

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 Return of Sherlock Holmes Adventure XXIX -- The Adventure of the Norwood Builder

The Adventure Of The Norwood Builder--Friendly Rivals

At the end of **The Adventure Of The Norwood Builder**, Sherlock tells us, "*But he had not that supreme gift of the artist, the knowledge of when to stop.*"

Sure, he's talking about the villainous **Jonas Oldacre**.

But he could just as well be describing writers and the Holmes/**Lestrade** relationship. (No, I'm *not* actually comparing any writers to a loathsome scumbag...but the quote was too appropriate not to use, no matter its origin. Apologies to any who are offended)

Yes, there should be some tension and competition between them. Yes, Holmes' superiority complex ensures that an occasional mean-spirited barb will be directed the inspector's way. Yes, Lestrade is not as smart as Holmes, and often seems reluctant to accept his "theories."

But many writers, whether adapting stories for another medium or producing pastiches of their own, don't have **Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's** gift as an artist, that knowledge of where to stop in portraying this relationship.

Lestrade only appears in 13 of the 60 stories of the **Canon**. But that is more than any other Scotland Yard official. And for whatever reason, that has been enough to make him a *fixture*. In many adaptations, they'll bring Lestrade into stories where he wasn't involved, or at least name drop him. If a pastiche has a police inspector in it, it's damn well going to be Lestrade.

And many, many (many) of those adaptations and pastiches tend to push the Holmes/Lestrade relationship well *past* the friendly rivalry stage. They'll make Lestrade an officious snob, a petty bureaucrat, a bumbling comic foil, an actual *barrier* to Holmes succeeding in his investigation.



It's hard to blame folks for doing this. Lessening Lestrade is one cheap and easy way to make Holmes look even brighter by comparison.

And modern detective fiction, from the noir era onwards, has made it almost a *plot requirement* to have official police be hostile to the private detective, an impediment to the truth coming out. So why not use Lestrade in that way, seems to be the modern attitude to the inspector.

And in my opinion, that's pushing things too far, and well past what Sir Arthur intended (and, *mea culpa*, I myself have been guilty of my fair share of Lestrade bashing).

Given that we're in a stretch of three consecutive stories involving Lestrade, this feels like a good time to examine his relationship with Sherlock, and where it stands at this point in the Canon.

We've come a long way since **A Study In Scarlet**. In **Hound**, Holmes declares that Lestrade is "*the best of the professionals*," and Watson notes "*from the reverential way in which Lestrade gazed at my companion that he had learned a good deal since the days when they had first worked together*." Clearly they've grown in each other's estimation over the years.

In this week's case, *all* of the evidence supports Lestrade's theory, and even Sherlock Holmes is unable to show otherwise until Oldacre makes a misstep at the very end. And yes, this story does contain some *chaffing* and *snarky* remarks to each other (as well as an occasional uncharitable remark from **Watson** in narration). But I think that the context calls for a more generous reading of these scenes, as old comrades who are competitive and who like to rattle each others cages, but have an underlying respect for each other.

Lestrade, after all, *does* allow Holmes his requested half hour to interview McFarlane, saying that "*we owe you a good turn at Scotland Yard*." He knows when Holmes is hinting to him about other directions in the case:

Lestrade had learned by more experiences than he would care to acknowledge that that brain could cut through that which was impenetrable to him.

They proceed to have a respectful and spirited back and forth of their theories of the case, and to be honest, Lestrade does come off as perfectly reasonable here, as Holmes is unable to come up with a single fact that disproves **McFarlane's** guilt. Sherlock is forced to concede "*the evidence is in some ways very strongly in favour of your theory*." Indeed, Lestrade scores a point over Holmes: "*[Y]ou know as well as I do that a criminal is often flurried, and does such things, which a cool man would avoid*." And Holmes confides to Watson, "*I kept a bold face before Lestrade, but, upon my soul, I believe that for once the fellow is on the right track and we are on the wrong*."

Yet Lestrade does not resent Holmes' theorizing, or try to block him from investigating. He invites his participation, and eagerly welcomes his input. It's just that Holmes has nothing to offer.

And surely, Lestrade does get a bit boastful, with his "*little cock-a-doodle of victory.*" But it's hardly mean-spirited--it's just that he finally has a chance to be in the right.

And when Holmes gives him a little jibe, he takes it in good stride--he's not offended, and his response can be read as somewhat magnanimous--Holmes' failure was just bad luck, not a personal defeat:

[S]o you must acknowledge that we have been a little in front of you this time, Mr. Holmes."

"You certainly have the air of something unusual having occurred," said Holmes.

Lestrade laughed loudly. "You don't like being beaten any more than the rest of us do," said he. "A man can't expect always to have it his own way, can he, Dr. Watson?"

When, at the last minute, Holmes chimes in with new information, "*Lestrade knew my friend too well to disregard his words.*" And Holmes admits aloud that his show at the end is just to get back at Lestrade a bit--something he probably wouldn't publicly confess to if Doyle meant this to be read as an adversarial relationship.

And once Oldacre is revealed, Lestrade *immediately* understands what has happened, and arrests the bitter old man at once. No sputtering, no "I don't understand"--the inspector realized right away that Oldacre had faked his own death to frame McFarlane, even if he hadn't grasped yet how Holmes had figured it out. He is not as bright as Sherlock (who is?), but Lestrade is *no* dolt.

He also immediately praises Holmes, saying that "*this is the brightest thing that you have done yet.*" And when Holmes "*clapped Lestrade upon the shoulder,*" and freely allowed him to take credit, that was hardly the act of enemies, or men who didn't have a deep respect for each other.

Over the course of the Canon, Doyle had the relationship between Holmes and Lestrade *evolve*, and grow, as each gained a greater appreciation for the other's strengths. And at no point in their relationship did Lestrade ever try to impede Holmes' investigations, or fail to act upon Holmes' requests, or refuse to admit the truth when the detective revealed it.

Far too many, though, have their relationship frozen in *amber*, bound by Watson's descriptions in *Study In Scarlet* and the early stories. And it's easier for them to make Lestrade a *plot complication*, rather than an actual character who is a true (if not always understanding) ally of Holmes.

But that's not a fair portrayal. Lestrade and Holmes are friendly rivals, not enemies. Don't push the friction too far, and know when to stop.

OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:

Jonas Oldacre--what a *vile* blackguard. Once of the best Holmes villains. "*He was more like a malignant and cunning ape than a human being.*" A brute who lets cats loose in an aviary (on the other hand, lucky cats!). A spiteful *** who sends mutilated pictures to former fiancés on the wedding day. A wealthy man who lost most of his wealth in speculation, and decided that the best way out was to fake his own death and pop up again in a new identity. The cherry on top: framing the son of the woman who spurned him for his "*murder.*" Considering that he had never met John Hector McFarlane, and Oldacre was dumped at least 28 years ago (Watson estimated McFarlane was 27) , that's one **** of a grudge he's been nursing.

And then, when caught, goes on to pledge vengeance against Holmes. Given how long he's been willing to wait until he gets vengeance, Holmes had best watch himself when Oldacre gets out of jail.

**In the truth is just as strange as fiction department: In 1921, my friend's great-grandfather actually did attempt to fake his own death in order to escape debts. He killed a local hermit, and used the headless body to pass as his own corpse in a staged car accident. Eventually he was caught (in Canada!), and after being convicted and sentenced to death, he hung himself in his cell. True story. (Given Holmes' theories about "hereditary strains of evil," maybe I should be worried about my friend...)

I'd always been tempted, as no doubt many of you have, to dismiss the "*faked his own death*" ploy as a silly literary device, akin to "*brain fever.*" It is merely, so I thought, a cheap way to surprise the reader or viewer. It's just a stupid cliché, not a real-life phenomenon. A sweeps week stunt, a season-ending cliffhanger from creators out of better ideas.

But a **Google** or **Wikipedia** search depressingly reveals that faking one's own death is *pretty popular*, and still happening even in modern times, when you think it would become increasingly difficult to get away with. Really, a ton of people have somehow thought it a good idea to fake their own deaths.

Still, it looks as if most of these "faked deaths" involved faked suicides or faked accidents, and very few involve fake "*murders,*" and fewer still revolve around framing the child of the woman who spurned you decades earlier. So points to Sir Arthur for originality...

**Sherlock implies that Oldacre used animal remains in the fire to serve as a substitute for his own "*corpse.*"

But, as many have pointed out, such a fire would almost certainly leave intact bones behind, and even in pre-DNA, pre-CSI days, **Scotland Yard** could a rabbit or dog skeleton from a human run.

The **Granada** adaptation solves this by having **Mrs. Lexington** lure in a tramp to the house, so Oldacre can kill him and use the body.

It's certainly a more effective frame. On the downside, though, there are now *actual murder charges* against him, in addition to conspiracy and fraud and attempted murder. Certainly a much longer prison sentence now awaits, if not the gallows. Perhaps Holmes *needn't* be looking over his shoulder after all.

****Ah, the mysterious Mrs. Lexington. The housekeeper that's willing to lie to the police to aid her employers scheme to defraud creditors, and willing to abet a scheme that results in young McFarlane being convicted and probably executed.**

And in the Granada version, she's a knowing accomplice to cold-blooded murder. "*There was a sort of sulky defiance in her eyes, which only goes with guilty knowledge.*"

Was she just loyal to a ridiculous fault? Were she and Oldcastle involved? Or was it just an unrequited love that led her to the dark side?

****Poor Holmes misses **Moriarty** and the exquisite crime he caused. He declares that London has become uninteresting since the professor's fall.**

So his boredom leads to one of the funniest lines that Sir Arthur ever wrote. When McFarlane bursts in, declaring that he's wanted for murder, and that the police are on their way to arrest him, Sherlock lets his glee at a new case slip a little bit: "*Arrest you!*" said Holmes. "*This is really most grati--most interesting.*" Yes, Sherlock, I'm sure that young McFarlane found that gratifying...

****Despite Holmes' claims of boredom, Watson tells us that they've been plenty busy: "*the case of the papers of ex-President Murillo, and also the shocking affair of the Dutch steamship FRIESLAND, which so nearly cost us both our lives.*"**

We will actually get to read the case of **ex-President Murillo** soon enough (although there really weren't any "papers" involved). The affair of the Dutch steamship FRIESLAND remains untold...although there really was a ship named Friesland. Speculate away.

****Holmes reminds Watson of a pre-**Hiatus** case:**

You remember that terrible murderer, Bert Stevens, who wanted us to get him off in '87? Was there ever a more mild-mannered, Sunday-school young man?"

Of course, that's a fascinating point--we never get to see the cases that Holmes *turns down*, obviously. It is interesting to see that it is not merely the innocent who come to Baker Street seeking help. And of course, if you could secure Holmes to your side, that might go a long way towards convincing a jury.

Obviously, you'd have to be pretty damn clever to be guilty yet convince Sherlock Holmes that you were innocent. I'd be interested to see that little interview: the ploy he used to try and secure Holmes' help, and the reasoning of Holmes' rebuff. Hey, Watson, get writing!

****Is Watson a kept man?**

When Holmes returned from the hiatus, Watson had a practice (and in the Granada series, a second job as an on-call "police surgeon"). Yet after Sherlock's return, "*at his request [I] had sold my practice and returned to share the old quarters in Baker Street.*"

Well, that's a tiny bit *creepy*, isn't it? If Watson were a woman, and the man in her life said, "I'm back now, dear--drop your job and come back to living with me full time," well, that would be viewed as smothering and unempowering.

It gets even creepier, as it turns out that "*A young doctor, named Verner, had purchased my small Kensington practice, and given with astonishingly little demur the highest price that I ventured to ask--an incident which only explained itself some years later, when I found that Verner was a distant relation of Holmes, and that it was my friend who had really found the money.*" So Sherlock Holmes really is Watson's **sugar daddy!!**

And then, when Holmes sallies forth on his initial investigation, he doesn't want Watson to come along. "*No, my dear fellow, I don't think you can help me. There is no prospect of danger, or I should not dream of stirring out without you.*"

So, Watson can't have a job, has to live with Holmes and depend on him for income, and can't go along on investigations unless he's needed to protect Holmes from danger? *Creepy.*

****Watson describing Holmes:** "*His cold and proud nature was always averse, however, from anything in the shape of public applause...*"

Please. This is *Sherlock Holmes* you're describing, a man who has never hesitated to put on quite a show for the surprise reveal of a mystery's solution. In this very story, he takes great pride and pleasure in using the fake fire to smoke out Oldacre.

Holmes may not want public applause, but he surely seems to *crave* it from Watson and the police...

****More evidence for those (like myself) who feel that Watson is more competent than many an adaptation or pastiche would have us think:** "*Familiar as I was with my friend's methods, it was not difficult for me to follow his deductions...*" After which Watson proceeds to explain *all* of Holmes' deductions about McFarlane, without any prompting from the detective.

****Much has been made of McFarlane saying that the signing of Oldacre's will was "*witnessed by my clerk.*"** British law required two witnesses, and as a beneficiary of the will himself, McFarlane couldn't have been the second witness in a valid will.

I think perhaps it goes to far to accuse McFarlane of incompetence. Let's give the young lawyer the benefit of the doubt, as he was in quite the panicked state while relating his tale, and may easily have made a slip of the tongue (or, of course, Watson simply dropped an "s" in what was supposed to be "*clerks*").

McFarlane was a *partner* in a law firm, which should speak in favor of his being somewhat competent. And as a partner, there should have been plenty of employees available at his office during the working day to be witnesses. This wasn't **Saul Goodman** with a *mall office*--viewing the Granada version, we see that McFarlane's own office had at least *four* other lawyers/clerks working under him in the room, and at least two pages, with heaven knows how many other employees are available in the building.

No, it makes far more sense to think that Doyle just made a mistake here, and meant to write "clerks."

******There's one thing that has always struck me as off about Oldacre's plan. If the police are meant to believe that McFarlane killed Oldacre for the bequest, *why would he burn the body?* The point of murdering Oldacre would be for him to be identified as dead, so McFarlane could get the inheritance. Burning the body could only delay identification of the body, if not completely stymie it, which would delay any probate of the will.

Then again, the police in those days seem pretty quick to charge murder *without* a firm corpse identification, or even a corpse. Recall from Hounds, when Watson mentioned Holmes "*defending the unfortunate Mme. Montpensier from the charge of murder which hung over her in connection with the death of her step-daughter, Mlle. Carere, the young lady who, as it will be remembered, was found six months later alive and married in New York.*" That had to be kind of embarrassing for the police...

Lestrade also has a fair theory--that McFarlane might have burned the body to remove any evidence that might have tied him to the murder.

******Holmes: "*I much fear that British juries have not yet attained that pitch of intelligence when they will give the preference to my theories over Lestrade's facts.*" Welcome to the 21st century, Sherlock, were juries don't seem to care so much about facts anymore...

******Holmes: "*I fear that the Norwood Disappearance Case will not figure in that chronicle of our successes.*" Ah, but you obviously suspect the truth already, Sherlock, even if only subconsciously. You're calling it the "**Norwood Disappearance case,**" *not* the "**Norwood Murder case.**" Deep down, you know it wasn't murder...

******Lestrade: "*You are aware that no two thumb-marks are alike?*" Holmes: "*I have heard something of the kind.*"

Ah, yes, the fingerprints. This is fairly interesting, as the story was set in **1894**, before Scotland yard had adopted fingerprints. So, far from being a dolt, Lestrade seems well ahead of the curve here. Many have failed

to notice that Holmes is being a bit sarcastic and defensive here--*of course* he's up to date on the latest crime detection theories. More important is the complaint that, had Oldacre used the wax thumbprint of McFarlane to plant the fake, *it would have been backwards*, and therefore not matched the suspect's "identically."

But those who make the complaint haven't read the story very carefully.

"*It was the simplest thing in the world for him to take a wax impression from the seal,*" says Holmes. In other words Oldacre didn't use the seal itself--he made *an impression of the impression* using wax...and thus he would have reversed the reversal! (I'll leave it to others to decide whether an amateur "*second-generation*" copy of a fingerprint would have been intact for such an exact match to be made)

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