

The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure XXV – The Adventure of the Naval Treaty

Seventeen thoughts for further ponderance of "The Adventure of the Naval Treaty" by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

1. Who Wants To Be A Milliona ... Er, Student?

Of Percy Phelps, Watson writes: "He was a very brilliant boy and carried away every prize which the school had to offer, finishing his exploits by winning a scholarship which sent him on to continue his triumphant career at Cambridge."

Here's a matter which an American Sherlockian needs a bit of filling in on: what sorts of prizes did schools offer in Victorian Britain? A scholarship is mentioned, but what others might have been offered? Cash, trophies, rankings or what?

2. Those Little Wascals And Their Wickets

When reading the phrase, "On the contrary, it seemed rather a piquant thing to us to chevy him about the playground and hit him over the shins with a wicket," one tends to think of Watson and his friends bullying the young Percy Phelps. Yet Phelps was two classes ahead and in the fifth form when Watson was in the third. Was Phelps being accosted by a gang of imps much smaller than himself? How was it that Phelps and Watson might have become close given their difference in classes and Watson's wicket-whacking?



3. Meeting Women Through Grapho-Analysis

Holmes quickly sees that the Phelps letter was written by "a woman of rare character. You see, at the commencement of an investigation it is something to know that your client is in close contact with someone who, for good or evil, has an exceptional nature. My interest is already awakened in the case."

What, Holmes actually showing an interest in his fellow man? Was he looking for kindred “exceptional” spirits or did he just think the presence of a rare individual made for more stimulating mental exercise during the case?

4. Another Treaty Between England And Italy

The impending union of England’s finest, Percy Phelps, and Annie Harrison, she of the “large, dark, Italian eyes,” seems to parallel the secret treaty between England and Italy a little too plainly. Was Watson trying to cast subtle suspicions toward the “asymmetrical” Miss Harrison by describing her in Italian terms?

5. Such Language For A Treaty!

Okay, here’s a secret treaty between England and Italy which, among other things, details England’s plans should France gain a naval advantage over Italy. Yet the original of this treaty is written in neither English or Italian, but French. Why? If it was something intended by the writers to serve as a warning to France, why the worries over the French finding out about it? Were international politics so sensitive that writing a treaty in the language of either signing country would show unwanted dominance?

6. The Master Of The House

Whose house is Briarbrae? Is it Percy Phelps’s home or his parents’ home? The reason I ask this is the curious business of Joseph Harrison being moved out of his room to make way for the ailing Percy Phelps. If Briarbrae was Percy’s place of residence, one would think he would have been most comfortable in his own bedroom. Why turn out the guest just because Percy had brain fever? Any man who could make it home by train could surely make it upstairs to his room, couldn’t he?

7. Holmes, The Man Of Nature

“He walked past the couch to the open window and held up the drooping stalk of a moss-rose, looking down at the dainty blend of crimson and green. It was a new phase of his character to me, for I had never before seen him show any keen interest in natural objects.”

Eventually, we’ll find Holmes reading J.G. Wood, observing bee culture, and stating a desire to turn from the study of criminals to that of nature. But was it Holmes that changed, or Watson’s knowledge of his friend? Were Holmes’s naturalist inclinations there all along?

8. Holmes, The Man Of Religion

The great detective states, "There is nothing in which deduction is so necessary as in religion. It can be built up as an exact science by the reasoner. Our highest assurance of the goodness of Providence seems to me to rest in the flowers."

When Holmes speaks of "the reasoner," he is usually speaking of himself. Had he built up his own personal faith with all the scientific methodology with which he had built up his detective methods? Does the fact that he rarely speaks of his faith demonstrate an uncertainty that was not present in the detection side of his life? Or is this just another facet of Holmes that remains "off-camera" as it didn't pertain to the stories?

9. One Of Holmes's Great Untold Lists

One of the happy challenges for a Sherlockian is when we read something like this exchange:

"Do you see any clue?"

"You have furnished me with seven, but of course I must test them before I can pronounce upon their value."

Holmes, of course, doesn't get around to counting off exactly what his seven clues were. Can we deduce them from the info he does give us?

10. Self-Induced Brain Fever

When Holmes tells Percy Phelps not to get his hopes up, Phelps replies: "I shall be in a fever until I see you again." While this might just have been a turn of phrase, it also could have been Phelps's pathetic way of actually trying to spur Holmes on with Phelps's own piteousness. One could almost see the sensitive ex-schoolmate of Watson's lapsing back into brain fever to await Holmes's solution.

Which brings up this point: Was Percy Phelps working himself into that vague and all-encompassing ailment "brain fever" just to avoid taking responsibility for the missing treaty? We are told he was not to be fired until he was healthy again, so he did have a motive for remaining ill. Did he only rouse himself from it upon hearing of Sherlock Holmes, perhaps from someone reading Watson's early chronicles to him on his sickbed?

11. Looking Down On The Urban Sprawl

Holmes remarks during the train ride: "It's a very cheery thing to come into London by any of these lines which run high and allow you to look down upon the houses like this."

Watson thinks he is joking at first, calling the view “sordid.” Holmes then makes his well-known board-school remark, which Watson accepts as the detective’s reason for finding the view “cheery.” But did Holmes have other reasons for enjoying the overview of the suburbs? Was he observing other details about the lives of the residents of the “slates”?

12. The Classes Of True Love

Of Annie Morrison, we are told: “She and her brother are the only children of an iron-master somewhere up Northumberland way.”

Given Percy Phelps’s family connections and appointment in the foreign office, was it unusual that he would wind up engaged to an iron-master’s daughter? How might they have met during Percy’s travels Northumberland way?

13. Counting His Cases

“Out of my last fifty-three cases,” Holmes says, “my name has only appeared in four, and the police have had all the credit in forty-nine.”

Was fifty-three the total number of cases Holmes had undertaken at the time of “Naval Treaty”? Is he leaving out matters that never involved the police, like “Yellow Face”? Was he making up this statistic, just to impress the Scotland Yard inspector, or did Holmes keep running totals on his performance? And if he did, what was the starting point for his count of fifty-three?

14. Watson Editorializes A Bit

Of Lord Holdhurst, Watson writes: “Standing on the rug between us, with his slight, tall figure, his sharp features, thoughtful face, and curling hair prematurely tinged with gray, he seemed to represent that not too common type, a nobleman who is in truth noble.”

The normally good and agreeable doctor slips in quite a slam against the nobility in that statement. Was this a common opinion among the folk of Victorian London? Or is Watson more rebellious about class structures than most?

15. Watson’s Holmes And Royalty Count

Watson tells Phelps, of Holmes: “To my certain knowledge he has acted on behalf of three of the reigning houses of Europe in very vital matters.”

Another classic “three” statement, but didn’t Holmes work for more royal houses than that? Did Watson just like to group things into threes more often than the exact facts required?

16. A Scotswoman’s Breakfast

There’s nothing like a classic food moment in the Canon:

"Mrs. Hudson has risen to the occasion," says Holmes, uncovering the dish of curried chicken. "Her cuisine is a little limited, but she has as good an idea of breakfast as a Scotswoman. What have you there, Watson?"

"Ham and eggs," Watson replies.

Ham and eggs is standard breakfast fare, but curried chicken? What part of Scotland is known for its breakfast curries? Holmes certainly seems to ignore it in favor of the ham and eggs. How many of us find curried chicken an acceptable breakfast choice?

17. Smooching Up To The Master

We are told Phelps “seized his hand and kissed it” when Holmes returned the treaty to him. Is Percy Phelps truly the only person known to have kissed Sherlock Holmes?

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