

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 Return of Sherlock Holmes Adventure XL -- The Adventure of the Second Stain

The Adventure Of The Second Stain--A Tale Of Two Letters!

There is a letter whose exact contents remain unrevealed. But if this letter were to be made public, it would have extremely damaging consequences: relationships would be broken, and the status quo irrevocably altered, and not for the better. So terrible is this letter, that people will go to nay lengths to keep its words from being unveiled publicly.

Actually, there are *two* such letters!!

Which brings us to The **Adventure Of The Second Stain**.

There is quite a clever little double act that **Sir Arthur Conan Doyle** has set up, as it becomes very easy to forget that there are *two* scandalous missives at large in this tale. But we shouldn't forget, because they provide an intriguing mirror to each other, and display how the *personal* can be just as frightening, just as damaging as the *political*.

Despite what **Lord Bellinger** and **The Right Honourable Trelawney Hope** aver, it is incontestably *untrue* that "in the case of a secret of this importance it would rise superior to the most intimate domestic ties." And this refusal to admit any spillover of their public and private worlds that causes most of the problems in this story.

Most obviously, we have the letter from an unnamed "*foreign potentate*," apparently written in an angry moment, which threatens the peace of the entire continent. Let's let our **Stuffy Government Officials** describe it for us:

[T]he document in question is of such immense importance that its publication might very easily--I might almost say probably--lead to European complications of the utmost moment. It is not too much to say that peace or war may hang upon the issue...



...The letter, then, is from a certain foreign potentate who has been ruffled by some recent Colonial developments of this country. It has been written hurriedly and upon his own responsibility entirely. Inquiries have shown that his Ministers know nothing of the matter. At the same time it is couched in so unfortunate a manner, and certain phrases in it are of so provocative a character, that its publication would undoubtedly lead to a most dangerous state of feeling in this country. There would be such a ferment, sir, that I do not hesitate to say that within a week of the publication of that letter this country would be involved in a great war...this letter which may well mean the expenditure of a thousand millions and the lives of a hundred thousand men...

...But if you consider the European situation you will have no difficulty in perceiving the motive. The whole of Europe is an armed camp. There is a double league which makes a fair balance of military power. Great Britain holds the scales. If Britain were driven into war with one confederacy, it would assure the supremacy of the other confederacy, whether they joined in the war or not.

All that, from *one* letter? Well, we'll come back to that in a minute.

What is often overlooked, because Holmes has already solved the titular clue by the time the issue arises, is that *another* embarrassing letter was the instigating incident for the other piece of mail's vanishing! There wasn't just a second stain--there was a second letter!!

Lady Hilda Trelawney Hope, it turns out, had one of those indiscreet romances that we've seen before in these stories. Let her tell us the tale:

It was a letter of mine, Mr. Holmes, an indiscreet letter written before my marriage--a foolish letter, a letter of an impulsive, loving girl. I meant no harm, and yet he would have thought it criminal. Had he read that letter his confidence would have been forever destroyed. It is years since I wrote it. I had thought that the whole matter was forgotten.

...On the one side seemed certain ruin, on the other, terrible as it seemed to take my husband's paper, still in a matter of politics I could not understand the consequences, while in a matter of love and trust they were only too clear to me.

So there we have it. Two "*foolish letters*," "*indiscreet*" and "*hot-headed*." Each with shattering consequences if it were revealed. Each of our parties is too frozen by fear to notice what is happening to the other. Trelawney is afraid of the global implications, he can't conceive of a personal problem that could compare to it. But Hilda is *equally* misguided, more afraid of the consequences to her marriage than potential international political consequences. I suppose a base moral we could draw right away is that, if these two could only communicate better, this mystery wouldn't have happened.

Drawing some larger lessons, we can wonder first about the international implications of the letter from the mysterious sovereign. *Who* was this foreign leader? What could he *possibly* have said? How could a simple letter have had such frightful implications?

Many **Holmes** scholars have suggested that our foreign leader might be **Germany's Kaiser Wilhelm II**. Nothing in the story actually confirms that--**Watson** is, after all discreet--but it's a fair guess, given his known behaviour and the political situation of the times.

As to what the letter could have actually said? Well, that may seem something of a mystery to modern readers. It's hard to imagine a letter so inflammatory that it could drive the English public to demand war, isn't it? What could be so provocative, "couched in such an unfortunate manner," that it could cause such fury? "*Dear Queen Victoria: You are ugly, and I fart in your general direction! You English are tiny-brained wipers of other people's bottoms! Your mother was a hamster, and your father smelled of elderberry! Signed, The King Of Belgium!*"??

It is possible, of course, that Hope and Bellinger were gravely overestimating the impact the letter would have, clutching their pearls, as it were, and imagining that something embarrassing somehow equated to a cause for war. Or, perhaps, they were deliberately overstating the threat from the letter, to ensure that Holmes would assist them.

Of course, it's *also* possible that, as a political species, we've matured a little bit over the past century and a quarter. After all, it's not uncommon for, say, secret U.S. State Department documents to leak, with American officials being caught saying unflattering things about foreign leaders and nations. And it's all too frequent for leaders to make public gaffes, straying outside the official lines to say something they probably shouldn't say publicly (as **Michael Kinsley** says, "A *gaffe* is when a politician tells the truth."). Yet war doesn't seem to result from indiscreet words. Apologies are issued, feathers are ruffled, and in about three days all is forgotten and more or less back to normal. Stick and stones may start wars, but words will never hurt us.

After all, this is unlike **The Naval Treaty**, wherein Britain and Italy secretly agreed to certain actions, or to support each other against others, or something--it was, after all a *secret* treaty. But at least there were *specific actions* and concrete promises which might trigger foreign responses, not just indiscreet and inflammatory words. Or did the Kaiser (or whomever) actually *threaten war* in the letter? A promise to attack over certain British "colonial developments?"

Another thing to note is the high level of respect, if not worship for diplomats--*at least from other diplomats*. The potentate may be the sovereign of his nation, but we're told he shouldn't be sending letters without the approval of his ministers. Why, without government functionaries to parse every word and

smooth every phrase, the consequences could be "a thousand million pounds and the lives of hundreds of thousands of men!" Leaders should sit back, and let the bureaucrats do all the actual communication (and by implication, perhaps, the actual policy-making?)! We can't trust sovereigns to rule!

Just as a simple letter can potentially cause international chaos, we're given a similar situation on a personal level. We've seen this before, especially in the case of **Charles Augustus Milverton**. A young woman, before her marriage, writes an indiscreet letter to a someone (Boyfriend? Lover?), that if it were revealed would cause the immediate dissolution of her current marriage.

I have already discussed, in the essay about Charles Augustus Milverton, how such blackmail schemes are, in part, a reflection of Victorian gender politics. A woman, it seems must be emotionally a virgin as well as physically, or her husband will reject her. (Then again, we saw a powerful male scared that word of a former dalliance might come to light in **Scandal In Bohemia**, so the phenomenon was not exclusively gender hypocrisy...)

What, pray tell, could have been in Lady Hilda's that was so *****ing*? She says that Trelawney "would think it criminal"--is this just a *metaphor*? Is her shame enlarging the "crime" in her mind to epic proportions? Or do the letters indicate that she was involved in something *actually forbidden* by law, such as adultery, or a lesbian relationship?

Or perhaps it's fear of her priggish husband, the man who won't even discuss his job with her, and avers to Holmes that politics is more important than his wife. Hilda tells us "[H]is own honour stands so high that he could not forget or pardon a lapse in another." That's *not* honor--that's standing in obnoxious moral judgement of others. "I'm perfect, so if you're not, you're shit"?! This is surely not someone I would want to married to.

Then again, that may be her fear and shame talking again. Perhaps if she were honest with him, Trelawney Hope would have easily forgiven her, as happened in **The Yellow Face**. And perhaps if he had been honest with her, she would never have taken the envelope if the first place, or returned it right away once she learned of its importance.

Similarly, if the English government had not been obsessed with secrecy, perhaps this wouldn't have been a crisis. Obviously, in the spin-doctor run 21st century, the Prime Minister *et al* would have tried to get in front of this story, to lessen the blow if the letter were revealed. The imprudent sovereign's ministers will deny the letter's veracity, as they had nothing to do with it, so you're already halfway home. Put a fake story out there, saying the Foreign Ministry had been receiving forged letters, allegedly from heads of state, seeking to foment war. Release the less inflammatory parts of the letter (if there were any!) to the press, so the full letter's release would not be thought "news." Arrange a quick summit or treaty with the foreign potentate, so

everyone sees you're all good friends. Have Victoria "*backdate*" a letter from herself to the leader, making it look as this had all been part of a quasi-joking exchange. Instead of simply sitting around and hoping that the letter is never revealed, get active, and find a way to minimize the damage.

Two letters, written imprudently. If revealed, the consequences will be disastrous, either to the continent or personally. Yet people are so frightened at the possibility of the missives becoming public, they act foolishly, and let secrecy nearly destroy everything.

The Second Stain is really a story about *communication, and secrets*. It's about how there really is *no* difference between the personal and political--rulers and lovers will say stupid things, and everyone else has to learn how to handle the fallout.

Honestly, given the dangerous outcomes, it's a wonder people ever put pen to paper for a letter in those days...

OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:

******As we've previously mentioned, there have been two prior mentions of this case...of have there?

In *The Yellow Face* (the British edition, at least), Watson listed "*the affair of the second stain*" (no capitals) as one of Holmes' few failures. Well, that doesn't seem to match this case at all.

In *The Naval Treaty*, Watson goes on at length about "*The Adventure Of The Second Stain*" which *deals with interest of such importance and implicates so many of the first families in the kingdom that for many years it will be impossible to make it public. 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. I still retain an almost verbatim report of the interview in which he demonstrated the true facts of the case to Monsieur Dubuque 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.*

Well, again, that *doesn't* seem terribly apt to this case, especially the "demonstration" to French and German detectives.

I guess Sir Arthur just had a real liking for the title, and unlike most of the "*apocryphal*" cases mentioned in the **Canon**, he came up with an actual case to portray. Even if he had forgotten what he had hinted about the case earlier...

******Speaking of which..."*I have notes of many hundreds of cases to which I have never alluded...*"

Watson!! Get writing!!

**Once again, this is the "*final*" Holmes story. He's retired, you see, and he doesn't want the "*notoriety*" any longer.

At least Doyle had learned his lesson this time, and didn't kill him off only to have to resurrect him again.

The gap between published stories would be much shorter, this time.

**Perhaps the biggest unanswered question about Second Stain is, *why keep the letter?* Why doesn't the government destroy it?!?

This is a letter whose revelation will surely lead to war and great loss of life. And England does not want it revealed.

Yet, for the past 6 days, Trelawney Hope *has carried the letter back and forth between work and home each day!!* Good heavens, that's a terrible risk to take, isn't it? If the letter is *so* dangerous, why keep it around? Why risk any possibility of it getting out?

The only thing I can think of is that the government *wanted* to keep it around, so they could blackmail the imprudent potentate at some later point. or perhaps to use the letter when Britain was more ready to go to war--then they would release the letter to foment war-fever amongst the populace.

Otherwise, why not *burn* the deuced thing immediately upon recovering it?!?

Not a particularly flattering portrayal of Her Majesty's ministers...

As has been noted, Second Stain comes across as a amalgam of other stories. Most obviously, it strongly resembles The Naval Treaty--a vital government document is stolen, which could lead to war and the end of a client's career, *but it's found hidden in the client's own house*. It's also clearly an echo of Charles Augustus Milverton, with a cad blackmailing women over their previous dalliances (the **Granada adaptation goes so far as to use some actual dialogue from CAM when they show **Eduardo Lucas** putting the screws to lady Hilda!). The Yellow Face had a wife with a secret so dark that she was certain that it would destroy her marriage. The emergency causing the villain to reveal the hiding place reminds of Scandal in Bohemia. And most recently, **Abbey Grange** had Holmes begging people to "be frank" with him, so he could properly cover up matters.

**Watson on Trelawney: "*dark, clear-cut, and elegant, hardly yet of middle age, and endowed with every beauty of body and of mind...*"

Some might suspect that "beauty of the mind" *shouldn't* locking your wife out of the most important aspect of your life. Or being willing to dump her if you found out that she had had an earlier relationship (although perhaps that was just lady Hilda's paranoia speaking...).

**"*They sat side by side upon our paper-littered settee...*"

Dudes--these are high government officials!! You're making the Secretary For European Affairs and the former **Prime Minister** sit on your messy clippings collection? Stop *hoarding*, and clean your place up!!!

What the ** is wrong with security at the Foreign Office? "*[The letter] was of such importance that I have never left it in my safe, but have taken it across each evening to my house in Whitehall Terrace...*"

Sir, if you think that your safe at work is not secure, than you need to have some *immediate* work done in that building!! And it's hard to imagine that your locked despatch-box at home is seriously *more* secure than a government safe, no matter how arrogant you are about how wonderful your servants are.

Then again, this was the *same* building (presumably) as in The Naval Treaty, wherein *a civilian can just walk in through an unguarded door after hours and make his way to offices without ever once encountering any security whatsoever*. I guess home doesn't look like such a bad option. But that's not excuse for not upgrading security at the Foreign office!!

**Trelawney Hope insisted that "*besides the members of the Cabinet there are two, or possibly three, departmental officials who know of the letter. No one else in England, Mr. Holmes, I assure you.*"

Well, somehow Eduardo Lucas found out. "*He had some spy in the office who had told him of its existence,*" Lady Hilda tells us. And Lucas had good enough information that he was able to give *an accurate physical description* of the envelope.

So either a) A cabinet minister is a traitor, b) one of the two or possibly three officials are a traitor, or c) somehow someone else who was close enough to describe the letter was a traitor.

But there is absolutely *no* follow-up to this. This person is never mentioned to Hope and Bellinger, and Holmes does his best to make people think the letter was never taken. ***Yet this person still knows of the letter's existence!!***

So this person is still employed, and still able to betray England's secrets to the highest bidder. Another reason why Holmes may have been wrong to take justice into his own hands. In order to protect a lady's honor and marriage, he has allowed a snake to continue to nest in the highest levels of government...

**Trelawney Hope's absolute faith in his servants really is silly. Not that we have any reason to suspect them. But we've seen in other stories, such as Charles August Milverton, that many a serving class person is willing to betray their *1%* masters for a sufficient price. To swear that his employees are perfectly happy and thus immune is arrogance talking, especially when he keeps insisting that no one could have gotten into the house from outside.

**Holmes on some international men of mystery: "*There are three who may be said to be the heads of their profession. I will begin my research by going round and finding if each of them is at his post.*"

How can they be great spies if they're *so well known*? I mean, he is Holmes, after all, so of course he knows them. But still, when a daring theft occurs and the immediate response is "it can only have been one of these 3 people," that means that their cover is well known, and that has to counter their effectiveness, right? Couldn't the government just deport them? Wouldn't the government have them under fairly constant surveillance? Or does *only* Holmes know this information?

***Holmes getting practical: "all, it is a question of money with these fellows, and I have the British treasury behind me. If it's on the market I'll buy it--if it means another penny on the income-tax."*

Sherlock is being fairly cavalier with other people's tax money, but as a matter of efficiency, he's certainly correct. If you can just buy the letter back, and avoid cloak-and-dagger shenanigans, that's by far the best policy.

Still it's probably a good thing that he didn't have the British treasury behind him on most cases...it would make for some fairly dull mysteries if Holmes just showed up flashing huge wads of cash, yelling "*Money for whomever gives me answers!!*"

***One of the better comedy moments in the Canon:*

There are only those three capable of playing so bold a game--there are Oberstein, La Rothiere, and Eduardo Lucas. I will see each of them."

I glanced at my morning paper.

"Is that Eduardo Lucas of Godolphin Street?"

"Yes."

"You will not see him."

"Why not?"

"He was murdered in his house last night."

My friend has so often astonished me in the course of our adventures that it was with a sense of exultation that I realized how completely I had astonished him.

Well played, John Watson!

***Just how good a spy was Lucas?*

All of this information is from newspaper accounts:

Mr. Eduardo Lucas, well known in society circles both on account of his charming personality and because he has the well-deserved reputation of being one of the best amateur tenors in the country...

A comparison of photographs has proved conclusively that M. Henri Fournaye and Eduardo Lucas were really one and the same person, and that the deceased had for some reason lived a double life in London and Paris.

We need more *playboy tenors who lead double lives and have crazy wives following them about serving as spies*. Seriously, getting yourself famous is not a good way to lead a "secret double life," right? And jealous women stalking you, as we saw, cannot be good for a spy career...

****Holmes, on Lucas being murdered just as Holmes decides that he's one of the top suspects:**

A coincidence! Here is one of the three men whom we had named as possible actors in this drama, and he meets a violent death during the very hours when we know that that drama was being enacted. The odds are enormous against its being coincidence. No figures could express them. No, my dear Watson, the two events are connected--MUST be connected. It is for us to find the connection.

Of course, it *was* a complete coincidence, although we can hardly blame Sherlock for making the same leap we all no doubt did when reading the story.

Then again, he never apologized to Watson, or admitted his error.

****Oh, John, the fair sex really is your department!** His description of Lady Hilda: *"the most lovely woman in London...the subtle, delicate charm and the beautiful colouring of that exquisite head...It was a queenly presence--tall, graceful, and intensely womanly."*

Now, I don't want to suggest that Watson is *easily smitten* with female clients, or that he exaggerates at all.

Yet **Constable MacPherson** was *not* nearly so impressed: *"respectable," "very pleasant, "genteel."* When pressed, he admitted *"I suppose you might say she was handsome."*

That hardly seems like someone describing "the most lovely woman in London." Yes, Hilda was trying to be incognito, so she might have trying to be a bit dowdy. But MacPherson still recognized her instantly from her picture.

Let that be a lesson: one man's "most lovely woman" is another's "well, I suppose you might say she was handsome."

And, perhaps, Watson is a little *too* easily charmed by a pretty woman...

****Lady Hilda: "There is complete confidence between my husband and me on all matters save one. That one is politics."**

Well, obviously not, as you so desperately wish to make sure that not even a hint of your youthful letter exists.

So you've lied to Holmes, and no doubt yourself...

****I don't want to pick on Lady Hilda too much. The shame spiral/panic is a tough beast to be under the control of.**

But on the day the letter is discovered missing:

"Is my husband's political career likely to suffer through this incident?"

"Well, madam, unless it is set right it may certainly have a very unfortunate effect."

"Ah!" She drew in her breath sharply as one whose doubts are resolved.

"One more question, Mr. Holmes. From an expression which my husband dropped in the first shock of this disaster I understood that terrible public consequences might arise from the loss of this document."

"If he said so, I certainly cannot deny it."

And yet she *still* won't turn over the letter!! Perhaps she could be forgiven about initially taking the letter. She had no idea what it was, thank to her husband's policy of keeping "politics" completely secret from him.

But now, thanks to Holmes, she *knows* that it's going to ruin his career, and perhaps cause terrible public consequences.

Yet even when she gets the letter back, she *still* won't return it!! Why?

"I could hardly prevent myself from there and then kneeling down at his feet and telling him what I had done. But that again would mean a confession of the past."

So covering up her past is more important than her family's welfare, and that of the nation? She'd rather let her husband suffer disgrace? Good heavens, what self-importance she attributes to her "past."

Especially when she could have found other ways to return the letter without confessing: put it back in the despatch-box herself; stash it under the bed or against the wainscoting and dramatically declare "look what I found!"; drop it in the post anonymously to her husband's office; give it to Holmes and have him make up a story about finding it (perhaps at Lucas' scene!).

But keeping it hidden, for 4 days after she knew the potential consequences? *Staggeringly selfish.*

****Apocryphal case:** *"You remember the woman at Margate whom I suspected for the same reason. No powder on her nose--that proved to be the correct solution."*

****"***Only one important thing has happened in the last three days, and that is that nothing has happened."*

As with the dog who did nothing in the night-time, a wonderful example of negative evidence.

****Wait...Lestrade** called in Holmes because the stains didn't match? He couldn't have figured out for *himself* that meant that someone had moved the carpet, and it had to have been either the constable or someone he had allowed into the room?

Maybe there *is* no hope for him.

**** **Lady Hilda's** was quite busy. She went to Lucas' to be confronted about her letter; she made an impression of her husband's key, and took that to Lucas; she went to Lucas to get the new key; after she had

taken the letter, she brought it to Lucas. And after Lucas' murder, she came back to steal it from his hiding place.

That's a *lot* of visits to his dwelling, even if he lived only a "*short walk*" from the Hope home. One can only wonder that her husband never got suspicious.

****So, *where* did Lucas get the Hilda's letter from? From her former love interest? From a servant?**

****Why the **** did Holmes carry a picture of Hilda with him?**

I suppose that, as Holmes initially knew that someone inside the household must be involved, she was considered a suspect. That only increased with her visit to Baker Street. So it made sense to carry a picture to help identify any female suspect.

But where did he get a *photo portrait* to cut her face from?!?

****Victory?**

You will be relieved to hear that there will be no war, that the Right Honourable Trelawney Hope will suffer no setback in his brilliant career, that the indiscreet Sovereign will receive no punishment for his indiscretion, that the Prime Minister will have no Europe an complication to deal with, and that with a little tact and management upon our part nobody will be a penny the worse for what might have been a very ugly incident.

Well, Trelawney Hope must appear as an idiot to his peers, which can't help his "*brilliant career.*" The indiscreet sovereign's suffering no punishment may only encourage him to be indiscreet in the future. The man in the Foreign office who passed the information on to Lucas is still there.

And most importantly, Hope and his wife *still* have secrets from each other, and would willingly risk ruin and war rather than be honest with each other. I can't say that a expect a happy future for them as a couple.

****Great closing line: "*We also have our diplomatic secrets.*"**

Brian Keith Snell

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