

## *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 LI – The Adventure of the Creeping Man

## The Adventure Of The Creeping Man--"Risible Science Fiction"?

I've discussed before why I feel that horror and supernatural stories aren't appropriate for **Sherlock Holmes**. Doyle himself has Holmes declare why, in **The Hound Of The Baskervilles** and **Devil's Foot**: "*if...we are dealing with forces outside the ordinary laws of Nature, there is an end of our investigation.*", and "*I have hitherto confined my investigations to this world. In a modest way I have combated evil, but to take on the Father of Evil himself would, perhaps, be too ambitious a task.*"

But what happens if the Holmes story seems to cross over into *science fiction*, instead of horror?

Which brings us to **The Adventure of The Creeping Man**.

Author **David Stuart Davies**, in an afterword to a 2004 edition of **Case-Book**, dismissed Creeping Man as "*risible science fiction.*" He's written a number of Holmes pastiches, so he has some qualifications to discuss what may or may not be appropriate for **The Great Detective**.

This quote gives me two things to discuss regarding Creeping Man. First, in general, are science fiction-type stories an appropriate *milieu* for Holmes? Secondly, *is* Creeping Man science fiction? And if it is, is it "*risible*?"

As to the first question, let me plead that I'm having to speak in overly broad generalities here--there are as many sub-genres of horror and science fiction as there are of mystery, if not more. So, as I gather my thoughts here, I'll gladly concede that of course there are exceptions to any of my pronouncements, and not all genre stories conform to the limitations I suggest.

I won't belabor the horror idea--I've covered that before, and we'll look at that again next story. But there is one thing in particular that I feel works against horror being a fair genre for Sherlock Holmes.



Horror by its very nature is outside of Holmes wheelhouse. Sherlock is an investigator who relies on absolute physical laws of nature. He's spent his life building up, through observation and experimentation, a system for analyzing and studying crime. But *without* firm physical laws, that system is useless. If footprints always work like X, and tobacco ash always works like Y, then Holmes, and the police, and ultimately the courts, can rely on his deductions. But if there are beings that are *super-natural*, able to violate and ignore those physical laws, than Sherlock's observation and deductions become useless. "*There are no footprints here, so the killer could not have gone this way--well, unless he was a vampire and turned into a bat and flew away*" would make for a pretty unconvincing pronouncement from Holmes, wouldn't it? It also makes it much more difficult to solve cases, and especially to prosecute criminal in court: "*Your honor, Sherlock Holmes himself concedes that a vampire could have committed the crime--that's reasonable doubt!*"

And I will admit once again that this is largely based on my personal preferences. There are any number of pastiches out there where Sherlock Holmes does indeed interact with the supernatural--so obviously plenty of people don't see it the way I do. And there are plenty of works out there about police and detectives who operate in a supernatural world...and a lot of them are pretty good. Which is fine--different strokes, there's room enough for everyone's interpretations, etc. But for me, Sherlock Holmes is a character who interacts with the real world, a proto-**CSI** who shows how crime and the like can be investigated and solved by the human mind. Take away that real world, or rather allow the unreal to creep in, and you completely change the dynamic.

Does that same problem apply to science fiction, however?

Well, that depends.

With much science fiction, we're still dealing with the real world, with real physical laws. The creators are just *extrapolating* and *building* upon those natural rules. With sufficient education, there's no reason why Holmes couldn't opine on how the mud of my trouser cuff could only have come from the colony on Jupiter's moon, and it would be consistent with how we accept Holmes now. After all, I don't think that any current readers of The Canon can honestly say that they know for certain how mud splashes into which seat of a dog cart, or what particular callouses on certain finger mean. We just *accept* Sherlock's word for it. It might as well be science fiction for those who have never been to Victorian England.

And if you wanted to lay sufficient groundwork, sure, Sherlock Holmes could recognize Dalek tracks or recognize that those bullet holes are too precise for Sand People. I'm not sure that you'd want to, but it wouldn't complete violate the *precis* of how the character works.

Of course, much science fiction goes far *beyond* that. When we have "*star-children*" from **2001**, or god-like beings who can transport people across the galaxy instantly, we've gone well beyond what we actually

know about the physical universe, and well beyond what our earth-bound detective can reasonably intuit. We've entered the realm of **Clarke's Third Law**: *any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic*. And that indistinguishability from magic takes us back to the problems I have with Holmes and horror-- if something isn't physically possible in Holmes' world, than there's no way his powers and faculties can be of use in solving them.

Such "*magical*" science fiction requires a massive suspension of disbelief, which is the opposite of what a detective story needs. Again, that produces results that I don't care for in my Sherlock Holmes stories. A "locked room" mystery shouldn't have "*Well, perhaps a Metron teleported him to a planet light-years away*" as a possibility.

So, science fiction *could* work in a Holmes story in some cases, but in many other cases would result in the same problems as horror. Where does that leave the Creeping Man, then?

At its most basic, this story is: old man injects himself with monkey serum so that he may be more virile for his younger love, but the stuff causes him to act more like a monkey.

Is this science fiction? Was it at the time?

**Alvin Rodin** and **Jack Key**, in their **Medical Casebook Of Dr. Arthur Conan Doyle**, relate to us the work of French physiologist **Brown-Sequard**, who was known for trying to invent elixirs of youth. In 1889, he announced in medical journals

*that he had injected himself with testicular secretions pf guinea pigs and dog, and felt "rejuvenated" as a result. He reported that he was now able to engage in sexual relations with his new, younger wife, whereas previously he had found his capabilities limited.*

That summary is by **Leslie Klinger** in **The New Annotated Sherlock Holmes**.

Well, that certainly sounds pretty on point to the case of **Professor Presbury**, doesn't it? Of course, it was mostly *quackery*. But quackery was not uncommon in medicine, even into the 1920s, when Sir Arthur Conan Doyle wrote Creeping Man. Hell, there were even doctors advocating transplanting actual whole glands from monkeys into humans at the time. Obviously, "*science*" wasn't what it is now, but this was (unsupported, unproven) scientific thought of the era, *not* "science fiction."

And much in the way that **Devil's Foot** seemed prescient of future developments in pharmacology, is Creeping Man in any way out of step with 2015? We *still* have people slaughtering endangered species because their body parts supposedly increase "*virility*" and "*vigor*." And check the spam folder in your email-- "*boner pills*" are a billion dollar business, and even the existence of real medications that actually do improve sexual performance doesn't stop the hunt for newer, cheap, non-prescription-required pills or supplements that will "*make her scream in pleasure*." An entire industry is based on making men feel inadequate and

ashamed of their sexual performance. In that light, the decision of Professor Presbury to seek a little something to put some extra steam in his stride wholly modern, and not "*risible science fiction*."

And we also know now, with actual medical certainty, that hormones and endocrines and other chemicals that you put into your body can have a tremendous effect on you mentally, as well as physically.

Just look at some of the side effects attributed to steroid use, for example, and compare them with the way people describe Presbury's transformation:

*"He became furtive and sly. Those around him had always the feeling that he was not the man that they had known, but that he was under some shadow which had darkened his higher qualities....His naturally violent nature is intensified by it..."* Apart from his queer fits, he has actually more energy and vitality than I can ever remember, nor was his brain ever clearer."

Becoming stronger, more energy and vitality--but accompanied by mood swings, mania, disproportionate anger, a tendency towards violence? Much of that could come straight out of any reporting from the last 15 years over the dangers of steroids or other performance enhancing drugs. This sounds like many of the descriptions of "*roid rage*." Creeping Man is decades ahead of its time in forecasting the dangers of trying to improve oneself, sexually or athletically, through putting gosh knows what into your body.

So, the part where injecting yourself with monkey serum makes you physically act like a monkey? Yeah, that's *probably* bullshit. But it's not as if the professor had physically transformed into a monkey. And such a serum probably could cause unexpected physiological and behavioral changes. Do we question whether a dog could detect the "monkey juice" in Presbury, and react violently? Well, modern science has given some credence to the theory that dogs can detect cancer in humans because of the different chemicals that malignancies emit--so is a canine detecting similar changes in his master *so* completely out-of-bounds?

Of course, Doyle meant a lot of this on an allegorical level, as did **Stevenson** in **Doctor Jekyll And Mr. Hyde**, of **Mary Shelley** in **Frankenstein**. He didn't intend it *merely* as a condemnation of dangerous and untested medicine, but also as a *moral parable* about knowing and being content with ourselves:

*"The real source," said Holmes, "lies, of course, in that untimely love affair which gave our impetuous professor the idea that he could only gain his wish by turning himself into a younger man. When one tries to rise above Nature one is liable to fall below it. The highest type of man may revert to the animal if he leaves the straight road of destiny."*

And Doyle amplifies that by opining how such "crazy" medicine endangers our world and our souls:

*There is danger there -- a very real danger to humanity. Consider, Watson, that the material, the sensual, the worldly would all prolong their worthless lives. The spiritual would not avoid the call to something higher. It would be the survival of the least fit. What sort of cesspool may not our poor world become?"*

So, sort of like **Left Behind**, with the remaining population consisting only of those "base" enough to put a priority on extending their lives past their natural limits. Pretty deep for a mystery story.

Was *Creeping Man* science fiction, then? A *bit*, perhaps, but it was based on a lot of medical thinking at the time, and modern medicine has shown that much of the story is not as far-fetched as older criticisms have tried to make it seem. Doyle took one half-step into the future, as part of an allegory. It seems churlish and short-sighted to dismiss the story as "risible science fiction."

#### **OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:**

**\*\***On the other hand, it *is* perfectly acceptable to dismiss the story as a *poor mystery*.

Indeed, there's not much "mystery" here. A respected man is behaving oddly. And...well, that's about it. The only question we have is why. No crimes have been committed, no one seems to be in any danger. There are no consequences--Sherlock promises to write a threatening letter to **Lowenstein**, but otherwise there is no follow-up whatsoever. We don't know if Presbury recovers; we don't know no if he resumes taking the monkey serum; we don't no the fate of his romancing of **Alice**; we learn nothing about the "*other client*" Lowenstein has in England; does **Bennett** end up marrying **Edith**? The entire story is "*Oh, it's monkey hormones, a shrug, and a rush to lunch without actually resolving anything.*"

And since Watson is telling us this story some *twenty years* after it happened, there's really no excuse for his not giving us any resolution to some of these questions.

**\*\*Granada** also apparently didn't think it was much of a mystery, so they seriously restructured things to try and keep the audience in the dark. Edith couldn't tell that it was her father in the window, only a vague someone or something. The fact that the dog had attacked its master wasn't revealed until much later in the story. Bennett hadn't wanted to consult Holmes, but Edith forced him. And no one suspected that anything was wrong with the professor, while the adaptation kept sowing red herrings about stolen or escaped apes.

**\*\***Watson has decided to tell us this story "*if only to dispel once for all the ugly rumours which some twenty years ago agitated the university and were echoed in the learned societies of London.*"

What rumors?!? If Bennett and Presbury and Holmes didn't go to the authorities, what rumors would there be? "*The professor had to take some time off after his dog went mad and attacked him*" seems like it would have been a perfectly fine excuse to spread around. Who was telling tales out of school, then, and what were the "*ugly*" rumours?

By the way, Watson, telling everyone that the professor was shooting up monkey testicle juice so he could be a better lover for his young wife isn't terribly non-ugly...Surely that's as bad as any of the rumours themselves?

**\*\*"Now we have at last obtained permission to ventilate the facts..."**

From *whom*? The professor would be 81ish at the time of the story's publication--was he still alive? Perhaps the serum was effective at extending life!

It would be odd to think that his daughter Edith had relented, if she had opposed the affair becoming public all this time. What changed? Who else could have had the right to give permission?

**\*\*Great "laconic message" from Sherlock: "*Come at once if convenient -- if inconvenient come all the same. S. H.*"**

**\*\*How Watson sees his later relationship with Sherlock:**

*As an institution I was like the violin, the shag tobacco, the old black pipe, the index books, and others perhaps less excusable. When it was a case of active work and a comrade was needed upon whose nerve he could place some reliance, my role was obvious. But apart from this I had uses. I was a whetstone for his mind. I stimulated him. He liked to think aloud in my presence. His remarks could hardly be said to be made to me -- many of them would have been as appropriately addressed to his bedstead -- but none the less, having formed the habit, it had become in some way helpful that I should register and interject.*

Nice cocaine reference, John.

Some people see *bitterness* in Watson's litany here. And John does seem a bit snippy in this story. But really, it is more bittersweet, as Watson is acknowledging that their lives have drifted apart. With Watson's practice thriving, and probably married, there's not just as much time in John's life for adventuring.

But it's also a bit of a *humble brag*, I think. Given the high regard Watson has for the intellect of his friend, to suggest that he was Holmes' *muse*, even if in a passive way, is no small thing. "*I was a whetstone for his mind*" doesn't sound like a rebuke to me.

**\*\*Holmes:**

*"I was able, by watching the mind of the child, to form a deduction as to the criminal habits of the very smug and respectable father...A dog reflects the family life. Whoever saw a frisky dog in a gloomy family, or a sad dog in a happy one? Snarling people have snarling dogs, dangerous people have dangerous ones. And their passing moods may reflect the passing moods of others."*

Watson is probably right to find it *"far-fetched."* It is interesting, though, as a reversal of Holmes' prior position on nature vs. nurture. Earlier in his career, Holmes was quick to blame *"bad blood"* and evil ancestry for a criminal's corruption. But this statement seems much more like suggesting that nurture is as important, if not more so...

**\*\***Just as Holmes and Watson have suggested that a woman in "middle age" should no longer be lusty (*"Miss Burnet, an Englishwoman of forty or thereabouts...I may add that Miss Burnet's age and character make it certain that my first idea that there might be a love interest in our story is out of the question"*), society seems to disapprove of older men being too "active" in romance.

*"Then the current of his life was broken. He is sixty-one years of age, but he became engaged to the daughter of Professor Morphy, his colleague in the chair of comparative anatomy. It was not, as I understand, the reasoned courting of an elderly man but rather the more passionate frenzy of youth, for no one could have shown himself a more devoted lover..."*

And his family disapproves *"We thought it rather excessive."*

No passionate frenzy for you, older men!! And women, if your over 40, forget it!! Leave that mushy stuff for the youngsters!!

**\*\***Holmes could sometimes appear not to be listening...

*...but I fear I weary you."* Mr. Bennett spoke in a tone of reproach, for it was very clear that Holmes was not listening. His face was rigid and his eyes gazed abstractedly at the ceiling. With an effort he recovered himself.

Dude, let the man think!

**\*\***Bennett's fear-filled description of his beloved mentor acting oddly:

*I could see that something was coming along the passage, something dark and crouching. Then suddenly it emerged into the light, and I saw that it was he. He was crawling, Mr. Holmes -- crawling! He was not quite on his hands and knees. I should rather say on his hands and feet, with his face sunk between his hands. Yet he seemed to move with ease. I was so paralyzed by the sight that it was not until he had reached my door that I was able to step forward and ask if I could assist him. His answer was extraordinary. He sprang up, spat out some atrocious word at me, and hurried on past me, and down the staircase.*

**\*\***Watson, as always, practical:

*"Lumbago, possibly. I have known a severe attack make a man walk in just such a way, and nothing would be more trying to the temper."*

*"Good, Watson! You always keep us flat-footed on the ground."*

\*\*Watson continues to be the only practical one, suggesting that Presbury's problems just might be psychological:

*"Speaking as a medical man," said I, "it appears to be a case for an alienist. The old gentleman's cerebral processes were disturbed by the love affair. He made a journey abroad in the hope of breaking himself of the passion."*

Good old Watson. In a sane world, you would be right...

\*\*Of course, Holmes is also willing to prick the balloon of Watson's practicality:

*"His letters and the box may be connected with some other private transaction -- a loan, perhaps, or share certificates, which are in the box."*

*"And the wolfhound no doubt disapproved of the financial bargain."*

\*\*Holmes again being wry:

*The door opened and a young lady was shown into the room. As she appeared Mr. Bennett sprang up with a cry and ran forward with his hands out to meet those which she had herself outstretched.*

*"Edith, dear! Nothing the matter, I hope?"*

*"I felt I must follow you. Oh, Jack, I have been so dreadfully frightened! It is awful to be there alone."*

*"Mr. Holmes, this is the young lady I spoke of. This is my fiancé."*

*"We were gradually coming to that conclusion, were we not, Watson?" Holmes answered with a smile.*

\*\*Once again we play the **Oxford/Cambridge** guessing game. But this time, Doyle is clearly aware of the controversy, and in on the joke. Instead of simply not naming the university, he calls it **Camford**.

I don't have a horse in this race, so I honestly don't care. It is fun, though, to watch everyone tie themselves into knots trying to make their arguments.

\*\*Watson again seeming a bit exasperated with Holmes, as dropping everything to go off on a case is *"an easy effort on the part of Holmes, who had no roots to pull up, but one which involved frantic planning and hurrying on my part, as my practice was by this time not inconsiderable."*

Yes, John, we sympathize. Would you rather go back to the days where Holmes bought your practice, paid your rent, and kept your checkbook for you?

\*\*Holmes questions whether Watson can bluff their way through a meeting with Presbury: *"Have you the effrontery necessary to put it through?"* But Holmes himself seems to lack the nerve, completely changing the planned story in the heat of the moment. Instead of claiming that the professor made the appointment himself during one of his "spells," Holmes tries to soft pedal it as someone else might have invited him: *"I heard through a second person that Professor Presbury of Camford had need of my services."*

\*\*Presbury's overreaction to Holmes' visit is pretty epic:



*"Hardly enough, Mr. Holmes!" the old man cried in a high screaming voice, with extraordinary malignancy upon his face. He got between us and the door as he spoke, and he shook his two hands at us with furious passion. "You can hardly get out of it so easily as that." His face was convulsed, and he grinned and gibbered at us in his senseless rage. I am convinced that we should have had to fight our way out of the room if Mr. Bennett had not intervened.*

He's ready to beat the c\*\*\* out of our duo just because of what could be explained as a misunderstanding!

Holmes tries to excuse him, a bit: *"Explosive, no doubt, but then from his point of view he has something to explode about if detectives are put on his track and he suspects his own household of doing it."* Really, if that's sufficient justification, than life amongst the luxury class in those days must have been much more violent than we thought!

\*\*Another reason is that this mystery is a bit lacking is that Holmes doesn't do all that much detecting. How does he find out about **Dorak**? *Someone else* does and hands the information to him: *"I have the address of the man in London to whom the professor writes. He seems to have written this morning, and I got it from his blotting-paper. It is an ignoble position for a trusted secretary, but what else can I do?"*

He has one of his agents track down Dorak. He waits until Presbury has been nearly killed to take his key and open the mysterious wooden box.

Honestly, most of this story would have played out *exactly* the same had Holmes not gotten involved!

\*\*As Holmes got older he adopted some agents to carry out menial tasks for him: *"Mercer is since your time," said Holmes. "He is my general utility man who looks up routine business."*

There could have been some interesting stories about these agents. Who are they? How did they come to work for Holmes?

\*\**"It's surely time that I disappeared into that little farm of my dreams."* Soon enough, Sherlock.

\*\*A crazy scene:

*In all our adventures I do not know that I have ever seen a more strange sight than this impassive and still dignified figure crouching frog-like upon the ground and goading to a wilder exhibition of passion the maddened hound, which ramped and raged in front of him, by all manner of ingenious and calculated cruelty.*

I don't know that monkeys are that interested in tormenting angry dogs. But what do I know? The Granada adaptation adds a line that in Hindu mythology, the dog and the monkey are mortal enemies to try and justify it.

\*\***Macphail** the coachman apparently knew a lot of what was going on well ahead of everyone else:

*The uproar had brought the sleepy and astonished coachman from his room above the stables. "I'm not surprised," said he, shaking his head. "I've seen him at it before. I knew the dog would get him sooner or later."*

Wait a minute!! You're "*not surprised*"?!?! You knew this *all along*, and didn't bother to tell anyone?!? Macphail knew that his employer was acting in a crazy fashion, and was tormenting the dog so much that he was jeopardizing his own life...*and he keeps this information to himself?!?!?* If he speaks up earlier, perhaps Holmes cracks the case earlier, before anyone is maimed!

Maybe Macphail was the one spreading ugly rumors...

**\*\*Mad Czech scientists:**

*Lowenstein! The name brought back to me the memory of some snippet from a newspaper which spoke of an obscure scientist who was striving in some unknown way for the secret of rejuvenescence and the elixir of life. Lowenstein of Prague! Lowenstein with the wondrous strength-giving serum, tabooed by the profession because he refused to reveal its source.*

In modern times, Lowenstein would have an hour-long infomercial on late night TV...

**\*\*You know, given the revelation that his employer and mentor was injecting himself with monkey testosterone (or whatever), Bennett is pretty \*\*\*\* calm: "Well, thanks to you, Mr. Holmes, it is very clear that we have traced the evil to its source."**

Really, that's all you have to say? No reaction of shock, or disgust, or outrage? Nothing?!?

**\*\*Holmes plan to impede Lowenstein's research:**

*When I have written to this man and told him that I hold him criminally responsible for the poisons which he circulates, we will have no more trouble.*

Well, first of all, it's not at all clear that Lowenstein has violated any laws at all. And just because Holmes will hold him responsible doesn't mean that the law will. And there's no indication whatsoever that Lowenstein would stop his research no matter what Holmes says. Heck, there's not even any indication that Presbury will stop buying the stuff and using it!!

I'm just saying, *writing a stern letter* is not the most satisfying way to resolve a mystery...

**Brian Keith Snell**  
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