

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 Casebook of Sherlock Holmes Adventure XLIX – The Adventure of the Mazarin Stone

The Adventure Of The Mazarin Stone--Worst. Holmes. Ever.?

There is a tendency--no, more like an *obligation*--among fans of various shows and genres to rank the objects of their obsessions. It's become even more prevalent during the internet era, when everyone can have a free platform, where we have immediate access to every episode or story, and where expressing your detailed opinion--and having it validated by "*likes*"--seems to be a major source of self-esteem.

So you don't have to look very far to find people's opinion of what the best episode of **Star Trek** is, the best **James Bond** movie, the best season of **Buffy**.

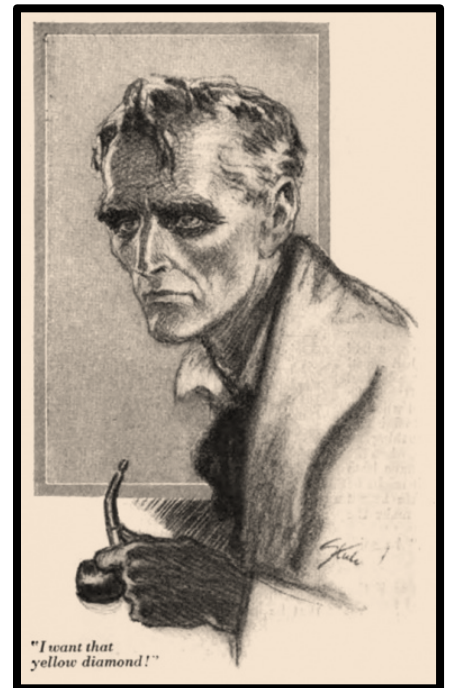
And because the yin is lonely without the yang, we also get much discussion of what the *worst* episode/story/season of a creative enterprise is.

Which brings us to **The Adventure Of The Mazarin Stone**.

Now, I'm not going to use this essay to belabor why I feel that Mazarin Stone is the *worst* of **Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes** tales. I'll discuss some of my reasoning below.

No, what I'm going to talk about today is what it *means* for something to be the worst of something good.

So what do we mean? Clearly, even if something is the worst Sherlock Holmes story, we *still* read it, *still* analyze it, *still* collect it. We still *love* it, in our own way.



I'm on record, for example, arguing that **Moonraker** is the worst James Bond film. But that doesn't mean that I *hate* the movie, or I refuse to watch it. It's 007, man! And the worst James Bond movie is more interesting to me than, say, the best Matt Helm movie.

We should, of course, make declarations about how "*bad*" something is with a measure of humility--every story, no matter how lowly we grade it, is still somebody's first James Bond film, the first Sherlock Holmes story they ever read. Nostalgia and context can have a large impact on someone's critical opinion, and I certainly don't want to be seen as deriding something they may love better than I. That's part of the joy of fandom--that *every* story is loved by someone.

And even the worst episode of most of our favorites has *something* to recommend it, some bit of dialogue or characterization or background--that adds to our overall understanding and enjoyment of the canon. Yeah, **Spock's Brain** is horrid...there are still bits of gold you can sift out. So it is with Mazarin Stone--there are some good moments, things that carry you away and make you forget that the story is supposed to be poor, until something comes along and jars you again.

That's the important thing, to a canon-lover. It's not *just* the obsessive completeness. It's the knowledge that everything plays a part in the whole, even if on its own it might not be very good. It may well be impossible for a series of 60 stories or 179 episodes to be great every time out of the block. But just like family members, we accept these "*black sheep*" with almost a deeper love, because the "*awfulness*" makes the better stories stand out. No one can tell you what the worst episode of **Full House** is, because no one cared enough to keep track (queue the deluge of comments from Full House fans...). But we care, and because we care, we shouldn't ever fully reject the terrible.

So we embrace the "worst." We don't seek to *excise* it from the canon. We don't throw away our precious VHS copy of **Angel One** (complete with commercials & trailer!). We don't try to dismiss the "bad" ones as dreams, hoaxes or hallucinations. We don't insist that the terrible run on our favorite comic "*didn't really happen*." We love the "worst," even when we hate it.

Except...

There is a feeling among certain Sherlock Holmes fans that certain stories should perhaps *not* be accepted as **Canon** because of their quality.

Now it's quite possible that I overstate this phenomenon. In addition, the fact that many Holmes commentators are playing "**The Grand Game**," the gentle fiction that all of Holmes' adventures are real, certainly makes it possible to interpret a tongue-in-cheek jest as a bit more serious than it really is.

But take one prominent example, the famous pastiche **The Seven-Per-Cent Solution**, by **Nicholas Meyer**. In the book's introduction Meyer, writing as **Watson**, tells us that Mazarin Stone, as well as 3 other stories in **Case-Book**, are "*forged drivel*." Now, this is within the context of a pastiche that also tells us that **Final Problem** and **Empty House** didn't really happen, so perhaps a grain of salt is needed here.

But still, this message seems loud and clear to me: because some stories are of *dubious* quality, they don't really belong in the Canon.

Others, even including editors of Holmes collections, have opined that some of the stories in Case-Book are *not* the work of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, because they seem to fit Doyle's "*style*." And they proceed, without a lick of evidence, to pile up "*likely*" other authors--his son! His wife! His agent! In other words, they're not good stories, so perhaps they shouldn't count.

Well, I can't agree with that. Are the stories in Case-Book, on average, *poorer* than those in earlier collections? That's pretty inarguable, I think. But I don't think that we should easily leap to "*this story isn't as good as others, so it can't be by Sir Arthur*," or "*this story is a failure, therefore we shouldn't count it*."

I love Doyle's work, but I don't think anyone can seriously argue that it's *impossible* that, late in his life, Sir Arthur was incapable of putting out a poor story or three, especially as he tried to continue to write a character he thought he had already said goodbye to (twice!). To assume that any drop in quality is automatic evidence that Sir Arthur didn't actually write the stories is to assign him to a pedestal of perfection that I think is unwarranted. And honestly, it is a bit immature--"*If X is good, it's by my hero; if it's not good, it can't be by him*" isn't so much a line of reasoning as a knee-jerk emotional reaction to disappointment.

As we noted above, the bad stories or episodes *shouldn't* be excised as "*forged drivel*." They are part and parcel of the whole, and deepen our understanding of the works. The Mazarin Stone, as poor as it may be, is part of the family. You don't deny its authorship or exile it from the Canon--you re-read it each time you work your way through Holmes again, understanding it for what it is--appreciating the good parts, and trying to understand why the less-good parts fail. You don't throw out your errant children...and we shouldn't try to distance ourselves from the occasional artistic misfire.

OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:

**On a housekeeping note, if you were expecting a *different* story here, sorry. Different editions of the Case-Book have presented the stories in different orders. Why, I couldn't tell you. But for our purposes here, I choose to go with the original publication order, which was also the publication order of the individual stories. I've been chronological throughout the rest of the blog, why stop now?

Also, the collection has been known alternately as **The Case-Book Of Sherlock Holmes, **The Case Book Of Sherlock Holmes** (no hyphen) and **The Casebook Of Sherlock Holmes**. *Sigh...*

For no real reason besides my aesthetic preference, I'll be going with Case-Book.

The first problem-causing aspect for this story is that it was based upon a *play* Sir Arthur had written some months earlier, **The Crown Diamond. [You can read the whole thing here.](#)

I've heard varying (and perhaps contradictory) reports of the play's success--it closed down in London after only a week, it later toured the country for 18 months? Regardless, it is the first Holmes that Doyle had written in some 4 years, and Sir Arthur decided to use it as the basis of a Holmes short story.

The play is *dreadfully* short (can it have taken more than 20-25 to perform live?), and has only one set, which explains the story's claustrophobic setting. The entire story takes place in the confines of **221B Baker Street**, with a parade of people coming and going. All of Holmes investigations take place *offstage*, and *prior* to the beginning of the play--perhaps a necessary conceit for the stage--but there's no reason why Doyle couldn't have substantially broadened the *mise en scene* when he adapted the play to prose form.

As it is, much of Mazarin Stone feels as if it were *lazily* copied from The Crown Stone, without Doyle bothering to make alterations to make the adaptation more appropriate to a prose story.

**Obviously, this is only the second time that John Watson is not narrating our story--but the second in a row!

I discussed why, in **His Last Bow**, that I think that led to a weaker story in that case. Well, it's even worse in this case. Watson plays no role *whatsoever* in the story, and we are robbed of much of his detailed descriptions of characters and scenes.

Observe the fairly prosaic way our narrator describes 221B and Billy, quite unlike the lush narration we're used to:

He looked round him at the scientific charts upon the wall, the acid-charred bench of chemicals, the violin-case leaning in the corner, the coal-scuttle, which contained of old the pipes and tobacco. Finally, his eyes came round to the fresh and smiling face of Billy, the young but very wise and tactful page...

And Watson's dialogue in this story? Almost entirely a barrage of single lines designed to draw out exposition, simple, repetitive and almost child-like:

"It all seems very unchanged, Billy.

"Yes, Billy, I know."

"But what is it all about, Billy?"

Watson doesn't even rise to the level of a plot device in this story.

As I alluded to above, this story has *no mystery whatsoever*. Holmes has *already* solved it before the first paragraph, although the reader doesn't so much of a sentence about how Holmes came to suspect the **Count, or how he tracked him down. It's like coming into an **Agatha Christie** story in the final chapter!

The only thing left unknown at the "mystery's" beginning is the location of the **Stone** itself. And Holmes doesn't used detection or deduction to discover it, but rather a fairly cheap (and unbelievable) parlor trick. *Boo!*

In the play, Doyle used **Colonel Sebastian Moran as the villain, and used aspects of The Empty House. Fair enough, I suppose, for presenting Holmes in another medium.

For the purposes of adapting the short story, Doyle changed the villain to **Count Negretto Sylvius** (Great *evil* name!). But he kept him as a big-game hunter, he kept the false Holmes mannequin, kept the references to airguns. And of course, as readers we already had seen all of this, giving us a distinct *deja vu*.

Doyle does have Watson explicitly acknowledge this--"*we used something of the sort before*"--to try and take the sting out of it. But a re-run is still a *re-run*. And calling attention to an earlier, far better story does no favors to our appreciation of this one.

**There is simply *no* way to picture the denouement so that it works. I'm sorry, *it just can't happen* in my mind:

Hallo! What was that?" There was a vague sound which seemed to come from the window. Both men sprang round, but all was quiet. Save for the one strange figure seated in the chair, the room was certainly empty.

"Thank you!" With a single spring Holmes had leaped from the dummy's chair and had grasped the precious jewel. He held it now in one hand, while his other pointed a revolver at the Count's head. The two villains staggered back in utter amazement.

You are not aware that a second door from my bedroom leads behind that curtain. I fancied that you must have heard me when I displaced the figure, but luck was on my side. It gave me a chance of listening to your racy conversation which would have been painfully constrained had you been aware of my presence."

In the stage play, Sherlock had caused the light to black out for a few seconds, which gave him ample time to switch himself with the dummy unobserved.

But that blackout *doesn't* happen in the short story!! The mannequin is in plain view *the entire time*!! So even *if* you grant that Holmes' bedroom suddenly has 2 hidden exits, you still have to believe that the Count and **Merton** would have their *entire* conversation with their back turned to the dummy, **AND** that Sherlock could move the dummy to some other spot and replace it without the movement and noise attracting attention. I'm sorry, without the blackout, *I just don't buy it*, not in the tiniest, least bit.

****Lord Cantlemere** wasn't in the play--he's a creation for the short story.

But he's only *vaguely* referred early in the play, by Billy: "*He's a stiff'un...but I can't stand his Lordship.*"

That's hardly a strong indictment of him, is it? Particularly coming from a young lad. So at the story's end, when Holmes goes through an elaborate charade to prank Cantlemere, it doesn't feel *earned* or *justified*--its just feels cruel. We also don't know who he is--what is his role in the government? Why is he apparently in charge of Holmes investigation?

If Doyle was going to bring in this character, and base the whole post-climax scene on him, he really should have brought Cantlemere into the story earlier, so the audience could loathe him early on, and feel that he *deserves* Holmes' "perverted" sense of humor.

****Billy:** "*We had the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary both sitting on that very sofa.*"

Of course, in the *last* story, we had the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary coming to Holmes to beg him to help out. So again, this feels like Doyle just riffing on some of Sherlock's greatest hits.

****How, exactly, was the stone stolen? We are given *no detail whatsoever*.** If we are to respect the Count as a master villain, we really need to see some aspect of the crime as particularly daring, or clever, or worthy of Holmes' talents. Instead, we got *not one single word* regarding the theft itself.

In the regrettable **Granada** adaptation, the Stone is on display, and the count just hits the commissionaire with his cane, smashes the case, and takes the stone. Hardly the robbery of the century.

****Speaking of the Granada adaptation...well...sigh.** it's pretty dire.

Jeremy Brett was ill, and only appeared in a tiny prologue and epilogue that were clearly filmed separately. Holmes was "up north," so the government went to **Mycroft** to recover the stone.

Fair enough. But the story was so short, it was apparently to difficult to pad out to 51 minutes, so they combined it with **The Three Garridebs**, in a way that made little sense, and...*pshaw*, let's just say it's awful and move on, shall we?

****Holmes, referring to the danger of having **Billy** the page working for him:** "*That boy is a problem, Watson. How far am I justified in allowing him to be in danger?*"

Watson, of course, was often in danger, too. But at least he was an adult.

Of course, anyone Holmes used in his investigations--street urchins, cab drivers, steamer captains, dog owners--could have been just as much in dangers.

And given that just a few minutes later, Holmes instructed Billy to go and taunt and insult a huge boxer, his concern for Billy's welfare was *short-lived...*

****Despite all my kvetching about the story, there is still some fun dialogue...**

"I'm expecting something this evening."

"Expecting what?"

"To be murdered, Watson."

****Holmes seems to have a completely opposite understanding of biology from, say, the real world:**

"You have not, I hope, learned to despise my pipe and my lamentable tobacco? It has to take the place of food these days."

"But why not eat?"

"Because the faculties become refined when you starve them. Why, surely, as a doctor, my dear Watson, you must admit that what your digestion gains in the way of blood supply is so much lost to the brain. I am a brain, Watson. The rest of me is a mere appendix. Therefore, it is the brain I must consider."

****Count Negretto Sylvius. Sounds like he could have been a better villain than he turned out: "half-Italian, you know, and with the Southern graces of manner when in the mood, but a devil incarnate in the other mood. But..Possibly you have heard of his reputation as a shooter of big game."**

****Holmes not wanting Watson's help:**

"Count me in, Holmes. I have nothing to do for a day or two."

"Your morals don't improve, Watson. You have added fibbing to your other vices. You bear every sign of the busy medical man, with calls on him every hour."

Where's the *explanation* of these deductions?!? Surely in such a short tale, you could spare three lines to tell us how Sherlock knew Watson had calls on him every hour!

****Padding out a story that should have been over already:**

"I've cast my net and I have my fish. But I have not got the stone. What is the use of taking them? We can make the world a better place by laying them by the heels. But that is not what I am out for. It's the stone I want."

Fair enough, I suppose. And we can't blame Holmes for knowing *ahead of time* that Sylvius would be stupid enough to be carrying the stone on him. Still, if you really *do* know the whole thing already, the wiser course might be to have them arrested, and *then* try to sweat the stone's location out of them, perhaps with an offer of a deal. Instead of, say, putting your own life (and Billy's...and Watson's) at risk in an extended interview that on the surface didn't seem any more likely to produce success...

***"The other is Sam Merton the boxer. Not a bad fellow, Sam, but the Count has used him. Sam's not a shark. He is a great big silly bull-headed gudgeon. But he is flopping about in my net all the same."*

Sam Merton is a good sounding idea for a character. But he's *not* really used well. What was his part in the theft? Why would a sophisticate like the Count hook up with a big lug like Merton?

As it is, Sam only exists in the story because Sylvius *needs someone to talk to about the stone's location*. Otherwise, there is no conversation to overhear!!

Plus, Doyle missed a prime opportunity to remind us of Holmes *boxing prowess*, and his reputation in the fighting community.

That bedroom. Holmes *ed bedroom. How many exits does that bedroom have?*

When Sylvius arrives, Holmes has Watson go for the police, but has him go through another bedroom exit, so he won't encounter the Count: *"I think we will go out through the bedroom. This second exit is exceedingly useful."*

OK, fine, I suppose--but wait--there is yet *another* exit: one that leads to behind a curtain next to the mannequin in the window: *"You are not aware that a second door from my bedroom leads behind that curtain."*

So now my head is spinning. Does Holmes' bedroom have **3** exits? Or are there only two, and the second one somehow leads *both* out of Baker Street and back into the sitting room?!?! Terribly poor attention to detail.

***We're back to Watson quality verbosity with the description of Count Sylvius: "The famous game-shot, sportsman, and man-about-town was a big, swarthy fellow, with a formidable dark moustache shading a cruel, thin-lipped mouth, and surmounted by a long, curved nose like the beak of an eagle. He was well dressed, but his brilliant necktie, shining pin, and glittering rings were flamboyant in their effect."*

***Holmes gets persnickety about criminals treating him with the proper manners:*

"Two can play at that game, Holmes."

"It is a small point, Count Sylvius, but perhaps you would kindly give me my prefix when you address me. You can understand that, with my routine of work, I should find myself on familiar terms with half the rogues' gallery, and you will agree that exceptions are invidious."

Geez. Good thing he didn't call you Sherlock...

***Apocryphal case: "Old Baron Dowson said the night before he was hanged that in my case what the law had gained the stage had lost."*

***Another fine exchange on why Holmes chases criminals (even if it furthers the "borrowed wholesale from Colonel Moran" problem):*

"Come now, Count. You used to shoot lions in Algeria."

"Well?"

"But why?"

"Why? The sport -- the excitement -- the danger!" "And, no doubt, to free the country from a pest?"

"Exactly!" "My reasons in a nutshell!"

***Holmes getting scary: "You can't bluff me, Count Sylvius." Holmes's eyes, as he gazed at him, contracted and lightened until they were like two menacing points of steel. "You are absolute plate-glass. I see to the very back of your mind."*

***Holmes has at least done his homework of the Count:*

"Do you know what I keep in this book?... "It's all here, Count. The real facts as to the death of old Mrs. Harold, who left you the Blymer estate, which you so rapidly gambled away."

"You are dreaming!"

"And the complete life history of Miss Minnie Warrender."

"Tut! You will make nothing of that!"

"Plenty more here, Count. Here is the robbery in the train de-luxe to the Riviera on February 13, 1892. Here is the forged check in the same year on the Credit Lyonnais."

Of course, all of that is completely *irrelevant* to the case at hand. If he could have been prosecuted for any of these misdeeds, he likely would have been already. So, aside from trying to convince us what an evil *bad**** Sylvius is, how does this help Holmes solve the case, or force the Count to confess? It doesn't.

Holmes is far *bolder* and more *accusatory* in the original play, outright saying that Moran had committed murders and robberies. Still, it is to the same effect--no impact on the story at all.

****How Holmes can prove Sylvius is guilty** " *I have the cabman who took you to Whitehall and the cabman who brought you away. I have the commissionaire who saw you near the case. I have Ikey Sanders, who refused to cut it up for you. Ikey has peached, and the game is up.*"

Again, with no details, we can't tell if this is brilliant detection on Holmes' part, or if the Count is just a *really, really terrible* crook, leaving at least 3 witnesses to his crime and doing a lousy job of disposing of his booty.

****For once, at least, Holmes is deferring to the authorities, and not his own personal sense of justice.** Despite his obvious distaste for the Count, Sherlock is willing to let him escape in exchange for fulfilling his mission: "*We don't want you or Sam. We want the stone. Give that up, and so far as I am concerned you can go free so long as you behave yourself in the future. If you make another slip well, it will be the last. But this time my commission is to get the stone, not you.*"

****Funny:**

"Billy, you will see a large and ugly gentleman outside the front door. Ask him to come up."

"If he won't come, sir?"

"No violence, Billy. Don't be rough with him."

Haha he's sending a child to confront a dangerous crook!!

****More droll dialogue:**

"You won't die in your bed, Holmes."

"I have often had the same idea. Does it matter very much? After all, Count, your own exit is more likely to be perpendicular than horizontal."

Ooooohhh...

****I complained about Sam's characterization earlier, so in fairness I must praise this small bit: *Holmes's debonair manner was a new experience, and though he vaguely felt that it was hostile, he did not know how to counter it.***

****Holmes leaving the villains alone to talk it over:**

I'm going into that bedroom. Pray make yourselves quite at home in my absence. You can explain to your friend how the matter lies without the restraint of my presence. I shall try over the Hoffman 'Barcarole' upon my violin. In five minutes I shall return for your final answer.

Merton and Sylvius *didn't* know the police had already been sent for. Why not *flee*? Holmes got lucky here.

****Ah, modern technology:**

"I suppose he's not listening?"

"How can he be listening with that music going?"

Really, *these* are master criminals?

**Sam, on why they can't flee the country yet: *"But the false bottom ain't ready."* Uh, false bottom to what? The line in the play is *"The false bottom ain't in the hat-box yet."*

**Master criminals at work again:

"Here is the stone."

"I wonder you dare carry it."

"Where could I have it safer? If we could take it out of Whitehall someone else could surely take it out of my lodgings."

Wow, it's hard to imagine these clowns stealing candy, let alone swiping a crown jewel...

**At the end, we're back to brief, unremarkable narration, and a fairly abrupt finish: *There was an inrush of police, the handcuffs clicked and the criminals were led to the waiting cab. Watson lingered with Holmes, congratulating him upon this fresh leaf added to his laurels.*

And again, the whole Lord Cantlemere bit is *anti-climactic* and overlong. Without properly setting up the noble as a boor, makes Holmes look a bit like a jack*.

Brian Keith Snell

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