

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 VI -- The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle

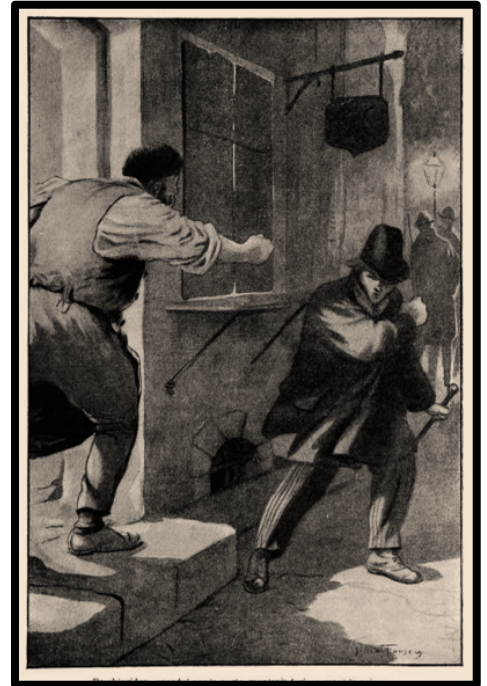
The Adventure of Beggars Can't Be Choosers!

The Adventure Of The Blue Carbuncle (the *first* of many, many stories to be titled "**The Adventure Of...**") is a delightful little story, a holiday season hunt along an unlikely chain from a homely goose to a stolen gem. **Holmes** is in fine form, witty and clever, and yet an avenging angel dispensing appropriate justice.

Or *is* it appropriate justice? This isn't the first time that Sherlock has taken upon himself to let a villain go unpunished, or at least unrevealed. The question we must face is this: was Holmes' allowing **Ryder** to flee true justice? For *everyone* involved?

It turns out that this story, and two television adaptations (**BBC 1968**, and **Granada**) all take subtly different approaches to this story, and those differences can make some large variances in how just we think the resolution is.

Let's look at four questions: A) Who ends up with the jewel? B) What about the unfairly accused **John Horner**? C) Who gets the reward? D) What about **Catherine Cusack**, the maid?



A) **Who ends up with the jewel?**

You'd think was a no-brainer, but **Arthur Conan Doyle's** impatience and Granada's nuttiness introduce all sorts of questions.

In the original story, Holmes keeps the stone while they continue the investigation, but he "*lock[s] it up in [his] strong box now and drop[s] a line to the Countess to say that we have it.*" Like many of the Holmes stories, though, Doyle has no patience to give us a true *dénouement*--he ends the story abruptly after the

climax, leaving the final details of the plot's true resolution to our imaginations (See, for example, **The Man With The Twisted Lip**). So we never actually see Holmes return the stone to the **Countess of Morcar**, even though we know he does.

In the BBC 1968 version, though, we actually *witness* Holmes return it to the Countess personally. It is a fun scene, and **Peter Cushing** has great fun annoying the Countess, who is portrayed her as a fairly mean and cruel person.

By the Granada version? Well, here's where things get *odd*. Holmes does *not* send a note to the Countess explaining that he has recovered the gem. He tells **Watson** that he shall keep the jewel "*in his museum*." At the end, he locks the carbuncle in a drawer, along with his picture of **Irene Adler** and his cocaine needle. The clear implication is that *he keeps the gem for himself!!*

What the heck? Aside from the fact that Holmes has never been portrayed as greedy before, keeping the jewel threatens to keep commissioner **Peterson** from collecting his reward, and could jeopardize the freedom of the falsely accused John Horner. We will discuss these problems below...

The Granada version *does* start with a dumb show illustrating the history of the carbuncle and the killings committed to possess it. (Interestingly, while Holmes says there have been *two* murders in the gem's brief life, we're shown *three*). Perhaps the production wished to emphasize the corrupting influence of the jewel, and then imply that Holmes himself was corrupted by it. Still, it is hardly an *ennobling* view of our hero, as he goes directly from an act of mercy to one of *avarice*.

Holmes also mentions in the original story that he has "*reason to know that there are sentimental considerations in the background which would induce the Countess to part with half her fortune if she could but recover the gem*." Perhaps Granada has taken this to imply that Holmes is merely keeping the carbuncle to leverage a greater reward from the Countess (The "*reason to know*" also suggests that Sherlock has had previous dealing with the Countess, so perhaps there is some measure of repayment for past wrongs?) Again, such *extortion* is hardly ennobling.

And even if you wish to make a point that the Countess didn't deserve to have the gem, the production itself does nothing to illustrate this point; and Holmes himself certainly has no greater claim to it. It's not as if he's putting it in an actual museum, or returning it to some prior and theoretically more-legitimate owner.

No, Granada (and screenwriter **Paul Finney**) just went way off the reservation on this point, and for the life of me I can't figure out what they were thinking.

B) ***What about the unfairly accused John Horner?***

The original story has the thieves do a fairly good job of framing Horner, ransacking the bureau and the leaving the jewel box open and empty, ensuring prompt discovery. (Neither TV adaptation has such an obvious burglary awaiting the Countess--she just opens her jewel box to find it empty) Multiple witnesses placed Horner there around the time of the theft, and he had had a prior conviction for robbery. A pretty solid circumstantial case.

The Doyle story's resolution is therefore somewhat *unconvincing*. Both Ryder and Holmes assert that when Ryder vanishes, the case against Horner will "*collapse*," and he will be freed.

Perhaps. But there was *another* witness (the maid--does she flee, too? See below.), and the rest of the circumstantial case stands--Horner was in the suite, he did have a record of robbery. There are any number of reasons why Ryder might have left London, so it's hardly conclusive that this proves he was lying about Horner. The jewel is recovered and returned, but essentially there is *only* the word of Sherlock Holmes (and Watson, of course) that Horner is innocent. Perhaps that would be enough...if only Doyle would give us one or two more paragraphs at the end of the story!!

The BBC '68 version deals with it the best--Holmes makes Ryder *sign a confession* before he's allowed to flee! Granted. this makes for a slightly less dramatic moment when Holmes declares "Get out!" But along with the returned jewel, it certainly means the police have more than sufficient evidence to free Horner.

Granada is again more troublesome. To their credit, Watson refuses to just wait and let the case fall apart. He *insists* that they cannot in good conscience let an innocent man spend another moment in jail. So he and Holmes head off--after midnight--to demand **Bradstreet** release Horner. And he does, as we see his reunion with his family on Christmas morning!!

But remember--in *this* version, *Holmes has not returned the carbuncle!!* And this version does *not* have Ryder leave a confession. So Inspector Bradstreet apparently releases Horner just because Holmes says so. And since the production had earlier made clear that Bradstreet was under heavy pressure from the Countess to secure the gem and get a conviction, it is questionable whether he would just capitulate to Holmes under these circumstances.

C) ***Who gets the reward?***

Obviously there are a number of ways to look at this. The "*very honest*" commissionaire Peterson found the goose, and his wife found the jewel in the goose's crop. He brought the problem to Holmes' initially, and immediately brought the lovely gem to him, as well. So he seems to have the best claim, and is probably the most deserving.

Of course, it was **Henry Baker's** goose to begin with, so he might lodge a protest, even though Holmes left him in the dark about what was actually contained in the fowl's *dissecta membra*. Still, he did leave the goose, so finders' keepers, I suppose. Yet, much is made of the hard financial times he's experiencing...

And Holmes himself spent no little time and money on tracking down the true thief--he has to place ads in all the papers (something Baker was too poor to do), buy a replacement goose, buy a round of drinks at the Alpha House, lose a sovereign in a "wager" with Breckenridge, *etc.*

The Doyle story, in its haste to conclude, leaves us *unclear* who gets the reward, or what any division might be.

BBC '68 shows the detective bringing Peterson the Countess' suite, to ensure that he gets the reward.

In the Granada edition, both Holmes and Watson promise Peterson that he will get the reward. But they never show that actually happening; and if Holmes keeps the carbuncle in his "*museum*," there is no reason for the Countess to ever pay up!! So Holmes has robbed Peterson of £1,000! Of course, if we believe that Holmes is keeping the gem only to squeeze more money from the Countess, perhaps ultimately everyone got paid. But that requires us to assume an awful lot...

D) ***What about Catherine Cusack, the maid?***

If Ryder's confession is to be believed. Cusack was in on the theft from the beginning. She told Ryder of the carbuncle's existence, and she backed up his account of finding the room burgled after Horner left. So there should be some measure of justice (or mercy) awaiting her, as well.

But not in Doyle's story. She's *not* mentioned again. So we have no idea whether she flees, or is arrested, or never has her part in this revealed and remains in the Countess' employ. We simply haven't a clue from the text.

BBC '68 makes it clear that Cusack and Ryder are *lovers*. During his confession, he mentions leaving the country with her. And at the end, we find that she *did* indeed flee with Ryder--the Countess tries to hire Holmes to find her!

Granada also indicates that they are lovers, and in his confession, Ryder says "*She put me up to it!*" But, as with the Doyle story, there is absolutely *no* indication of what Cusack's fate is.

All 3 versions, of course, have Holmes allow Ryder to flee. You can debate whether sending such a pathetic wretch to live abroad, with no means of support, will actually "*save his soul*," or make him more likely to return to a life of crime. But it was the season of forgiveness, and it's not as if Ryder was a murderer (ahem, **Boscombe Valley Mystery**...). Debate amongst yourselves whether this is justice.

Taken as a whole, though, it's the BBC '68 version that *best* completes the story and gives the audience proper assurances that justice was done. We see the jewel returned, and the proper person rewarded. We see strong enough evidence left to assure that Horner will be freed, not just a haphazard "oh, it will all work out." And we find out the maid's fate, instead of just forgetting all about her.

And of course, in the BBC '68 version, Holmes isn't a thief . So there's that. Seriously, Granada, *what* were you on that week?

MORE TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:

** Both TV versions change the time from two days after Christmas to Christmas Eve. All the better for a tale of mercy, I suppose. But would pubs and goose-sellers be open so late that night?

**As I mentioned, Holmes is at his *poetic* and *puckish* best in this tale, particularly when it comes to the carbuncle: "*Of course it is a nucleus and focus of crime. Every good stone is. They are the devil's pet baits. In the larger and older jewels every facet may stand for a bloody deed.*" and "*this forty-grain weight of crystallised charcoal. Who would think that so pretty a toy would be a purveyor to the gallows and the prison?*" Wonderful stuff.

Sherlock also makes me laugh several times during the story, particularly when Peterson comes in yelling about the goose: "*Eh? What of it, then? Has it returned to life and flapped off through the kitchen window?*" And his "*It is always awkward doing business with an alias*" tickled my funny bone, too. "*Battered billycock?*" "*Some small jollification?*" "*The ultimate destiny of a goose?*" This story gives us Holmes at his most playful.

But it's not just his rhetoric that's at the top of his game--Holmes' various (successful) tactics to wheedle information without giving away the goal of his search to Baker, to the landlord of the **Alpha**, and especially the hostile **Breckenridge** the goose seller are top-notch. This story is Holmes at his best.

** This story featured some of **Sidney Paget's** best illustrations. He and Doyle were very much in sync here.

** Much can be made over Holmes' deductions regarding the owner of the hat, and many commentators have raised objections to their accuracy, especially when other interpretations might be available.

BBC '68 manages to defuse that a bit, by having Watson raise those objections *as his own* during Holmes' lecture, and having Holmes answer them. Best of all, Watson derives much amusement when it turns out the goose was not for Henry Baker's wife, but sister-in-law. **Nigel Stock's** finest moment.

** Both TV adaptations raise the stakes in making us care about Horner in more than an abstract way. Doyle doesn't give us much beside his fainting at his arraignment.

BBC '68 has his fiancé leave him as a result, and he tries to hang himself in his cell. Dr. Watson is summoned to see to him (is he always on call for the police?), and become convinced of his innocence. As a result, Watson keeps prodding Holmes at slow points in the investigation.

Granada has Horner married. He and his wife are buying Christmas gifts for their children when he is arrested. He vowed to give up crime when he wed, and now his wife doubts him, and is prepared to leave. But we get a tearful Christmas morning family reunion at the end.

** Holmes is *not* at his best when you wake him up early:

** I must confess, as a youth I always confused the word "*carbuncle*" for "*barnacle*." I could never figure out why the story wasn't about a boat...

** No allusions to untold cases this time out.

** Ah, the glory days of newspapers. According to the ads Holmes wants placed, London had (at least) the following evening papers: **Globe, Star, Pall Mall, St. James's, Evening News, Standard, Echo**. Yes, London was a major metropolis, but to support 7 (or more) evening papers?

It seems foreign to us, in the age of "*dying*" physical newspapers. But pre-**Craig's List**, pre-widespread telephone, this is how you communicated with a lot of people at once. We've seen in several stories that it is *assumed* that people watch the papers for ads of interest to them--there's no "*But what if he doesn't read the papers, Holmes?*" There was no other means of mass communication, and given the era of (generally) mass literacy and (relatively) inexpensive papers, the press thrived. I'd imagine that the sheer number of ads that Holmes alone took out kept several publications in the black...

** The full list of crimes the carbuncle has caused? "*Two murders, a vitriol-throwing, a suicide, and several robberies.*" Which is why I shy away from the bling, thank you.

** A fairly good mission statement:

"My name is Sherlock Holmes. It is my business to know what other people don't know."

Brian Keith Snell

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