

## *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 LVIII – The Adventure of the Retired Colourman

## The Adventure Of The Retired Colourman--Paint-By-Numbers Mystery With One Colour Missing?

The Adventure Of The Retired Colourman is not a bad set-up for a story.

But in too many ways, it doesn't go *beyond* the set-up, the basic sketch. The story has a few good things going for it, but it feels like there a lot of details missing, a lot of necessary connective tissue to make us *care* about the mystery.

Take, for example, our victims. Let's start with the wife, uh...umm...well....she's never even *named* in the story!!

That's not all that unusual for **Doyle**--he has a bad habit of not naming wives, sometimes, as if they're just adjuncts of their husbands. The era, and sexism, and all.

But in this case, it's also indicative that after Sir Arthur came up with the killer and how he did it, the rest of the backstory was too much to be bothered with.

What of **Mrs. Amberley**, then? We're told that **Josiah** retired at 61, and one year later married "a woman twenty years younger than himself." So she's presumably in her forties. Why does a woman like woman marry a man like Josiah? Did she have no idea what an *abusive miser* he was? Did he somehow manage to fool her? He certainly, as Holmes said, "*has few outward graces, whatever his inner virtues may be.*" Or was this a marriage of *convenience*? Perhaps she was recently widowed, with no means of support, and any port in a storm? Maybe he promised to take care of her family's debts if she married him?

Without understanding why she married him, and what the basis of their relationship was, it's hard to judge the state of their marriage, and whether she was likely to have had an affair. Remember, *everything* we



know about Mrs. Amberley comes to us third hand. Perhaps most importantly, it comes to us through a mind so *unbalanced* that **Holmes** believes he may belong in an asylum and not the gallows.

Despite this, Holmes seems to accept *all* of Josiah's accusations at face value. "*Ernest was frequently in the house, and an intimacy between him and Mrs. Amberley was a natural sequence*"? "*So also is it that young Dr. Ernest, an unmarried man, played chess with Amberley, and probably played the fool with his wife.*"? Given what we know of Josiah after the case is over, isn't it just as likely that either he is lying, or it is all in his paranoid imagination?

Not that it necessarily matters--even if she was having an affair, that hardly justifies her murder, particularly in such a gruesome fashion. But without victim-shaming, it is *important* to know what drove the killer. Was she fooling around with **Dr. Ernest**, or was Josiah just foolishly jealous over nothing? A cold-blooded murderer, or truly insane?

The same applies to Dr. Ernest. What do we know about him? *He plays chess.* End of story.

We're told that Josiah "*made his wife so wretched by his niggardly ways that she was a ready prey for any adventurer.*" An adventurer? A doctor who goes to play Josiah at chess--at Josiah's invitation--qualifies as "*an adventurer?*"

How about Ernest's looks? Age? Type of doctor? Disposition? Any history of wooing wedded women (and fleeing with her husband's fortune)? As Holmes asked, "*Was he the gay Lothario one would expect?*" Again, there is no actual evidence shown to confirm Amberley's accusations. Holmes claims that "*the opinion of the neighbours*" is enough to "*confirm*" Josiah's story, but come now--that's also getting your story third or fourth-hand. The detective is willing to put local gossip above actual evidence? *Pshaw.* Even after Amberley has been caught, and Holmes declaims on the level of his madness, he is still willing to declare "*so also is it that young Dr. Ernest, an unmarried man, played chess with Amberley, and probably played the fool with his wife.*" That is truly unsupported by *anything* except the claims of a murdering madman and local gossips. We expect Holmes to make such declarations based on actual evidence.

Oh, and Dr. Ernest's family was willing to hire a detective to investigate his disappearance, which is at least *one* indication that those close to Ernest didn't believe Josiah's calumny. (There's no indication that Mrs. Amberly's family did the same, but then again, we don't know anything whatsoever about her, including whether she had family).

And it should be emphasized--even *if* we believed that Ernest and Mrs. Amberly were having an affair, there is even *less* evidence that they planned to abscond with any money or securities.

Holmes often proclaims that he seeks justice--well, in this case, he should have spent some time securing justice for the *slandered victims* of an insane murderer.

Some of these details could have been--should have been--explored. It would have been easy to make the story a bit longer (it is *very* short), or if necessary, to spend less time on **Watson** and Amberley's amusing but overly-long trip to the hinterlands.

But without this information, how can we understand the murderer? What about Josiah? Was he truly justified in his fears of an affair? Again, not that that would excuse homicide--but it would broaden our portrait of the character. Had he been married previously, and cuckolded before? If his jealousy could reach the point of a "frantic mania," why invite Ernest into his home? Was he, in his madness, trying to "test" her loyalty?

There are also some inconsistencies in Sir Arthur's portrayal of Josiah. He is such a *good actor* that he completely fools Watson and Holmes on his first visit. But later, he does nothing but complain about following any investigative path, when an innocent victim would have been eager to follow up any such "clues." He has the "swank" (we Americans would say "balls") to beard the lion in his den, and go to Sherlock Holmes to "solve" his wife's "disappearance." But the first time that someone mentions that he's a suspect, he tries to commit suicide? Someone so arrogant as to think he could best Holmes wouldn't be carrying around cyanide pills, because he wouldn't be able to conceive of being caught--at least that's how my armchair psychology reads it.

So we have a chilling murder, and an interesting (if confusing) murderer. But by completely ignoring the victims, and not properly examining the truth of the killer's claim, Doyle weakened leaves some of the *colours* out of this mystery's palette. It's an incomplete picture, which does disservice to the victims (and the readers), and ultimately makes the murderer himself less interesting.

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

**\*\*Welcome back, John Watson. You've been missed!!**

**\*\*Geez, Sherlock, cheer up a bit! "Exactly, Watson. Pathetic and futile. But is not all life pathetic and futile? Is not his story a microcosm of the whole? We reach. We grasp. And what is left in our hands at the end? A shadow. Or worse than a shadow -- misery."**

Sounds like someone needs some drugs...

**\*\*Scotland Yard** has a habit of foisting of low priority cases upon Holmes?

*He has been sent on by the Yard. Just as medical men occasionally send their incurables to a quack. They argue that they can do nothing more, and that whatever happens the patient can be no worse than he is.*

So how, then, can they complain about Holmes "*stealing the glory*" and taking credit for cases?

\*\*Amberley must have been a pretty good actor, as Holmes seems to be taking his claims at face value:  
*"The old story, Watson. A treacherous friend and a fickle wife."*

\*\*The *real* crime? *"What is more, the faithless spouse carried off the old man's deed-box as her personal luggage with a good part of his life's savings within."* Mess with his heart, but not his money!

Contrast with **Three Gables**, where Holmes says more and more people are using banks now, and not hiding their money on the premises.

I guess that didn't apply to *paranoid misers*...

\*\*It's good to be needed:

*"What will you do about it?"*

*"Well, the immediate question, my dear Watson, happens to be, What will you do? -- if you will be good enough to understudy me."*

\*\*Apocryphal case: "You know that I am preoccupied with this case of the two Coptic Patriarchs, which should come to a head to-day. I really have not time to go out to Lewisham,"

\*\*Swank: *"The old fellow was quite insistent that I should go."* Just think about that. Amberley was so confident that he actually *wanted* Sherlock Holmes to examine the scene of the crime.

\*\*Watson: *"I set forth to Lewisham, little dreaming that within a week the affair in which I was engaging would be the eager debate of all England."*

What's to debate? I suppose whether Amberley gets a straight jacket or the noose...

\*\*See, *this* is why we missed Watson:

*Holmes lay with his gaunt figure stretched in his deep chair, his pipe curling forth slow wreaths of acrid tobacco, while his eyelids drooped over his eyes so lazily that he might almost have been asleep were it not that at any halt or questionable passage of my narrative they half lifted, and two gray eyes, as bright and keen as rapiers, transfixed me with their searching glance.*

There's no way we would have gotten that same kind of self-description from Holmes as narrator...

\*\**"The Haven is the name of Mr. Josiah Amberley's house."*

I really think I missed out, growing up in an era where houses have *numbers*, not names. Or was that only a British thing? Do they still do that?

Maybe I'll just rechristen my apartment. From henceforth, I shall call my domicile "The Glade." Now I just have to explain it to the mailman...

\*\*Holmes is *not* of fan of having to listen to Watson's detailed descriptions of architecture:

*"I think it would interest you, Holmes. It is like some penurious patrician who has sunk into the company of his inferiors. You know that particular quarter, the monotonous brick streets, the weary suburban highways."*

*Right in the middle of them, a little island of ancient culture and comfort, lies this old home, surrounded by a high sun-baked wall mottled with lichens and topped with moss, the sort of wall --"*

*"Cut out the poetry, Watson," said Holmes severely. "I note that it was a high brick wall."*

**\*\*Our mysterious stalker is first seen:**

*He was a tall, dark, heavily moustached, rather military-looking man. He nodded in answer to my inquiry and gave me a curiously questioning glance, which came back to my memory a little later...It was undoubtedly the tall, dark man whom I had addressed in the street. I saw him once more at London Bridge, and then I lost him in the crowd. But I am convinced that he was following me."*

*"No doubt! No doubt!" said Holmes. "A tall, dark, heavily moustached man, you say, with gray-tinted sun-glasses?"*

*"Holmes, you are a wizard. I did not say so, but he had gray-tinted sun-glasses."*

*"And a Masonic tie-pin?"*

*"Holmes!"*

Some have complained that it would be a violation of rules for a Mason to wear his pin where it could be seen by the public. But if that were true, how would anyone outside of the group ever *know* what the pin looked like in the first place?

More seriously, that's part of the disguise, the superfluous detail that, while perhaps not strictly accurate, distracts the witness...

**\*\*There seems to be a lot of confusion among commentators about **Barker**, and that Holmes' statements seem to contradict themselves.**

Nonsense. Although we not presented the information on Barker in a proper chronological order, so the reader has to do a little bit of lifting for himself, it's all their, and not contradictory.. Allow me to help.

Holmes: *"You had not met Barker, Watson. He is my hated rival upon the Surrey shore."* The "hated rival" is a bit *facetious*, as Sherlock later describes Mr. Barker as *"my friend and rival."* He's been successful, and Scotland Yard is well acquainted with him: *"He has several good cases to his credit, has he not, Inspector?"*

Ernest's family hired Barker to look into the doctor's disappearance, so he and Holmes were on the same case, just from different ends: *"He has been interesting himself also in your business, Mr. Josiah Amberley, though we have been working independently."*

Once they stumbled upon each other, *"Of course, I told him how matters stood and we continued the case together."*

So when Holmes says, *"as to Barker, he has done nothing save what I told him,"* he's referring to the conduct of *this particular case*, not his entire career.

Barker is a friendly rival detective, they both ended up working the same case, and this one time they decided to pool their efforts. No confusion at all, really.

There, was that so hard?

\*\*Wait, so Barker operated "*upon the Surrey shore?*" Is he still there when Holmes retires? Does he consult Holmes on cases?

Or, with the vacuum from Holmes' retirement, has Barker moved his operation to London?

\*\*Watson (and Doyle) continue to adhere to the "moral deformity must be echoed by physical deformity" school of literature:

*"He seemed to me like a man who was literally bowed down by care. His back was curved as though he carried a heavy burden. Yet he was not the weakling that I had at first imagined, for his shoulders and chest have the framework of a giant, though his figure tapers away into a pair of spindled legs."*

*"Left shoe wrinkled, right one smooth."*

*"I did not observe that."*

*"No, you wouldn't. I spotted his artificial limb. But proceed."*

Seriously, how could he *not* be a bad guy?

\*\*Watson's thought on the role of Victorian women:

*I have never seen a worse-kept place. The garden was all running to seed, giving me an impression of wild neglect in which the plants had been allowed to find the way of Nature rather than of art. How any decent woman could have tolerated such a state of things, I don't know.*

Of course, how a "*decent woman*" is expected to an estate in good repair when her husband is a miser might be the question you *should* be asking, John.

Of course, deeper commentary about how decent women not allowing plants "*to find the way of Nature*" and the metaphor of "nature" being a bad thing is invited here, but I'll leave that to others.

\*\*The husband doth protest too much, methinks:

*And human nature, Dr. Watson -- the black ingratitude of it all! When did I ever refuse one of her requests? Was ever a woman so pampered? And that young man -- he might have been my own son. He had the run of my house. And yet see how they have treated me! Oh, Dr. Watson, it is a dreadful, dreadful world!*

Well, at least he didn't go on about it forever..."*That was the burden of his song for an hour or more...*"  
Oh.

\*\*Holmes tempers his usual criticism of Watson:

*It is true that though in your mission you have missed everything of importance, yet even those things which have obtruded themselves upon your notice give rise to serious thought."*

*"What have I missed?"*

*"Don't be hurt, my dear fellow. You know that I am quite impersonal. No one else would have done better. Some possibly not so well."*

High praise from Sherlock.

**\*\*Holmes** has adjusted quite well to the existence of telephones: *"Thanks to the telephone and the help of the Yard, I can usually get my essentials without leaving this room."*

Wait until he sees the internet...

**\*\*Amberley** begins to break character:

*"It's perfectly absurd, Mr. Holmes," he said. "What can this man possibly know of what has occurred? It is waste of time and money."*

*"It would make the worst possible impression both on the police and upon myself, Mr. Amberley, if when so obvious a clue arose you should refuse to follow it up. We should feel that you were not really in earnest in this investigation."*

*Our client seemed horrified at the suggestion. "Why, of course I shall go if you look at it in that way," said he.*

Obviously, the man who *really* wanted to find his wife (and his money) wouldn't turn up his nose at a clue like this.

The **BBC 1965** adaptation sweetens the pot here , by telling us that Mrs. Amberley had a sister in the area of **Little Purlington**, thus making a communication from the area vicar not completely random and unlikely...

**\*\*Obviously**, at this point Holmes is fairly convinced Amberley is guilty: *"Whatever you do, see that he really does go," said he. "Should he break away or return, get to the nearest telephone exchange and send the single word 'Bolted.' I will arrange here that it shall reach me wherever I am."*

Of course, it's difficult to believe that this direction doesn't tell *Watson* what the game is. Let's just write that up to authorial discretion, and trying to preserve the mystery until the end of the story.

**\*\*Watson's** road trip from \*\*\*\*:

*My remembrance of the journey is not a pleasant one, for the weather was hot, the train slow, and my companion sullen and silent, hardly talking at all save to make an occasional sardonic remark as to the futility of our proceedings. When we at last reached the little station it was a two-mile drive before we came to the Vicarage.*

Holmes was surely laughing at how perfectly remote his choice of ruse was.

**\*\*Elman the Vicar** is rather a douche:

*A big, solemn, rather pompous clergyman received us in his study. Our telegram lay before him.*

*"Well, gentlemen," he asked, "what can I do for you?"*

*"We came," I explained, "in answer to your wire."*

*"My wire! I sent no wire."*

*"I mean the wire which you sent to Mr. Josiah Amberley about his wife and his money."*

*"If this is a joke, sir, it is a very questionable one," said the vicar angrily. "I have never heard of the gentleman you name, and I have not sent a wire to anyone."*

*Our client and I looked at each other in amazement. "Perhaps there is some mistake," said I; "are there perhaps two vicarages? Here is the wire itself, signed Elman and dated from the Vicarage."*

*"There is only one vicarage, sir, and only one vicar, and this wire is a scandalous forgery, the origin of which shall certainly be investigated by the police. Meanwhile, I can see no possible object in prolonging this interview."*

What a *self-important prig*. Sure it's an inconvenience, this mistaken meeting, but what would it cost you to be polite to people come to seek your aid? Some man of God...

**\*\*By the way...would a forged telegram really be a police matter, as long as there was no attempt at defrauding someone of money or property?**

**\*\*Miser: "It was soon apparent to me that my companion's reputation as a miser was not undeserved. He had grumbled at the expense of the journey, had insisted upon travelling third-class, and was now clamorous in his objections to the hotel bill."**

**\*\*The big reveal:**

*But we both have the same question to ask you!"*

*Mr. Amberley sat down heavily. He sensed impending danger. I read it in his straining eyes and his twitching features. "What is the question, Mr. Holmes?"*

*"Only this: What did you do with the bodies?"*

**\*\*Great moments in over-acting:**

*The man sprang to his feet with a hoarse scream. He clawed into the air with his bony hands. His mouth was open, and for the instant he looked like some horrible bird of prey. In a flash we got a glimpse of the real Josiah Amberley, a misshapen demon with a soul as distorted as his body.*

Seriously, he was a good enough actor to convince Holmes (initially) of the truth of his story. But at the first word of doubt he *completely loses it?*

**\*\*I mentioned this above, but it bears repeating:**



*As he fell back into his chair he clapped his hand to his lips as if to stifle a cough. Holmes sprang at his throat like a tiger and twisted his face towards the ground. A white pellet fell from between his gasping lips.*

*"No short cuts, Josiah Amberley. Things must be done decently and in order."*

Someone as arrogant and calculating as Amberley just doesn't strike me as the type who would throw in the towel at the first doubting word. That kind never believes they could lose, so they never prepare for defeat. Holmes described him as *"He felt so clever and so sure of himself that he imagined no one could touch him."* That doesn't seem like someone who would end his own life at the first setback.

I could see suicide *later*, in his cell. But to carry around a pill means planning to be caught, and that's not how I read Josiah. Then again, crazy is crazy, so...?

Not to mention, Holmes has not yet presented a *single* piece of evidence against him. He just says, essentially, "I think you did it." And Josiah immediately gives up?

**\*\*Holmes being a bit cavalier about civil rights and the like:**

*The irregulars are useful sometimes, you know. You, for example, with your compulsory warning about whatever he said being used against him, could never have bluffed this rascal into what is virtually a confession.*

Which is why the courts often take a dim view of "irregulars" doing work for the police, often at their behest.

**\*\*So, is an alleged suicide attempt "virtually a confession"?** Again, remember no one official witnessed this, just the "irregulars." And if Amberley *is* mentally ill, then any attempt at self-harm could have multiple meanings besides an admission of guilt.

Fortunately, the bodies were found, and the ersatz gas chamber, so it's rather a moot point. Still, "bluffing" rascals into attempting suicide doesn't have a ton of evidentiary value, if you ask me.

**\*\*Inspector MacKinnon:** *"You will excuse us for feeling sore when you jump in with methods which we cannot use, and so rob us of the credit."*

But **you** sent him to Holmes!!

In fairness, it quite likely wasn't MacKinnon himself who sent Amberley to Holmes. Still, you're surely not allowed to complain when you pass of loser cases to civilians and they go and solve them for you. You clearly made *yourself* look bad in that case.

**\*\*Rather a broad defamation:** *"Amberley excelled at chess -- one mark, Watson, of a scheming mind."*

Really?

Of course, Ernest played chess, *too*--was he a schemer? Should police haunt chess clubs, looking for potential master criminals and murderers?

**\*\*Paint, obviously, was way stinkier back in the day.**

**\*\*Josiah's alibi was *pretty terrible*, as it was so easily checked: "I had examined the box-office chart at the Haymarket Theatre -- another of Dr. Watson's bull's-eyes -- and ascertained that neither B thirty nor thirty-two of the upper circle had been occupied that night."**

**\*\*Holmes again boasting of his criminal prowess: "*Burglary has always been an alternative profession had I cared to adopt it, and I have little doubt that I should have come to the front.*"**

**\*\*The death chamber:**

*You see the gas-pipe along the skirting here. Very good. It rises in the angle of the wall, and there is a tap here in the corner. The pipe runs out into the strong-room, as you can see, and ends in that plaster rose in the centre of the ceiling, where it is concealed by the ornamentation. That end is wide open.*

Many have asked how long it took to fashion this gas chamber; how it was done without the wife or servant noticing; and what that tells us about how long Josiah had been planning this double homicide.

The BBC 1965 clarifies (or perhaps *retcons*) this, having Holmes explain that the gas line was pre-existing, running to lighting in the room. Amberley had removed the light fixture, and removed the shut off knob on the gas line. So no expensive and time-consuming alterations needed...

**\*\*The dying words:**

*'We we --' That's all. "What do you make of that?" "Well, it's only a foot above the ground. The poor devil was on the floor dying when he wrote it. He lost his senses before he could finish." "He was writing, 'We were murdered.' "*

Talk about *confirmation bias*! Couldn't it just as well have been a confession--"We were having an affair"? "We were guilty, so we decided to kill ourselves"??

**\*\*Sherlock's diagnosis of Josiah:**

*But, first, I would give you an insight into this man's mentality. It is a very unusual one -- so much so that I think his destination is more likely to be Broadmoor than the scaffold. He has, to a high degree, the sort of mind which one associates with the mediaeval Italian nature rather than with the modern Briton... Like all misers, he was a jealous man, and his jealousy became a frantic mania.*

Or, just a murdering \*\*\*\*\*.

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