



The Return of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure XL – The Adventure of the Second Stain

Lord Bellinger, the British Premier, and his Secretary for European Affairs, the Right Honourable Trelawney Hope, were beside themselves with worry. A letter written by a foreign potentate had disappeared — a letter which was phrased in such unfortunate and inflammatory terms that public knowledge of its contents would very likely ignite a war that would engulf all of Europe. Quite sensibly, the two politicians decided that the only person who could possibly retrieve the missing letter without its contents becoming public was Sherlock Holmes.

Holmes decided that the letter would most likely be in the hands of one of three foreign agents known to be in London, and determined to visit each of them in an effort to recover the letter. Before he could do so, however, he learned that one of them had been murdered on the very night the letter disappeared. Since the odds against this event being a coincidence were astronomical, Holmes went to the scene of the murder, located a likely hiding place under the parquet flooring...and found it empty.



It is interesting to speculate the identity of the nameless potentate who started this whole adventure by writing an impulsive and inflammatory letter to high British officials. Although Watson says that the year and even the decade of the adventure must be withheld, surely we have enough information on hand to offer some clues. For what nation, in the last two-or-three decades of the nineteenth century, was a crouching lion a symbol? It would have to have been a nation ruled by an autocrat, and an influential nation at that to be in a position to trigger a European war.

Further, it must have been a nation that in some ways had been affected by English colonialism.

Can the historians of the Hounds come up with any educated guesses? And would anyone care to speculate who it was that Watson promised to publish SECO?

What bothers me is why the inflammatory letter was even retained in the first place? It, and presumably its contents, was known to only Lord Bellinger, Trelawney Hope, and two or possibly three “officials.” It is not even clear that its contents were known by the last mentioned. What purpose was served by keeping the letter when public knowledge of it would prove so disastrous? Why not just respond with the diplomatic equivalent of a “There, there!” or a “Tough luck, fellah!” and destroy the offensive letter?

Lestrade said of the scene of Lucas’ murder, “...we thought we could tidy up a bit.” Was it the normal routine of the police force to “tidy up” the scene of a crime in a private residence once they had examined it for possible clues?

Lady Hilda Trelawney Hope said that Lucas had some spy in her husband’s office who knew of the existence of the potentate’s letter. Only Lord Bellinger, Trelawney Hope, and the aforementioned “officials” had or could have had such knowledge. Excusing Lord Bellinger and Hope from suspicion (which might not be a wise thing), it must, therefore, have been one of those officials who “leaked” the information to Lucas. Yet, there was no indication that Holmes intended to reveal the presence of a spy to Lord Bellinger. Of course, to do so might have been to incriminate Lady Hilda, but should such a consideration outweigh the continued presence of a spy in the Foreign Office?

Lastly, when Lord Bellinger paid Trelawney Hope a compliment, Hope bowed. Yet at the time, he was seated on the settee. Was it customary to bow while seated?

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