

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 LIX – The Adventure of the Veiled Lodger

The Adventure of The Veiled Lodger--Sherlock's Quantum Of Solace?

The **James Bond** short story **Quantum Of Solace** involves Bond listening as the governor of the **Bahamas** relates a tale about the tragic romantic history of a couple he once knew. That's it--Bond just listens to someone else's story. No spycraft or adventure for **007** whatsoever. It's not a bad story--indeed, it's pretty good--but it's really not a *James Bond* story, if you know what I mean.

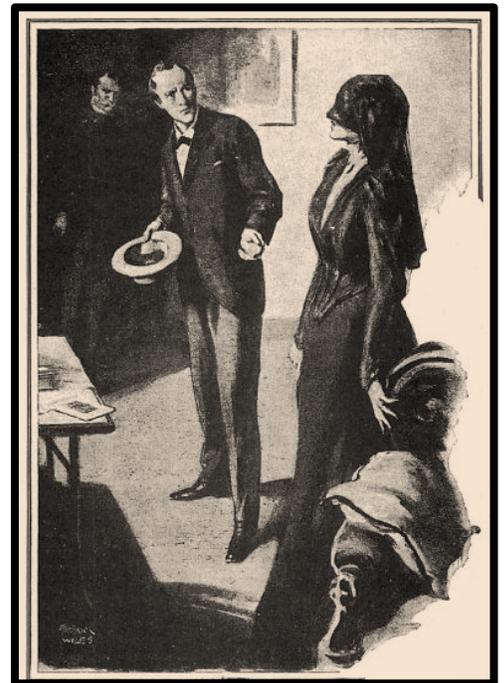
Which brings us to **The Adventure Of The Veiled Lodger**.

The crux of *Veiled Lodger* is just **Holmes** sitting and listening to the tragic story of our mysterious woman. There is no *mystery* at all, no deductions to be had. Sherlock just hears her tale of woe, and offers her a bit of advice. He might as well have been a *priest*. It's a good enough story, but it's not really a *Sherlock Holmes* story, if you know what I mean.

Which leaves me frighteningly little to right about here.

Fortunately, the good doctor has rescued us. For, while this may not be much of a mystery, and not your *standard* Sherlock Holmes story, **Watson** provides us plenty of meat in this amazingly dense first paragraph:

When one considers that Mr. Sherlock Holmes was in active practice for twenty-three years, and that during seventeen of these I was allowed to cooperate with him and to keep notes of his doings, it will be clear that I have a mass of material at my command. The problem has always been not to find but to choose. There is the long row of year-books which fill a shelf and there are the dispatch-cases filled with documents, a perfect quarry for the student not only of crime but of the social and official scandals of the late Victorian era.



Concerning these latter, I deprecate, however, in the strongest way the attempts which have been made lately to get at and to destroy these papers. The source of these outrages is known, and if they are repeated I have Mr. Holmes's authority for saying that the whole story concerning the politician, the lighthouse, and the trained cormorant will be given to the public. There is at least one reader who will understand.

Well, there are a number of juicy morsels there. What can we unpack?

Let's start with Watson's comment of the length of their partnership:

When one considers that Mr. Sherlock Holmes was in active practice for twenty-three years, and that during seventeen of these I was allowed to cooperate with him and to keep notes of his doings...

Lots of good fodder there for chronologists and players of **The Great Game**.

I'll leave it to others to argue about when "active practice" started, or what stories count as part of that, or what this tells us about Watson's absences and marriage(s). Do the adventures during the **Interregnum** count as the active practice? What about the two years he spent building up to **His Last Bow**? Ohm the headaches...

What is interesting to me is that, while Holmes was in "active practice" for 23 years, Watson/**Doyle** published stories of that practice for 41 years, or nearly twice the length of Sherlock's career!

From another angle: doesn't 23 years seem rather *short* for Holmes' career? At least by modern standards, one finishes college and perhaps grad school at, let's say an average of age 25. Then you work until you retire. Which for most people would mean an active practice of 35-40 years (albeit often not at the same job). Which makes Holmes' 23 years seem surprisingly *small*.

Still, we shouldn't necessarily judge by modern standards. Life spans were shorter then, and retirement may have come early. Doyle never gives us a clear idea of Holmes' age when we first meet him. **Stamford** certainly seems to think that Holmes is a student; but that doesn't necessarily tell us much, as Sherlock may have been a "*professional student*," staying in college for years gathering his eclectic knowledge without approaching the normal degree path. And we're certainly not clear on his age when he retired. Perhaps he didn't retire because of old age, but because of ill health, or boredom, or sufficient wealth not to have to work, or the desire to get out of the city he spoke about in **Lion's Mane**. A late start to his "active practice," an early retirement, knock out 3 years for the Interregnum...you could just about argue 23 years. Still feels short, though...

As to the matter of how much material Watson has...

...it will be clear that I have a mass of material at my command. The problem has always been not to find but to choose.

There is the long row of year-books which fill a shelf and there are the dispatch-cases filled with documents, a perfect quarry for the student not only of crime but of the social and official scandals of the late Victorian era.

Given that Watson has spoken of hundreds, if not *thousands*, of untold cases, well, that has to be an awful lot of material there.

Of course, it's practically required for any pastiche to begin with an "*editor's*" introduction explaining how some of those papers came into their possession--inheritance, estate sale, hidden compartments in old homes they just purchased--thus justifying the story as "*real*."

The real problem with that idea is that Watson never tells us that he has *completed stories* just laying around--just year books and documents. In fact, several times John has told us that he has to go back and refer to his notes when Sherlock has given him permission to write up an old case. These untold cases *haven't* been written up yet--which puts paid to any claims to anyone claiming to have found *completed manuscripts* written by Watson in those newly discovered dispatch cases! At best they would have found newspaper clipping and notes. *Don't be fooled!!*

Still, these year-books and dispatch cases full of documents are irresistible, aren't they? As he says, they form a record of late Victorian life, of crime and scandal and society. We've already been given such a glimpse of that era through the 60 stories we have...just think how much *more* we could learn with access to all of Watson's files!

Alas, it was not to be:

...I may say that the writers of agonized letters, who beg that the honour of their families or the reputation of famous forebears may not be touched, have nothing to fear. The discretion and high sense of professional honour which have always distinguished my friend are still at work in the choice of these memoirs, and no confidence will be abused.

Damn you and your *discretion*, Watson!!

Of course, we can question how *legitimate* those requests for privacy are. By Victorian standards, a relative suffering from a rare disease was seen as bringing great shame upon a family. Women who had written indiscreet letter before they even met their husbands were driven to insane lengths to "*protect their honour*" and cover up their past, as if they were expected to have been emotional as well as physical virgins before they wed.

So by our standards, a lot of the "*honour*" and "*reputation*" used to justify covering up these tales would surely be trivial. Not only that, but now you're protecting the reputation of *forebears*? Come on now, John and Sherlock--surely the records of your cases are far more important than the world learning that some upper-class twit was a twit!!

But some people go beyond begging:

Concerning these latter, I deprecate, however, in the strongest way the attempts which have been made lately to get at and to destroy these papers. The source of these outrages is known, and if they are repeated I have Mr. Holmes's authority for saying that the whole story concerning the politician, the lighthouse, and the trained cormorant will be given to the public. There is at least one reader who will understand.

Whoa!! Watson is laying down some *serious* smack there!! Veiled threats directed at a reader! Mysterious attempts to steal Watson's papers! Allusion to an *insane* sounding apocryphal case!! Holy crap!! There's a whole story there, just in someone's attempts to suppress a story that Watson had no intention of telling!! *Egads!!*

Well, that's an awful lot to digest from one paragraph. Unfortunately, that's about it, as we now transition to Sherlock not solving a mystery or making any deductions, but just listening to a woman's confession. "*But the most terrible human tragedies were often involved in those cases which brought him the fewest personal opportunities, and it is one of these which I now desire to record,*" Watson tells us. Quantum of solace, indeed...

OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:

***Watson on this story: "In telling it, I have made a slight change of name and place, but otherwise the facts are as stated."*

How many *other* lion attacks were there in England?? How many circus owners killed by their show beasts.

Unless you changed the *species* of the animal involved, it doesn't seem like it would have been too hard for Watson's interested readers to track down the "real" story, discretion be damned.

***Holmes is in high humor:*

When I arrived I found [Holmes] seated in a smoke-laden atmosphere...

"Mrs. Merrilow does not object to tobacco, Watson, if you wish to indulge your filthy habits.

****Holmes:** *"You will understand, Mrs. Merrilow, that if I come to Mrs. Ronder I should prefer to have a witness."*

Why?

****Let's build the Gothic terror:**

"You say that Mrs. Ronder has been your lodger for seven years and that you have only once seen her face."

"And I wish to God I had not!" said Mrs. Merrilow. "It was, I understand, terribly mutilated."

"Well, Mr. Holmes, you would hardly say it was a face at all. That's how it looked."

****Mrs. Ronder** had some money:

"Did she give references when she came?"

"No, sir, but she gave hard cash, and plenty of it. A quarter's rent right down on the table in advance and no arguing about terms. In these times a poor woman like me can't afford to turn down a chance like that."

Let's remember that a little further on, shall we...?

****More terror building:**

She seems to be wasting away. And there's something terrible on her mind. 'Murder!' she cries. 'Murder!' And once I heard her: 'You cruel beast! You monster!' she cried.

****Mrs. Merrilow** counseling her boarder to find some help: *'Mrs. Ronder,' I says, 'if you have anything that is troubling your soul, there's the clergy,' I says, 'and there's the police. Between them you should get some help.'*

Perhaps there's something *in the middle* of those two options?

****When Mrs. Merrilow suggests Sherlock Holmes:** *'That's the man,' says she. 'I wonder I never thought of it before.'*

Perhaps because no one would think of a famous detective as a confessor where no detection was involved?

****The terrible crime scene:**

Ronder lay, with the back of his head crushed in and deep claw-marks across his scalp, some ten yards from the cage, which was open. Close to the door of the cage lay Mrs. Ronder upon her back, with the creature squatting and snarling above her. It had torn her face in such a fashion that it was never thought that she could live.

****Holmes actually admiring a policeman:** *"...young Edmunds, of the Berkshire Constabulary. A smart lad that!"*

**Mrs. Merrilow perhaps isn't the good Samaritan the beginning of the tale would have us think:

It was very clear that her chief preoccupation was lest she should lose a valuable lodger, and she implored us, before showing us up, to say and do nothing which could lead to so undesirable an end.

**Watson waxing lyrical: *"From keeping beasts in a cage, the woman seemed, by some retribution of fate, to have become herself a beast in a cage."*

***"She sat now in a broken armchair in the shadowy corner of the room."*

What, the well-paid landlady can *repair* or *replace* a chair for her only boarder?

**Why had Ronder lied to the police? *"Because the fate of someone else depended upon it. I know that he was a very worthless being, and yet I would not have his destruction upon my conscience. We had been so close -- so close!"*

Not to be too indelicate, but perhaps the reason she lied is because *she were a participant in a plot that successfully murdered your husband?* That seems slightly less altruistic than she's trying to present it, right?

**More from Eugenia: *"I could not stand the scandal and publicity which would come from a police examination. I have not long to live, but I wish to die undisturbed."*

Lady...you **MURDERED** another human being. One would think that avoiding scandal and publicity would be the least of your concerns...as opposed to avoiding the *gallows!*

**Ronder: *"And yet I wanted to find one man of judgment to whom I could tell my terrible story, so that when I am gone all might be understood."*

Holmes is an *odd* choice for that role, isn't he? He's known for solving crimes, yet she's seeking absolution.

"That when I am gone" might suggest that Watson waited until her death to publish this account-- which perhaps means she lived another 30 years.

**Watson still hung up on physical corruption representing spiritual corruption, and vice versa: *"Ronder was a huge porcine person and that his wife was a very magnificent woman."* And:

It was a dreadful face -- a human pig, or rather a human wild boar, for it was formidable in its bestiality. One could imagine that vile mouth champing and foaming in its rage, and one could conceive those small, vicious eyes darting pure malignancy as they looked forth upon the world. Ruffian, bully, beast -- it was all written on that heavy-jowled face.

It's interesting, then, that Watson didn't make the same leap to suggest that Eugenia's facial injuries were a reflection of her role as a murderess...

***"When I became a woman this man loved me, if such lust as his can be called love, and in an evil moment I became his wife."*

Not sure by what she means "*an evil moment*," unless she means that her own "lust" caused her to say yes to his proposal...

***Eugenia on her co-conspirator: "Compared to my husband he seemed like the angel Gabriel. He pitied me and helped me, till at last our intimacy turned to love -- deep, deep, passionate love, such love as I had dreamed of but never hoped to feel."*

Apparently a one-sided love, as **Leonardo** ran--and even after Eugenia lied for him and he was in the clear, he abandoned her...

***The moment that happens in every noir film: "Soon my lover and I understood that it could not be avoided. My husband was not fit to live. We planned that he should die."*

I'm in no way defending Ronder's treatment of his wife. And the *draconian* divorce laws of the era limited her options.

But couldn't Eugenia and Ronder just have taken off? As two people who left a traveling circus troupe, it's hard to see that the police would have spent much time hunting for her, even if the "porcine" husband filed a complaint. And there are plenty of places--even other countries--they could have gone to live in bliss and safety.

So why not *leave*, instead of stooping to cold-blooded murder?

***A cunning plan:*

We made a club -- Leonardo made it -- and in the leaden head he fastened five long steel nails, the points outward, with just such a spread as the lion's paw. This was to give my husband his death-blow, and yet to leave the evidence that it was the lion which we would loose who had done the deed.

It worked well enough to fool local coroners and constabulary...

***The flaw in the cunning plan:*

You may have heard how quick these creatures are to scent human blood, and how it excites them. Some strange instinct had told the creature in one instant that a human being had been slain. As I slipped the bars it bounded out and was on me in an instant.

Oops.

The sad part is, that even if the lion hadn't turned on them, the poor guy likely would have been destroyed anyway, framed as a "*man-killer*." At least this way, he got a little of his own back.

***The "deep, deep passionate love" of her life:*

Leonardo could have saved me. If he had rushed forward and struck the beast with his club he might have cowed it. But the man lost his nerve. I heard him shout in his terror, and then I saw him turn and fly.

******So what does a mauled circus widow do?

I had but one desire, Mr. Holmes, and I had enough money to gratify it. It was that I should cover myself so that my poor face should be seen by none, and that I should dwell where none whom I had ever known should find me.

******Go back to that line: *"I had enough money to gratify it."*

According to Eugenia herself, she started as a *"poor circus girl."* Now, she has "money enough" to gratify her wishes, and *"plenty of hard cash"* to throw at her landlady.

That's one detail that Mrs. Ronder omits from this tale--because the death of her husband was declared an accident, *she inherited his money and property (and perhaps insurance money?).* The murder left her well-off enough to fulfill her desires--although admittedly they might have been better desires had she not been mauled.

So there's the *motive* that hasn't been shared with us, and the probable reason Eugenia and Leonardo went *straight to murder* instead of flight as their first option: the money.

******Holmes, though, seems fooled: *"Poor girl!" he said. "Poor girl! The ways of fate are indeed hard to understand. If there is not some compensation hereafter, then the world is a cruel jest."*

******Again, why she didn't turn in Leonardo: *"He had left me under the beast's claws, he had deserted me in my need, and yet I could not bring myself to give him to the gallows."*

Damned conveniently, lying to the police also spared **herself** the gallows...but surely that never entered her thinking, did it?

******Of course, perhaps Holmes *did* figure all this out. After all, I'm not making any of this up--all is this is straight from Watson's narrative, even if he doesn't give it the interpretation I do. Surely *Holmes* saw the same things?

It's not the first time he has let a wife go unmolested for the death of an abusive husband. But unlike **Abbey Grange**, there's no plausible way that this incident can be written off as merely an *"accident."* Eugenia by her own words admitted to enthusiastically and successfully participating in a plan to murder her husband.

Perhaps Holmes felt the disfigurement was punishment enough. Or that enough time had passed, and no good could come of making it a police matter. Or maybe...

******Holmes, sensing that Eugenia is planning suicide:

"Your life is not your own," he said. "Keep your hands off it."

"What use is it to anyone?"

"How can you tell? The example of patient suffering is in itself the most precious of all lessons to an impatient world."

A very Catholic attitude.

But then again, we know she was no mere "*patient sufferer*," but ultimately the author of her own pain.

There's nothing to support this reading, and it's likely not in character, but part of me likes to think that while Holmes didn't think she any longer deserved civil punishment, he felt she should remain alive, to suffer with her guilt and bad dreams. But that's just me projecting, in all likelihood.

**Watson on her terrible injuries:

It was horrible. No words can describe the framework of a face when the face itself is gone. Two living and beautiful brown eyes looking sadly out from that grisly ruin did but make the view more awful.

**Eugenia relinquishes her poison:

"I send you my temptation. I will follow your advice." That was the message. I think, Watson, we can guess the name of the brave woman who sent it.

Brave woman? Please....

That also makes two stories in a row with people carrying around cyanide. How *easy* was that stuff to get in those days??

**I suppose you can tell that I'm *not* terribly sympathetic to Eugenia.

Not to minimize her torment before the killing (assuming it was real, as we only have her word for it), but my more modern sensibilities can't help but read this like a classic *noir*, be it **Double Indemnity** or **Body Heat**. A woman takes a lover, dupes him into killing her husband for the money, and she dumps the guy. In this case, of course, *she's* the one who suffers for her crime, not the dupe...but the injuries from the lion were essentially *self-inflicted*, a punishment for her crimes. Murder will out, even if the ********* had it coming.

Or perhaps I'm just a lot more hard-hearted than Holmes and Watson (and Doyle).

Brian Keith Snell

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