

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 XIII -- The Adventure of the Beryl Coronet

The Rich Are Different. Royalty? Even Differenter

OK, here's a little test for you all. This week, I'd like you all to go into the most respected bank in your community, and tell them you'd like to borrow \$6 million, and promise that you'll repay it on Monday.

Didn't work? OK, show them the most valuable thing that you've taken from your workplace, even though it doesn't technically belong to you, and offer it up as collateral. And make sure that you insist on complete secrecy.

Still didn't work? That's odd; it worked just fine in **The Adventure Of The Beryl Coronet...**

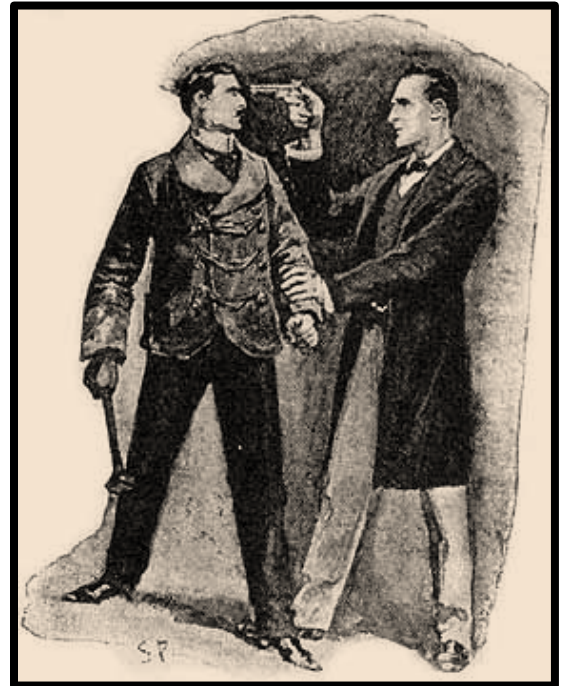
Actually, in *one* case it works, and in one case it fails. **Arthur Conan Doyle** has presented us with an interesting compare and contrast in this story.

The honorable **Alexander Holder**, senior partner in the "*second largest private banking concern*," has two problems.

His son, **Arthur**, is a "*grievous disappointment*," "*wild and wayward*," a gambler at cards at horses, who is constantly asking for money to settle his debts.

Meanwhile, a new client at the bank--"*one of the highest, noblest, most exalted names*"--needs **£50,000**--in cash--for reasons he will not reveal, and he has refused to approach friends or family in this matter.

Arthur needs **£200** pounds to settle gambling debts, lest he be dishonored. Holder refuses, and vows to not let Arthur have a farthing (a quarter of a penny!) Yet when the noble client wants £50,000 (the modern equivalent of roughly *\$6 million!*), Holder is so eager to help, he avers that he would have loaned it "*from his own purse*," if he only had enough funds of his own!!



Arthur vows to find other means to raise the money; yet not only does he *not* steal, he actively tries to prevent others from stealing from his father. Meanwhile, the noble client takes, without permission and likely without any legal right, "*one of the most precious public possessions of the empire*," and is willing to essentially pawn it for a few days financial convenience. Depending on how you view the various legalities involved, the noble client is willing to steal from his family (and his subjects) to settle his debts.

To make things crystal clear, let's acknowledge something that would have been quite obvious to contemporary readers: the "noble client" is almost unquestionably based on Albert Edward, then Prince of Wales and heir apparent to the British throne. Albert had quite the reputation as a "*Prince Hal*," widely reputed to have had innumerable affairs, and living the life of what we would call a playboy (and no, not the **Bruce Wayne** kind). Less than a year before *Beryl Coronet* was published, Albert was tangentially embroiled in a very public illegal gambling scandal, and forced to testify in court about the affair.

So when the Victorian audience read about the "*noble client*" asking for an immense loan, with honor leaving him unable to turn to friends or family, and willing to risk unimaginable "public scandal" by putting up a national treasure as collateral, they could hardly help but think of their *wastrel* Prince and the sordid activities he had been involved in (both confirmed and rumored). Why could he so urgently need £50,000, that it couldn't wait 4 days (when he was expecting a "large sum due him")? Gambling debts? Blackmail over one of his peccadilloes? A ***** child, perhaps? To prevent yet another public and embarrassing court action? To help cover up his son's role in the **Jack The Ripper** murders? Certainly, it couldn't be anything good and innocent, right?

So we have two characters in very much the *same* situation, in need of immediate capital to avoid scandal. Holder's own son needs a (relative) pittance, and is practically disowned. The noble client? Holder is willing to fall all over himself to help him avoid scandal, *brown-nosing* the royal and practically promising to loan the vastly larger sum himself, no questions asked. Arthur refuses to resort to stealing, yet is still rebuked and mistrusted by his father; yet when the noble client is willing to fence the crown jewels, Holder falls all over himself to help.

I think Doyle meant this as a bit of social criticism, a note that *genteel* society was perhaps too willing to bend over backwards to accommodate the whims and sins of the royal class, while not extending the same largesse to even their own families. The public was continuing to fund the prince's playboy lifestyle while rebuking their own children enjoying the same activities. What was the point of following Victorian morality, after all, if it didn't even extend to Victoria's own family? How could people be more worried whether "the noblest in the land will suffer" than they are about their own family?

Or maybe that's just me imposing my 21st century democratic viewpoint upon a harmless 19th century story.

OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:

** Despite **Holmes'** declaration last week in **The Noble Bachelor** that he finds cases of humble origins much more interesting than those that come from the social elite, **Watson** clearly has a preference for choosing the more socially elite.

Let's inventory: **Study In Scarlet**--Holmes brought in by police. **Sign Of Four**--**Mary Morstan**, a governess. **Scandal In Bohemia**--hired by the **King of Bohemia**. **Red-Headed League**--hired by a pawnshop owner.

Case of Identity--**Mary Sutherland**, who could live off of her bequest if she chose. **Boscombe Valley Mystery**--who hired Holmes wasn't precisely clear; if it wasn't the police, it was the daughter of the area's largest land-holder. **Five Orange Pips**--A wealthy heir. **Man With The Twisted Lip**--the wife of a well-to-do investor (or so she thinks). **The Blue Carbuncle**--no one hires Holmes precisely, but the case (and the goose) is brought to Holmes by the honest commissionaire. **The Speckled Band**--an heiress. **The Engineer's Thumb**--a man who could, if he chose, live off his inheritance. **The Noble Bachelor**? A Lord of the realm, son of a Duke. And in this tale, it was the senior partner in the 2nd largest bank in London.

There's not a lot of cases of "*humble origins*" there--Sign Of Four, Red-Headed League, and the Blue Carbuncle are the only ones that can be considered coming from the working class, depending on your definition. And certainly nothing from what we might consider the "lower" classes.

That doesn't mean Holmes *didn't* have many more such cases--these are just the one that Watson chose to publish. No wonder Sherlock is always so cranky about how the good doctor writes up his cases, as John Watson seems irresistibly drawn to ones that come from money, and are therefore the ones that the great detective considers less interesting...

****Mary Holder** is quite a piece of work.

Even if we accept Holmes' bromide that "*there are women in whom the love of a lover extinguishes all other loves*," Mary's actions go beyond the pale.

Not only does she betray the trust of her uncle/adoptive father, but she does so even *after* he warns her of how ruinous the consequences of losing the coronet might be. In she so enamored of the blackguard **Sir George Burnwell** that she will not only immediately get word to him of the immense treasure they're holding there, but also steal it for him?

She seems concerned about Arthur's well-being--she repeatedly begs Holder to see him released--but takes absolutely *no* steps to help him out. Even when she leaves the household for good, she doesn't leave any kind of confession that would aid in freeing him.

Her farewell letter is a case study in failing to take responsibility (or even understand?) her role in the looming destruction of her family: "*I feel that I have brought trouble upon you, and that if I had acted differently this terrible misfortune might never have occurred.*" She *feels* that she's caused trouble? This *might* not have occurred if she had had'n't, you know, stolen the coronet? Talk about deflection!

Mary's continued insistence that everything will be just fine if Holder only "*lets the matter drop*" shows that she is completely unable to appreciate the consequences of her actions. (Also, that she is perhaps unaware that her beau has *already* fenced the stones?) Is she besotted with love? An idiot? Or a *sociopath*? Given that there is no way Burnwell could have known that the coronet was at **Fairbank** other than for Mary to have told him, I'm leaning to the last of those options.

** Although this was written in **1892**, Doyle--through Holder's words--gives us a lesson in what banking actually is that apparently still needs to be taught to many in the financial world more than a century later:

...in a successful banking business as much depends upon our being able to find remunerative investments for our funds as upon our increasing our connection and the number of our depositors. One of our most lucrative means of laying out money is in the shape of loans, where the security is unimpeachable.

Hey, he forgot to mention foisting derivatives based on ludicrously-unsafe mortgage-backed securities! "*Unimpeachable security*"?!? Oh, how quaint!! Pump out those unsafe loans, baby, and then sell them to someone else! Not your problem anymore...

** Holder had his cashier give the noble client "*fifty 1,000 pound notes.*"

This is a further indication that his debt was probably *somewhat illicit*--he owed someone who would only take cash?

Than again, I imagine that £1,000 notes weren't all that disposable as currency--how many places could make change for one?--except as a bank deposit, perhaps. That probably makes the transaction a bit traceable, and not as covert as the parties might want...

** Many of Doyle's short stories present a *challenge* for TV adaptation.

Most of the tales start with a client showing up at **Baker Street**, narrating their experience while Holmes interjects a question or two.

That can be a bit *static* for the beginning of a television episode, so often, we're treated to a presentation of the crime/mystery, and then they'll show us the client arriving at 221B.

This presents its own set of problems, of course. In the case of the **BBC '65** adaptation, that means that Holmes and Watson don't appear on screen until *20 minutes* into a 48 minute show.

I think it would be wiser to show the events as the client narrates them, intercutting back to Baker Street occasionally for questions/comments. But it is an interesting problem, with no easy answer...

** One minor adjustment the BBC '65 version made that I liked was that the noble client *himself* brought the coronet to Fairbank, and Holder gave him the money there--all the better to keep the transaction on the down-low.

That makes sense...but then again, if Holder kept *£50,000* in cash laying around, why didn't Mary steal that earlier? Or maybe that was the plan, and then she saw that the coronet was there...

** One other thing from the BBC '65 version--perhaps this is just me reading too much into it, but we do see Arthur gambling (badly) at his club. And I had the distinct impression that Sir George Burnwell was *egging* on Arthur a bit, trying to encourage his wild losses. Was Sir George trying to make Arthur broke, so he would be a suspect in the robbery? Or perhaps put Arthur so deeply in debt that he'd be tempted to help out Burnwell in his scheme?

It's probably not really there, but if it is--what a *blackguard*, trying to corrupt an entire family...

** I really was curious about one aspect of the story. The noble client warned Holder that "*Any injury (to the coronet) would be almost as serious as it's complete loss.*" Oops.

So yes, I wanted to see the noble client's reaction. He couldn't get too publicly indignant, after all--the whole transaction had to remain secret. And it wouldn't prove to difficult to find a jeweler who could repair the coronet, and with the right incentive, secretly.

Still, would the noble client use this as an excuse to not pay interest on the payday loan, or even the full principle? "I'm taking the cost of repairs out of what I owe you, also, a penalty for your idiocy!" Given the need by both sides to avoid scandal, the negotiations on this point would have been very interesting.

Also, exactly how much interest was Holder planning to charge for a 4 day loan of *£50,000*? We never find out...

** It's noted more than once that, in the middle of the night, Arthur was dressed "*only*" in "his shirt and trousers."

Apparently, Victorians were supposed to remain fully dressed even in bed? Seriously, that's much less than I where around the house most nights...

** This is the *second* time that Holmes has believed the accused to be innocent because "*if he were guilty, why didn't he invent a lie*" (or at least a better lie)--see also [The Boscombe Valley Mystery](#).

That's not a completely irrational basis for a hunch, I suppose. But then again, as these cases were being *published* by Watson, I would imagine that would of this position of Holmes' circulated fairly quickly amongst the wrong element: "*Oi, if you're caught, just refuse to explain the full facts, and 'Olmes 'imself will believe you!*"

As to Arthur's stubborn silence, especially as half of it was to protect the woman who was willing to destroy his family and to let him personally rot in prison...what a schmuck.

** Holmes: "*I am exceptionally strong in the fingers...*"

Must be all that violin playing?

Some of you have dirty minds...

** Holmes' confrontation with Burnwell proves one thing:

Don't bring a club to a gun fight!

** Burnwell wasn't a particularly *smart* thief, when it came to fencing his stolen goods. He fenced the 3 beryls he had for £600. As that was only 1/13th of the gemstones in the coronet, that means he would have fenced the whole thing for £78,000. Even adding in for the gold work and the increased value of an intact headpiece, he was willing to part with a treasure worth at least double the £50,000 (according to the noble client), for less than \$10,000. And if Mary had told him the story of its origin, well, he should have known that it could have been worth that much without even fencing it, by blackmail?

**Sir George and Mary are really going to have a great life together, eh?

Brian Keith Snell

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