

**Again, the father may have been too close to see what was fairly obvious to an outside observer:

It is the more painful because it is a distorted love, a maniacal exaggerated love for you, and possibly for his dead mother, which has prompted his action. His very soul is consumed with hatred for this splendid child, whose health and beauty are a contrast to his own weakness.

**The worst prescription in the history of crime-fighting: "*I think a year at sea would be my prescription for Master Jacky,*" said Holmes, rising from his chair.

WHAT?!?!?!?

Look, this youngster has been *poisoning pets* and *trying to murder infants*. Jacky is a **serial-killer** waiting to happen, right? Can anybody *seriously* believe that "a year at sea" would cure him of his pathology? That a little salt air would heal his "*distorted, maniacal, exaggerated love*" and "*soul-consuming hatred*"? When Jacky comes home in a year, would you going let him anywhere near the child? Near the wife? Around any pets?

I'm sorry, Sherlock, but two counts of attempted murder calls for something a little stronger than a vacation/exile. I fear Jacky went on to become quite the killer, and you're responsible.

****Finally, we get a bit of closure in a Holmes story--if only a bit:**

Ferguson was standing by the bed, choking, his hands outstretched and quivering. "This, I fancy, is the time for our exit, Watson," said Holmes in a whisper. "If you will take one elbow of the too faithful Dolores, I will take the other. There, now," he added as he closed the door behind him, "I think we may leave them to settle the rest among themselves."

****The Granada adaptation of this story is quite possibly *the worst thing that I have ever seen*. It is terrible in every way possible. I will say no more.**

Brian Keith Snell

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