

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 XIV -- The Adventure of the Copper Beeches

Detective Dunsel!

There is a danger, when writing a series of adventure stories about a character, that the author so gets caught in the presenting the heroes opinions and mannerisms, that she forgets to have the character *actually do anything* in the story. Oh, there character is there, and opines, and takes a train ride, occasionally runs up and down corridors and such...but they have absolutely *no* interaction with the plot or it's outcome. The author has forgot to have them impact on the events, so the resolution would have been 100% the same had our hero *never* been involved (See, for example, the **Doctor Who** episode **The Planet Of The Ood**).

Which brings us to **The Adventure Of The Copper Beeches**.

It is ironic, but surely not intentionally so, that in a story in which **Arthur Conan Doyle** has **Holmes** spend the first few pages complaining that **Watson's** storytelling focuses on the trivial while ignoring logic and deduction, Doyle then proceeds to give us a story were deduction and logic play *no part whatsoever* in the resolution. perhaps it is Watson's revenge...

We spend a lot of time with Holmes in Copper Beeches, and he says an awful lot of clever things. There's a train trip to the country, a grand Gothic mystery with odd servants and frightened governesses and mysterious watchers, there are dog attacks and secret plans...yet all of that merely distracts us from the fact that had Holmes *not* showed up, *the resolution would have been exactly the same* (save, perhaps, that **Rucastle** might not have been mauled by the dog).



Had **Miss Violet Hunter** never come to consult Holmes, she would have still had taken the job--her "*mind was made up that she would accept it.*" Had Holmes never gone up to the Copper Beeches, events would have transpired in exactly the same manner: **Mr. Fowler** had *already* bribed **Mrs. Toller** to get her husband drunk and have a ladder ready--they knew nothing of Holmes' interest in the case, nor of his impending visit.

Had Holmes never gotten involved, **Alice Rucastle** would have escaped at the exact same day and time, she and Fowler would still have been wed the next day, and they would still be living in **Mauritius**.

One could argue that, had Holmes and Watson not gone to Copper Beeches, Rucastle wouldn't have found strangers in the house at the same time he found Alice escaped, and therefore he *might* not have unleashed the mastiff. So, you could suggest that the villain only received his just desserts because of the detective's presence.

But the damsel would have been rescued without Holmes' involvement. And he displays *no* great feats of deduction--prior to his journey to the estate, he has merely narrowed down to "seven separate explanations" for the curious facts of the case. And he only arrives at the correct solutions after Violet Hunter has told her fortnight's experience, and she herself had already come to the same conclusion.

Copper Beeches certainly isn't a bad Sherlock Holmes story, or a boring one. It's a grand Gothic melodrama, and we do learn a fair bit about Holmes in the story. But for all the good bits, Doyle neglected to make Holmes *necessary* to the story, which diminished its impact quite a bit.

I think there's a lesson there for aspiring writers--it's not enough to have your hero *present* in the story--you got to remember to make his participation crucial to the outcome, or why even bother to have him there?

OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:

** This story does contain my *favorite* piece of prose from Doyle, as our heroes take a train through the bucolic countryside, and Watson waxes poetic about how lovely it is. Holmes does not agree:

"Do you know, Watson," said he, "that it is one of the curses of a mind with a turn like mine that I must look at everything with reference to my own special subject. You look at these scattered houses, and you are impressed by their beauty. I look at them, and the only thought which comes to me is a feeling of their isolation and of the impunity with which crime may be committed there."

"Good heavens!" I cried. "Who would associate crime with these dear old homesteads?"

"They always fill me with a certain horror. It is my belief, Watson, founded upon my experience, that the lowest and vilest alleys in London do not present a more dreadful record of sin than does the smiling and beautiful countryside."

"You horrify me!"

"But the reason is very obvious. The pressure of public opinion can do in the town what the law cannot accomplish. There is no lane so vile that the scream of a tortured child, or the thud of a drunkard's blow, does not beget sympathy and indignation among the neighbours, and then the whole machinery of justice is ever so close that a word of complaint can set it going, and there is but a step between the crime and the dock. But look at these lonely houses, each in its own fields, filled for the most part with poor ignorant folk who know little of the law. Think of the deeds of heinous cruelty, the hidden wickedness which may go on, year in, year out, in such places, and none the wiser.

Had this lady who appeals to us for help gone to live in Winchester, I should never have had a fear for her. It is the five miles of country which makes the danger.

It's a wonderful bit, emphasizing how *obsessed* Holmes is with his chosen field, so much so that he can't ignore it even to enjoy the scenery.

Of course, the question is, how *true* it might be. In **1892**, the average London reader would still have the **Jack The Ripper** murders very fresh in his mind, which at the very least showed that the "*pressure of public opinion*" and "*indignation among the neighbours*" weren't the great preventative to vile crimes that Holmes thought they were.

Of course, on a very general level, Holmes has a point--whereas densely populated cities get the rap of being crime-infested, *plenty* of bad stuff goes on in rural areas. But claiming the countryside had "*a more dreadful record of sin*" is simply silly and argumentative.

** Not to accuse Sir Arthur of *overusing* a plot, but in the 12 stories in the Adventures collection, this is the **3rd** which revolves around a young woman's family going to extreme lengths to prevent her from marrying, so that they can control her inheritance.

Even as a recognition of the difficulties and pressures single women faced in Victorian times, that's a little much. Surely there are *other* plot devices that could be used to illustrate the point, without the repetition.

Then again, maybe in the 1890s, ladies being *catfished/murdered/imprisoned* by their parents or step-parents to keep them from marrying was a social epidemic...

** Meanwhile, the biggest question is--*why the heck isn't Jephro Rucastle in jail?* Or his wife?

I'm no scholar of the era's laws, but I would have to believe that imprisoning an adult woman against her will until she signs over her wealth to you was a felony--perhaps *multiple* felonies--and hiring a look-alike to cover up your deed proves that Rucastle believed it would be actionable if the authorities became involved. And since it wouldn't make a lot of sense to free Alice if she ever did relent and sign, one can't help but wonder if *murder* wasn't in the offing, as well.

(Note--this is why Holmes certainly should have stepped in to expose **Windibank** in **A Case Of Identity**, or at least alert **Mary Sutherland** to his cruel schemes. That cad was only a few steps away from replicating Jephro Rucastle's crimes, it seems.)

Granted, Rucastle was "*horribly mangled*" by his own pet, and lived the rest of his life "*a broken man, kept alive solely through the care of his devoted wife.*" But is that *really* punishment enough? Shouldn't the law get involved?

And **Mrs. Rucastle** was at least an *accomplice* in the kidnapping/extortion--why shouldn't she be turned over to the authorities?

Yet Alice and Fowler did take off immediately, getting married and leaving the country. So perhaps they weren't interested in pressing charges, and just wanted to get on with their lives. And without Alice available, it might have been impossible to prove a case--neither Holmes nor Watson nor Violet Hunter ever so much as *set eyes* on Alice, or heard her voice.

Their testimony alone couldn't even prove she existed, let alone that she was being held under duress. So, perhaps without Alice's cooperation, there was no point in going to the authorities...

** How large was Alice Rucastle's inheritance? If Jephro is willing to spend **£120** per year to access it, than clearly it was *much greater* than that, or else the whole ruse isn't financially worth it. (For what it's worth, the **BBC '64** version stipulates that Alice's mother's estate was £180,000, 80% of which went to Alice.)

Of course, it's also possible that Jephro Rucastle had no intention of *fulfilling* that salary, and once Fowler was successfully fooled, he would fire Violet--*or worse*...

** Does *every individual house* have a name in England? Seriously, every time Holmes and Watson travel outside of London, they end up at Copper Beeches or **Fairbank** or **The Cedars** or **Pondicherry Lodge** or...I'm just saying, *I've* never lived in a house with it's own name. Must be an English thing...

** One of the more annoying things about a lot of Holmes commentary is the fact that *every* time a woman who is not a complete ninny turns up, everyone decides that she is really after Holmes romantically, or he after her. One compliment from the detective, it seems, is enough to make everyone see sparks flying, despite what Watson wrote about in **Scandal In Bohemia** about there being "*but one woman.*"

It might be forgivable in this case, though, as Watson *himself* seems to be trying to play matchmaker between Holmes and Violet Hunter. Despite several compliments that Holmes pays to Miss Hunter during the case, Watson confesses disappointment that Holmes doesn't pursue her romantically.

** An innocent phrase also sets off a torrent of commentator speculation. When Holmes says, "*I confess that it is not the situation which I should like to see a sister of mine apply for,*" it seems to me to be *clearly* a hypothetical statement.

Yet it has launched countless discussions as to whether it indicates that Holmes does have a sister or not.

Some have even gone so far as to claim that this statement shows that Violet Hunter *herself* is Holmes' sister, or perhaps half-sister.

Now, you would think that Holmes or Watson or Hunter would have at least *mentioned* it, if that were the case. But never let common sense deter fanboy speculation. In **Robert Schutz's** essay "**Half-Sister; No Mystery**" (as cited in the original **Annotated Sherlock Holmes**), he declares, "There is no direct evidence to contradict the assumption that Holmes' mother married a Mr. Hunter after the death of Sherlock's father, and gave birth to a daughter named Violet, twelve years after the birth of Sherlock."

Well, true. But there is *also* no direct evidence to contradict the assumption that Violet Hunter is a **Terminator** sent from the future to kill **John Conner's** great-great grandfather. Which is what you get when you make nutty assumptions without a shred of evidence in the first place..

** Holmes takes a very clear stand on nature vs. nurture when it comes to children's behavior: "I have frequently gained my first real insight into the character of parents by studying their children. This child's disposition is abnormally cruel, merely for cruelty's sake, and whether he derives this from his smiling father, as I should suspect, or from his mother, it bodes evil for the poor girl who is in their power."

So, *nurture*, then.

Given Miss Hunter's description ("Giving pain to any creature weaker than himself seems to be his one idea of amusement, and he shows quite remarkable talent in planning the capture of mice, little birds, and insects."), the young Rucastle sure seems like a *serial killer* waiting to happen...

** Things I learned: the use of the term "*electric blue*" as a dress color felt *anachronistic* to me when I heard it in the adaptations. After all, electricity was hardly an everyday phenomenon yet in 1892.

But Doyle himself used it in the story, and Wikipedia tells me that "the first recorded use of electric blue as a color name was in **1884**," and that "the color was in vogue in the **1890s**."

Arthur Conan Doyle: *fashionista!*

** Was saving a lady's cut hair a *thing* in Victorian times? As a modern dude, Alice's shorn locks being saved and found by Violet, who also had an "identical" rope of hair, strikes me as a tad too contrived and coincidental.

Of course, women *did* often sell their hair to wigmakers back in the day. And I suppose there was, I don't know, sentimental value? Why else pack it and bring it to your new home?

And perhaps the Rucastle's had envisioned using Alice's hair a part of some other deception...

** The **Granada** adaptation "*introduces*" **Natasha Richardson**. It's not her first role, but it is her first major part, and boy, is she *pretty*:

Joss Ackland plays the evil Rucastle, which gives him a *unique* distinction: he's the only person to play a **Sherlock Holmes** villain, a **Lethal Weapon** villain, *and* a **Bill & Ted** villain.

Yes, I'm a loser.

** The idea for this story apparently came from Doyle's mother, as she wrote him that his next story should include a girl with "*beautiful golden hair: who kidnapped and her hair shorn should be made to impersonate some other girl for a villainous purpose.*"

You *go*, Mrs. Doyle!

** Before they arrive at Copper Beeches, Holmes has "*seven* separate explanations, each of which can cover the facts as far as we know them."

We know two of them. At the first meeting, Violet suggests that Mrs. Rucastle is a *lunatic*, and he humors her to keep her from being put away (a solution Holmes says is the "*most probable*"). And then there is the correct solution: She's being hired to impersonate someone who is being held under duress.

Well, what are the *other 5* explanations? BBC '64 has Watson suggest one: that the mysterious watcher (Fowler) is a villain who means Alice harm, and Violet's impersonation is to protect her.

OK, so what are the *other 4*?

** Poor Holmes. He complains, "the days of the great cases are past. Man, or at least criminal man, has lost all enterprise and originality."

Dude, be *careful* of what you wish for!! Moriarty is in the offing!

Brian Keith Snell

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