

## *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 LV – The Adventure of the Three Gables

## The Adventure Of The Three Gables--Sherlock As Atticus Finch?!?

We've all experienced this, haven't we? We go home for a family gathering, and a favorite uncle or cousin we've long admired is there. Our ideal is shattered, though, when the relative suddenly blurts out something hateful and racist, and suddenly you're disillusioned and uncomfortable and you have no idea what to do.

Which brings us to **The Adventure of The Three Gables**.

One of the reasons this post is so late is that I have no idea what to do here.

Like when your beloved grandfather starts dropping anti-Semitic comments during Thanksgiving dinner...what do you do? Try and correct him? Start a big argument that ruins dinner for everybody? Press too hard and you find out that many more of your loved ones harbor similar disturbing prejudices? Keep eating and stew in silence? Stop accepting invitations to family gatherings?



Granted, **Sherlock Holmes** (and **Watson**) are fictional characters, but in some ways the sting is just as bad. To see a character you admire, the *epitome* of intellect and reason and not letting unwarranted prejudices cloud your reason, speaking and behaving in way that you feel is racist--it jars. It *hurts*.

Now, as a middle-aged middle-class white male, I am spectacularly unequipped to speak intelligently on such issues. Anything I can add to the discussion would be as an outsider dilettante, right?

And there are some halfhearted defenses I *could* try to make of Holmes' behavior in this story. "*All his jabs weren't directed at blacks in general, just at **Steve Dixie**. He wasn't generalizing, he wasn't being racist-- Dixie really did smell bad!*" Or "*Holmes didn't really feel that way--he was trying to use those comments to get under Dixie's skin, to throw him off guard and get him to blurt out information about his boss!*"

Or "*Holmes was just as rude to **Sam Merton** the boxer in **Mazarin Stone!** He's not racist, he just hates dumb bruisers in general!" Or "...but *The Adventure Of The Yellow Face!*"*

And they even be some glimmers of truth, and perhaps mitigation, in those arguments. But Watson himself is *also* not terribly pleasant in some of his descriptions of Mr. Dixie, and in his transcription of his dialogue. So we can't just dismiss complaints about this story out-of-hand with rhetorical tricks.

As regular reader **Aryne** said, "*[Holmes] is a racist a\*\*hole in Three Gables!*" It's difficult for me to reject that conclusion.

Perhaps a better question is--should we be surprised? After all, even in real life, people are *terribly complicated*, and inconsistent in ways that would never pass muster if we analyzed them the way we analyzed literary works. **Abraham Lincoln**, the Great Emancipator, held views on race relations that, while common at the time, would have right-thinking people reject the entirety of his career if spoken today. People can be *more than one thing at once*, even contradictory things.

That can be true in literature and entertainment, too. Without getting into all of the controversy over the release of the "*sequel*" to **To Kill A Mockingbird**, **Go Set A Watchman** tells of an **Atticus Finch** in his older days who maybe isn't quite the perfect idol of liberalism 9th grade English classes (and **Gregory Peck**) have made him to be for decades. He attends meetings of racist organizations! He's for "states' rights!" Despite his defense of **Tom Robinson**, he doesn't support integration or full civil rights for blacks!!

Good Lord, you would have thought they were murdering puppies on Main Street, so great was the anguished outcry by people astonished that their lifetime hero maybe, just maybe, was *not* an icon of perfection!! How dare you tell us our heroes are complex and contradictory and...

We can see a similar thing in the original **Star Trek**. It was the **1960s**, and they liked to make a big deal over Earth overcoming all its prejudices and hatreds. But *every single episode* featured the chief medical officer making racist comments about the ship's first officer. So much for racism being over...or does racism not count if you're only racist against *fictional* races and species? (And yes, insert all of the defenses of "*they're friends*" and "*he's just needling Spock*" you like...but then ask yourself why some of those same defenses wouldn't apply to Holmes in this story.)

This and later iterations of Trek were quick to assert that everybody on a planet had the exact same culture and behavior: **Tellarites** are *all* quarrelsome, **Ferengi** are *all* greedy, **Klingons** are *all* warlike, etc. \*\*\*\*, the **Next Generation** episode *Redemption Part II* has a high-ranking *Star Fleet* officer say that, "*No one would suggest that a Klingon would be a good ship's counselor, or that a Berellian could be an engineer. They're just not suited for those positions.*" Even the mighty **Federation**, it seems, can harbor some racism (or speciesism) in the future.

I can't get into the mind of **Sir Arthur Conan Doyle**, but surely he was, just as we all are, products of our time. That's not a defense, of course. And I'm not going to get so clever as to say "*he was only portraying the racism of the times, he wasn't actually racist himself.*" Maybe he was, maybe he wasn't. We can't know, though, so where does that leave us?

As I said above, I just don't know. The best I can do here is to suggest that Sherlock Holmes is as human as the rest of us. That he is *vast*, and *contains multitudes*, and some of the lesser multitudes peeked out during this story...and maybe allowing for a little bit of mitigation for the era, a little bit for the possibility that Holmes may have been trying to provoke a perp...

Yeah, Sherlock is a "racist \*\*\*\*\*" in *Three Gables*. I don't think that we toss out the whole story because our hero was less than perfect this time around. We continue to admire Lincoln and Atticus Finch. We still watch **Star Wars** despite "*I'd just as soon kiss a Wookiee.*" And we still go to family gatherings despite Uncle Bob's occasional embarrassing moment.

That's the best I've got.

#### **OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:**

\*\*All of the above being said, this is a pretty *nice* little story, marred only by two things: we should have met **Langdale Pike**, and the ending was far too abrupt. How did Holmes explain the *largesse* of a world trip to **Mrs. Maberley**?

Otherwise, it is a fairly low stakes affair, with the whole motive revolving around that old Victorian fear of scandal. *Good heavens!!*

\*\*The **Granada** adaptation manages to greatly raise the stakes. In the television version, **Douglas Maberley** actually because of the beating **Isadora Klein's** goons gave him. Apparently, the attack "*ruptured his spleen,*" according to Watson, which somehow caused the pneumonia that killed him!! That was the reason she was so desperate to get the "*novel*"--it functioned as an accusation (and proof?) of *murder*!! And despite the seeming impossibility of proving that in a court of law, Holmes essentially blackmails Klein with it, by promising not to report it to the authorities if she funds Mrs. Maberley's trip, and breaks off her engagement to Duke and leave England forever!!! Which *she does!!*

Also, Granada makes Mary Maberley Douglas' *grandmother*, instead of his mother. Go figure...

\*\*Man, Sir Arthur was using "*Three*" a lot in his stories. **Three Gables, Three Garridebs, Three Students, Missing Three Quarter**...you're making it very *confusing* for us to remember which story was which, Sir!!

\*\*Good old Watson: "...the slight clatter which I made as I picked up the poker." Always ready to leap to Holmes' aid.

\*\*If Holmes *actually* knew something of the murder of "young Perkins," why hadn't he gone to the authorities with it? Or did he just have his suspicions, which he was able to conveniently use to scare Dixie? Does he have a lot of "I suspect but can't prove" in his arsenal, ready to dispense when needed?

\*\*Mrs. Maberley's note said, "I have had a succession of strange incidents occur to me in connection with this house." Yet, as far as we can tell, there was only *one* incident: someone trying to buy the house with odd conditions attached to the sale. Did other things happen, that she never bothered to tell us about? There was no sign of threats, or break-ins, or anything, right? Or was one eccentric, rich anonymous person trying to buy your house enough to justify hiring a detective?

\*\*Then again, Mary was familiar with Holmes work: "I believe that my late husband, Mortimer Maberley, was one of your early clients." Holmes says, "it is some years since he used my services in some trifling matter."

So a minor, apocryphal case...

\*\*Watson, architecture critic, on the house name Three Gables: "the house, a brick and timber villa, standing in its own acre of undeveloped grassland. Three small projections above. the upper windows made a feeble attempt to justify its name."

\*\*Apparently, Douglas Maberley was the talk of the town. Holmes:

*But of course all London knew him. What a magnificent creature he was!...I have never known anyone so vitally alive. He lived intensely -every fibre of him!"*

One can only wonder at what inspired such fame and adoration for a minor diplomat.

\*\*Mary: "You remember him as he was -- debonair and splendid. You did not see the moody, morose, brooding creature into which he developed. His heart was broken. In a single month I seemed to see my gallant boy turn into a worn-out cynical man."

Holmes: "A love affair -- a woman?"

Mary: "Or a fiend."

Hmmm. Does Mary *know* that Isadora was the one who broke Douglas' heart and spirit? That "fiend" comment suggests she knew something. It's a pity she wasn't more forthcoming. as she could have saved Holmes some time hanging around with gossip columnists!

Also? When Holmes says. "A love affair--a woman?" Is he implying that maybe it wouldn't have been a woman? That he suspected Douglas of having...*ahem*...other interests? It just seems odd to insert that qualifier in there, in that way, if you didn't have some reason to think that maybe it wasn't a woman...

\*\*Of course, someone willing to considerably overpay for a house *could* be an indication of evil-doing. Or it *could* be a sign of a housing bubble with imminent economic collapse coming...

\*\*This "**Haines-Johnson**" and Klein make a bit of a mistake by over-egging the offer a fair bit.

Buy the house and all the furniture for far more than market price? No problem. But language in the contract stating that she "*could not legally take anything out of the house -- not even your own private possessions?*" And his explanation to her, "*Well, well, some concession might be made for your personal effects. But nothing shall go out of the house unchecked,*" is obviously going to be unacceptable to a woman of "*refinement and culture.*"

There should have been some way to make that contract more *subtle*, without forcing Mrs. Maberley to an option that anyone would see as offensive and unacceptable--not to mention immediately alerting her lawyer that something odd was going on.

\*\*What other options existed?

Douglas effects had arrived "*last week,*" and been untouched, "*piled in a corner.*" Surely the wicked maid **Susan** knew his luggage was there, unopened. Surely she and her cronies should have known that Douglas' novel must be there. Couldn't Susan have *searched* Douglas' things? Offered to unpack them for Mrs. Maberley? Mary had *no* idea that the novel even existed--she would never notice that it was missing?!?!

Surely Mary was not at much as a shut-in as **Garrideb** was. Break in (or have Susan let you in) while she's at the market, or visiting friends, or at church. Why do you need to rush in and chloroform her, especially when you must know, through Susan, that Mary has no idea the manuscript exists? What's the infernal rush?

Offer Mary the contract, without the offensive clauses. Include her moving expenses as part of the deal. **Stockdale** and his gang pose as movers, and search the trunks while in transit...or even switch them out entirely.

There were an awful lot of options available before resulting to *insane contracts* and *break-ins that involved physically assaulting an old woman.*

\*\*Holmes catching Susan eavesdropping: "*He strode across the room, flung open the door, and dragged in a great gaunt woman whom he had seized by the shoulder. She entered with ungainly struggle like some huge awkward chicken, torn, squawking, out of its coop.*"

\*\*Isadora may have felt that Susan and Barney were "*good hounds who run silent.*"

But look at what Holmes is able to get out of Susan *in about 30 seconds*:

"*Suppose I tell you that it was Barney Stockdale to whom you spoke?*" said Holmes.

"*Well, if you know, what do you want to ask for?*"

*"I was not sure, but I know now. Well now, Susan, it will be worth ten pounds to you if you will tell me who is at the back of Barney."*

*"Someone that could lay down a thousand pounds for every ten you have in the world."*

*"So, a rich man? No; you smiled -- a rich woman. Now we have got so far, you may as well give the name and earn the tenner."*

So in quick order, Holmes gets Susan to admit she's with Stockdale, and that they're working for a wealthy woman.

Klein really shouldn't be confident of her droogs' ability to stay silent when Sherlock Holmes on the case.

**\*\*Holmes being very pawkey with Susan:**

*"Just a little wheezy, Susan, are you not? You breathe too heavily for that kind of work."*

*"Now, Susan, wheezy people may not live long, you know. It's a wicked thing to tell fibs."*

*"Good-bye, Susan. Paregoric is the stuff..."*

See, he's laying the insults on *everybody* this case,. not just Dixie...

**\*\*Every homeowner's dream: "You don't happen to have a Raphael or a first folio Shakespeare without knowing it?"**

**\*\*Sherlock is on a roll this day: "I was wondering whether [the previous owner] could have buried something. Of course, when people bury treasure nowadays they do it in the Post-Office bank. But there are always some lunatics about. It would be a dull world without them."**

Of course, now there's BitCoin. Then again, people are buying gold as a safety investment again these days, so maybe there are some more folks burying things in their back yards...

And yes, there are *always* some lunatics about.

**\*\*Holmes and Watson ask Mary in about three different ways whether or not something new had come into the household lately. It does make her look a little bit *dotty* to not think about the "several trunks and cases" that were lying there in plain sight.**

**\*\*At their second encounter, Steve Dixie avers to help Holmes if he can, and Sherlock replies that "*that the lady in that house, and everything under that roof, is under my protection.*"**

So, did Steve take part in the break in? He certainly *didn't* inform Holmes about it, before or after...does Sherlock follow up on his threat to tell the authorities about the murder of Perkins?

**\*\*As mentioned above, I think not showing us Langdale Pike is a lost opportunity:**

*...his human book of reference upon all matters of social scandal. This strange, languid creature spent his waking hours in the bow window of a St. James's Street club and was the receiving station as well as the*

transmitter for all the gossip of the metropolis. He made, it was said, a four-figure income by the paragraphs which he contributed every week to the garbage papers which cater to an inquisitive public.

*If ever, far down in the turbid depths of London life, there was some strange swirl or eddy, it was marked with automatic exactness by this human dial upon the surface. Holmes discreetly helped Langdale to knowledge, and on occasion was helped in turn.*

What a *delicious* description. Obviously Pike is one of the many agents Holmes employed later in his career, and, despite Watson's obvious distaste, could have been a fascinating character to meet. It also would have been nice to hear his stories about Douglas and Isadora first hand, and not have Holmes pull them out as a surprise reveal many (many) pages later.

Some commentators have said that "Langdale Pike" is such an *obviously false* name, that it somehow proves that this story was not canonical. Please...many a gossip columnist--not to mention dealers in secret information--have used *pseudonyms*.

**\*\*After the break-in, we meet "a bustling, rubicund inspector, who greeted Holmes as an old friend."**

This is the *only* case where Doyle doesn't *name* the inspector. Who is it? Why *not* name him? Why not use **Lestrade** or one of the old stand-bys?

Perhaps since the inspector is portrayed as a *racist* and a *bigger than usual dolt*, Doyle didn't wish to sully **Gregson** et. al. with this character...

**\*\*Unnamed inspector is incompetent, and pompous about being incompetent!**

*Mary: "There was one sheet of paper which I may have torn from the man that I grasped. It was lying all crumpled on the floor. It is in my son's handwriting."*

*"Which means that it is not of much use," said the inspector. "Now if it had been in the burglar's --"*

*"Exactly," said Holmes. "What rugged common sense! None the less, I should be curious to see it."*

*The inspector drew a folded sheet of foolscap from his pocketbook. "I never pass anything, however trifling," said he with some pomposity. "That is my advice to you, Mr. Holmes. In twenty-five years' experience I have learned my lesson. There is always the chance of fingermarks or something."*

Idiot.

**\*\*Douglas was certainly not destined to win any writing awards:**

*". . . face bled considerably from the cuts and blows, but it was nothing to the bleeding of his heart as he saw that lovely face, the face for which he had been prepared to sacrifice his very life, looking out at his agony and humiliation. She smiled -- yes, by Heaven! she smiled, like the heartless fiend she was, as he looked up at her. It was at that moment that love died and hate was born. Man must live for something. If it is not for your embrace, my lady, then it shall surely be for your undoing and my complete revenge."*

It must have been fun for Sir Arthur to deliberately write so *badly*...

\*\*This is the 3rd time in **Case-Book** when a woman of Latin American origin has played a substantial role in the story, having married a wealthy American or European and come home with him. I wonder what was going on in Sir Arthur's life that brought that about...

\*\*That being said, Doyle does tell us that Isadora "*is pure Spanish,*" and "*her people have been leaders in Pernambuco for generations.*" But **Pernambuco** is in *Brazil*, which was under Dutch and then Portuguese control!! It's not impossible a Spanish family could have lived there, of course...

\*\*Holmes describes Klein as "*the richest as well as the most lovely widow upon earth.*" Wow. I'm not sure how *extensive* his research on that esoteric topic is, though.

Meanwhile, Watson may not be 100% in agreement, at least on the beauty part, as he notes "*The lady had come, I felt, to that time of life when even the proudest beauty finds the half light more welcome.*"

As to the "*wealthiest*" part? The reason Isadora rejected Douglas' pleas for marriage was that he was "*a penniless commoner.*" And nothing was more important to her than "*her life's ambition*" to marry a young duke, so it was "*imperative*" to avoid scandal. Money, and perhaps royal title, were still of great importance to her, no matter how wealthy she may have been.

\*\*Quite a humorous bit from Watson:

*A machine-like footman took up our cards and returned with word that the lady was not at home.*

*"Then we shall wait until she is," said Holmes cheerfully.*

*The machine broke down.*

*"Not at home means not at home to you," said the footman.*

Ha ha!

\*\*Holmes: "*Surely no man would take up my profession if it were not that danger attracts him.*" And, by hiring goons to warn him away, Isadora "*forced me to examine the case of young Maberley.*"

Yet another reason pursuing some alternate, easier plans for obtaining the manuscript might have been in order...

\*\*Kudos to Isadora for being *bright* enough to burn the manuscript immediately, unlike many another mysteries where the criminal keeps evidence around for no good reason.

\*\*The fickle winds of fate--if Douglas *hadn't* died of pneumonia, he *would* have sent the other copy of the (awful) manuscript to the publisher from Italy, and it would have been printed. Talk about lucky...and perhaps the reason Granada chose to make Isadora's actions the (not quite believable) cause of his illness and death. Because we don't like to think of fortune favoring the wicked like that...

\*\*Holmes: "*I am not the law, but I represent justice so far as my feeble powers go.*"

Well, this is no murderer he is freeing in this case. Yes, she is a fairly nasty "*belle dame sans merci*," ruthless and cruel...but that is hardly a crime. The *actual* crime, burglary and assault, are not nothing, but no one was seriously hurt. And Mrs. Maberley wasn't even *aware* of what was lost, and wasn't hurt substantially by its taking.

Still, it *was* a crime, and as Holmes notes, Mrs. Klein does like to play with "*edged tools*," so more incidents were not unlikely in the future.

So, a *tough call* on the feeble powers of justice here. Certainly Mrs. Maberley wouldn't have been too happy with a *lurid scandal* involving her dead son, either. And she does get to travel around the world the substantial check from Klein, *AND* she gets to keep her house and furniture! And perhaps becoming a Duchess will encourage Klein to end her questionable associations and illegal activities. So, *justice?!?*

\*\*I would have loved a scene where Sherlock hands a big check to Mrs. Maberley, and tells her to go on a world cruise, but can't tell it who it's from or what it's about, or explain the mysteries of the offer to buy the house, or the break-in. Is it justice to *keep your client in the dark...?*

**Brian Keith Snell**

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