

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 Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure XXV -- The Adventure of the Naval Treaty

The Naval Treaty--The Perils Of Nepotism

The Naval Treaty is a *cracking good Holmes* story, one of the best. A clever twist, lots of clues, lots of red herrings, Holmes at his puckish best, state-level intrigue, stories from **Watson's** past...it's a pretty full bag, and almost all of it is good.

But if there's *one* lesson to take from The Naval Treaty. it's this: *don't hire relatives*. They're nothing but trouble.

The tales centers around poor **Percy Phelps**, who's in rather a quandary due to, well, let's just say it--*gross incompetence*. Ironically, the only *thing* that he does right is go into a fugue state for 9 weeks, which unintentionally prevents his blundering from having the serious consequences that it should have.



While in school, although Percy was a "*brilliant*" student, he was bullied by the other students, even those in lower forms. He was a "*nervous, sensitive boy*," and that obviously continued into adulthood, as his first set-back--admittedly, a major one--unnerved him so that he was literally useless for two and a half months!! Just imagine how he would have reacted had he woken up to find out that the treaty had made its way to the French!!

Lord Holdhurst, the much admired foreign minister who seemed destined to become Prime Minister, used his "*influences*" to appoint Phelps to a position at the Foreign Office. And while Percy had successfully completed "*several missions of trust*" for his uncle, the current instance was one which required the utmost secrecy, as the existence of the secret treaty with the Italians could not become public knowledge. So crucial was the secrecy, Percy was told to wait until all of the other employees had left for the day, for fear of someone looking over his shoulder while he worked!!

We certainly can't fault Percy for wanting some coffee--twenty-six articles in French to copy by hand would test the wakefulness of any of us. But when he rings the bell, an unfamiliar face comes to answer his request. So what does he do when his coffee doesn't come, and he knows there is an unfamiliar face lurking about? Instead of ringing the bell again--which we later see was enough to wake the commissionaire--Phelps goes downstairs himself to check on the coffee. **While leaving his office door open. While leaving the top-secret treaty and the copy sitting atop his desk in plain view**, instead of locking it in his desk.

Seriously.

I think "*brilliant*" goes out the window, as well as missions of trust.

Upon learning of the theft, Percy promptly informs the police and passersby of the secret document, and insists on following a red herring (although, in fairness, it was the only real lead anyone had at that moment).

And when that false lead doesn't pan out? He was immediately overwhelmed by *self-pity*, threw "*a fit*," became a "*hysterical maniac*," and spent the next 9 weeks with brain fever.

So as we can see, Percy is neither terribly good at preserving secrets, and doesn't deal at all well with pressure or a crisis. *Exactly* what we want from a man serving in the Foreign Office!!

And when Percy wakes up, the potential damage to his nation's welfare is secondary--*it's all about him!* He becomes convinced that he is "*the unconscious centre of some monstrous conspiracy, and that my life is aimed at as well as my honour.*" Yes, Mr. Phelps, the whole point of stealing the treaty was merely to *impugn your honor*.

All in all, it seems to be a pretty good thing that Percy had a powerful uncle, because on the face of it, he is *spectacularly unqualified* for any position in diplomacy. England is exposed to "very grave consequences" because the Foreign Minister gave an important job to an unqualified nephew. And we have to wonder if, after Holmes recovered the treaty, Lord Holdhurst retained Phelps in his current position, or found him a slightly *less challenging* sinecure, with no chance of destroying national security because Percy has to make a coffee run.

Of course, while not nepotism, **Annie's** brother **Joseph** also gives relations a bad name. He became a bit of a moocher--Holmes says Joseph decided to stay down because "*he felt pretty snug*," implying he preferred the cushier lifestyle at the Phelps household. After blowing his money "dabbling" at stocks, the "*absolutely selfish*" Joseph took the first opportunity to screw over his future brother-in-law (and therefore his sister) for a quick buck--not to mention intending to commit treason, and just perhaps, commit murder. A winner on all accounts.

So the message we can take away from The Naval Treaty? Don't hire relatives, and don't let them live with you. *It only leads to disaster!*

OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:

******Some commentators have suggested that Joseph, and perhaps his sister Annie as well, weren't actually who they said they were--*they were actually spies for a foreign power*, using Percy to get access to sensitive foreign office intelligence.

Poppycock. That makes no sense in the context of the story.

If Joseph were a spy, than when he found Percy's office empty, he most certainly *would not* have rung the bell--he would have taken the opportunity to search the office before alerting anyone that he was there!! Furthermore, when he took the treaty, he almost certainly would have taken it straight to the embassy of whichever foreign power he was working for, rather than take it home and hide it in his bedroom. No, if Joseph was a spy, he was a *terribly incompetent and unprofessional* one.

As to the possibility of Annie being a spy? **Preposterous!**

Percy was in the grip of his "brain fever" *for over 9 weeks!* Whether you accept the description that he was "unconscious" or "raving" or "out of his head" for that time, he only came to his senses 3 days ago! He was being given "sleeping draughts" to help keep him quiet!

If Annie was working in concert with Joseph, *wouldn't he have told her where in the room he hid the document?* And in the **108** (or so) days that Percy was incapacitated, how can we possibly believe that she couldn't have found an opportunity to retrieve it, while her fiancé was asleep or unconscious or delirious?!? If we believe his condition, he certainly would have had *no idea* what was going on! She could have taken it with impunity! At worst, she could have distracted Percy while Joseph came in to remove the document.

And when Holmes left with Percy for the day, there is *no* conceivable reason that she wouldn't have used the opportunity to recover the treaty, if she were involved.

No, to suggest that these two were actual spies works only if we accept that they were particular inept spies, unable to retrieve a hidden piece of paper from a room because an insensate man was sleeping there.

******This is the *longest* of the short stories in the **Canon**, so long that the **Strand** broke it into two parts for publication.

And the story is all the better for it. Without the clipped, rushed ending he often gave us, **Sir Arthur Conan Doyle** gives us a story that has room to breathe, and allows us to go deep into the details. That is one of the reasons the mystery works so well--we get time to properly establish the red herrings, to investigate several suspects, to pursue alternate theories, and to properly enjoy the ending.

**Watson is oddly shocked that the letter from Percy could have been dictated to a devoted woman--
"*A man, surely, I cried.*"

Given Percy's own description of himself as "a nervous, sensitive boy," perhaps Watson assumed that there couldn't have been a *female* in Phelps' life...and perhaps that is the real reason Watson and his schoolmates bullied the lad. If true, shame on you, Doctor!!

**Secret treaties, and public treaties with secret codicils, were a very real thing in the seething hotbed of European power struggles of the era. Many times they expressly contradicted other, public treaties, so keeping them secret was indeed paramount.

While England and Italy did agree on a treaty in 1887 regarding what to do about French actions in the Mediterranean, it wasn't a secret--Germany's **von Bismark** mediated the negotiations, and later Austria and Spain joined it. (Or maybe there was another agreement that was *sooooo* secret that we still don't know about it) Still, many Canon chronologists place this story in 1887 or 1888--perhaps Sir Arthur was thinking of this agreement when he wrote the story?

**Wait just a minute--the clerks and servants entrance to the British Foreign Office is left *unguarded* and *unlocked* at night?!? Anyone can walk in there off the street, bypassing even the commissionaire, and saunter throughout the building *undetected*?!? Yes, Percy Phelps was a bit of an idiot for not locking his office door, but good heavens, it's not like there was *any type of security whatsoever* at one of the most important buildings in the Empire!!

**So Phelps hadn't contacted Watson for decades...and then he reaches out, but only because *he wants to borrow Sherlock Holmes*. What a user...Then again, if Watson really was a terrible bully in school, I suppose Percy had an excuse for avoiding his old school chum.

Given the potential grave consequences, and **Scotland Yard's total lack of success for two months, I have to wonder why the government didn't reach out to Holmes *themselves*, rather than waiting for Percy to wake up and letting him do it.

By this point Holmes already had "*acted on the behalf of three of the reigning houses of Europe,*" so certainly he would have had a reputation for this sort of work. Then again, perhaps that *was* the problem--given their concern for ultra-secrecy, perhaps they were concerned that Holmes' continental connections proved too much of a risk of a security breach.

Or perhaps they just feared Watson's discretion?

**They were primitive, but methods of copying documents *did* exist in that era. You would think that an outfit of the size and prestige of the British government would have invested in these, rather than relying on clerks to copy documents by hand...

Watson gives us some more unpublished cases...but this is at least the *third* version of "The Adventure Of The Second Stain.**"

In **The Yellow Face**, Watson mentions the "affair of the second stain" (not capitalized) as an example of a case where Holmes failed.

This time, Watson mentions The Adventure Of The Second Stain, and rather than Holmes failing, Watson tells us that "no case, however, in which Holmes was engaged has ever illustrated the value of his analytical methods so clearly or has impressed those who were associated with him so deeply." Hardly an example of a failure, then.

Watson also tells us how Holmes "demonstrated the true facts of the case to Monsieur Dubugue of the Paris police, and Fritz von Waldbaum, the well-known specialist of Dantzig, both of whom had wasted their energies upon what proved to be side-issues." Yet when we get to the *actual* published Second Stain a decade later, these characters are not mentioned at all, and the case doesn't sound at all like Watson's description. And certainly Holmes *does not fail* in the published case, as Yellow Face tells us.

So we have three mutually inconsistent cases with the same name!

Perhaps, by the time he published it, Watson substantially changed the details of the case, as it was of "*such importance and implicates so many of the first families in the kingdom*" that there was no way to print it in a 100% accurate version.

Or perhaps the title phrase was just burbling around Doyle's head for a long time, and kept peaking out.

Or perhaps there were an *awful lot* of stains in Victorian England...

The other apocryphal case Watson teases us with is **The Adventure Of The Tired Captain. Tell me this didn't make you think about **James T. Kirk** on shore leave...

**"*Holmes was seated at his side-table clad in his dressing-gown, and working hard over a chemical investigation. A large curved retort was boiling furiously in the bluish flame of a Bunsen burner, and the distilled drops were condensing into a two-litre measure.*"

Holmes just invented the 2 liter bottle of **Mountain Dew**, didn't he?

**Lord Holdhurst asks Phelps, "*You have a desk in your office?*"

Really? You don't know if your nephew even has a desk? Does the Foreign Office have lots of clerks without desks?

(Yes, I know, he was probably just asking if had a desk with lockable drawers, as opposed to just a writing table or such. Don't spoil the joke.)

**Watson's description of the timing of events leaves me confused about some of Holmes inquiries.

Watson gets the letter, goes to fetch Holmes, they "*start at once*" and "*catch an early train,*" and take a "*few minutes walk*" to **Briarbrae**. They meet Joseph, go in to interview Percy, and then leave for the city. Joseph drives them to the station, they get on the train. While on the train, Holmes tells Watson something of the history of Annie and Joseph, down to the when Percy and Annie were engaged, and that Joseph accompanied her as a chaperone.

But since Holmes had *never even heard* the names of Annie or Joseph before they reached Briarbrae, let alone knew of their existence, how did he come by this information? Holmes says he's "*been making a few independent inquiries.*" When? How? Unless Watson left some chunk of the narrative out, *when* would Holmes had a chance to make inquiries, let alone receive results?

Perhaps before they caught the train to Woking, Sherlock sent a note to **Mycroft**, asking for any information he might have been able to get on Percy, and the elder Holmes had it wired to the Woking station?

**While people like to criticize Holmes' reverie on the rose--of course color and smell have a purpose in nature--they miss the fact the Sherlock is using this as a *stalling tactic* while he cases the room for possible hiding places for the treaty.

Right after Annie interrupts his little flower appreciation moment, Holmes says that "*suspects himself*" of "*coming to conclusions too rapidly.*" Of course--he's already solved the case, at least in his head, and has deduced that the treaty must be in room!! So he needs to keep everyone quiet while he looks around to figure out where the document might be!!

Of course, it could be anywhere, and he can't give the room his usual intense examination, so eventually he allows Joseph to reveal that himself, saving himself "*an infinity of trouble.*"

At least, that's how *I* would stage it if I were directing an adaptation...

They suspect **Gorot just because he had a French name? If his loyalty was at all suspect, why in heaven let him have a position in the Foreign Office?

**Not to put too fine a point on it, but why send Percy on a train home when he begins to lose it? Shouldn't *he* be a suspect, as well? After all, there is *only his word* that the treaty is missing, and the whole "OMG, the paper is stolen, let's run around on false leads, and oh now I'm having a nervous breakdown" could merely have been a *very clever cover for his own theft!!*

Of course, we know that's not true, but at the time, Scotland Yard certainly *should* have counted him as a prime suspect, and not let him go home without police supervision, as he would then have opportunity to hide the treaty anywhere.

Lord Holdhurst is certainly suspicious of Percy. He immediately leaps to "*brain fever*" when Holmes speculated that illness might have prevented the culprit from selling the treaty, and his parting comment "every success to your investigation, *be the criminal who it may*" certainly implies that he fears his nephew is a traitor, and won't object if Holmes nails him.

**This is what, the 6th or 7th time that "*brain fever*" has been an element of a Holmes story? Many have speculated what "*real*" disease it might have been, if indeed it was real. But the fact that, in literature, it is usually triggered by severe emotional upset, makes it seem more like a psychiatric condition such as a "*nervous breakdown*."

Of course, in fiction it really is just a *convenient device* to render witnesses or suspect unavailable at important times. I do wish that Sir Arthur, being a doctor himself, would move on from this plot device (although it is used to fine effect here).

**Finally--Holmes places a newspaper advertisement that *doesn't* produce results!!The decline of print has begun!!

****Inspector Forbes** is a bit of a piece of work, instantly getting his hackles up and attacking Sherlock, until Holmes slaps him down.

After that, he calms down, and proves to be a competent, and even somewhat creative inspector. He even has someone undercover go drinking with **Mrs. Tangey**, in case she'll spill something while she was "*well on*."

And at the end, Holmes does indeed give him the name of the perpetrator, and kept none of the glory for himself, as promised.

Still, for a man who argues that he's not interested in self-glorification, Sherlock sure is *very familiar* with his own statistics, isn't he? He's kept track of his last 53 cases, and knows his (and the police's) statistics? Oh, Sherlock...

**I think we know whom Watson is voting for, because he sure has a *man-crush* on Lord Holdhurst. "[H]e seemed to represent that not to common type, a nobleman who is in truth noble" is merely one of the many ways that Watson lovingly slurps the Foreign Minister.

**Holmes' ploy with how he reveals the recovered treaty to Percy--funny or cruel--*or both*? You'll have to decide for yourselves, but I love it. Again, this puckishness pretty much disproves the "Holmes is a Vulcan" idea...

**In case I hadn't mentioned it, I *really love* this story, and could go on for quite awhile if it weren't getting so late.

Clearly one of Doyle's best, in Sherlock's penultimate story.

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