

## *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 Adventures of Sherlock Holmes Adventure V -- A Case of Identity

## The Mystery of the First Case of Catfishing

On it's face, **A Case Of Identity** is a trifle, a *curio*, a minor piece of the Canon.

It has been adapted *far* less frequently than most **Holmes** stories, especially compared to other stories from **Adventures**, which would seem to indicate a fairly low level of interest. It is quite short. There is no crime involved. Holmes never leaves the confines of **Baker Street**--no disguises, no derring-do. There are no great revelations about Holmes' or Watson's pasts. It's not too much of a mystery--Holmes has solved it well before **Miss Mary Sutherland** even finishes her story. And let's be honest--the title is a bit of a *giveaway*, isn't it?



But we shouldn't be too quick to dismiss A Case Of Identity, for there are, as Holmes would put it, some areas of interest.

I think a tendency many readers have, upon reading **ACOI** the first time, is scoff at how *unlikely* it all seems. She allows herself to be wooed *by her own step-father*, and doesn't recognize him? She was familiar enough with his handwriting that he had to conceal it, but tinted glasses and bushy whiskers and a "*hoarse voice*" were enough to disguise him? Even if she is short-sighted? How blind is she?

We have to remember that convincing disguises have a long history as a literary device. Holmes declares it "*an old idea*." All the way back to the ancient Greek theater, the Bible, Shakespeare... literature is replete with examples of disguises that just shouldn't work: kings disguising themselves as commoners, women dressing as men, "*bed tricks*." Even Sherlock Holmes is consistently able to fool **Watson**, who certainly should be expecting to have his friend turn up in astonishing disguises.

Compared with the goings-on of, say, **Twelfth Night**, or **Ahab**, or **Chaucer**, Mary not recognizing her step-father isn't terribly out of line--at least for a literary work.

The other issue about the disguise, and how Mary is taken in by it, is that the concept could fit very well into 21st century life. When I first read this story in the 1970s, I scoffed at the likelihood of it. 40 years later, though? I'd wager that all of us know someone who is in a relationship with someone they met online, a situation fraught with the chances of falling for someone who isn't really what they seem.

"**Catfish**" has become the well-known term for the situation where someone uses a false online identity to start a relationship with another person. We've had a movie and a television series based on the concept.

We've even had a major college athlete tell us the devastating story of the death of his girlfriend, only to have it turn out that she never really existed--he was being hoaxed in an online relationship (although some feel he may have been in on it). Folks, *that's* a case of identity if ever there was one. Aspects of many of the Holmes stories have, of course, become dated over 120+ years; but in many ways, *A Case Of Identity* is *more* relevant to our culture now than it was in its own time, and perhaps well overdue for someone to adapt it into a modern context.

The other major area of interest is the huge *ethical* decision Sherlock Holmes made. Acknowledging that, legally, there is nothing he can do, Holmes allows Windibank to go...and he decides NOT to tell Mary Sutherland the truth!!

I have to say, I strongly disagree with this decision, on several grounds.

First, Miss Sutherland is Sherlock's *client*. Granted, as Holmes is the *first* private consulting detective, the ethical guidelines of his profession surely aren't set. Still it seems fairly clear to me--she hired him, and unless she turns out to be an evil murderess manipulating Holmes to recover the **Maltese Falcon** while she double-crosses him, Holmes' duty should be to her.

Secondly, if you argue that Holmes' first duty is to justice, it seems unclear how allowing **Windibank's** scheme to go on could serve that goal. The deception is "*as cruel and selfish and heartless a trick in a petty way as ever came before me,*" and "*there never was a man who deserved punishment more.*" Yet since legal sanctions weren't available, why not at least unveil his scheme to Miss Sutherland? Why allow the cruel and selfish and heartless scheme to go on?

Holmes is certain that Windibank "*will rise from crime to crime until he does something very bad, and ends on a gallows;*" letting him off scot free seems more likely to allow him to reach that dangerous point.

Consider--at the very least, by keeping Mary in the dark, Windibank will continue to "*have the use of*" her annual £100 for a decade. And one can imagine that, as the 10 years draws near (or Mary becomes restive), a mysterious postcard or telegram would arrive, from an unknown origin, that would be enough to rekindle her devotion to **Hosmer Angel**. At the very least, letting Mary know the truth would deprive him the use of her income, and cause her to leave that awful, awful home.

Finally, Holmes' casual dismissal that "*she will not believe me*" is unpersuasive, especially as Holmes has substantial evidence and, *a witness to Windibanks' confession* in Watson. To follow that with an Persian proverb that it might be too dangerous to let her know simply means that Holmes is being far too *patronizing* and *paternalistic*.

Nothing drives me more nearly insane than the "*we can't tell X the truth*" meme that crops up in fiction. The patronizing "*he can't handle the truth*," the condescending "*we know better than she does what's best for her life*," are infantilizing attitudes that do no justice to the people supposedly being "*protected*." More information is *always* better than less, and it is disappointing (although perhaps not surprising given the culture he arises from) that Sherlock Holmes believes that it is better a victim continues to be victimized, than to "*traumatize*" her by telling her the truth. Trust in her, and give her the choice--that's the correct action.

In fairness, I can see alternate sides of the argument, too. Maybe Mary Sutherland would be so traumatized by the truth, she goes on a *killing spree*, slaughtering her mother and her father-in-law. Or, perhaps by thwarting Windibank's plan, the truth would merely set him on a faster pace towards a gallows-worthy crime. As he already goes to the bank to withdraw the quarterly interest payment for Mary, he presumably could continue doing so if she were suddenly imprisoned--*or worse*--by the cad. So revealing the truth might drive him to desperate, more harmful measures. I don't think it would happen, especially if Holmes let it be known he would be watching very carefully. But I concede the possibility, even though I still say "Tell her, dammit!"

This isn't the last time that Holmes will take justice into his own hands, raising serious ethical concerns. But none will feature decisions so egregiously wrong, in my opinion.

So, for such a minor story, attracting so little interest from adapters, A Case Of Identity sure raises a number of cultural and ethical issues for contemplation. Which is why it's really *not* a minor story.

### **OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS**

\*\* Let us not forget, Mary Sutherland's *unnamed mother* was part and parcel of this icky plan.

"**Mother**" was all in favor of the betrothal, and the swearing of eternal loyalty, and encouraged the hasty

wedding. She "*was even fonder of [Hosmer] than*" Mary. EEEWWWWWW! Mother was all in favor of breaking her daughter's heart and keeping her from having healthy relationships, just so she could get access to Mary's money. And if it involved her younger husband's pitching woo to Mary, go for it. EEEEEWWWWWWWWWW!!!!!!!

All the more reason, I would think, for Holmes to reveal the truth and get Mary out of that vile little house.

\*\* How much money did the Windibanks *need*?

As our handy chart reminds us, even if her father's plumbing business was undervalued when sold, the Windibanks received **£4700**...or roughly *47 years worth* of Mary's bequest from **Uncle Ned**.

Granted, running the household certainly might require more than £100 pounds per year. But Windibank also had his position as a traveling wine merchant. So unless there were substantial debts, bad investments, or terribly expensive habits, it's hard to see why Mr. & Mrs. Windibank so desperately need to keep control of Mary's income.

There's not much point in "*a man marrying a very much older woman than himself for her money,*" if immediately afterwards he needs to rob the daughter's piggy bank. Was there less money than he thought, or did he have outrageous expenses?

\*\* The Most Misleading Book Cover Ever?

\*\* Watson's practice sure seems to have it's ups and downs. In **The Red-Headed League**--which takes place *after* this story--John declares, "*I have nothing to do to-day. My practice is never very absorbing.*" Yet during this case, he tells us, "*A professional case of great gravity was engaging my own attention at the time, and the whole of next day I was busy at the bedside of the sufferer.*"

Sounds as if the practice *had* been absorbing, at least for one patient. Quite a swing in a short time. Perhaps in the "*case of great gravity,*" the patient died, and so people decided not to patronize his practice anymore, resulting in free time for the Doctor in the later story...

\*\* This story contains one of **Doyle's** greatest bits as prose, as Holmes declares:

*"[L]ife is infinitely stranger than anything which the mind of man could invent. We would not dare to conceive the things which are really mere commonplaces of existence. If we could fly out of that window hand in hand, hover over this great city, gently remove the roofs, and peep in at the queer things which are going on, the strange coincidences, the plannings, the cross-purposes, the wonderful chains of events, working through generations, and leading to the most outré results, it would make all fiction with its conventionalities and foreseen conclusions most stale and unprofitable."*

OK, it's just a wordy way of saying "*truth is stranger than fiction.*" But I like it.

No *sniggering* over the image of Holmes and Watson flying out the window "hand in hand," please.

\*\* You are challenged to use this phrase in conversation this week: "Oscillation upon the pavement always means an *affaire de coeur.*"

\*\* I'll admit, this makes me look dopey, but every time I read "Hosmer Angel," my brain transposes it to "**Homer Angel**," and I picture this as a **Simpsons** episode.

And then I picture Homer disguising himself to woo **Lisa** and get her allowance, and **EEEEWWWWWWWWWW!!!!**

\*\* Mostly vague allusions rather than concrete references to apocryphal cases this time, but we do have:

-- The matter of "*some delicacy*" for the reigning family of Holland, which Holmes cannot discuss with Watson, for which Holmes was rewarded with a dazzling ring.

-- An "*intricate matter from Marseilles.*" Some have speculated that since Windibank traveled to France for his wine business, perhaps Holmes was already investigating his misdeeds.

-- **The Dundas Separation Case**--in which the husband took out his false teeth after every meal and threw them at the wife!

-- Finding the missing husband of **Mrs. Etherege**, when the police had given him up for dead.

\*\* Holmes declaration that "*I believe that a single lady can get on very nicely upon an income of about 60 pounds*" tells us a lot the economics of Victorian London. There are a number of ways to calculate the inflation between 1888 and 2014. A straight inflation adjustment would translate £60 in 1888 to £5,800 in 2014, an amount almost certainly not enough for a single to get by "nicely" on in London today. But looked at in terms of relative economic status (e.g., how that income compared to others at the time), the £600 translate to a 2014 "*economic status*" of £41,000.

So, that would be probably be "very nicely."

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**July 06, 2014**