

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 LX – The Adventure of Shoscombe Old Place

The Adventure of Shoscombe Old Place--The Series Finale!

Is this the way **Holmes** ends--not with a bang but a whimper?

Perhaps that is overstating things. And perhaps we modern readers have been conditioned by modern fiction series to expect not merely a final story, but **AN ENDING**. And when we don't get that, that sense of closure, we feel cheated.

Which brings us to **The Adventure of Shoscombe Old Place**.

It's not as if the "series finale" is a new concept. **The Fugitive**, **The Mary Tyler Moore Show**, and **M*A*S*H** are just a few examples of how the concept has been around for awhile.

But these days, it is *ubiquitous*. It's no longer satisfactory, it seems, to simply leave it to the viewers' imaginations what might have happened to their favorite characters--the producers are obligated to *spell it out for them*, and tie off every plot line, and answer every question. Genre press and blogs will update their annual "*What are the best and worst series' finales ever*" lists.

So to modern sensibilities, it's a little bit jarring to see Sherlock Holmes just...*end*. No big wrap-up. No final statement. Just another story, with nothing too special about it.

Of course, it's not as if **Sir Arthur Conan Doyle** hadn't already tried to do a "series finale" for his own creation--*twice*. He killed the detective off in **The Final Problem**...but it didn't take. And he gave us the "story set in the (series') future that show our heroes' last adventure" in **His Last Bow**. That, too, turned out not to be particularly final.



So perhaps there's no surprise to be had that Doyle didn't go to that well for a third time--what was left to do in that mode, show Sherlock's funeral? (Or better yet, a diminished Holmes solving his last mystery at **Watson's** funeral? Say...Someone get me a pen, I gotta start writing this down...).

It's pretty clear that Sir Arthur knew that this was the last story in **Case-Book**. It was the 12th story since Last Bow, and the collections tended to gather in dozens. Case-Book was published within a few weeks of the publication of Shoscombe.

But did he *know* that this was to be the last Holmes story of all? There's certainly not any indication of that. It is, not to damn it with faint praise, just another mystery. Watson doesn't even give us the usual "*this tale was so fascinating I had to relay it*" shtick as an introduction. There's no real villain, certainly not Holmes' ultimate foe or dastardly enemy agents. There's no *real* crime, which while not necessarily a story defect, doesn't seem to be the note you'd want to retire the world's greatest detective on. The deductions are not particularly brilliant.

Perhaps we'll never know what was in Sir Arthur's mind. Was this just another story, and he planned to pick up Sherlock again later? Or was this his last word, and Doyle just decided not to make a big deal of it, the better to have Holmes fade quietly away?

Whichever, the end of the series hasn't the *closure* modern genre consumers have come to expect. And really, that's just fine. Now we can just use our imaginations for ourselves. And just like we had to imagine **Dick Van Dyke** still toiling away on writing for that show, or **Napoleon** and **Ilya** still **U.N.C.L.E.**ing away without us, we can close our eyes and see Sherlock and Watson still in the Victorian fog, solving the thousands of mysteries which Watson has alluded to. Perhaps for these heroes, it's better not to have a definitive ending.

Thanks for reading this humble effort at a blog!

OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:

**Shoscombe may be a mid-level Holmes affair, but *literarily* it works quite nicely. We have a nice theme of impostors and doubles running throughout--Sir Robert uses an identical horse to fake out touts, and uses a fake sister to forestall his creditors, while Holmes and Watson pose as city-slickers out for some bucolic fishing. And the bones in the furnace are meant to fake us out into thinking that they are Lady Beatrice's.

The whole tale, while ultimately rather slight, is well put together, teasing us with red herrings and surprising plot twists.

Doyle bringing Holmes into the **CSI-future: "*Sherlock Holmes had been bending for a long time over a low-power microscope...they have begun to realize the importance of the microscope.*"

Little did Doyle know that 80 years later, the airwaves would be filled with nothing *but* "regular" police using such scientific methods to solve crimes.

****The last two apocryphal cases mentioned:**

In the St. Pancras case you may remember that a cap was found beside the dead policeman. The accused man denies that it is his. But he is a picture-frame maker who habitually handles glue.

and

Since I ran down that coiner by the zinc and copper filings in the seam of his cuff they have begun to realize the importance of the microscope.

Interesting that these both come from Holmes, and not Watson.

****Perhaps the most-remembered part of this story: Watson's gambling "problem":**

By the way, Watson, you know something of racing?"

"I ought to. I pay for it with about half my wound pension."

I think this was pretty clearly sarcastic exaggeration, not meant to be taken literally. Still, perhaps we now know why, upon his return, Holmes kept Watson's checkbook for him...

****Sir Robert Norberton** was clearly a violent, dangerous man:

"Norberton nearly came within your province once.

"How was that?"

"It was when he horsewhipped Sam Brewer, the well-known Curzon Street money-lender, on Newmarket Heath. He nearly killed the man."

And we're told that *"[h]e's a terrible man with his fists if he gets started, and no respecter of persons."*

And still another person who knows him warns, *"But mind what I have told you about Sir Robert. He's the sort that strikes first and speaks afterwards"*

So it's hard to understand why, exactly, Sir Robert hasn't done jail time, or at least been sued out of his holdings even before the creditors got to him. He *"nearly killed"* a man by whipping him--could even a noble get away with that? Maybe Norberton paid to hush it up. Or perhaps Watson (or the press) exaggerated the incident.

Still, despite the fact that he was so violent, Watson cannot believe that *a noble* would actually commit premeditated murder:

And yet...Let us suppose, Watson -- it is merely a scandalous supposition, a hypothesis put forward for argument's sake -- that Sir Robert has done away with his sister."

"My dear Holmes, it is out of the question."

"Very possibly, Watson. Sir Robert is a man of an honourable stock. But you do occasionally find a carrion crow among the eagles.

A presumption of innocence because of class. Oh, Victorian/Edwardian era, I shall miss you...

******Watson's description of Sir Robert as better suited to a different era is classic:

Well, he has the name of being a dangerous man. He is about the most daredevil rider in England -- second in the Grand National a few years back. He is one of those men who have overshot their true generation. He should have been a buck in the days of the Regency -- a boxer, an athlete, a plunger on the turf, a lover of fair ladies, and, by all account, so far down Queer Street that he may never find his way back again.

******Yes, I know it's *picking at low-hanging fruit* to mock older slang that has picked up altogether different, risque meanings over the decades. And yes, I know that the phrase merely means that Sir Robert was deeply in debit.

Still, I can't help but emphasize this utterly perfect phrase: *"so far down Queer Street that he may never find his way back again."* Priceless.

It's also not the *only* time the queer-word is used for Sir Robert: *"Well, sir, when a man does one queer thing, or two queer things, there may be a meaning to it, but when everything he does is queer, then you begin to wonder."*

I know, I know. Still, all of that perhaps puts another meaning on *"Sir Robert has never married. Just as well, I think, considering his prospects."* Maybe it wasn't the *prospects* that kept him from marrying...

******Sir Robert's living arrangements are considered odd:

He lives with his widowed sister, Lady Beatrice Falder."

"You mean that she lives with him?"

"No, no. The place belonged to her late husband, Sir James. Norborton has no claim on it at all. It is only a life interest and reverts to her husband's brother.

It's another, final look at some of the *sexism* of the era. If unmarried sibling are living together, even Sherlock assumes that the sister *"lives with"* the brother--that is, that he is the property holder and source of income, and she the *"freeloader."* To suggest otherwise? Holmes takes that as an obvious mistake!!

Here, as well, we have yet *another* case of a woman being used for her inheritance. Perhaps even more egregiously, she's not allowed to *keep* the estate to pass on--when she passes on, it reverts to the **Falder** clan.!!

Of course, that's a good way for declining aristocracy to make sure that's what's left of their wealth stays in their family, and isn't redistributed by weddings.

I can only imagine (hope) the will would have been different had **Beatrice** and her husband had children to pass the estate to. Also, surely her husband recognized Sir Robert's spendthrift nature (and Beatrice's willingness to let it happen), and this was just a means to protect the family wealth from being squandered by a jerk...

****John Mason**, head trainer of Sir Robert's horses, is probably the *worst* client/witness ever!

You'd think that, if you're trying to interest Sherlock Holmes in taking your case, you'd start with the worst evidence first--*bones in the furnace!*

But no, Mason tries the soft sell: "*First of all, Mr. Holmes, I think that my employer, Sir Robert, has gone mad.*"

Well, Holmes notes that this really isn't his department. But rather than go on to potentially great evils, Mason just embellishes on the madness theory: "*Well, first of all, you have only to look at him. I don't believe he sleeps at night. He is down at the stables at all hours. His eyes are wild. It has all been too much for his nerves.*"

Then Mason moves on...but not to any evidence of foul play! He just segues to the fact that Beatrice is behaving oddly:

Then there is his conduct to Lady Beatrice! They have always been the best of friends. They had the same tastes, the two of them, and she loved the horses as much as he did. Every day at the same hour she would drive down to see them -- and, above all, she loved the Prince. He would prick up his ears when he heard the wheels on the gravel, and he would trot out each morning to the carriage to get his lump of sugar. But that's all over now." "Why?" "Well, she seems to have lost all interest in the horses. For a week now she has driven past the stables with never so much as 'Good-morning'!

So far Mason has only laid out that he thinks Mason mad, and that Beatrice is behaving oddly. Not much call to involve a private detective is there?

Oh, yeah, there's the dog:

"You think there has been a quarrel?"

"And a bitter, savage, spiteful quarrel at that. Why else would he give away her pet spaniel that she loved as if he were her child?"

Still not a lot of interest here, is there? Oh, well then, she's drinking more than she used to!

She is brooding and sulky and drinking, Mr. Holmes -- drinking like a fish."

"Did she drink before this estrangement?"

"Well, she took her glass, but now it is often a whole bottle of an evening. So Stephens, the butler, told me.

Again, Mason has wasted Holmes time (and pages!) without anything particularly dastardly. At best, it looks like a sibling fight. What does he expect Holmes to do about that?

Only *then* does Mason begin to bring in the Gothic and sinister: "*But then, again, what is master doing down at the old church crypt at night? And who is the man that meets him there?*"

OK, you now have Holmes' interest. Still, Mason waits to casually drop in the fact that there's grave robbery (or worse) going on: "*No, sir, and there is something more that I can't fit in. Why should Sir Robert want to dig up a dead body?*" Heavens, talk about burying your lede!

And only *after* all of that, with Holmes still expressing skepticism about getting involved, does Mason finally reveal the burned skeleton: *He took a paper from his pocket, and, unwrapping it carefully, he exposed a charred fragment of bone.*

It just seems to me that if you want to convince Sherlock Holmes to get involved, you *start* with the potential evidence of a potential crime, and then add in the soap opera aspects. But maybe that's just me.

******Sir Robert's plan to keep the odds high in the race:

You can get forties now, but it was nearer the hundred when he began to back him."

"But how is that if the horse is so good?"

"The public don't know how good he is. Sir Robert has been too clever for the touts. He has the Prince's half-brother out for spins. You can't tell 'em apart. But there are two lengths in a furlong between them when it comes to a gallop.

Admit it--when you read that, you were *sure* that the story was going to be some kind of **Silver Blaze** reprise, with a horse-switching happening somewhere along the line. That's what I thought...

******I must confess to *confusion* about the maid, **Carrie Evans**, and her alleged affair with Sir Robert.

Mason, despite his claims to discretion, quite clearly implies that the affair is well-known and long-lived:

"There is her maid, Carrie Evans. She has been with her this five years."

"And is, no doubt, devoted?"

Mr. Mason shuffled uncomfortably. "She's devoted enough," he answered at last. "But I won't say to whom." "Ah!" said Holmes. "I can't tell tales out of school.

...

"Well, the scandal has been pretty clear for a long time."

It would have been hard for Mason to confirm the affair more *firmly*, uncomfortable shuffling or not.

And yet...Norberton hires **Carrie's husband** to carry out the impersonation of Beatrice!!

Carrie, for whatever reason, *has been living under her maiden name!!* So maybe Mason didn't even realize she was married!!

So *was* there an affair? If there was, perhaps **Mr. Norlett** didn't know about it? But Mason sure seems to imply that it was common knowledge.

Or perhaps there *was* an affair, and Norlett did know, and cooperated anyway. Maybe Sir Robert promised him a handsome payday for his cooperation, and all he had to do was turn his head. The rich really are different, you see.

So was Mason completely wrong about the affair? Or was there, and Mr. Norlett behaved in a fairly unbelievable way? And why even introduce this into the story? Just to give Sir Robert a (*far-fetched* at best) motive for murder?

The **Granada adaptation changes things around a bit, so stable boy played by a very young **Jude Law** impersonates Lady Beatrice

Oh, Jude....

**Another reason Mason should have started with crypt robbing and mysterious bones, as Holmes says, "*It is only the colourless, uneventful case which is hopeless.*"

**Sherlock declares that "*Dogs don't make mistakes.*"

Well, I've known some pretty damn dumb dogs in my day. And even the smartest ones aren't that hard to fool...

**Our first actual view of Sir Robert: *He was a terrible figure, huge in stature and fierce in manner. A large stable-lantern which he held in front of him shone upward upon a strong, heavily moustached face and angry eyes...*

**Apparently, death did not *flatter* lady Beatrice:

He turned and tore open the coffin-lid behind him. In the glare of the lantern I saw a body swathed in a sheet from head to foot with dreadful, witch-like features, all nose and chin, projecting at one end, the dim, glazed eyes staring from a discoloured and crumbling face.

**Holmes: "*In any case, my business is that of every other good citizen -- to uphold the law.*"

Hahahaha!! How many thieves and murderers have you let walk away, Sherlock?!? And that's just in the stories we know about!!

**OK, I have to admit that I'm confused by some of the finances here.

We're told that Sir Robert has hocked everything in a desperate attempt to win the race and save his financial situation from ruin. And we're told that when Beatrice dies, the estate reverts back to her husband's family.

But Sir Robert says, "*I have always known that if my sister were to die my creditors would be on to my estate like a flock of vultures. Everything would be seized -- my stables, my horses -- everything.*"

Wait...wouldn't that property revert to *the Falders*? It's not "*his*" estate, right? If the stables and the horses were part of the estate, wouldn't they go to the Falders, as well?

I'll confess freely that I'm no financial expert, and have no idea whether the creditors would be able to step in *before* probate or have to wait until *after*. But since *none* of the estate belonged to Sir Robert, it seems to my untrained mind that the estate would revert to the Falders, and the creditors would have to go after them to seize the horses, etc.

Again, we have incomplete information, but if Sir Robert had invested "*everything*" on the horse race, his only asset the creditors could go after would be his actual bets.

Holmes disagrees. "*Your bets on the race, and therefore your hopes for the future, would hold good even if your creditors seized your estate.*"

Well, wait. If I borrowed thousand of dollars, and put it all into lottery tickets, and then when bankrupt before the drawing...wouldn't the creditors be *entitled* to those tickets, as an asset with potential value? It seems wrong to say that I could default on my debts, but walk away with the tickets and become a millionaire, and the creditors couldn't touch me.

**So, no *real* crime was committed here (putting aside whatever minor laws about notifying authorities or properly treating dead bodies might have existed). So, no harm, no foul, right, Sherlock?

Hardly. Holmes gets mighty *judgy* here:

"There was no indignity or irreverence, Mr. Holmes. I do not feel that I have wronged the dead."

"Your conduct seems to me inexcusable, Sir Robert."

Wow. Worse than the murderers and adulterers and thieves you've let off the hook?

"Well, Sir Robert," said Holmes, rising, "this matter must, of course, be referred to the police. It was my duty to bring the facts to light, and there I must leave it. As to the morality or decency of your conduct, it is not for me to express an opinion."

I think you have expressed you opinion adequately, Holmes...

**Watson tells us that thee was a happy ending:

It is generally known now that this singular episode ended upon a happier note than Sir Robert's actions deserved. Shoscombe Prince did win the Derby, the sporting owner did net eighty thousand pounds in bets, and the creditors did hold their hand until the race was over, when they were paid in full, and enough was left to reestablish Sir Robert in a fair position in life.

Watson neglects to tell us whether or not he bet any of his wound pension on the race...

****Apparently, the authorities were not *nearly* so morally outraged as Holmes:**

Both police and coroner took a lenient view of the transaction, and beyond a mild censure for the delay in registering the lady's decease, the lucky owner got away scatheless from this strange incident in a career which has now outlived its shadows and promises to end in an honoured old age.

It seems that, over time, Sir Robert mended his violent ways, and his spendthrift ways, and...Money really *does* change everything!

**Brian Keith Snell
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