

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 XI -- The Adventure of the Engineer's Thumb

You Call That An Adventure?

At the beginning of **The Adventure Of The Engineer's Thumb**, **Watson** tells us that, of all the problems Sherlock Holmes has taken on, "*there were only two which I was the means of introducing to his notice--that of Mr. Hatherley's thumb, and that of Colonel Warburton's madness.*"

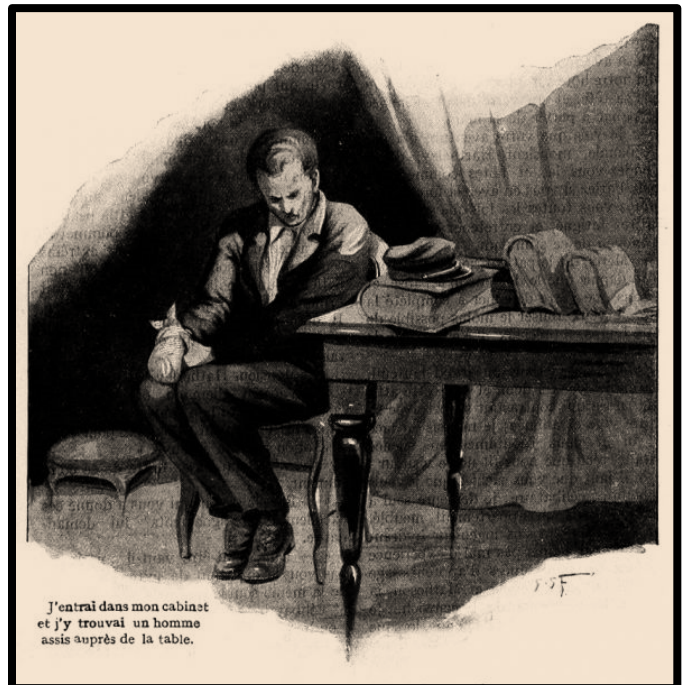
We would have been better off if Watson had told us the tale of **Colonel Warbuton's** madness.

The Adventure Of The Engineer's Thumb is a tale where, well, pretty much *nothing whatsoever* happens.

All of action is narrated to us by the titular **Victor Hatherly**. Holmes makes no noteworthy deductions, nor do we learn anything interesting about him or his worldview. When our crew arrives in **Reading**, the house in question is already burned down, and the criminals fled without a clue, never to be captured, their true identities never revealed.

This was an odd choice of a tale for **Sir Arthur Conan Doyle** to have presented us with. Had Holmes and Watson never gotten involved, quite literally *not a single thing in the story or its outcome would have changed*. Hatherly would have gone to a different doctor, would still have gone to the police, and not a single thing in the story's outcome would have changed.

Not that there aren't interesting elements at play here--*severed thumbs! A man trapped in a hydraulic press, about to be crushed to death! A counterfeiting ring! Foreign intrigue (?)!!* But all of these are presented to us in front-loaded flashback narration, which robs us of all of the potential drama.



When Hatherly is trapped in the press, for example, he is telling his tale to Holmes and Watson--so we already *know* he escaped, which undercuts any tension the scene might have had.

We should also compare this tale with **The Five Orange Pips**, another story that I found underwhelming. When Sherlock never even meets the villains, and has nothing to do with their final fate, we lose a fundamental source of interest--seeing our hero confront the malefactors. Yet even in Pips, for all its weakness, Holmes at least did some detective work to figure out who the perpetrators were (probably), and took steps to ensure their capture. In Engineer's Thumb, we're even denied that. Despite the fact that we know this crew has murdered at least one person, Holmes does *absolutely nothing* to track them down, or even identify them. Essentially, he just shrugs and says, "Well, at least you have a nice story to tell at parties!" Talk about unsatisfying.

It is little wonder that the usual suspects, the **1960s BBC** series and **Granada**, chose to pass on this story. There's very little here, and what little there is of no credit to the series' hero. Yet we're not completely without adaptations here, as the **1954** American series Sherlock Holmes took on Engineer's Thumb.

I haven't spoken about that series yet, mainly because they did very few straight adaptations from the **Canon**. Filmed in France and syndicated in America, the 39-episode series starred **Ronald Howard** (son of **Leslie Howard**) as Holmes and **Howard Crawford** as Watson. With an episode length of only 25 minutes, many of Doyle's stories were simply too long to justice to, so the producers went with mostly original material, while sprinkling in bits and pieces of the Canon here and there. Some of the episodes were "*loosely inspired*" by Doyle's stories, by which they meant they took the basic plot premise and tortured into a shape to fit their production. On the whole, it wasn't a terribly good show.

But their "**The Case Of The Shoeless Engineer**" is perhaps instructive. It's one of only 3 stories they pretty directly adapted. Not that there aren't differences, as the title indicates. While a severed thumb is all well and good for Victorian readers of 1892, it was considered far too gory for American TV viewers in 1955, so they changed it so that Hatherly kept his thumb, but lost his shoe (and almost his foot) in the hydraulic press. Also, **Elise** the helpful (German?) woman changed to **Ruth Connors**, a mute Englishwoman, the niece of one of our crooks. The shock of their ordeal cures her psychological muteness, and she and Hatherly make a nice couple at the end.

But perhaps most important, the show gives Holmes a much more active role in the story. He deduces where the house must be; he deduces that the bad guys haven't escaped, but are hiding in a secret cellar; and, in a clumsy bit of gunplay and fisticuffs, captures our villains. How novel--having our hero actually involved in the story!

I'm not sure why Doyle chose to have Holmes *completely in the background* of the story, or choose a scenario that did so little to display his deductive talents. Perhaps the pressures of putting out the stories on a monthly basis for **The Strand** were causing him to rush a bit. After all, there were issues of potential interest in the story, had he chosen to rework it a bit. When even a show as unambitious as 1954 Sherlock Holmes can improve on your story, there was certainly opportunity to make a stronger tale.

But sadly, as it is, Engineer's Thumb reads as if it were the product of **Colonel Lysander Stark**--a hasty counterfeit.

OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:

** Interestingly enough, the Russians have always seemed fascinated by Sherlock Holmes, and have had a number of movies and TV series dedicated to the character. The 1986 TV movie "**The Adventures of Sherlock Holes And Doctor Watson--The Twentieth Century Approaches**" took on four different stories, including Engineer's Thumb. And like any good Soviet production, this adaptation took a bit of a Marxist bent: our counterfeiters were agents of the German government, attempting economic sabotage of the British Empire.

When they're caught, **Mycroft** declares that, to "*balance the warp to our economy*," England will pump out an equal amount of counterfeit German currency!! Every story is tied in to the economic clashes of capitalist nations!

Hey, at least it's more motive and information about the crooks than Doyle ever gave us in the story...

** When Hatherly frets that he won't be paid his promised £50, my first thought was, "*Idiot--even if they did pay you, it would have been counterfeit!*" I mean, come on now!!

** Hatherly, "having also come into a fair sum of money through [his] poor father's death," is the latest in a line of characters who don't actually have to work, thanks to bequests. **Mary Sutherland**, the **Stoner** twins, **John Openshaw**...was that really that common in those days? Or was it just the class of people Doyle moved in, and thus put into his stories?

It's a good thing Hatherly had his inheritance--having earned only £27 over two years, he pretty clearly wasn't go to earn a living running his own hydraulic engineering business...

** A particularly *horrifying scene*, as Hatherly has to decide how he will meet the descending ceiling inside the press:

Then it flashed through my mind that the pain of my death would depend very much upon the position in which I met it. If I lay on my face the weight would come upon my spine, and I shuddered to

think of that dreadful snap. Easier the other way, perhaps; and yet, had I the nerve to lie and look up at that deadly black shadow wavering down upon me?

See, with keen observations like that, it should have been a much better story. Sadly, no.

** Great moments in bad decisions:

Was there a police-station anywhere near? There was one about three miles off. "It was too far for me to go, weak and ill as I was. I determined to wait until I got back to town before telling my story to the police.

Granted, Hatherly was doubtless weak and disoriented due to blood loss and trauma. But the "wait until after I take a long train ride home to notify the police" was silly. No doubt that was responsible for giving the villains more than ample time to get away.

Of course, Hatherly hadn't made a *single* good decision the entire story, why start now? Tries to start his own business; accepts a clearly dubious offer for the money; turns down a perfectly good chance to escape; decides to get lippy with the obvious crooks, resulting in their trying to kill him; going home first before contacting the police...if Hatherly makes even one intelligent decision anywhere along the line, it's a very different story.

** Holmes reads from the year-old newspaper ad: "*Listen to this: 'Lost, on the 9th inst., Mr. Jeremiah Hayling, aged twenty-six, a hydraulic engineer. Left his lodgings at ten o'clock at night, and has not been heard of since. Was dressed in, ' etc., etc.'*"

It's clear that this gang has killed before, even if we hadn't already inferred that. So why no desire by Holmes to track them down after they flee?

** I did enjoy the station-master describing the fat suspect and the skinny suspect: "there isn't a man in the parish who has a better-lined waistcoat. But he has a gentleman staying with him, a patient, as I understand, who is a foreigner, and he looks as if a little good Berkshire beef would do him no harm." Wonderful understated colloquialism.

** The theory that Hatherly's oil lamp, crushed in the press (it was a candle in the 1954 TV version), somehow set the fire is odd. If true, given the timing (the fire would have started at 1am-ish, and the fire wasn't "subdued" until sunset that night), the house burned for 16-20 hours. That's a pretty long time for a house to burn. Given the unlikelihood that oil lamp could have started the fire like that, it seems more likely that Stark and company set the fire to cover their tracks when they decided that flight was required.

** The closing scene: Hatherly laments. "I have lost my thumb and I have lost a fifty-guinea fee, and what have I gained?"

The reply? "Experience," said Holmes, laughing. "Indirectly it may be of value, you know; you have only to put it into words to gain the reputation of being excellent company for the remainder of your existence." Man, I would have *smacked* Holmes there, myself.

The bad guys got away unscathed, doubtless to set up the counterfeiting ring again, and continue murdering people who got in their way.

Hardly time for the jocular sit-com fade out...

Brian Keith Snell

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