

## *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 Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes Adventure XIX -- The Adventure of the Gloria Scott

## The Gloria Scott--Sherlock Holmes And The Phantom Menace?

Prequels...there's *always* got to be prequels...

It's inevitable, of course. Create characters compelling enough, and the audience will want to know about them, and especially their earlier history. How did they get to be the way they were? What events shaped them, who influenced them? *"Tell us more, tell us more!"*

Of course, the catch is, we've already begun to fill in this information ourselves, in our imaginations (if not our fanfics). So, all too often, when we finally do get *"official"* prequels, they seem all too dissatisfying to us. Which is, in part, our *own \*\*\*\* fault* for demanding them, I guess.

There are, in my opinion, three main reasons that prequels disappoint:

A) Lack of suspense. Obviously, we know our hero survives, so on a gut level we know that any danger is just manufactured rigamarole. Of course, that's true for our heroes set in the present day—we know that **James Bond** isn't going to die this movie—but surprises can still happen (**M** can die!! *Shh*, spoiler alert!) So an air of inevitability, of treading water, can set in.

B) To much *demythologizing*. As long as we can speculate about our hero's origin's we can be vague and grandiose. When it's actually put on paper or film, it becomes, *"meh,"* because it can never live up to what we imagined. Of course **Darth Vader** was a whiny kid when he was a whiny kid. What did we really expect? And we already knew that the **Jedi** and the **Republic** fell to the **Sith**—so how can we be upset that our erstwhile heroes come off like a bunch of senile idiots who are manipulated for decades?



How else could have a two-man operation pull off such a coup? But by showing our villains used to be less villainous and our heroes less able, prequels can end up *disappointing* us.

C) *The same old same old*. Sometime a prequel doesn't really do anything except change the geography and the cast of characters. **Superboy** was billed as "the adventures of **Superman** as a boy," and it turned out there really wasn't a heck of a lot of difference between that and his adventures as a man. Sure, he was in **Smallville**, and in high school, but he still had the love interest constantly trying to expose his secret identity, he still battled **Luthor** and aliens and crooks, he still had a secret hideout and robots to cover for him and...Nothing against Superboy, but perhaps the proper approach for the concept would have been "the adventures of Superman before he was competent." Hey, he was a teenager with the power to juggle planets—surely he could disastrously screw up (as we all did at that age). And in fairness, some—albeit relatively few—did that. Bit all too often, it was just the adventures of the same guy we knew when he wore a smaller sized super suit.

Which brings us to **The Gloria Scott**.

Because I think that most readers would agree with me that, well, it's a little bit disappointing.

It's **Sherlock Holmes'** "*first case!*" OMG!! That has to be fascinating, important, exciting, right?

Well...*meh*.

The Gloria Scott avoids the first problem of prequels, the lack of suspense. We've been given very little of Holmes' pre-**Watson** life, so there's not much continuity to have us know what's going to happen already (There's also not much continuity to callously violate—yet somehow **Young Sherlock Holmes** happened!).

But on the other hand, we do hit upon the other problems. We imagined something *bolder* for the instigating event that pushed Sherlock towards being a detective. Instead, he does the standard "well, I can't really tell much about you" followed by a lengthy chain of deductions that we've seen Holmes do dozens of times, followed by, "Hey, you really ought to be a detective!"

Now, it's difficult to imagine that no one had told this to Sherlock before, or that he hadn't realized this himself.

But more importantly, we wanted something more *myth-making*, more life-changing: Sherlock lays out some deductions that save someone from dying! Sherlock experiences for the first time the authorities being unwilling/unable to help someone, and realizes that there's a role for his skills in this world! It's what modern storytelling has trained us for: *an instigating event* that changes everything, and sets him on his course, forever changed!! Something makes him the way he is!! Some destiny-making *epiphany!* We want drama!!!

Yes, that's mainly our own \*\*\*\* fault, for setting expectations so high. But really, we did want something with the *teensiest* more heft than "Hey, you could be a detective." "Oh, I guess."

And of course, there's the problem of the same old same old. The mystery we have here is really just a remix of **The Boscombe Valley Mystery**: criminal acts lead to a man getting rich in Australia, coming to England to establish a new life for himself, someone from his past shows up to blackmail him. (Seriously, Australia is nothing but trouble, according to Sherlock Holmes)

And really, Sherlock doesn't do a \*\*\*\* thing to "solve" the "mystery." **Victor's** left him the full account of his past, and told the doctor to tell Victor where to find it. **Beddoes** and **Hudson** were never found—we don't know if one or both are alive, or where they've gone to, or anything. Really, *all* Sherlock does is decrypt the cypher...which the elder Trevor had done already, scrawled at the bottom of his confession. Everything would have turned out *exactly the same* had Sherlock never come into Victor's life!!

So maybe that's why he chose to become a consulting detective—his "first case" made the gig look pretty easy!

We shouldn't blame **Sir Arthur Conan Doyle** for not having our century-plus of hindsight about what we want as an origin story. He's not responsible for our out of whack expectations. But still, The Gloria Scott is a bit disappointing.

#### **FURTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:**

\*\*People tend to forget about the obviously brief "*present day*" sections of the story. But we shouldn't forget the fairly remarkable fact that Sherlock, without prompting, volunteers this tale to Watson, and essentially encourages him to publish the tale!!

It does seem a bit *unlike* the Holmes we know. I usually don't play the "dating" game, but I could speculate that perhaps this took place right before **The Final Problem**, and Holmes was trying to give all of his stories to Watson before he faced what he thought might be his death.

Or perhaps Holmes hadn't given up on finding Beddoes and Hudson, and thought that if the tale was published, it might flush them out?

\*\*Of course, this is one of the tales where we get a (*very*) brief glimpse of Holmes' college days. And everyone tries to use the (*very*) little information we have to vigorously debate whether Holmes attended **Oxford** or **Cambridge** (or both, or neither, or...).

As an American with essentially zero knowledge of these institutions, I really have nothing of value to add to this debate. It's fun to watch people argue themselves silly, however.

\*\*Your bull terrier biting onto Holmes ankle is a pretty good *meet-cute* for two friends (although Holmes was laid up for *ten days*, so **OUCH**).

But, could Holmes have made other friends? Sure, he was "*never a very sociable fellow.*" But just the meager interaction of going to visit the injured Holmes made them "close friends," even though he was "the very opposite to [Sherlock] in most respects." And obviously, the same happened with Watson--aloof at first, but living together lead to the being fast companions.

So Sherlock certainly was capable of forming friendships, once he got past the initial barrier of letting them into his life. Perhaps he should have had more "*happy accidents*" like this, so he could expand his social circle just a bit. So long as they didn't involve dogs maiming him...

\*\*Holmes was on his way to chapel when Trevor's dog attacked him. Services were likely required of students then, and perhaps he had other business there. This may, however, be the one instance in the **Canon** of Holmes attending a house of worship outside of an investigation...

\*\*Holmes initially describes how the mysterious note "*knocked clean down*" a "*fine, robust old man.*" Really? Because very soon we see him passing out from fright at one of Holmes' innocent deductions, and learn that he has a bad heart, and "it does not take much to knock me over." After always accusing Watson of playing up the melodrama, Holmes himself sure is putting the *hard sell* on the power of the letter...

\*\*Obviously Hudson kept up with life as a sailor. But why did it take him *thirty years* to come seek "payment" for his knowledge? If it was because he didn't know Trevor & Beddoes' new identities, how did he find them out?

\*\*Hudson sinisterly says that he knows where "**all** his old friends are." Are there *more* survivors than just Trevor & Beddoes out there?

\*\*For what it's worth, Hudson's "*blackmail*" is pretty weak sauce. He wants *a job? As a butler?* If insulted, he'll just go to the next victim?

Of course, he was one of the sailors who took money to *mutiny* and *murder*, so he's facing just as dire a consequence if the truth comes out as are Trevor & Beddoes, right? So he probably knew that if he pushed too hard, he'd be rebuffed, or face the gallows himself.

\*\*Why send the message to Trevor in a cypher, anyway? Did he fear his mail was being read? If it really was so urgent, why go to the trouble of encoding it? Who's going to know? Why waste the time, instead of just writing "*flee for your life,*" stuffing it in an envelope, and going?

I suppose if you were caught, you wouldn't want to leave a open confession like that for the police to find, and seal your fate.

And maybe they sent lots of messages back and forth: "*Hey, remember how we murdered all those soldiers and sailors and made ourselves rich? Great times!*"

Obviously, the "*real*" reason cypher is there to give the case it's macabre twist, and to give Holmes something to actually do.

\*\*This story makes the same mistake as **Study In Scarlet**--a *loooooong* lump of exposition *at the end*. It's an interesting tale, no doubt, but it's still a flashback inside of another flashback, and sucks the energy out of the narrative.

\*\*Hey, look--financiers guilty of financial shenanigans arrested, convicted, and harshly punished!! *How novel!*

Of course, all these sultans of high finance turned out to be murderous thugs, so...

\*\*Trevor's tale is quite graphic and bloody: "Bloody he lay with his brains smeared over the chart of the Atlantic which was pinned upon the table, while the chaplain stood with a smoking pistol in his hand at his elbow." "Wilson and eight others were wriggling on the top of each other on the floor, and the blood and the brown sherry on that table turn me sick now when I think of it." Rough stuff, Sir Arthur.

\*\*The "*well, we only murdered a few, we didn't slaughter everybody*" defense is hardly ennobling. And as in Boscombe Valley, the "*woe is me because I murdered people, struck it rich, and now have to live this terrible upper class lifestyle, and oh, I fear being found out*" whining of our "victims" is not at all sympathetic. If Trevor (or **Turner**) had expressed even the slightest remorse for their victims, maybe we could feel for their anguish. But they have no problems justifying their multiple murders to themselves, and trying to shift the listeners'/readers' ire to their blackmailers. Sorry, guys, but I can despise both groups.

\*\*Starting a new life on an Indian tea plantation is as good an exile as any, I guess. Did Victor ever finish school? Is he still in contact with Holmes? Perhaps Holmes went to visit him during his post-"death" wanderings...

\*\*I know I complained about it above, but I just wanted to emphasize the story's annoying lack of resolution. We know that Hudson didn't actually "*tell all*," because no complaint had ever been lodged with the police (and Hudson himself faced the gallows if he did!). But Beddoes and Hudson we never seen again.

So why did Beddoes think that Hudson had squealed? And what happened? Did Hudson kill Beddoes? Why? If so, where is he? Or did Beddoes kill Hudson, as Holmes thought? Why? Where's the body? Where did he go?

All in all, not really an auspicious debut for Holmes' detective career.

**Brian Keith Snell**

**October 19, 2014**