

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 L – The Problem of Thor Bridge

The Problem Of Thor Bridge - A Tale Of Two Women

One of the reasons I gave for starting this little blog was that I felt the **Sherlock Holmes Canon** gave us insight to an entire different time and culture, a look at a different country and class structure and moral framework.

Which brings us to **The Problem Of Thor Bridge**.

Thor Bridge is a *great* story, well-written and fascinating, with a cracking good mystery (based on a real crime!). Holmes is at the top of his game, the dialogue sparkles, and **Watson** is back in charge narratively. By itself, Thor Bridge is a firm rebuttal to those who want to disparage the Case-Book based on a few below-average stories.

But Thor Bridge also serves as--perhaps unintentionally--an examination of the place of women in Victorian society, and how sexism and class rules trapped females into fairly *terrifying* existences.

Let us start with our victim--and our killer!--*hmmm*, what's her name again?

That's only half a joke. Imagine my surprise when I searched through the story several times before I realized that **Maria Gibson** is referred to by name only 3 times in this story. Once her widow refers to her, but by her maiden name, **Maria Pinto**. Once a police sergeant refers to her as **Mrs. Gibson**. And her alleged murderer, **Grace Dunbar**, also calls her Mrs. Gibson once. Every other time--literally *every* time she's mentioned--it's not by name, but as "*Mr. Gibson's wife*," or "*my wife*" or "*she*" or "*that poor woman*." Her identity is, essentially, *erased* in this story--never once is she referred to as Maria Gibson. Even Holmes can only identify her as "*a wife, the victim of this tragedy, of whom I know nothing save that she was past her prime...*" Though she is the victim in a high-profile murder case, Maria Gibson is reduced to a mere *prop*, a placeholder, until we're told the true nature of her involvement at the end.



In place of her name, though, **Sir Arthur Conan Doyle** has *everyone* in the tale reduce her to an ethnic stereotype. In *Thor Bridge*, Maria is referred to as "*tropical*" more often than she is referred to by name. Think about that.

Marlow Bates refers to Maria as "*a creature of the **tropics**, a Brazilian by birth...*" He follows by calling her, "**Tropical** by birth and tropical by nature. A child of the sun and of passion." Her husband said she had a "*deep rich nature, too, passionate, whole-hearted, **tropical**, ill-balanced...*" Of course he felt the crime was due to her Latin American origins: "*She was crazy with hatred and the heat of the Amazon was always in her blood.*" And Grace Dunbar felt that Maria "*hated me with all the fervour of her **tropical** nature.*"

OK, we get it. "*Tropical*" = hot-headed, emotional, out of control. Those **** Latin Americans get so excitable, they just can't help it.

Of course, all of these staid middle and upper class white folks of the era *would* think in such terms, as the era was full of ethnic (and other) stereotyping. What's less clear, is whether this is Doyle accurately presenting what the attitudes of the day were, or his projecting *his own* prejudices into the story.

On one level, we should reject this, if for no other reason than basing a character's behavior on a biased view of "*hot-blooded*" Latinos is lazy, and robs that character of much of their own *agency*. Certainly, there are women of *many* times and cultures who become obsessive and manic in their love. Why rely on stereotype to explain it?

Then again, having everyone else in the story talk about Maria this way does serve to *reinforce the sense of loneliness and isolation* she must have felt. Imagine her plight--a bold, attractive American marries her, moves her around three continents, has children with her...and then suddenly decides that he doesn't love her anymore, and he decides he must be "*harsh to her, even brutal*" in order to "*kill her love*," because that "*would be easier for both of us.*" And so now Maria is *trapped*--trapped in a loveless marriage with a total jackass, trapped in a country not her own, and trapped in a society where *every single person* in her life treats her as a cartoon character, "*tropical*" and "*fiery*". And her husband is trying to get the governess to be his new lover! Is it any wonder she went a little bit bonkers?

Even worse, those around her subtly blamed Maria for her marriage's failure. Bates said, "*She had loved him as such women can love, but when her own physical charms had faded -- I am told that they once were great -- there was nothing to hold him.*" See, she got old and less beautiful--it's **her** fault! Miss Dunbar suggests that Maria was too emotionally immature to hold the love of a great white person: "*I would not wish to wrong her, but she loved so vividly in a physical sense that she could hardly understand the mental, and even spiritual, tie which held her husband to me...*" See, those **** Brazilians don't understand **true** love! And the Senator? "*It was only when the romance had passed -- and it lingered for years -- that I realized that we*

had nothing -- absolutely nothing -- in common. My love faded." Hers didn't. Why couldn't she just get over it? And her jealousy? Well, those foreigners couldn't understand a pure, spiritual connection like I have with the hired help:

"There is a soul-jealousy that can be as frantic as any body-jealousy, and though my wife had no cause - - and I think she understood this -- for the latter, she was aware that this English girl exerted an influence upon my mind and my acts that she herself never had."

There were possible solutions, other than tormenting the poor wife, and trying to make her hate you so she'll happier spending the rest of her life with you (*WHAT?!?*). Yes, England's divorce laws were fairly *draconian*, but Gibson was "*the world's greatest economic force*"--surely he could have managed to work some pressure for a favorable interpretation of those laws. Or, since they weren't married in England and weren't British citizens, he could have had them take a trip to wherever the Victorian version of Reno was. From what we're told, Maria probably wouldn't have wanted a divorce. Still, Gibson could have had his wife and children reside at another of the many estates he owned world-wide. Instead, he chose to *keep* her in his household, abusing her, *and forcing her to watch him bond with another woman*.

And then we come to our second woman in this tale, Miss Grace Dunbar, the lovely young governess.

We have seen a lot of *governesses* in the Canon, because in the day, there weren't a lot of other career options available for unmarried middle class women. Typist, teacher, governess...that was about it, if you weren't independently wealthy. And Miss Dunbar didn't seem to have one of those convenient bequests that would allow her independence.

The problem with being an attractive governess, especially if you're a lovely young lady, is that you might be in a bad position if your employer is a *predator*. You depend on him for your income, you live under his roof...there's no escape.

And let's be clear--the ex-senator was a bit of a cad:

I guess all my life I've been a man that reached out his hand for what he wanted, and I never wanted anything more than the love and possession of that woman. I told her so." "I said to her that if I could marry her I would, but that it was out of my power. I said that money was no object and that all I could do to make her happy and comfortable would be done."

Remember, he told us the Latin Americans were the ones unable to control their passions. *Ha!!* Also, a proposal that can be broken down to "*I will pay you to be my concubine who lives with me and my wife*" isn't the type of proposal that most women want to hear, I think.

So what does a young woman do when her incredibly wealthy (and potentially abusive) boss comes on to her? Grace couldn't leave his employment, because "*others were dependent upon her, and it was no light*

matter for her to let them all down by sacrificing her living." Not to mention, if he were vindictive, he could make it very difficult for her to get any other jobs of any valuable.

Holmes quite sensibly remonstrates Gibson: *"I do not blame you for feeling (passion for her). I should blame you if you expressed it, since this young lady was in a sense under your protection."* That's a fairly enlightened position to take in Victorian times--that men shouldn't abuse their positions of power to undertake romantic relations with their employees.

Perhaps Sherlock does a little bit *creepily paternalistic* when he chides Gibson, *"you have tried to ruin a defenceless girl who was under your roof,"* and asserts that such harassment might be worse than murder. Heavens, we can't have a girl *"ruined,"* can we? Then again, given the multiple instances Holmes had witnessed of women terrified that their husbands/fiancées would find out that they had had prior dalliances, our detective is justified in worrying about Grace's future might be once Gibson's love *"faded"* after he had had his way with her. Still, that's another other trap Miss Dunbar faced--if she returned her employer's affections, she would be viewed as tarnished and ruined. *Yeesh.*

That's not to say that these characters are merely studies in victimology. Neither of these women are exactly candidates for sainthood in how they deal with their problems. While Maria *did* suffer greatly, I think most of us will agree that nothing can justify *killing yourself and framing someone else for the murder so they will suffer.* That goes beyond justifiably upset to straight-up crazy.

Meanwhile, Grace was not above using her charms to manipulate things to her advantage. The other reason she didn't quit immediately?

She knew the influence she had over me, and that it was stronger than any other influence in the world. She wanted to use it for good...She believed and said that a fortune for one man that was more than he needed should not be built on ten thousand ruined men who were left without the means of life. That was how she saw it, and I guess she could see past the dollars to something that was more lasting. She found that I listened to what she said, and she believed she was serving the world by influencing my actions. So she stayed.

And Dunbar admits this much to Holmes--*"it was only my desire to influence his power to good ends which kept me under his roof."* I don't wish to be harsh to Grace here, but *"I won't let my rich married boss have sex with me, but I will stay and use his feelings for me to influence his multi-million dollar empire"* might not be the most ennobling response she could have had. Then again, it's not as she had a lot of other options...so if she's forced to stay, some good could come from Gibson's besottment.

It should also be noted that Grace was a little bit of a self-justifier: *"Nothing could justify me in remaining where I was a cause of unhappiness, and yet it is certain that the unhappiness would have remained even if I had left the house."*

So, since Maria is going to be miserable anyway, you might as well stay on let Gibson dote on you? *Please*. That's hardly standing up for the sisterhood.

So, that is our tale of two women. One was a wife, who was trapped in a marriage of unrequited love when her husband suddenly discovered he didn't love her anymore. He was terribly abusive to her, because "make her hate me" seemed like a more practical solution than "divorce" or "separate homes." She was forced, in a foreign country and foreign language, to helpless watch while her husband rejected her but wouldn't release her, and while he preyed on the hired help. The other woman is that hired help, a woman trapped in a society that provided no means of support for her and her family outside of marriage or working for her sexual harasser. Maria and Grace were stuck in situations with no good options, and forced to essentially be in conflict with each other over the affections of a rich man.

I can't say that Doyle *intended* this story to function as a critique of how women were treated in Victorian England, but it doesn't take a lot of digging to tease out this interpretation. So the next time someone wants to write an article on how superior Victorian times are to modern day, perhaps we can recommend that she read this story, and remind her that back in those "*good old days*" she might not have had the option of publishing articles under her own name, or of having legal protections against abusive husbands or sexual predator employers.

OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:

****For the first time, we have a story titled "Problem." Huzzah!!**

I never understood why Doyle so *overused* "**Adventure**" in the titles of his story, especially since so many of them were not terribly, well, *adventurous*. And most of the stories that didn't use the adventure naming convention have titles that work perfectly fine.

After this brief and welcome respite, though, *all* of our remaining tales are "adventures."

****As a young **Marvel Comics** fan, I was quite distressed when I read this story and found out that not only did it *NOT* feature a *hammer-wielding Norse god*, but there was also not a trace of a *magical Asgardian rainbow bridge*. What a rip-off!!**

****Thor Bridge is a wonderful mystery--and the best part is, it's apparently based on a *real* case!**

Dr. Hans Gross, an Austrian professor of criminology, wrote the **Handbook For Criminal Investigators** in 1893, and it was translated into English in 1898.

In the book, Gross describes the case of "*A.M.*," a supposedly wealthy grain merchant who was found apparently murdered by gunshot in the middle of a bridge. His wallet and watch were missing, and it was

assume that he had been robbed murdered by a local vagrant, who was arrested. But the "*Investigating Officer*" noticed "*a small, fresh injury*" on the wooden parapet of the bridge. He assumed the murderer had thrown something into the water and nicked the bridge; upon dragging the riverbed, they immediately found a large rock tied with 14 feet of rope to a gun with one chamber discharged! Experiments easily recreated the fake/suicide scenario, with nearly identical marks made in the parapet each time. It turned out that A.M. was really in deep financial trouble. He had taken out a large life insurance policy, and staged his suicide to look like a murder so his family would get the benefits. (You can read the full version of the case reprinted in **Volume II of The New Annotated Sherlock Holmes.**)

Truth is indeed stranger than fiction, eh? Clearly Doyle had read this account, or at least had it described to him in some detail. It is interesting that he changed it from an insurance fraud to a more melodramatic love triangle and attempt to frame someone else for the "*murder.*"

****The sentences that launched a million pastiches:**

Somewhere in the vaults of the bank of Cox and Co., at Charing Cross, there is a travel-worn and battered tin dispatch box with my name, John H. Watson, M. D., Late Indian Army, painted upon the lid. It is crammed with papers, nearly all of which are records of cases to illustrate the curious problems which Mr. Sherlock Holmes had at various times to examine.

That particular bank was destroyed during the **Blitz**. Thus, it became *de rigueur* for pastiches to preface themselves with tales of somehow finding tin boxes in the attic, or storeroom, or antique shoppe, or handed down by deceased relatives, to justify them as "*actually*" based on the writings of John Watson.

****Watson describes some of these "lost tales":**

Some, and not the least interesting, were complete failures, and as such will hardly bear narrating, since no final explanation is forthcoming. A problem without a solution may interest the student, but can hardly fail to annoy the casual reader.

Uh, this is one reader who *disagrees*, doctor. We want *all* the cases, not just the successes!!

****A panoply of apocryphal--albeit failed--cases:**

Mr. James Phillimore, who, stepping back into his own house to get his umbrella, was never more seen in this world.

No less remarkable is that of the cutter Alicia, which sailed one spring morning into a small patch of mist from where she never again emerged, nor was anything further ever heard of herself and her crew.

A third case worthy of note is that of Isadora Persano, the well-known journalist and duelist, who was found stark staring mad with a match box in front of him which contained a remarkable worm said to be unknown to science.

Tell me that you don't read that last one and immediately think of **Khan's** mind-control worms from **Star Trek II**. *KHAAAAAAAAANNNN!!!*

***One of John's reasons for suppressing some stories seems to be, well, we must protect the rich: ...the secrets of private families to an extent which would mean consternation in many exalted quarters if it were thought possible that they might find their way into print. I need not say that such a breach of confidence is unthinkable, and that these records will be separated and destroyed now that my friend has time to turn his energies to the matter.*

But what if they are "non-exalted" quarters? Is it OK to spoil the secrets of the poor?

Given this standard, it seems most likely means that **Senator Gibson** has passed on, or at the very least left England...certainly his family would feel "consternation" at the publication of this tale, unless he were no longer around to know of it...

***The reason Watson didn't publish more stories? "I feared to give the public a surfeit which might react upon the reputation of the man whom above all others I revere."*

No, no, we wanted *more*, not less!! More stories could not hurt the reputation of Sherlock Holmes!! More stories, *******!!**

***A lot of the controversy over the last two stories being narrated in the third-person was totally unnecessary, according to Watson: "In some I was myself concerned and can speak as an eye-witness, while in others I was either not present or played so small a part that they could only be told as by a third person."*

Funny how so few commentators seem willing to take John at his word there, and come up with increasingly unlikely theories as to who "really" wrote those tales.

***Watson continues to improve with "the method," according to Holmes: "The faculty of deduction is certainly contagious, Watson," he answered. "It has enabled you to probe my secret."*

***Our client: "You have heard of Neil Gibson, the Gold King?" he said. "You mean the American Senator?" "Well, he was once Senator for some Western state, but is better known as the greatest gold-mining magnate in the world."*

Wait, don't famous ex-senators all run for president, and take high-paying jobs on cable news networks while waiting for their return to power? Different times, I guess.

***Holmes: "The interesting personality of the accused does not obscure the clearness of the evidence."*

Wait--interesting how? At this point Holmes knows *nothing* about Grace Dunbar except that she is the young governess. He certainly doesn't know anything about her personality, other than the fawning letter Gibson sent. How is her personality "interesting," then?

****Really, does this sound like a letter from a man whose wife has just been slain?**

*I can't see the best woman God ever made go to her death without doing all that is possible to save her...It has been the gossip of the country. And never a voice raised for her! It's the ***** injustice of it all that makes me crazy.*

It's pretty incredible that a man doesn't *once* mention his murdered wife in a plea for the detective to help clear the woman accused of murdering her. There's falling out of love with your wife, and then there's *not giving a tinker's ***** that the mother of your children was murdered in cold blood*. What a *****.

****Fine set-up for a mystery:**

The wife was found in the grounds nearly half a mile from the house, late at night, clad in her dinner dress, with a shawl over her shoulders and a revolver bullet through her brain. No weapon was found near her and there was no local clue as to the murder...A revolver with one discharged chamber and a calibre which corresponded with the bullet was found on the floor of her wardrobe...Then the dead woman had a note upon her making an appointment at that very place and signed by the governess.

****Of course, that just points out that there was little ballistics or other forensic science yet. "Same calibre" by itself would get a verdict of not guilty on most episodes of **Law & Order**. And if you could run ballistics, do fingerprints, check for gunpowder residue, etc., the frame-up would completely fall apart even without Holmes' help.**

****Marlow Bates: "a thin, nervous wisp of a man with frightened eyes and a twitching, hesitating manner -- a man whom my own professional eye would judge to be on the brink of an absolute nervous breakdown."**

Love those Watson descriptions. And given that Sherlock has twice been forced to rest due to "*nervous exhaustion*," we can take it that he knows what he's talking about here.

****Bates: "But his wife was his chief victim. He was brutal to her -- yes, sir, brutal! How she came by her death I do not know, but I am sure that he had made her life a misery to her."**

Of course, he doesn't specify exactly *what* that brutality was.

In a later conversation with Gates: "*Did you ever witness physical violence towards her?*" "*No, I cannot say that. But I have heard words which were nearly as bad -- words of cold, cutting contempt, even before the servants.*"

I don't want to belittle the agony of constantly being verbally and emotionally abused. But even Gibson's biggest critic can't claim that he physically abused her.

Apparently some thought that physical abuse was necessary to justify her murderous scheme-- the **Granada** adaptation has Gates say that Gibson *actually struck her more than once*. The better for the audience to hate him, and sympathize with her, I suppose.

****More delicious Watson descriptions:**

If I were a sculptor and desired to idealize the successful man of affairs, iron of nerve and leathery of conscience, I should choose Mr. Neil Gibson as my model.

His tall, gaunt, craggy figure had a suggestion of hunger and rapacity. An Abraham Lincoln keyed to base uses instead of high ones would give some idea of the man. His face might have been chiselled in granite, hard-set, craggy, remorseless, with deep lines upon it, the scars of many a crisis. Cold gray eyes, looking shrewdly out from under bristling brows, surveyed us each in turn.

"An Abraham Lincoln keyed to base uses instead of high ones." My god, that's great stuff, even if you don't agree with Doyle's theories that physical appearance echoes moral character...

****This statement by Holmes has caused some controversy: "My professional charges are upon a fixed scale," said Holmes coldly. "I do not vary them, save when I remit them altogether."**

That may or may not be consistent with what we've seen in other stories. Perhaps this is a newer policy, once Holmes' successes have made him financially secure. Or perhaps the "fixed scale" is not per hour or per case, but the clients' wealth..."*if you're this rich, I charge this much*"?

**** Holmes sarcasm to Gibson is breath-taking: "I suppose you are within your rights -- and maybe doing your duty -- in asking such a question, Mr. Holmes." "We will agree to suppose so," said Holmes.**

and

This case is quite sufficiently complicated to start with without the further difficulty of false information." "Meaning that I lie." "Well, I was trying to express it as delicately as I could, but if you insist upon the word I will not contradict you."

and

You've done yourself no good this morning, Mr. Holmes, for I have broken stronger men than you. No man ever crossed me and was the better for it." "So many have said so, and yet here I am," said Holmes, smiling.

and

"Very generous, I am sure," said Holmes with a sneer.

You have to love the stories where Holmes take the piss out of the upper class, and this story is problem the detective at his most snide and vicious.

****Holmes admits that, for once, he doesn't actually know everything for certain right away:**

Bluff, Watson, bluff! When I considered the passionate, unconventional, unbusinesslike tone of his letter and contrasted it with his self-contained manner and appearance, it was pretty clear that there was some deep emotion which centred upon the accused woman rather than upon the victim.

****More Holmes upbraiding a rich man pretty severely:**

"I don't know that anything she is accused of is really worse than what you have yourself admitted, that you have tried to ruin a defenceless girl who was under your roof. Some of you rich men have to be taught that all the world cannot be bribed into condoning your offences."

Nice sentiment, except for the implication that adultery or deflowering a young woman is worse than murder.

****Trouble getting in to see Miss Dunbar in jail: *"There was some delay in the official pass,... We were compelled to spend the night at Winchester, as the formalities had not yet been completed..."***

Was it *really* so difficult for someone--especially Sherlock Holmes--to get in to visit an accused person in jail prior to trial? Or was this red tape just a *plot device* to delay his meeting with Grace, and thus make the story last a little longer?

****Sergeant Coventry:**

He was a tall, thin, cadaverous man, with a secretive and mysterious manner which conveyed the idea that he knew or suspected a very great deal more than he dared say. He had a trick, too, of suddenly sinking his voice to a whisper as if he had come upon something of vital importance, though the information was usually commonplace enough.

Seriously, Doyle/Watson was pretty much *on fire* in this story with the descriptive prose.

Coventry is also a fairly *reasonable* copper, not afraid at all of having Sherlock make him look bad:

"Anyhow, I'd rather have you than Scotland Yard, Mr. Holmes," said he. "If the Yard gets called into a case, then the local loses all credit for success and may be blamed for failure. Now, you play straight, so I've heard."

Maybe it was just **Scotland Yard** inspectors who resented Holmes' *"interference."*

****"And these Americans are readier with pistols than our folk are."**

Unfortunately, still true in the 21st century.

****Holmes on why the nature of the crime speaks against the killer making panicky mistakes:**

You have planned it. A note has been written. The victim has come. You have your weapon. The crime is done. It has been workmanlike and complete. Do you tell me that after carrying out so crafty a crime you would now ruin your reputation as a criminal by forgetting to fling your weapon into those adjacent reed-beds

which would forever cover it, but you must needs carry it carefully home and put it in your own wardrobe, the very first place that would be searched?...Where a crime is coolly premeditated, then the means of covering it are coolly premeditated also.

Of course, just because a killing is coldly planned doesn't mean that, once the blood start flowing, that a first-time criminal might not *freak out* a little bit and do something stupid. Still, the point is well-taken: the fact that everything else was so well planned makes the suggested "*panicked mistake*" less likely.

****Grace describing her meeting at the bridge with Maria:**

Never did I realize till that moment how this poor creature hated me. She was like a mad woman -- indeed, I think she was a mad woman, subtly mad with the deep power of deception which insane people may have. How else could she have met me with unconcern every day and yet had so raging a hatred of me in her heart?

This is a good example of Dunbar's lack of self-awareness. By her own admission, Dunbar was having a "*mental and spiritual*" relationship with Maria's husband--can she *really* be surprised that the woman is upset with her? Does she really believe that most wives would be fine being put on the sidelines emotionally while their husbands bonded "*spiritually*" with their "*work wives*"?

Granted, Maria *was* indeed insane--but Grace shows a *stunning* lack of empathy and some serious self-deception to claim befuddlement at Maria's anger.

****According to the Granada subtitle, Brazilian women yell and curse...in Spanish:**

****Holmes shows the perils of having too good an imagination while spinning theories: "*but one drawback of an active mind is that one can always conceive alternative explanations which would make our scent a false one.*"**

Of course, this also applies to various commentators spinning out alternate theories as to what really happened in the various Holmes stories (*myself included*).

****Holmes defends the police investigation (and his own) against anticipated press attacks, once the truth is known:**

The papers may ask why the mere was not dragged in the first instance, but it is easy to be wise after the event, and in any case the expanse of a reed-filled lake is no easy matter to drag unless you have a clear perception of what you are looking for and where.

Of course, believing that they had found the gun right away would have made dragging the mere pointless, so there's really not *much* for the press to attack--especially since they themselves were enthusiastic supporters of "*the gorgeous governess did it*" theory!

***"Well, Watson, we have helped a remarkable woman, and also a formidable man. Should they in the future join their forces, as seems not unlikely, the financial world may find that Mr. Neil Gibson has learned something in that schoolroom of sorrow where our earthly lessons are taught."*

Given that Watson wrote this story up *decades* after it happened, he *already knows* what happened in the future with Gibson and Dunbar. He really should have told us, instead of signing off on a "I wonder what will happen" note. *Boo!*

Brian Keith Snell
September 13, 2015