

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 LIII – The Adventure of the Three Garridebs

The Adventure Of The Three Garridebs--Robin Hood's Eleven?

There is one type of crime that audiences *love*.

No, not murder, not blackmail, not securities fraud, not jaywalking--although of course these all have their fans.

No, what the public loves--and loves so much that they revere the criminals as heroes--are *con artists*. Grifters. Players of The Long Game.

Which brings us to **The Adventure Of The Three Garridebs**.

Garridebs is the third of a "*trilogy*" involving elaborate scams to set up robberies and other crimes. In **The Red-Headed League**, most famously, **John Clay** lived under an assumed name for months, and came up with a *so-crazy-it-must-be-true* story to get **Jabez Wilson** to leave his shop every day while Clay tunneled into a nearby bank vault.

In **Stockbrokers Clerk**, the thieves convince a young clerk not to take up his new position at a prestigious firm, and come to work for them, while one of their crew took **Pycroft's** place and tried to burgle a hundred thousand pounds from their safe.

And here, in Garridebs, "**Killer**" **Evans** assumed a false identity and concocted another "too-crazy-not-to-be-true" scheme with a ridiculous bequest, to get poor **Nathan Garrideb** to leave his quarters for a few hours so Evans can get to a secret room with counterfeiting equipment and hundreds of thousands in queer bills.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's plots for these tales have been critiqued by some as too unbelievable (and too similar...we'll deal with that later).



Yet in a number of ways, Doyle was *prescient*, for a whole sub-genre of crime fiction followed these tales--the scam, the long con, and in some aspects, the heist.

In modern times, we have a vast supply of grifter fictions--and we love them. **The Lady Eve**. **The Music Man**. **The Sting** won an **Oscar** as best picture. **Ocean's 11**, followed decades later by **Soderbergh's Ocean's Eleven**. The television shows **Leverage** and **Hustle**. **Paper Moon**. **Inception**. **Mission Impossible**--not the movies, which I love, but the television series, which was a different beast altogether, as every week the **IMF** essentially ran a brilliant confidence game to trick the bad guys and leave them baffled about where their money/prisoner/technology had disappeared to. The list goes on and on--and in a real way this **Holmes** "trilogy" is the father of all of those stories.

But as a precursor to the genre, these Doyle stories do *differ* in a few ways from the modern form of many of these tales. Somewhere in the past century, sentiment has shifted, and such scam artists--at least in our entertainment media--have become the *good guys!!*

In modern day confidence entertainments, the crooks are the *heroes*, portrayed as modern day **Robin Hoods**. They're the heroes. No one roots for the cops to catch **Danny Ocean** or **Henry Gondorff**--the audience *wants* to see them succeed.

Of course, in a series of stories where Sherlock Holmes is the hero, any opposing him *must* be a villain. So, even if we admire their wits, no one roots for John Clay or Killer Evans or the **Beddingtons** to succeed--if they did, it would only lessen our regard for Sherlock Holmes!!

Part of the Robin Hood transformation of the genre came in the choice of villain. In the classics of the genre, our con artists don't go after the little guy; they don't rob grandmothers of their nest eggs or trick the witless with Nigerian email scams, as real life confidence men might. No, the modern grifter in entertainment goes after bad people--the *victims* are the *villains*! In **The Sting**, they were trying to defraud a gangster who had murdered a colleague. The IMF went after "*organized crime*" or dictatorial governments. Every week, the guys on **Leverage** went after *evil corporations or millionaires* who had ruined someone's life, or otherwise had it coming. When **Jim Rockford** put on an elaborate long game, it was to recover money from the people who had swindled it from **Richie Brockelman's** parents. The modern **Ocean's** movie go after wealthy and corrupt casino owners.

The opposite was true in the Holmes stories. First, Doyle had the people who *hired* Sherlock be sympathetic, if not pitiable, characters. Jabez Wilson, Hall Pycroft and Nathan Garrideb aren't the true victims of the scam--they're just the *gulls* who are being moved out of the way so the crooks can get to the real goal.

Those three wouldn't have lost much if the scams had succeeded (although Pycroft surely never got his original job back, and so was unemployed...and Garrideb *went insane from disappointment!!*). But they put a human face on the crimes, so we're less inclined to root for the robbers.

We should also note that showing us some innocent victims cuts against an aspect that modern scam movies and TV shows choose to downplay or ignore--they may *not* be so victimless. The security guard that gets tricked away from his post, the secretary who is fooled into giving up private info, the tech guy who lets the heroes place cameras everywhere...these people would all likely be humiliated and *fired* in the aftermath of the scams, especially if the "victim" corporations and billionaires are as evil as portrayed. But we're distracted by all the "balls in the air" as the scripts juggle many scam threads in front of us, and we forget to ask about the inevitable collateral damage. Yeah, it's all wonderful fun in **Ocean's Thirteen** when Danny and the crew ruin **Willy Banks'** new casino. But what about the thousands of people who work there? They lose their jobs, right?

Meanwhile, the victims of the scams in the Holmes stories are mostly faceless corporations, or the government, instead of gross millionaires who deserve to be scammed. There's never any hints that these con games might in some way be justified. We meet *Mr. Merryweather*, the banker. He is a bit of an arrogant twit, but nothing so severe as to make the audience root for his bank to fail. We never meet anyone from **Mawson And Williams**--it's just a stock brokerage, and there is no indication that they in any way deserved to be robbed. And in Garridebs, counterfeiting is presented as a bad thing, no questions asked. There can be little doubt that if these tales were retold today, though, that each company and the government would be portrayed as in some way "*asking for it*," with the crime itself portrayed as not hurting any "innocents."

Finally, in modern con entertainments, quite often our grifters explicitly *disdain* the use of guns and violence. In Ocean's Thirteen, **Linus** berates a rival thief for being so inelegant as to use a gun, instead of succeeding through guile and wits. The IMF crew could go entire seasons without a cast member holding a gun (although they were *all too willing* to leave victims to be later killed by angry superiors/partners). Leverage had a tough guy, but he was there for *fisticuffs*, and he refused to use lethal weapons. That's part of the new Robin-Hood mythology, you see--if these new "heroes" are to *truly* be heroes, they can't use guns and kill people. Tricking people with your mind and clever schemes? Admirable. Coercing them with deadly force? Not so much.

Yet the Holmes con artists were all far more violent. John Clay brought a gun with him, which Holmes knocked out of his hand with a riding crop. Beddington *murdered* a watchman in cold blood at Mawson & Williams. And Killer Evans was indeed a killer, convicted of manslaughter, and *he actually took two shots* at **Watson**. You couldn't find starker contrast between these older stories and modern scam

entertainments--in the past scammer were vile villains, ready to kill to finish the jobs. That can't happen with our modern day Robin Hoods, or they wouldn't be heroes.

We love to watch people who are exceedingly clever. We love to watch heroes who are there to help the little guy. We love to watch heroes who can successfully go undercover in crazy disguise. We love to watch heroes who are willing to take the law into their own hands (but only up to a point). But with Sherlock Holmes, we *already* had a hero who fulfilled all of those qualities. So the con men, the players of the long game, even if clever, *had* to fail, and be shown to be *morally retrograde*.

But that's *changed* in modern fiction, to a large degree. There is no Sherlock Holmes to protect us. The banks and brokerages and the government are now often viewed as the bad guy. Who can protect the little people? Only those bold enough to nominally break the law, to take on unjust and overwhelming economic power armed only with wit and guile--just like Robin Hood, the bad guy has become the hero, and breaking the law is justified in the name of justice.

Unfortunately, in real life, the confidence men are usually *also* real villains, and the innocent and downtrodden are their victims. Just ask those victimized by **Bernie Madoff**--he was no Robin Hood. A thief is a thief, and while it may be entertaining, perhaps it's foolish to lionize even a fictional group of them in the name of "*sticking it to the man*." Because 99 times out of a hundred, they're sticking it to *you*.

OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:

******A lot of people mark this story down because of the huge similarity to Red-Headed League. And that's a fair enough observation: both scams involve using *an alleged American millionaire making crazy conditional bequests in his will to complete strangers to get someone away from their place of business or residence so the crooks can get in to access ill-gotten goods*.

Of course, if a type of con works, there's no reason that other crooks *wouldn't* use the same scam in the future. It's not like there's been only one **Ponzi** scheme in history, and people have been running variations of the **Spanish Prisoner** trick for centuries.

Still, fictional narratives have *different* demands than real life, and repeating yourself during a series of stories is seen as *laziness*, not efficiency.

But if you ask me, the bigger problem with Three Garridebs is that Killer Evans is *a fairly big idiot*. His scheme is nowhere as near as *airtight* as the one John Clay used in Red-Headed League. And Evans was hot-headed, as well as being a poor liar. Holmes has the scheme pretty much figured out after "Garrideb's" first visit.

It is the lack of a worthy enemy, rather than the originality of the scheme, that hurts The Three Garridebs.

**Granada worked The Three Garridebs into their adaptation of The Mazarin Stone. There, Evans was trying to get into Garridebs apartment because the secret room held the workshop of a deceased jewel cutter and fence, and he need to get in because it held the only tool in England capable of cutting up the great Mazarin Stone.

Bah.

**Watson tells us, "*It may have been a comedy, or it may have been a tragedy...Yet there was certainly an element of comedy.*"

It's difficult to see *any* comedy, unless you think that doddering old Nathan Garrideb is a ridiculous figure.

Remember, Watson and Holmes *did* laugh at poor Jabez Wilson and his consternation in Red-Headed League...perhaps they thought that victims of con men were fitting subjects for mockery?

**Before this story, Holmes had recently "*refused a knighthood, for services which may be someday described.*" Why refuse it?

Ironically, this story was written soon after Arthur Conan Doyle *himself* had had been knighted--and he accepted!

**Garrideb really is a *non-existent name*--apparently no one in the world has been found, then or now, who ever actually had that surname.

Fitting choice as a name for this plot, then. But my question is...*where* did Doyle come up with it? Did he just generate a random name, and then check the phone directory or census to see if it was really rare? Did he take a variation on a real name? Or were there real Garridebs once, but the line died out (as it would have in this story, as Nathan had no children and no prospects for breeding?)

What plot would Evans have come up with if Nathan had been named **Smith?

Surely it couldn't have been *that* hard to get Garrideb out of the house for a bit--perhaps a fake flier for an auction or sale at **Sotheby's** or **Christie's**, which Garrideb was known to attend. Or perhaps a fawning letter from another "*collector*," asking Nathan to come as an expert to examine some rarities--that would certainly appeal to Nathan's vanity.

**Watson describing Evans: "*...with the round, fresh, clean-shaven face characteristic of so many American men of affairs.*"

Still, that's not a compliment, it seems: "*The general effect was chubby and rather childlike, so that one received the impression of quite a young man with a broad set smile upon his face.*"

So many American businessmen are chubby and childlike? Well, OK, I'll give you **Donald Trump**? Still...

**Watson again: *"His accent was American, but was not accompanied by any eccentricity of speech."*

Well, let's be clear here: American *don't* have accents--the *English do*. And what the hell do you mean by "eccentricities?"

**Holmes sussing out Evans right away:

"You are, of course, the Mr. John Garrideb mentioned in this document. But surely you have been in England some time?"

"Why do you say that, Mr. Holmes?" I seemed to read sudden suspicion in those expressive eyes.

"Your whole outfit is English."

**Perhaps a man named "Killer" doesn't have the proper demeanor to be a top-tier con man, as he loses his cool pretty easily at the least sign of someone scrutinizing his story.

"Why did he ever drag you into it at all?" asked our visitor with a sudden outflame of anger. "What in thunder had you to do with it? Here was a bit of professional business between two gentlemen, and one of them must needs call in a detective! I don't want police butting into a private matter."

Dude, you're supposed to be playing a role here, and you're blowing it!

**So, were American millionaires making *really odd bequests* common in those days? Was it a common entertainment trope? Is there any chance of someone I've never heard of leaving *me* \$5 million bucks?

**Evans: *"It was the queerest will that has ever been filed in the State of Kansas."*

That should have been easy enough for Holmes to *verify*, right? A quick telegram to one of Sherlock's police or press friends in America?

***"It's five million dollars for each if it is a cent..."*

That was quite the princely sum, worth more than *\$100 million* in 2010 dollars.

Some sources put the net worth of the top 1% in Victorian England at a mere *\$265,000*, according to **Leslie Klinger** in **The New Annotated Sherlock Holmes**. Which means Evans was promising to make Garrideb wealthier than almost everyone else in the country. No wonder his head was turned.

**Evans falls for a rather *obvious* ploy by Holmes: *"I used to have a correspondent -- he is dead now -- old Dr. Lysander Starr, who was mayor in 1890."*

Again, this is an example of how poorly qualified Evans was for a job like this. He should have performed at least *some* minimal research, in case someone asked a question like this. Or a better answer, perhaps...*"I don't follow politics?" "I would have been a child then?"* etc.,

**As it is, Holmes has the falsehood of the whole enterprise figured out before the fake Garrideb left.

"I was wondering, Watson, what on earth could be the object of this man in telling us such a rigmorole of lies. ...The whole of this Garrideb invention was apparently for no other end. I must say, Watson, that there is a certain devilish ingenuity about it, even if the queer name of the tenant did give him an opening which he could hardly have expected. He wove his plot with remarkable cunning."

**Holmes spots another transparent lie from Evans:

There have been no advertisements in the agony columns. You know that I miss nothing there. They are my favourite covert for putting up a bird, and I would never have overlooked such a cock pheasant as that.

Seriously, the man went to confront Holmes without being prepared in any way whatsoever.

**Holmes: *"I think the fellow is really an American, but he has worn his accent smooth with years of London."*

I thought we covered that--you guys are the ones with accents, *not us!* Enough of this anti-American propaganda!

**The "real" Garrideb:

...a very tall, loose-jointed, round-backed person, gaunt and bald, some sixty-odd years of age. He had a cadaverous face, with the dull dead skin of a man to whom exercise was unknown. Large round spectacles and a small projecting goat's beard combined with his stooping attitude to give him an expression of peering curiosity. The general effect, however, was amiable, though eccentric.

**Today, Garrideb would likely be described as a hoarder:

[The room] was both broad and deep, with cupboards and cabinets all round, crowded with specimens, geological and anatomical. Cases of butterflies and moths flanked each side of the entrance. A large table in the centre was littered with all sorts of debris, while the tall brass tube of a powerful microscope bristled up among them. As I glanced round I was surprised at the universality of the man's interests.

**Seriously, is Garrideb already wealthy enough?

With no visible means of income, he maintains his household, and spends his time collecting anything and everything. It seems he was fairly well off.

But Garrideb begs to differ:

"No, sir. I am not a rich man. It is a good collection, but not a very valuable one..."

Later, though, he tells us

There are a dozen specimens in the market at the present moment which fill gaps in my collection, and which I am unable to purchase for want of a few hundred pounds. Just think what I could do with five million dollars.

If filling the "gaps" in your collection would take "*a few hundred pounds*," what must the bulk of the collection itself be worth?

Certainly there might be some thieves interested in that. And surely you have sufficient things to sell if you need money...

**Of course, the victim's ego is crucial in many con games: "*Why, I have the nucleus of a national collection. I shall be the Hans Sloane of my age.*"

Dream high, Nathan Garrideb. *Dream high!*

**More anti-Americanism (although this time it is Evans trying to justify Garrideb traveling to Birmingham):

"Why should he believe what I tell him? But you are a Britisher with solid references, and he is bound to take notice of what you say."

**Evans finishes with, "*I would go with you if you wished, but I have a very busy day to-morrow, and I could always follow you if you are in any trouble.*"

Busy doing *what?!?* Your whole story is that you were in England to look for Garridebs. You claim you've found one, and *now* you have something more important to do?!?!

**Clever repartee:

"Our little problem draws to a close," said he. "No doubt you have outlined the solution in your own mind."

"I can make neither head nor tail of it."

"The head is surely clear enough and the tail we should see to-morrow."

**More proof that when it comes to clever schemes, Evans is a complete *nitwit*, as his "advertisement" was *riddled* with errors easily spotted, even by Watson:

"I saw that the word 'plough' was misspelt."

"Oh, you did notice that, did you? Come, Watson, you improve all the time. Yes, it was bad English but good American. The printer had set it up as received. Then the buckboards. That is American also. And artesian wells are commoner with them than with us. It was a typical American advertisement, but purporting to be from an English firm."

Seriously, these are *minor league* errors, especially when you're facing Sherlock Holmes!

**"Garrideb's" true identity:

'James Winter, alias Morecroft, alias Killer Evans,' was the inscription below." Holmes drew an envelope from his pocket. "I scribbled down a few points from his dossier: Aged forty-four. Native of Chicago. Known to have shot three men in the States. Escaped from penitentiary through political influence. Came to London in

1893. Shot a man over cards in a night-club in the Waterloo Road in January, 1895. Man died, but he was shown to have been the aggressor in the row. Dead man was identified as Rodger Prescott, famous as forger and coiner in Chicago...Very dangerous man, usually carries arms and is prepared to use them.

Some have questioned why, when the infamous forger **Prescott died, the police didn't search his residence for his counterfeiting works.

The answer is *fairly obvious*, as Holmes tells out directly: Prescott rented his flat under an assumed name!

The previous tenant was a gentleman at large named Waldron. Waldron's appearance was well remembered at the office. He had suddenly vanished and nothing more been heard of him. He was a tall, bearded man with very dark features. Now, Prescott, the man whom Killer Evans had shot, was, according to Scotland Yard, a tall, dark man with a beard.

Obviously, a known criminal would use an alias, lest his hideout be easily found.

**Evans entering the flat: "*Then came the sharp, metallic snap of a key, and the American was in the room.*"

Where did he get a key?!?

Presumably, when he saw Garrideb off at the train station, he either surreptitiously lifted it, or borrowed it from Nathan on some pretext ("*I left my briefcase at your apartment earlier*").

As we discussed above, unlike the "modern" version of the con men, Evans would anger **Matt Damon by resorting to gunplay, even after he is caught:

His face turned upon us with a glare of baffled rage, which gradually softened into a rather shamefaced grin as he realized that two pistols were pointed at his head...In an instant he had whisked out a revolver from his breast and had fired two shots.

**Watson has been wounded by bullets before, perhaps more than once. So when he describes his pain, he's not whining: "*I felt a sudden hot sear as if a red-hot iron had been pressed to my thigh.*"

If this tale was not explicitly dated in 1902, we could use it to answer the enigma of Watson's "*wandering gunshot wound.*"

**Perhaps the grandest moment in the Holmes/Watson friendship:

Then my friend's wiry arms were round me, and he was leading me to a chair. "You're not hurt, Watson? For God's sake, say that you are not hurt!" It was worth a wound -- it was worth many wounds -- to know the depth of loyalty and love which lay behind that cold mask. The clear, hard eyes were dimmed for a moment, and the firm lips were shaking. For the one and only time I caught a glimpse of a great heart as well as of a great brain. All my years of humble but single-minded service culminated in that moment of revelation.

His face set like flint as he glared at our prisoner, who was sitting up with a dazed face. "By the Lord, it is as well for you. If you had killed Watson, you would not have got out of this room alive.

****Holmes can't be bribed, and asserts that it's a property of *all* Englishmen:**

"Yes, sir," said our prisoner, staggering slowly to his feet and then sinking into the chair. "The greatest counterfeiter London ever saw. That's Prescott's machine, and those bundles on the table are two thousand of Prescott's notes worth a hundred each and fit to pass anywhere. Help yourselves, gentlemen. Call it a deal and let me beat it."

"We don't do things like that, Mr. Evans. There is no bolthole for you in this country."

****Evans, on why he didn't just kill or incapacitate Garrideb in the first place: "It would have been easy enough, but I'm a soft-hearted guy that can't begin shooting unless the other man has a gun also."**

Let's remember that he shot *three men* in America, as well as Prescott. Hardly *soft-hearted*, I think.

****A key question--at this point, what exactly can Evans be *charged* with?**

"But say, Mr. Holmes, what have I done wrong, anyhow? I've not used this plant. I've not hurt this old stiff. Where do you get me?"

"Only attempted murder, so far as I can see," said Holmes. "But that's not our job. They take that at the next stage."

At least Evans seems to be fairly clever in facing the legal possibilities of his acts.

Perhaps he could be charged with trespassing, as well? And surely, posing as a lawyer must have been an offense?

****Garrideb, sadly, was crushed by the disappointment of not receiving \$5 million:**

We heard later that our poor old friend never got over the shock of his dissipated dreams. When his castle in the air fell down, it buried him beneath the ruins. He was last heard of at a nursing-home in Brixton.

Watson, in his introduction, told us that Garrideb had "*lost his reason*," so his "*nursing-home*" is not merely a quiet retirement.

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October 18, 2015