

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 LVI – The Adventure of the Blanched Soldier

The Adventure Of The Blanched Soldier--Detective, Heal Thyself!!

All of us have thought, "I can do X better than he" at some point in our life.

It's part of human nature, to apprise our own skills more highly than those of another, even if we don't actually have any evidence or experience to back that up.

But when it come time to put brush to canvas, as it were, well, it can be a rude awakening.

Which brings us to **The Adventure Of The Blanched Soldier**.

Many, many times, **Sherlock Holmes** has criticized **John Watson's** written accounts of their cases. Well, the shoe is on the other foot, now, and the results are not exactly to Holmes' credit.

Let's step back to the real world, for a second, away from the "*gentle fiction*." Of course Holmes and Watson aren't real. So the decision to have Sherlock take up the pen himself comes squarely down to the creator and author, **Sir Arthur Conan Doyle**.

Nearing the end of his *40-year* run on the character, Sir Arthur should be commended for trying to keep things fresh and interesting, to *shake up the formula*. It would have been remarkably easy to coast at this late point in his life, as he approached his 70th birthday. You merely have to travel to a modern bookstore to see how many series of crime fiction continue on and on, with no real changes to the basic premise, and a cookie cutter approach to each new novel. Or, a "*co-writer*" is hired to do most of the actual work while the creator keeps his name in large print and continues to rake in the bucks.

So props to Doyle. Why not, in your *52nd* Holmes short story, try something new, by having Holmes himself narrate? Why not shake up the formula a little bit?



That leaves us two questions, I think, outside of the quality of the mystery itself (which I will try to tackle below).

First, does Sir Arthur do a good job of *altering his usual writing style*, to make it convincing that a different "author" "writing" this story? Secondly, does leaving Watson aside turn out to be a good choice for *storytelling* purpose?

As to the first question, I think the answer is a resounding "yes." The prose and narrative style Doyle employs here is quite different than that he used when Watson was the putative author. Take, for example, the very first line of the story: "*The ideas of my friend Watson, though limited, are exceedingly pertinacious.*"

Well, that's just not a sentence you would hear Watson writing, is it? Aside from the vocabulary, that's just not the way John Watson would start a story, is it? Watson might express a similar thought, but only as a way of trying to justify his decision why to write up the current mystery, or to give us a greater picture of the subject of his admiration, Sherlock Holmes. And think about this:

Perhaps I have rather invited this persecution, since I have often had occasion to point out to him how superficial are his own accounts and to accuse him of pandering to popular taste instead of confining himself rigidly to facts and figures. "Try it yourself, Holmes!" he has retorted, and I am compelled to admit that, having taken my pen in my hand, I do begin to realize that the matter must be presented in such a way as may interest the reader.

While Watson passed along Holmes' opinion often enough, it was almost never to defend himself, but to illuminate Sherlock. And it rarely came in the story's preamble. But here Holmes, rather than introducing the actual tale, instead of leading us into the mystery, is *writing about writing!* And making *himself* the subject, something Watson was loathe to do when he had the writing reins.

Another way that Doyle makes Holmes' writing differ from Watson's is by having Sherlock's be *much less descriptive*, especially of people. When **Dodd** arrives at **Baker Street**, for example, Holmes describes him thusly: "*I had my visit from Mr. James M. Dodd, a big, fresh, sunburned, upstanding Briton.*" That's it! Watson would have taken at least two more sentences to fully describe Dodd's physical appearance.

Another example: When Holmes finally meets the colonel, all he gives us is "*bristling beard and twisted features, as terrible an old man as ever I have seen.*" Contrast with the way Dodd had described Emsworth much more interestingly, as "*a huge, bow-backed man with a smoky skin and a straggling gray beard, seated behind his littered desk. A red-veined nose jutted out like a vulture's beak, and two fierce gray eyes glared at me from under tufted brows.*" The latter is obviously a much more Watsonian description, but Holmes seems to pass along such information only when transcribing the words of other people.

So, if you were to ask my humble opinion, Sir Arthur does a fine job of differentiating between Watson as biographer and Holmes as autobiographer. But does that *work* for a Holmes story?

There are two major ways that it fails. First, the drier, less descriptive prose of Sherlock Holmes is *far less interesting* to read than Watson's. Holmes may have felt that all of the extraneous detail (and humanity) that Watson included in each tale was distracting. But as I have noted here before, Watson gave us a sense of time, a sense of place, a window in to the culture of the era. Holmes is *utterly uninterested* in such details, unless they're key to solving his mystery, and so he gives them little attention. It may be more direct, but it is far less *involving*, far less *immersive* than the stories as Watson told them.

The second, and perhaps more important, is that Watson, by his mere presence, was able to *pace* a story better, and keep the tale as a whole flowing.

For example, Watson would often question Holmes about his theories of the case. And even when Holmes chose to be cryptic, still the interplay between the characters was worth reading...and even when being deliberately vague, Holmes would give us some clues to his insights.

In *Blanché Patient*, though, without Watson to banter with, Holmes takes being *opaque* to heights that hurt the readers' interest. Once he's solved the case, before even getting up from his chair, this is all he gives the reader:

Such was the problem which my visitor laid before me. It presented, as the astute reader will have already perceived, few difficulties in its solution, for a very limited choice of alternatives must get to the root of the matter. Still, elementary as it was, there were points of interest and novelty about it which may excuse my placing it upon record. Dry, dull. Not a hint of what he's thinking. It's tough for the audience to "*play along*" with the author when the author shows no interest in playing whatsoever. Holmes says, "*The narratives of Watson have accustomed the reader, no doubt, to the fact that I do not waste words or disclose my thoughts while a case is actually under consideration.*" But that's not true at all!

If Watson had been along, the doctor would have offered some theories, which Holmes would shoot down with explanations that enlightened the reader; or Watson would have expressed befuddlement, and Holmes would have remonstrated him while offering "*teasers*" about what he thought were the important clues. When Watson was present, Sherlock was interested in trying to teach him, to bring him along with his thought processes, which helps the reader.. Without Watson, Holmes shows not the least interest in helping the reader along.

And frankly, as a writer Watson was better at pacing a story, at breaking up the large expanses of exposition that began many a Holmes story. When Dodd tells his tale, it goes on forever--*11 pages* of nearly uninterrupted, monologued exposition. And, to quote Holmes from elsewhere in the story, "*here it is that I*

miss my Watson. By cunning questions and ejaculations of wonder he could elevate my simple art, which is but systematized common sense, into a prodigy." We don't get the questions or ejaculations, or Watson's narrative on how he feels about the tale that is being spun in front of him. There is no nudging, no pressing for additional details (except "what newspaper was it?"), no description of Holmes' demeanor during the interview. This is where Watson's presence is missed the most, because he would have broken up this massive block of dictation for us, and presented this as a *story*, and not as *unbroken testimony*. (This happens, albeit to a lesser extent, at the end, when young Emsworth tells his story in yet another long unbroken monologue.)

So, for this story at least, the use of Holmes as "author" is a bit of a failure. While Doyle does a fine job of presenting the story as if Sherlock had written it, that style is so bereft of *pacing*, of *dramatic flow*, of *interaction between characters*, it reads more like an overlong treatise than a mystery story. We can applaud the attempt, while thinking the results were perhaps much more lackluster than Sir Arthur would have liked.

OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:

****So the first story without Watson, and you decide to do a "medical" mystery?!? *Face palm***

Not that there's anything inherently wrong with the medical mystery. Heck, the hero of the television series **House, M.D.** was based on Sherlock Holmes.

But--and this is entirely my *personal* predilections--I don't really care for "medical" shows. You know how some people have a problem with **Star Trek** "*technobabble*"? Well, that's pretty much how a medical-jargon based mystery feels to me--all the terminology might as well be Greek (or Klingon), and makes my eyes glaze over. Again, that's just my personal tastes. But it proves a double disadvantage in this case. In an episode of *House*, you have the head doctor *constantly debating* the meanings of symptoms and what could be causing them with his colleagues. So at the very least, the medically unenlightened (me!) can follow along. But in *Blanchard Soldier*, there is none of that *back and forth*, none of that *discussing and dismissing* of theories. Holmes keeps all the cards to himself...he won't even tell us that the gent he brings along is a doctor, so we don't even know that it's a medical mystery to begin with!!

So when Holmes pulls out the solution at the end--*it's leprosy!!*--it feels like a cheat, a magic trick akin to his unveiling of cabby as the killer in **Study In Scarlet**, something that comes completely out of left field, without any basis in what we've read so far. It feels more like a feat of prestidigitation than a series of deductions, because Holmes (and Doyle) choose to keep everything from the reader until the end.

I'll accept an argument that contemporary readers might have been more aware of leprosy, and thus would have been better able to follow along with Holmes. But for modern readers? Literally the only clues we're given is that **Emsworth** served in South Africa, and his brow was terribly pale. I don't expect every mystery to be a "*play fair*," but that's asking too much of us.

So, not such a good mystery, I think...

"Oh, it's not leprosy, is "*pseudo-leprosy*," which is not contagious and it's curable" sure as * sounds like a risible, made-up happy ending, doesn't it?

It is often my lot to bring ill-tidings and seldom good," said he. "This occasion is the more welcome. It is not leprosy." "What?" "A well-marked case of pseudo-leprosy or ichthyosis, a scale-like affection of the skin, unsightly, obstinate, but possibly curable, and certainly noninfective.

But ichthyosis was commonly referred to as pseudo-leprosy in the medical literature of the era, so it's not completely out of left field to use that description. Although, as Sir James Saunders noted, it was quite a coincidence that a man suspected of contracting leprosy would actually contract ichthyosis, which isn't really related. And the explanation that maybe Emsworth *psychosomatically gave himself the wrong disease*?

But is it coincidence? Are there not subtle forces at work of which we know little? Are we assured that the apprehension from which this young man has no doubt suffered terribly since his exposure to its contagion may not produce a physical effect which simulates that which it fears?

The less we think about that, the better off we are, I think...

**Holmes: "*The good Watson had at that time deserted me for a wife, the only selfish action which I can recall in our association. I was alone.*"

I try not to spend too much time worrying about *chronology*, or Watson's marriage(s).

But almost every Sherlockian agrees that Watson's marriage to **Mary Morstan** happened more than a decade before this story was set. So if Watson has married *again*--or for that matter, if he is *still* married to Mary, and she has just returned from somewhere--this clearly cannot be the *first* time that Watson has "*deserted*" Holmes, selfish or not.

Or was Watson fudging dates even more significantly than we had thought?

**Holmes has quite a compliment for Watson...

Speaking of my old friend and biographer, I would take this opportunity to remark that if I burden myself with a companion in my various little inquiries it is not done out of sentiment or caprice, but it is that Watson has some remarkable characteristics of his own to which in his modesty he has given small attention amid his exaggerated estimates of my own performances.

But then he has to go and turn it into a left-handed compliment, or even an insult:

...A confederate who foresees your conclusions and course of action is always dangerous, but one to whom each development comes as a perpetual surprise, and to whom the future is always a closed book, is indeed an ideal helpmate.

Oh, Sherlock...

****One advantage of having Sherlock as our narrator is that we can get actual confirmation of some of his motives for how he conducts his interviews.**

For example, *"It is my habit to sit with my back to the window and to place my visitors in the opposite chair, where the light falls full upon them."* and *"I have found it wise to impress clients with a sense of power, and so I gave him some of my conclusions."*

****Dodd's initial reason for concern:**

He was my mate -- and that means a good deal in the Army....I got one letter from the hospital at Cape Town and one from Southampton. Since then not a word -- not one word, Mr. Holmes, for six months and more, and he my closest pal...He was a good lad, and he would not drop a pal like that.

Hmmm. I know Holmes is (theoretically) transcribing what Dodd says. But given Sherlock's earlier lamentations about Watson's "deserting" him, do I detect a bit of a jibe at Watson, who did "drop a pal?"

****Dodd: "Tuxbury Old Hall is inaccessible -- five miles from anywhere. There was no trap at the station, so I had to walk, carrying my suitcase, and it was nearly dark before I arrived."**

I know that, to the older Emsworth, Dodd was an unwelcome visitor. But making a guest walk five miles, while carrying his own luggage?!? How very *unspeakably ill-mannered!* Surely that would have lead to unwelcome gossip and hurt the family's reputation!

Of course, the colonel had no problem providing a trap when he kick Dodd out...

****Dodd again: "There was a butler, old Ralph, who seemed about the same age as the house, and there was his wife, who might have been older. She had been Godfrey's nurse, and I had heard him speak of her as second only to his mother in his affections, so I was drawn to her in spite of her queer appearance. The mother I liked also -- a gentle little white mouse of a woman. It was only the colonel himself whom I barred."**

Perhaps it's just speculation, but Dodd seems only to like those he perceives as non-threatening...or easily cowed? Problems with authority?

****Dodd describes Emsworth's suspicious demeanor:**

'Well, sir,' said he in a rasping voice, 'I should be interested to know the real reasons for this visit.'

'I answered that I had explained them in my letter to his wife. '

'Yes, yes, you said that you had known Godfrey in Africa. We have, of course, only your word for that.'

Again, this may seem unbelievably rude for the era.

Although, given some of the crazy schemes we've seen con men and thieves uses to get access to houses that we've seen in the **Canon**, can we really say that the old man is wrong to be so untrusting?

Upper class insults: 'Many people, Mr. Dodd,' said he, 'would take offence at your infernal pertinacity and would think that this insistence had reached the point of *ed impertinence.'*

Oh, snap!!

***Top melodrama:*

" 'Listen,' I said. 'You are going to answer one question before you leave if I have to hold you all night. Is Godfrey dead?'"

"He could not face my eyes. He was like a man hypnotized The answer was dragged from his lips. It was a terrible and unexpected one. " 'I wish to God he was!' he cried, and, tearing himself free he dashed from the room.

*** Fair enough theory, given the lack of medical knowledge, and Holmes refusing to share anything whatsoever:*

"Clearly my poor friend had become involved in some criminal or, at the least, disreputable transaction which touched the family honour. That stern old man had sent his son away and hidden him from the world lest some scandal should come to light."

Holmes dismisses that:

No unsolved crime had been reported from that district. I was sure of that. If it were some crime not yet discovered, then clearly it would be to the interest of the family to get rid of the delinquent and send him abroad rather than keep him concealed at home.

Well, perhaps. But what if it were a *non-local* crime that had been committed--something elsewhere in England, or during his travels home, or even in South Africa--that was the reason his family was trying to conceal him?

***The shame of leprosy:*

There was something shocking about the man, Mr. Holmes. It wasn't merely that ghastly face glimmering as white as cheese in the darkness. It was more subtle than that -- something slinking, something furtive, something guilty -- something very unlike the frank, manly lad that I had known. It left a feeling of horror in my mind.

Just the thought that he had leprosy made Geoffrey "*slinking, furtive and guilty.*"

***Holmes: "It happened that at the moment I was clearing up the case which my friend Watson has described as that of the Abbey School, in which the Duke of Greyminster was so deeply involved."*

Wait, is Holmes referring to **The Adventure Of The Priory School**? But Watson was *clearly* a bachelor and living in Baker Street then: "*We have had some dramatic entrances and exits upon our small stage at Baker Street, but I cannot recollect anything more sudden and startling than the first appearance of Thorneycroft Huxtable, M.A., Ph.D., etc.*"

Most chronologists place the Priory School in **1901**, and Holmes definitively tells us that this case takes place in **1903**. So is he referring to the *same* case? Are the **Abbey School** and the **Duke of Greyminster** really Priory School and the **Duke of Holderness**? Are there some issues from that case that still needed "*clearing up*" two years later? Or is this some other case entirely? And if so, how was Watson involved, if he had "abandoned" Holmes?

****Another apocryphal case:** "*I had also a commission from the Sultan of Turkey which called for immediate action, as political consequences of the gravest kind might arise from its neglect.*"

****And one more untold tale:** "*I was able once to do him a professional service, and he is ready to advise as a friend rather than as a specialist. His name is Sir James Saunders.*"

****A typical Holmes trick, this time with the master narrating his moves rather than Watson:**

I have, as my friend Watson may have remarked, an abnormally acute set of senses, and a faint but incisive scent was apparent. It seemed to centre on the hall table. I turned, placed my hat there, knocked it off, stooped to pick it up, and contrived to bring my nose within a foot of the gloves.

****Despite Holmes' reputation, detectives were clearly held in disrepute.**

Emsworth: "As to you, sir," turning upon me, "I extend the same warning to you. I am familiar with your ignoble profession, but you must take your reputed talents to some other field. There is no opening for them here."

Ignoble? Snap again!!

****Of course, if the colonel were so knowledgeable about what detectives do, he wouldn't have been so surprised by Holmes figuring out the truth... "*How do you know?*" he gasped, sitting down heavily in his chair. "*It is my business to know things. That is my trade.*"**

**** "Well, it's not a long story to tell," says Geoffrey.**

But it takes *another 3 pages of uninterrupted exposition!!* Man, this story is nothing but pacing problems!!

****Odd weather description, as apparently a cold day in South Africa is worse than a cold day in London (or Michigan): "*You remember the kind of numb cold which used to come at evening, a deadly, sickening sort of cold, very different from a crisp healthy frost.*"**

****Given what he thought he had contracted, you'd think that Geoffrey could have been a little bit more *sympathetic* in his description of others so afflicted:**

In front of me was standing a small, dwarf-like man with a huge, bulbous head, who was jabbering excitedly in Dutch, waving two horrible hands which looked to me like brown sponges. Behind him stood a group of people who seemed to be intensely amused by the situation, but a chill came over me as I looked at them. Not one of them was a normal human being.

Every one was twisted or swollen or disfigured in some strange way. The laughter of these strange monstrosities was a dreadful thing to hear.

***Sherlock's description seems a far cry from Dodd's panicked "ghostly" and "ghastly" and "as white as cheese":*

His appearance was certainly extraordinary. One could see that he had indeed been a handsome man with clear-cut features sunburned by an African sun, but mottled in patches over this darker surface were curious whitish patches which had bleached his skin.

Not to make light of ichthyosis, but that really doesn't sound nearly as horrifying as Dodd described...

***Well, at least the family hired a doctor?*

Under pledge of secrecy, Mr. Kent, who is a surgeon, was prepared to stay with me...

May I ask, sir, if you are an authority on such complaints, which are, I understand, tropical or semi-tropical in their nature?"

"I have the ordinary knowledge of the educated medical man," he observed with some stiffness.

Geez, at least get a *specialist* to look at him?? Especially since his diagnosis was, well, really wrong? Was the family shame so bad that they couldn't at least get a, well, good doctor?

***Geoffrey: "But absolute secrecy was necessary, or even in this quiet countryside there would have been an outcry, and I should have been dragged to my horrible doom."*

Really? You're expecting a *lynch mob*? Well, maybe. I can't speak to the general British populace's (or authority's) fear of leprosy in 1903. But we've been told how isolated the estate was--5 miles from anything else! Was he any more of a treat to public health than typhoid or cholera patients?

***See, it wasn't just Watson making that up: "That process," said I, "starts upon the supposition that when you have eliminated all which is impossible, then whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth."*

*** Good to know: "It is not illegal, however, to keep a lunatic upon private premises so long as there is a qualified person in attendance and that the authorities have been duly notified."*

I wonder if that's still the case...

**Of course, when one is afraid of torch-wielding villagers or the like, you have to wonder how impressed they'll be by "it's only *pseudo-leprosy*!!" Which is probably the reason the term fell out of favor. Still, it's hard to see the Emsworth's fear of medical shaming allowing even the "safe" ichthyosis diagnosis to be made public...

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