

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 XXIV -- The Adventure of the Greek Interpreter

The Greek Interpreter--The Elephant In The Room?

Throughout the **Memoirs**, **Watson** frequently started of the stories with an explanation of how he came to pick that week's particular case to publish.

But not this time. Any consideration of the mystery is forgotten, as Watson's introduction is essentially, "*Hey!! Sherlock Holmes just told me something about his family!!!*"

Which is essentially the problem I'm having in deciding what to write about **The Greek Interpreter**.

I didn't want to make the lead essay here about **Mycroft**. I mean, it's been done, right? *Everybody* talks about Mycroft. So, I told myself, I'll just find some angle on the mystery itself to talk about.

Yet I find myself in the same position as Watson. As hard as I try to make the case my focus, I am drawn *inexorably* back to Mycroft.

Why does the character have such a *gravity*? He appeared only twice in the **Canon**, and was mentioned on only two other occasions. Yet it's difficult to find a pastiche, a modernization or an adaptation series that doesn't use him far more frequently than **Sir Arthur Conan Doyle** ever did. Like the **Baker Street**

Irregulars, a few small appearances have been, over the years, transformed into a major part of the Canon that people feel obliged to work into every appearance. For a character whom **Sherlock** never even mentioned to Watson for the first several years of their association, Mycroft Holmes has grown to **mythological** proportions.

Of course, much of that is due to Mycroft's second appearance, where Doyle gives in to temptation and *retcons* Mycroft a bit, greatly expanding on what we were told in Greek Interpreter. But we'll get to that in



a few weeks. For our purposes today, let's look at what it is about this first appearance that so captured the public's imagination.

First, of course, is the acknowledgement that up to this point, Doyle has told us *frightfully* little about Sherlock's past or family. And just like Watson, the audience craves more.

We want to know every tidbit of the upbringing that produced such a *wunderkind* as Sherlock, who his family is--are there more at home like him??

And of course the revelation that he not only has a brother, but one who is *smarter* than he is--well, that inflames the imagination, doesn't it? Even as he tries to temper our expectations--he has "*no ambition and no energy*," he lacks the ability to put his deductions to "*practical*" use, he's chosen another field entirely--still, Mycroft is the ***Man Who Is Smarter Than Sherlock***, and that has an attraction that's irresistible to us.

Yet there is a tendency by many to ignore the *qualifications* on his skills that we are given in this story, and transform Mycroft into a Machiavellian schemer and grand mastermind behind the scenes. Part of that is his government role (as described by Sherlock) in **The Bruce-Partington Plans**. And part of that is our desire for a "*big bad*," the person who is revealed to be the master villain in time for the season-ending showdown. Also present is our desire for "*The Twist*," where we learn that a character we thought we knew is revealed to be something else entirely. And so we ruin everything, imposing modern storytelling expectations on a 120 year old story.

I kid about the "*ruin*" part. Yet there are plenty of commentators, past and present, who insist that Mycroft had some secret plan going on in the Greek Interpreter. He was either involved, or covering something up; he was working either for the Government, or for **Moriarty**; dammit, he was up to something!!

Let's all calm down a bit. First and foremost, if Mycroft was involved, or covering something up, *why involve Sherlock, and his biographer*? That certainly seems contra-indicated, if you're trying to keep some business secret. Secondly, Mycroft had no way of knowing that Sherlock would be coming to visit that day--he didn't summon his brother, our duo just decided to visit when Mycroft came up in random conversation. (Of course, you can speculate that Watson *lied* about how the conversation played out, because he was in on it; or that Sherlock deliberately dropped the "*brother bomb*" at that point as an excuse to drag Watson over there. In either case, we're pretty far down the rabbit hole, where nothing can be taken at face value, so let's not go there). Furthermore, if it were a cover-up, why would Mycroft go to **Baker Street** after he received the note from "**Davidson**"?

And it is especially important to note that, once again, Sherlock does virtually *nothing* towards solving the case. Mycroft has already placed the newspaper ads, even before he told Sherlock of the case; he receives the reply, giving them the address; and everything Sherlock does once they get to the house could have been

accomplished by anyone. So the motive for a supposedly involved Mycroft to bring Sherlock into this affair is what?

Perhaps more important is the description that we get from Sherlock himself, of Mycroft as a "*dilettante*," a clumsy hobbyist in the deduction business. Mycroft was indeed smarter, but didn't have the real-world training or common sense of Sherlock to do a good job in these cases. Lacking "*street smarts*," as it were. Even if we discount a bit of what Sherlock tells us as possible sibling jealousy, Mycroft does come across as a bit of an incompetent bungler in this story. Publishing the newspaper ads as he did was obviously a mistake. He can't even be bothered to have telegraphed Athens for information on the mysterious Greeks. And when Mycroft gets a letter revealing where the kidnapped man is being kept, his first instinct is to go interview the writer, rather than go and rescue the near-death captive, much to Sherlock's exasperation. The whole story proves Sherlock's point that Mycroft "was absolutely incapable of working out the practical points."

So even if we accept Mycroft as head of **Her Majesty's Secret Service**, or whichever grandiose role the next pastiche wants to project him into, that doesn't mean he's as good a detective as his brother. It's experience and instinct, not just brains, that make the man. And that's why we value Mycroft--not just for the similarities, but for the *differences* between him and his brother.

Besides, who really *wants* an evil Mycroft?

OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:

**Not to be too delicate, but why is Mycroft so often portrayed as, well, *not fat*?

Don't get me wrong--I'm fairly hefty myself, so I feel I'm not coming at this from some anti-obesity prejudice.

And I'm also not one to get too uptight about on-screen portrayals having to look *exactly* like their prose descriptions. Really, who cares if a character is dark-haired but the actor blonde? It's the *essence* of the character and the *portrayal* that are important, not superficial trivia.

Yet Watson was *so* specific--and *emphatic*--in his description of Mycroft Holmes. He wasn't just "*stout*" (Watson's usually code-word for big)--no, Mycroft was "*absolutely corpulent*." He was "*massive*." His "*broad, fat hand*" was "*like the flipper of a seal*." He had trouble on the stairs, "*following as quickly as his great bulk allowed*."

Leaping ahead to another story, the good doctor will write that Mycroft was "*massive*" with "*uncouth physical inertia*," having an "*unwieldy frame*" and a "*gross body*." I think we're getting a pretty clear picture that Mycroft was, well, overweight.

Yet so often, especially in "*modernizations*," we get rail-thin actors to play Mycroft. **Rhys Ifan** plays him in **CBS' Elementary**, and he's a far from corpulent as you can get. **Mark Gatiss** is Mycroft in **BBC's Sherlock**, and he is fairly lean. **Christopher Lee** portrayed Mycroft in **Billy Wilder's The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes**, and I doubt that he ever had a corpulent moment in his life.

There are counter-examples, of course--**Charles Grey** and **Stephen Fry** are examples of more recent, stouter Mycrofts--and **Sidney Paget's** drawings of Mycroft hardly make him look like **Mr. Creosote**. Still, it could be argued that Mycroft's size is part of his character--his laziness and lack of energy reflected physically--and helps to make a good contrast with Sherlock.

Perhaps there just aren't enough corpulent actors out there...

****Curious place, the Diogenes Club:**

There are many men in London, you know, who, some from shyness, some from misanthropy, have no wish for the company of their fellows. Yet they are not averse to comfortable chairs and the latest periodicals. It is for the convenience of these that the Diogenes Club was started, and it now contains the most unsociable and unclubable men in town.

Given that this club was likely restricted to the well-to-do, it's hard to imagine that the members couldn't afford *their own* comfortable chairs and periodicals, and be misanthropes and loners when they were *actually alone*, at home. Methinks perhaps they protest too much about their unsociability--rather, they want to be *seen* being "unclubbable" by others. This is especially true as Mycroft seems to do plenty of business there...perhaps sending a message: "See how important you are? I break the Club's air of unsociability to meet you!"

A further irony is that Diogenes, after whom Mycroft named the club, was hardly one to be silent...

****Sherlock described the club thusly: "*The Diogenes Club is the queerest club in London, and Mycroft one of the queerest men.*"**

Of course, that would cause too many titters and guffaws these days, so **Granada** replace "*queerest*" with "*oddest*." Sigh...

****Once you get past all the Mycroft, it turns out that The Greek Interpreter isn't really much of a mystery. It's essentially the same story as **Engineer's Thumb**--expert tricked into helping crooks at location he can't re-find later, and they try to kill him as he flees the jurisdiction--and even Watson is able to guess the whole story immediately after **Melas** has finished his tale.**

But despite not being a good mystery, it is a good *crime* story, if I may make the distinction. Desperate crooks, a prisoner being starved, death-traps, lovely ladies held in thrall, a gory end many miles away....fun stuff, even if we don't get all of the answers.

****Some friends Sophy had. While visiting them,**

[S]he had met a young man named Harold Latimer, who had acquired an ascendancy over her and had eventually persuaded her to fly with him. Her friends, shocked at the event, had contented themselves with informing her brother at Athens, and had then washed their hands of the matter.

Granted, these friends likely had no way to know that **Latimer** was ultimately a thief and a murderer. But they were "*shocked at the event*," so they must have felt *something* was amiss.

How then, after informing Sophy's brother, could they have "contented themselves" and "washed their hands of the matter"??

I guess interventions hadn't been invented yet...

****Not to suggest that Latimer and Kemp were stupid villains--but heavens, why let Melas go free after the first session? Despite having "no physical courage," he was hardly intimidated from speaking to "one human soul" about the incident--he immediately went to the police, and then to Mycroft Holmes. Even if he couldn't find their lair, all that took was one newspaper ad (and it probably would have been even quicker, had the police done their damn job).**

From the criminal's point of view, even if they never caught on to Melas' scheme to get additional information from **Paul**, he would be able to identify Paul and Sophy, as well as them, and have some idea of their scheme. Letting him loose was foolish--especially since they were willing to kill later. And they would obviously have to kill Paul if they did induce him to sign, because otherwise he could contest the document as being signed under duress. So letting Melas loose was the height of folly. If you're a criminal.

****And again, like the Engineer's Thumb, instead of just killing their victims, they leave them in an *escapable death trap*. What is this, a comic book? Or a Bond movie?**

I suppose one could argue that the criminals do this to leave themselves some plausible deniability about their intentions: "Your honor, we didn't *know* the room would fill with fumes!! We didn't intend to murder them! It was an *accident*." Conceivably, it could help them avoid the gallows, with a good barrister and a credulous jury.

Or, they're just crappy criminals.

****Paul Kratides told Melas that he was held prisoner for 3 weeks. If Sophy was there with them the entire time, how did they manage to keep from her the fact that they had a prisoner they were torturing and badgering every night? Was she so under Latimer's sway that she didn't care? Did she readily agree to stay up**

there every time they brought him up? She heard and saw nothing? Or did she just not care until she saw that it was here brother?!?

**Prior to hiring Melas, Latimer and Kemp had a "*friend who speaks Greek and who began these negotiations [who was] forced to return to the East.*" Who was this? Where is he? Why was he "*forced*" to leave the country? Was he another patsy, killed by the villains? A confederate who somehow got himself arrested and/or deported? If he was indeed Greek, maybe he knew of the Kratides family, and alerted the scoundrels of a potential target?

**Big question: *Who sent Holmes the newspaper clipping from Budapest?* Who knew of his interest in these two gentleman? Sophy never met Holmes, and likely never even knew of his involvement. I suppose if you want to make the "Mycroft is really in the secret service" argument, this could be taken as evidence: his men, or Hungarian intelligence contacts, tracked them down, and passed along the news.

There is another possibility, though: Melas. He had reason for revenge, and as one who could speak "nearly all" languages, would have some facility at tracking the killers through Europe. And he would know that Holmes would want to be informed...

Sure, it's just as far-fetched as any Mycroft theories (and we can combine them--Melas was working for Mycroft and HMSS the whole time!!). But if Sophy killed them herself, who would have sent a clipping from a Hungarian newspaper to Sherlock??

**Once again, we have a woman in jeopardy because of some money she is inheriting--or something of the like, as we don't ever get a clear explanation of what the cads were after, or what they were trying to force Paul to sign.

1880s families--***JUST GIVE YOUR DAUGHTER THE DAMN MONEY!!*** Tying it up in trusts and allowances just leads to scams and kidnappings and murders!!

Sure, she still would have been swindled out of it by the handsome Latimer, but at least her brother would still be alive...

**At one point Paul says that he will sign if Sophy and Latimer are wed in his presence, by a Greek priest.

Really? You'd be OK if she married this bounder? You believe the bonds of wedlock would suddenly make him *less* of a torturer and likely murderer? You'd have no problem with your sister being tied to this man *for the rest of her life?*

Well, he was probably a bit loopy after the starvation...

**Paul ultimately refuses to sign the paper, so they kill him--we're not certain what effect that will have on their scheme. With Paul dead, does Sophy ultimately inherit for herself? Someone else become trustee?

In the Granada adaptation, Paul *does* sign. They kill him anyway, but they don't get to enjoy their spoils--Latimer dies jumping from a train to avoid capture, and Kemp is arrested.

**Watson's description of Holmes here has influenced many:

This reticence upon his part [to discuss his family or early years] had increased the somewhat inhuman effect which he produced upon me, until sometimes I found myself regarding him as an isolated phenomenon, a brain without a heart, as deficient in human sympathy as he was pre-eminent in intelligence.

However, please note how Watson *qualifies* this: he says he "sometimes found himself regarding" Sherlock this way, not that he actually was that way.

We have seen plenty of times when Sherlock *has* showed sympathy and heart, and obviously Watson knows this. He's just saying that occasionally Holmes made him feel this way. Unfortunately, some folks have misinterpreted this, and feel that this is an accurate description of how Holmes must be portrayed, as an emotionless android.

**The "*deduction contest*" with Mycroft is fun. Still, at some point, of course, Sherlock should beat Mycroft, right? Mycroft's "dilettante" skills should, at least in some cases, take a backseat to Sherlock's real world experience, and hard study. Surely Mycroft doesn't have Sherlock's skill at identifying tobacco, for example. And Sherlock's work on *actual cases* must certainly, in some instances, clearly put him ahead of Mycroft in his ability to see and deduce...

**To diss Melas as having "no physical courage" is a bit *harsh*, isn't it? He's not used to dealing in these circles.

Sure, after the fact, we can obviously argue that he should have tried to make a break for it, or try to overpower Latimer.

But his ruse to learn more from Kratides during their interview was *quite clever*. And despite the threats made to him, he doesn't hesitate to go to the police or Mycroft for help. All of that displays some amount of courage...

Boy, the police and **Inspector Gregson come off particularly badly here.

The police don't seem to take Melas' story seriously--there is no indication whatsoever that they've done a single thing in the two days they've known of the story.

When Holmes go to **Scotland Yard**, they had to wait "more than an hour" for Gregson and (apparently) a warrant, despite evidence that a man's life was in danger. (This should answer some of those who exalt

Mycroft's position--if he really *was* as powerful as some claimed, surely he could have cut through the red tape and gotten a swifter response)

When they get out the to crime scene, Gregson certainly doesn't have the demeanor of a senior officer investigating a serious crime. He *laughs* at one of Holmes' deductions, *literally* shrugs his shoulders at the implications, seems unwilling to enter the house unless invited in, and treats Holmes' finding a way in as occasion for a joke.

Sherlock doesn't go into any of his anti-Scotland Yard rhetoric this story, but he certainly would have been justified in doing so.

****Giggling, twitchy Kemp sets the template for the default Peter Lorre character,
years before Lorre was born...**

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