



## His Last Bow

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

The foul weather in November 1895 was finally getting on Holmes' nerves. For three dreary days, he had patiently waited for the sort of criminal activity that heavy fog seemed to be designed for. As the fourth day dawned with a thick, yellow, oily mist still shrouding Baker Street, he showed his impatience. Pacing the floor of 221B, he declared to Watson that the somber stage was set for some truly dramatic event.

Right on cue, a message from Holmes' brother Mycroft arrived. Mycroft was taking the highly unorthodox step (for him) of making a personal appearance at Baker Street to discuss a vital matter involving Arthur Cadogan West — someone Holmes had never heard of. It devolved that Cadogan West was a junior clerk at the Woolwich Arsenal. His body, head badly crushed, had been found next to a railway line. In his pockets were top-secret plans for a new type of submarine being developed.



Mycroft Holmes said that "...naval warfare becomes impossible within the radius of a Bruce-Partington's operations." So far as I know, although submarines were definitely under development in 1895, even the most sophisticated design would scarcely have had such an effect. Indeed, the Bruce-Partington must have been a relatively simple submarine if only ten plans were enough to allow it to be replicated. A related question: If Oberstein had enough technical knowledge to enable him to know which of the plans to keep, how was it that he did not know that an "essential detail" was missing?

In any case, Oberstein was not a "spy" in the conventional sense of the word, since he was not working for any foreign country; rather, he was a freelancer who put the stolen plans "up for auction" to every country on the Continent.

During our discussion of NAVA, there was considerable mention of the security arrangements, or lack thereof, used to safeguard important State documents. We encountered another example of such arrangements in SECO. But it would seem that the protection of the Bruce-Partington plans was adequate —

only two keys to the safe containing the plans, and the safe itself behind two locked doors in a separate, secure building. Yet Cadogan West apparently thought these precautions were inadequate. What turned his mind to thoughts of security, and what persuaded him that it would be a simple matter for a traitor to get at the plans? Surely, Colonel Valentine Walter would not have been so careless as to allow West to see him obtaining the keys that needed to be copied? And evidently, Sir James Walter inexplicably took no action when he **did** see his brother handling the keys. In any case, if Cadogan West had seen such activity, why did he not report it to Sidney Johnson, or to some superior? Was all this an effort on the part of the Literary Agent to call attention to a perceived lack of security in high-level Government affairs?

Was it really necessary to force entry into Hugo Oberstein's flat in Caulfield Gardens? Holmes told Watson that there were insufficient grounds to justify a warrant, but in matters of national security, it is often easier to obtain permission to search. This was particularly true when the premises to be searched were occupied by a known high-level foreign agent who just happened to leave the country immediately after the theft of highly sensitive documents was discovered. Was the "break-in" a literary device to heighten the reader's sense of suspense and risk? (It was certainly a mechanism to inject a note of humor into the narrative, as Mycroft "indignantly refused" to clamber over the railings in the areaway to enter the premises as his brother had done the night before.)

Holmes says of the newspaper clippings found in Oberstein's flat, "No dates — but messages arrange themselves." To my untrained eye, there are several possible sequences in which the messages would make perfect sense. How did Holmes know the correct sequence, and why did the sequence of the messages matter? It was well after nine P.M. when Holmes and Watson finished their examination of the Caulfield Gardens premises. Yet before returning to Baker Street, Holmes stopped at the offices of the \*Daily Telegraph\* to place a decoy advertisement. Was it customary in those days for newspaper offices to accept advertisements at any hour of the night? And how did Holmes know that any of the conspirators represented by the Caulfield Gardens messages would still be watching for further communications from Pierrot?

I wonder what events in 1895 involving Siam would have concerned the British Government?

A final question: We learn that Hugo Oberstein "was safely engulfed in a British prison for fifteen years." How could he possibly escape the scaffold for murdering Arthur Cadogan West?

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