

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 VII -- The Adventure of the Five Orange Pips

The Case of the K.K.K. Took My Baby Away!!

The Five Orange Pips is a story that has never really been adapted to the screen.

A 1945 movie was partly based upon some aspects of the tale, kinda sorta; one of the episodes of **BBC's Sherlock** made a pun about the title, without including any of the actual story. And that's about it.

There are two reasons, I think, for the lack of adaptations. The first is (and this is purely my uninformed opinion) that many potential adapters have been scared away by the *potential controversy* over doing a story featuring the **Ku Klux Klan** as the villain, especially one that focuses on their making rich white Englishman their victims, while largely ignoring their crime against African-Americans. Who needs the agita, when there are 59 other stories that won't get your production embroiled in a potential **The Birth Of A Nation**-style uproar?

The second, and more important, reason is that, sad to say, The Five Orange Pips is just *not a very good story*.

Despite the fact that **Sir Arthur Conan Doyle** picked it as one of his top ten favorite **Holmes** stories, this is easily the most *disappointing* story so far in the **Canon**:

-- The mystery isn't much of one. Granted, perhaps it just seems that way to me, because a 21st century American reader is much more familiar with the Ku Klux Klan, and the obvious meaning of K.K.K, than a nineteenth century British reader might have been.



But we can't forget what we know, and the Klan involvement is *painfully* obvious early on. And once again, it's a case that Holmes has mostly solved before the client even finishes his story, which doesn't make for the best mystery.

-- There is little to no "*action*" in the piece. We don't go to any of the scenes of the crime; Holmes doesn't wear any disguises or interact with any suspects; he spends the "whole day" at the library (OK, **Lloyd's**, but you know what I mean). *Everything* significant happens "off screen," as it were.

-- We never even meet the killer(s). Holmes deduces who they must be, but he has been wrong before. To have him rail so much against the killers, and then *never* so much as see them, is frustrating. Add to the fact that their final fate is in no way due to Holmes' actions. They die (?) off screen, in an apparent storm. Because of this, they are by far the *weakest* villains in the Canon, all shadows and no substance whatsoever.

-- Watson writes that "*there are points in connection with [the case] which never have been, and probably never will be, entirely cleared up.*" He may be right, but on a meta-level, that's the author's duty to fill in the missing information. We don't know for sure that **Captain James Calhoun** and company are the killers; we don't know *how* they accomplished their murders in ways to fool the authorities; we don't know why they were so eager for the **Openshaw's** papers, and why they resorted to cryptic threats instead of merely burglarizing the home; we don't know for sure that they are perished. In fact, there is nothing that we actually know for sure beyond the facts that young John Openshaw lays out for us.

We certainly can't know why Doyle chose such a thinly-plotted and lazily sketched in story as one of his favorites; perhaps he thought the gimmick of the mysterious messages and orange seeds were sufficiently unique and cool to make blind us to the lack of the most basic tenets of a mystery's requirements.

It is particularly ironic, in that in this tale, Doyle has **Watson** confess that "*it is no easy matter to know which*" of Holmes many cases to publish. Watson then gives a list of criteria which would make for a poor story (in his view):

Some, however, have already gained publicity through the papers, and others have not offered a field for those peculiar qualities which my friend possessed in so high a degree, and which it is the object of these papers to illustrate. Some, too, have baffled his analytical skill, and would be, as narratives, beginnings without an ending, while others have been but partially cleared up, and have their explanations founded rather upon conjecture and surmise than on that absolute logical proof which was so dear to him.

He then proceeds to give us a tale which he admits fails those criteria, because it was "so remarkable in its details and so startling in its results." Eh, sorry, *not really*, Doctor.

OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:

** Some commentators describe this case as a failure for Holmes, as his client dies before Holmes takes any action. Perhaps this is a bit of a *harsh* assessment, as the critics never seem to state what Holmes should have done differently. Young Openshaw had *already* gone to the police, and been dismissed. It is unclear that Holmes would have been able to convince them differently, given that Scotland Yard's usual initial reaction is to dismiss his "theories" (not to mention it would require them to admit they may have been wrong about the earlier deaths).

So no protective custody. What then? Accompany him back to **Horsham**? But the information Holmes needed to crack the case was in London. Have him stay at **Baker Street**? Perhaps. But the ninja-like ability of the Klansmen might mean they would not be afraid to strike there, and perhaps harm Watson and **Mrs. Hudson**.

Openshaw was alert to the danger, armed, and supposedly traveling among crowds the whole way. The killers had only struck in lonely, rural areas. Hindsight, of course, says sending him back alone was a mistake. But I think it's a mistake to blame Sherlock for Openshaw's death.

** Openshaw's father declares, "*Pooh! We are in a civilised land here, and we can't have tomfoolery of this kind.*"

But of course, he's wrong. In Doyle's universe, England is *the seething crucible* in which foreign disputes are settled. Of the 7 published stories published to this point, **5** involved quarrels/disputes that began in far away lands...and *all 4* of the murder cases Watson has chronicled came as the vengeful resolution of feuds started in Australia, America, India...

England may have been a "*civilised*" land, but it is also the place where people from uncivilized lands come to settle their scores.

** This story is an all-you-can-eat buffet of references to unpublished cases.

Just from the year 1887, for example, we have:

The Adventure Of The Paradol Chamber

The Amateur Mendicant Society (who held a luxurious club in the lower vault of a furniture warehouse)

The loss of the British ship **Sophy Anderson**

The singular adventures of the **Grice Patersons** in the island of **Uffa**

The Camberwell Poisoning Case, in which Sherlock Holmes was able, by winding up the dead man's watch, to prove that it had been wound up two hours before, and that therefore the deceased had gone to bed within that time

And from an unknown year we have the **Tankerville Club** scandal, in which **Major Prendegast** was wrongfully accused of cheating at cards (shades of **Moonraker!**).

Busy, busy detective. Watson said that he "may" sketch these out at some future date, but of course he didn't (unless someone has one of those trunks of Watson's lost writings in their attic).

** Watson was staying at Baker Street while his wife was "*on a visit to her mother's*." But of course, **Mary Morstan's** mother was long dead; and *The Sign Of The Four* is mentioned in this story, and she and Watson became engaged at the end of that story!

This is the type of things that drives players of **The Great Game** mad. Good luck sorting out those dates and wives...

** If I were a large and powerful terror organization, I'd like to think that I could find *better* agents to enact my schemes than a few sailors who only dock in England every other year. The killings occurred in 1883, 1885 and 1887, the years **The Lone Star** was docked in England, yet there was no Klan activity directed at the Openshaws during the intervening years.

If it was so urgent that the papers be recovered, you'd think that someone could be sent on a *more timely basis*. Unless, of course, this was purely a personal mission for Captain James Calhoun and cohorts.

Some people have suggested (as they always do) that **Moriarty** was ultimately responsible for these crimes. *Again with the Moriarty!* And this is pretty transparently false, in my opinion. If Moriarty **had** been hired to kill Colonel Openshaw (and get his papers), do we really believe that the **Napoleon Of Crime** would have to rely on assassins who only show up on a bi-annual basis, and are unable to burglarize a house themselves? (Unless you want to posit that Moriarty was *framing* the Klan, and his crimes were for some other nefarious purpose, which strains credulity. And makes Holmes look ever more foolish)

** The Baker Street **NSA** at work: Holmes spends rainy nights "*cross-indexing his records of crime*."

** Sherlock: "*Except for [Watson], I have [no friends]*." Awwwww....

** This is the second story in a row in which we have seen coroners and inquest juries reach incorrect results. As I discussed last week, in a pre-forensics time period, we can't be too surprised.

Still, to insist that two brothers, who each received the same obscure threatening letter, and each died not long afterwards, is just *coincidence*...? That is, as Holmes declared, "*incredible imbecility!*" And, as others have noted, for a jury to conclude suicide when a man clearly in fear for his life is found drowned in a two-foot deep pond is insane.

** That being said, this was a lost opportunity for Watson to display his medical knowledge to good use again, as he did in the **Boscombe Valley Mystery**. How about going over the coroners' reports, to see if he can ascertain any signs of violence or poison on these victims?

Then, perhaps, we could know how the assassins killed these men and made it look like suicide and accidents.

But as I said above, Doyle seemed satisfied with the orange seeds gimmick, and didn't bother to develop the story any more after that.

** Holmes opines that "*even in these days of free education and encyclopaedias,*" possession of all knowledge is "somewhat rare." Somewhat?

One can only wonder what Holmes would make of our era, when the internet gives us access to almost infinite knowledge, yet we still seem as dumb as ever, as a species...

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