



His Last Bow

Adventure XLII -- The Adventure of the Bruce-Partington Plans

Now let me see if I've got this straight. Some vital, top-secret submarine plans are missing. The prime minister is upset. The admiralty is buzzing like an overturned bee-hive. Scotland Yard is on the case already; they have a habit of putting their oar in whenever a dead body is discovered in suspicious circumstances. Well, Inspector Lestrade is a good man who has solved a lot of difficult cases. Of course, this case involves national security, so it really goes beyond the authority of even the official police. I know! We'll put that fellow Holmes onto it. He may not look like much, but he has a younger brother who is an amateur detective.... Ah yes, it is one of the perpetual wonders of the Canon that it can take the implausible and make us believe, at least for a while, that events truly took place just the way Watson wrote it down. So forget your dress-circle tickets to the theatre! Leave your sweetie on the corner and join the Hounds as they plunge into the fog in pursuit of "The Bruce Partington Plans."

Who you gonna call? In my introduction to this week's case, I expressed some doubts that Mycroft and Sherlock Holmes would really have been called in to help in the investigation. In the England of 1895, were there any official channels to deal with such a situation as the theft of secret documents? Hugo Oberstein seems to have been a freelance spy, but was it necessary to employ a freelance detective to track him down? Were there counter-intelligence agents in the British government in those days?



At the beginning of the story, Inspector Lestrade proposed a very reasonable theory to explain the circumstances surrounding the theft of the plans. And yet Mycroft Holmes insisted, "All my instincts are against this explanation." Did Mycroft know more than he was willing to tell? Did he know Cadogan West personally? Was he already suspicious of the Walter brothers?

Cadogan West: Cadogan West was a junior clerk whose duties “brought him into daily, personal contact with the plans. No one else had the handling of them.” But what was he doing when he handled the plans? Was he making copies? Building a model? Researching the patents? Testing various materials for construction? Was anyone actually engaged in building the submarine, or did it just make the Admiralty happy to have the plans around?

Cadogan West was twenty-seven at the time of his death, and he had already spent ten years in government service. Despite his youth, Sidney Johnson testified that West was one of the people who possessed the technical knowledge to copy the submarine plans had he desired to do so. But how did West come by his technical knowledge if he started work at the age of seventeen? I know that people went off to college at younger ages than they do now, but isn't seventeen a bit young to graduate under any system? Was Cadogan West a prodigy? Would the Admiralty have given him an opportunity to acquire his technical knowledge on the job?

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