

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 LIV – The Adventure of the Illustrious Client

The Adventure Of The Illustrious Client--The Incomplete Story Of Miss Kitty Winter!!

I won't lie--I'm *not* a big fan of **The Adventure Of The Illustrious Client**.

Sorry. I know that's not much of a lead-in. No deep thoughts, no underlying metaphors, no discourses on what the story tells us about Victorian/Edwardian society.

To a large extent, that's because we have *already* covered this story before. On a fundamental plot level, Illustrious Client is the *exact* same story as **Charles Augustus Milverton**. Except it's not as good.

In both tales, Holmes is hired to protect an upper class woman from the mechanizations of an evil, evil man. After a meeting with the villain that proves Holmes has nothing in his detective arsenal to thwart the villain, Sherlock resorts to burglarizing the bad guy's home. He succeeds, but is almost caught, when a former female victim shows up and physically neutralizes the villain.

Yes, there are some differences. But these are basically the same stories. You'll recall that I wasn't fond of the Milverton story as a **Sherlock Holmes** story, and Illustrious *repeats* many of those missteps. There is no mystery to solve--we know who the bad guy is, there's never any question about that. There's no *whodunnit*, *howdunnit* or *whydunnit*. ****, unlike Milverton, there's not even a crime being committed. Sherlock makes *no deductions* in either story, and the greatest detective of all time simply resorts to blunt force breaking and entering to "*solve*" the case. An outside party steps in to settle the villain's hash.

On another level, Illustrious Client just seems to be, well, a *seedier*, *seamier* story. If you disregard the speculation over the identity of the client, you're left with a tale that could as well come from some *penny*



dreadful. Holmes is hired not to solve a crime, but to break up an engagement. He's a *fixer*, not a detective!! **Baron Gruner** may be murderer, but his chief interest seems to be using and discarding woman. He keeps a "*lust book*": "*Snapshot photographs. names, details, everything about them. It was a beastly book -- a book no man, even if he had come from the gutter, could have put together.*" We get precious few details about the women he has "*ruined*," but one of those victims throws acid in his face, and we spend several paragraphs in a rather *grisly* description of the resulting injuries.

Yuck.

Yet, ironically, I found I wanted far *more* detail about one character in particular: **Miss Kitty Winter**. She's obviously of great importance in the tale--she tells Holmes about Gruner's diary; she goes with Holmes to try and convince **Violet de Merville** that her fiancé was a snake; Holmes grabs her to help find the diary in his study; and of course she gains her vengeance by tossing vitriol on him. She's feisty, she's likable (well, at least until the acid-throwing), she's the most colorful and vital and interesting character in the story.

But we need more details to make her character work *within the story*. Perhaps it was due to **Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's** Victorian prudishness, but we never learn exactly *how* the baron wronged Kitty. He clearly didn't murder her. He pretty clearly didn't rob her of any family fortune, as the story (and both of the TV adaptations) portray her as lower class.

What then, *did* Gruner do to Miss Winter to make her a raving maniac whenever his name comes up? We never find out. When she has her confrontation with Violet, Kitty neglects to say *a single word* about what the baron did to her--negating the reason she came in the first place!! She merely comes across as a madwoman because of that, constantly raving and *never* explaining, which weakens her position in the narrative. It's hard to take sympathy with someone's cries from justice, when we *never* know what the injustice was to begin with.

When tried for the "*grave crime of vitriol-throwing*," "*Such extenuating circumstances came out in the trial that the sentence, as will be remembered was the lowest that was possible for such an offence.*" What extenuating circumstances? Why aren't we told at any point in the story what actually happened to her?

Clearly Gruner did more than "*love her and leave her*," or cheat on her, because that certainly doesn't seem like it would be extenuating enough to let her off lightly for what could have been charged as an attempted murder.

Did he leave her with child, or force her into an abortion? Make her participate in some particularly degrading sexual acts? Did he prostitute her? Did he beat her? The **Granada** adaptation showed us that Gruner had *scarred her neck and chest with acid* himself, which makes her fury more understandable, and her acid-throw at him seem at least somewhat justified.

But in the printed story, we have *no idea* of what motivates Kitty Winter, unless there are some coded words and phrases in the story which made sense to a **1920s** fan that now escape the modern reader.

But I think Doyle was just being *too delicate* and discreet--a gentleman shouldn't write of such things! Yet by eliding past any actual explanations, he weakens the character, and makes us question the justice of her actions.

Holmes also treat Miss Winters very oddly. After Gruner's goons attack him, he insists that Watson get her out of town, because she is danger:

Tell Shinwell Johnson to get that girl out of the way. Those beauties will be after her now. They know, of course, that she was with me in the case. If they dared to do me in it is not likely they will neglect her. That is urgent.

But just six days later, Holmes drags Kitty along *to Gruner's residence!!* How unbelievably callous-- "you're in grave danger from this man, now come with me to his house?!?" No wonder she brought acid!! Holmes' reason, "*But I had to be sure of the position of the book, and I knew I had only a few minutes in which to act...therefore I gathered the girl up at the last moment*" makes little sense. In their first meeting, Kitty had told Holmes, "*How can I tell you where [the book] is now? It's more than a year since I left him.*" It seems a very slender thread upon which to justify bringing the woman along, risking both her safety and her arrest for abetting a felony, when the lust book might not even be in the same location.

So, as promised, no particularly deep thoughts. It's just a story I don't particularly like, and the most interesting character, who could have tied everything together much better, is underdeveloped to the point of actually harming the narrative.

OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:

**For what it's worth, Sir Arthur was quite pleased with this story, telling a friend in a letter that he considered it among the top six Sherlock Holmes stories.

Well, I'm a terrible judge of my own writing, too.

Holmes tells **Watson that "*it can't hurt now*" to write up this adventure.

"Now" would seem to imply that earlier it hadn't been all right to tell it. Since the tale occurred in 1902, and was published in 1924, obviously something--or several somethings--had *changed* in the intervening 22 years.

Edward VII, most people's choice for the "*illustrious client*," had of course died in 1910. So there could be no fear of upsetting him--although certainly his part in tale can only make him look good, unless he were embarrassed as having been seen interfering in a society wedding. Or perhaps, given tales of Edward's past, there is a deeper reason--perhaps he is *really* Violet's father?!?

If Baron Gruner were still alive, some of what Watson recorded here might seem actionable--actually accusing him of a murder, assaulting detectives and of "ruining" young women, at the least. So perhaps he had passed.

The only other person who might care would be Violet de Merville, for being made to look like such a fool. She probably wouldn't be too happy that the circumstances of the breaking of their engagement be made public. Surely she had actually married by this point. Perhaps she had left the country, or maybe she had passed in the intervening decades, as well...

**"*Both Holmes and I had a weakness for the Turkish bath.*" Do they even have Turkish baths anymore? There don't seem to be any in my neck of the woods...

**A number of commentators suggest that the following is Sherlock Holmes snidely tweaking an upper class twit:

...said Holmes with a smile. "Don't you smoke? Then you will excuse me if I light my pipe.

See, **Sir James Damery** had not taken off his elegant gloves, and he was a bit of a dandy, so Holmes asking him if he wanted to smoke was supposedly the detective's way of subtly criticizing him for not having taken off his gloves to shake hands with them, and...

No, I really *don't* see that, sorry. And neither the **1965 BBC** adaptation nor the Granada version do anything with that either--they show not a trace of Sherlock taking umbrage or making merry.

No, if you want a suggestion of Holmes' being so insolent, you really have to go to his reading Damery's missive: "*It may be some fussy, self-important fool; it may be a matter of life or death...*"

Of course, Holmes hadn't met Damery yet, and only knew of his reputation as a "fixer" and high society diplomat.

And to be honest, Damery *isn't* a twit at all. He doesn't take issue with Watson joining in. He doesn't talk down about people from lower classes, or from America. He shows ample respect for Holmes' power, acknowledging that Holmes could easily deduce Damery's patron if he tried. He makes sure that Holmes will

"*have a free hand.*" He listens with "*deepest attention.*" Damery certainly comes across as much more likable and friendly than, say, **Lord Cantlemere** in **Mazarin Stone** or **Lord St. Simon** in **Noble Bachelor**. Really, the *only* reason Holmes could have to subtweet Damery as folks claim is that Holmes objected to his being a clothes horse.

No, if Doyle is having Holmes take the piss with Damery, it's far too subtle for *me* to see (or understand why).

**Despite my misgivings about the story as a whole, Watson's (*and Holmes'!*) character descriptions are amazing, deep and rich. When they first meet Colonel Damery.

...many will remember that large, bluff, honest personality, that broad, cleanshaven face, and, above all, that pleasant, mellow voice. Frankness shone from his gray Irish eyes, and good humour played round his mobile, smiling lips. His lucent top-hat, his dark frock-coat, indeed, every detail, from the pearl pin in the black satin cravat to the lavender spats over the varnished shoes, spoke of the meticulous care in dress for which he was famous.

Again, Watson doesn't seem to be tweaking him, either, unless "*meticulous care in dress*" is a subtle shot. But this reads to me like an approving assessment of the man, not a criticism at him.

**Damery on Gruner: "*I should say that there is no more dangerous man in Europe.*"

Holmes seems a bit dismissive: "*If your man is more dangerous than the late Professor Moriarty, or than the living Colonel Sebastian Moran, then he is indeed worth meeting.*"

Of course, Gruner does a good job of having the crap kicked out of Holmes by minions...and Holmes is not able to outwit him. So Damery's description seems *apt*.

**Damery: "*To revenge crime is important, but to prevent it is more so.*"

Of course, what Gruner is doing is no crime. As distasteful as it might seem, a cad marrying a well-to-do woman *isn't* illegal--even if his previous wife came to a bad end.

**Damery: Gruner "*has been fortunate in some rather shady speculations and is a rich man, which naturally makes him a more dangerous antagonist.*"

So, wait--he made his money from "shady" investments? He didn't murder his first wife for her money? Than *why* did he kill her?

And if he is *already* well off, why is he so insistent on marrying Violet? For more money? For the sheer sadism? Or...does he *really love her*?

**Holmes doesn't like anonymous clients: "*I am accustomed to have mystery at one end of my cases, but to have it at both ends is too confusing.*"

**Ah, the mysterious client.

I will credit Doyle for this much--the use of this device helps *disguise* how much this story is merely a re-run of Milverton.

If Damery himself had been the client--or **General de Merville**--we wouldn't be so wrapped in speculation, deduction and argument over the identity of the "illustrious" gentleman. And without those "bookends" around the story, we might notice its weaknesses more easily.

Perhaps its just because I'm an American, but I get no particular thrill over pondering *which* high-born noble person is secretly Holmes' patron in this case. One prince or baron or king is as good as another to me.

Of more interest is why, exactly, King Edward (or whomever) was so adamant that "*his honoured name has been in no way dragged into the matter,*" that his "*incognito not be broken.*" Perhaps there was some social/class taboo; perhaps a reigning monarch simply couldn't be seen to interfere in non-royal matters. Or, as I asked above, perhaps there's some secret relationship between the monarch and the maid...

Then again, since Holmes' detection abilities were *never* used in this case, it is interesting that the **Emperor of The British Empire** didn't have someone available for burglary and undercover dirty work, without involving an outsider an commoner and risking the story getting out. "*007, we have as job for you...*"

****And one very important point about the plot device of the secret, illustrious client?**

Sir James carried away both it and the precious saucer. As I was myself overdue, I went down with him into the street. A brougham was waiting for him. He sprang in, gave a hurried order to the cockaded coachman, and drove swiftly away. He flung his overcoat half out of the window to cover the armorial bearings upon the panel, but I had seen them in the glare of our fanlight none the less. I gasped with surprise.

Seriously, bro, if you want to keep your client's identity a secret, *you don't drive around in a carriage bearing his coat of arms!!!!!!!!!!* Good gravy, that's a really stupid and amateurish bit of business...

****Baron Gruner is a ladies' man:**

The fellow is, as you may have heard, extraordinarily handsome, with a most fascinating manner. a gentle voice and that air of romance and mystery which means so much to a woman. He is said to have the whole sex at his mercy and to have made ample use of the fact.

****He also, apparently, does a brilliant job of *inoculating* his "victims" against anyone telling bad stories about him:**

The cunning devil has told her every unsavoury public scandal of his past life, but always in such a way as to make himself out to be an innocent martyr. She absolutely accepts his version and will listen to no other.

Gee, if I had known it was that easy to make a woman forgiving of my flaws, well, a lot of my relationships might have gone differently...

****This story is the first, and sadly only, appearance of Shinwell Johnson:**

During the first years of the century he became a valuable assistant. Johnson, I grieve to say, made his name first as a very dangerous villain and served two terms at Parkhurst. Finally he repented and allied himself to Holmes, acting as his agent in the huge criminal underworld of London and obtaining information which often proved to be of vital importance. Had Johnson been a "nark" of the police he would soon have been exposed, but as he dealt with cases which never came directly into the courts, his activities were never realized by his companions.

With the glamour of his two convictions upon him, he had the entree of every night-club, doss house, and gambling den in the town, and his quick observation and active brain made him an ideal agent for gaining information.

And Holmes:

"Johnson is on the prowl," said he. "He may pick up some garbage in the darker recesses of the underworld, for it is down there, amid the black roots of crime, that we must hunt for this man's secrets."

In other stories in the **Case-Book**, Watson has mentioned "agents" that Holmes used in his latter days. Shinwell is one of the few we ever actual meet.

It's an intriguing set-up, but Johnson doesn't actually *do* anything in the story except find Kitty Winter and introduce her to Sherlock, which seems to be considerably beneath the talents that Watson and Holmes lay out in his description.

****Watson's description of Shinwell: "a huge, coarse, red-faced, scorbutic man, with a pair of vivid black eyes which were the only external sign of the very cunning mind within."**

****Holmes: "Woman's heart and mind are insoluble puzzles to the male. Murder might be condoned or explained, and yet some smaller offence might rankle."**

Well, that's maybe *a little bit* sexist, Sherlock...

****Holmes description of Gruner:**

He is an excellent antagonist, cool as ice, silky voiced and soothing as one of your fashionable consultants, and poisonous as a cobra. He has breeding in him -- a real aristocrat of crime with a superficial suggestion of afternoon tea and all the cruelty of the grave behind it...Some people's affability is more deadly than the violence of coarser souls.

****Holmes' attempts to sway Gruner are particularly ineffective:**

No one wants to rake up your past and make you unduly uncomfortable. It is over, and you are now in smooth waters, but if you persist in this marriage you will raise up a swarm of powerful enemies who will never leave you alone until they have made England too hot to hold you.

The baron calls his bluff rather easily, and Holmes is no more effective than he was against Milverton.

***Gruner on his power over women: "You have heard of post-hypnotic suggestion. Mr. Holmes. Well you will see how it works for a man of personality can use hypnotism without any vulgar passes or tomfoolery."*

Some have taken that to mean that Gruner actually did use some form of hypnosis to enchant Violet.

How silly--it's *obviously* a metaphor.

***Watson, after hearing of Gruner's threats against Holmes: "Must you interfere? Does it really matter if he marries the girl?"*

My thoughts exactly. It's not as if she's being forced, and if she wants to be a ****ed fool despite the efforts of everyone in her life, well, it's a free country.

***Watson's description of Miss Winter: "a slim, flame-like young woman with a pale, intense face, youthful, and yet so worn with sin and sorrow that one read the terrible years which had left their leprous mark upon her."*

***Nice turn of phrase: "If I can help to put him where he belongs, I'm yours to the rattle."*

***Having called out Holmes for sexism, I feel obliged to point out Watson's take on the difference between men and women: "There was an intensity of hatred in her white, set face and her blazing eyes such as woman seldom and man never can attain."*

***Holmes' description (as transcribed by Watson) of Violet:*

I don't quite know how to make her clear to you, Watson. Perhaps you may meet her before we are through, and you can use your own gift of words. She is beautiful, but with the ethereal other-world beauty of some fanatic whose thoughts are set on high. I have seen such faces in the pictures of the old masters of the Middle Ages...she waved us into our respective chairs like a reverend abbess receiving two rather leprous mendicants. If your head is inclined to swell. my dear Watson, take a course of Miss Violet de Merville.

Sounds charming, doesn't she?

That's a difficulty with the story, and any adaptations: if you portray Violet as a young, flighty thing--the type you'd think might easily fall for a bad man--than the hold Gruner has on her really isn't such a big deal. We've probably all known someone like that who fell in love with the wrong man.

But you have to be careful not to *overcorrect*. Yes, build up Miss de Merville so Gruner's ability to enchant her is impressive. But don't make her such an unpleasant--and I hate to use the term--"ice queen" that she becomes an unsympathetic character. Unfortunately, that's how far Doyle took it. Her voice is *"like the wind from an iceberg."* No one *"could not bring one tinge of colour to those ivory cheeks or one gleam of emotion to those abstracted eyes."*

"There was something indescribably annoying in the calm aloofness and supreme self-complaisance of the woman whom we were trying to save."

Now, in fairness, these were all Sherlock's descriptions. Perhaps, had Watson met her, her might have found *warmer*, more charitable words to draw her picture. Then again, when Sherlock Holmes says that you're being frosty and unemotional, well, he knows what he's talking about!!

When the hero of your story tells us the woman they're trying to help is icy and aloof and haughty and, well, unpleasant, it really dispels any sympathy the audience might have for her plight, and instead leaves us thinking that she probably deserves Gruner.

******So besotted is Violet, and so arrogant, that she actually believes that she is heaven's agent: *"If his noble nature has ever for an instant fallen, it may be that I have been specially sent to raise it to its true and lofty level."*

Oh, barf.

******I had noted this above, but it's worth mentioning again. When Kitty has her chance to tell Violet everything that Gruner had done to her...she doesn't mention a *single* thing. *Not one*. Instead, she harangues Violet, insulting her, and ultimately physically attacking her. No wonder the gambit failed!

******It's an indication of Sherlock's fame at this point in his career that an attack on him rates as front page news.

It's also fun to see that--as in **The Six Napoleons**--Holmes has mastered using the press to confuse his foes.

******Watson is a medical doctor, right? He seems all too willing to listen to news reports and other doctors' reports, rather than actually taking a look for himself. It's difficult to believe that Watson didn't insert a line of two along the gist of *"my experience told me Holmes was right, and the injuries looked worse than they were"* or some such.

*******"There was a curious secretive streak in the man which led to many dramatic effects, but left even his closest friend guessing as to what his exact plans might be."* Or, translated: Sherlock Holmes is a jerk!

******Watson:

The same evening papers had an announcement which I was bound, sick or well, to carry to my friend. It was simply that among the passengers on the Cunard boat Ruritania, starting from Liverpool on Friday, was the Baron Adelbert Gruner, who had some important financial business to settle in the States before his impending wedding to Miss Violet de Merville, only daughter of, etc., etc.

That does seem a little intrusive, for the press to be printing up the comings and goings of people, and passengers lists for ships, and the like. Certainly, an American would bemoan the invasion of privacy (well, at least pre-9/11).

It is mighty convenient, though. Had they not printed that notice, Holmes wouldn't have known to act in time...

**The whole gambit regarding Watson posing as an expert and connoisseur of Chinese pottery *fails* to work *as a story element* for two separate reasons.

First, we were told early in the story that Gruner had written a book on the subject. Now, it's either not credible, or extraordinarily foolish on Watson's part, to believe that during his 24 hour cram session on the subject, *he didn't read Gruner's book*. Either way, it makes it ridiculously easy for Gruner to disbelieve Watson's story.

Secondly, *not once* does Watson actually use any of that knowledge he stuffed into his head. *Not once*. Oh, sure, he name drops a bunch of things earlier in his narration. But go reread his meeting with Gruner--not once does he bring up *a single fact* that he had learned. The entire conversation would play *exactly* the same had Watson *never* picked up a single book on Chinese pottery. Watson evades, deflects or ignores every one of Gruner's queries and tests. Considering that he was playing for time, this is inexcusable. John might as well have spent that 24 hours napping.

And just how hard would it have been to come up with a vaguely plausible provenance for the Ming saucer? "*The father of one of my patients had served in the Opium Wars, and when he died he left this box full of plundered antiquities to his son. Knowing my interest in such things...blah blah blah.*" At least that would have Gruner off guard for a few more minutes, rather than instantly being suspicious.

So, either we are to believe that Watson is *a complete dunce*, or that Sir Arthur did a particularly *poor* job writing that gambit.

**Watson's description of Baron Gruner:

He was certainly a remarkably handsome man. His European reputation for beauty was fully deserved. In figure he was not more than of middle size, but was built upon graceful and active lines. His face was swarthy, almost Oriental, with large, dark, languorous eyes which might easily hold an irresistible fascination for women. His hair and moustache were raven black, the latter short, pointed, and carefully waxed. His features were regular and pleasing, save only his straight, thin-lipped mouth. If ever I saw a murderer's mouth it was there -- a cruel, hard gash in the face, compressed, inexorable, and terrible. He was ill-advised to train his moustache away from it, for it was Nature's danger-signal, set as a warning to his victims.

His voice was engaging and his manners perfect. In age I should have put him at little over thirty, though his record afterwards showed that he was forty-two.

******Sherlock really isn't a very good burglar, is he?

Then something struck upon [Gruner's] ear, for he stood listening intently...Beside [the window], looking like some terrible ghost, his head gin with bloody bandages, his face drawn and white, stood Sherlock Holmes. The next instant he was through the gap, and I heard the crash of his body among the laurel bushes outside.

Holmes didn't get away cleanly while breaking into Milverton's crib, either...

******Again, Doyle goes a bit *grand guignol* here, devoting 4 long paragraphs to the effects of the acid thrown in Gruner's face. Yuck.

******This story does a better job than most Holmes' tales of giving us some resolution.

Still, I can't help but feel cheated by not seeing Violet receiving and reading Gruner's diary. Not chivalrous of me, I know...but Doyle does such a fine job of making her unbelievably arrogant, I'd love to see her get her comeuppance.

*******Sherlock Holmes was threatened with a prosecution for burglary, but when an object is good and a client is sufficiently illustrious, even the rigid British law becomes human and elastic. My friend has not yet stood in the dock.*

In other words, the fix was in, and The Man got Sherlock off the hook. In effect, he had been granted His Majesty's *License To Burgle*.

Still, not matter what a scumbag Baron Gruner was, or how "*good*" the cause is, it really doesn't show British law in a very good light when you can burgle a man's home and maim him with acid and no one pays any real penalty. Vigilante justice, sponsored and protected by The Crown. That's more the hallmark of a despotic regime than a just democracy...

Brian Keith Snell
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