



An Inquiry into: “The Adventure of the Bruce-Partington Plans”

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“The Adventure of the Bruce-Partington Plans” was first published in *The Strand Magazine* in December 1908 and in *Collier’s Weekly Magazine* on the same month and year. It is part of *His Last Bow*.

Regarding the case’s date, for a very welcome change, there is little room for speculation: “The third week of November in the year 1895” is Watson’s open-

ing sentence. He then adds that the day was Thursday. If one consults the calendar for that year, it shows that the date had to be the 21st. Uncharacteristically, little argument is possible, as shown by the table.

In 1895 Sherlock Holmes was 41 years old and Doctor John H. Watson 43.

Main Characters:

Mycroft Holmes, elder brother of Sherlock Holmes, and highly influential government official. Giles Lestrade, Scotland Yard Inspector. Arthur Cadogan West, junior clerk at the Woolwich Arsenal.

Violet Westbury, Arthur Cadogan West’s fiancée. Sir James Walters, official in charge of secret and sensitive papers. Colonel Valentine Walter, Sir James’ brother. Sidney Johnson, senior clerk at the Woolwich Arsenal. Hugo Oberstein, known German spy.

Notable Quotes:

“The London criminal is certainly a dull fellow. Look out the window, Watson, see how the figures loom up, are dimly seen, and then blend once more into the cloud-bank. The thief or murderer could roam London on such a day as the tiger does the jungle, unseen until he pounces, and then evident only to his victim.”

The Adventure of the Bruce-Partington Plans

| <i>Chronologist</i> | <i>Date of the Adventure</i> |
|---------------------|------------------------------------|
| <i>Canon</i> | <i>Thursday, November 21, 1895</i> |
| <i>Baring-Gould</i> | <i>Thursday, November 21, 1895</i> |
| <i>Bell</i> | <i>Thursday, November 21, 1895</i> |
| <i>Blakeney</i> | <i>Thursday, November 21, 1895</i> |
| <i>Brend</i> | <i>November 1895</i> |
| <i>Christ</i> | <i>Monday, November 18, 1895</i> |
| <i>Dakin</i> | <i>Thursday, November 21, 1895</i> |
| <i>Folsom</i> | <i>Thursday, November 21, 1895</i> |
| <i>Hall</i> | <i>November 21, 1895</i> |
| <i>Keefauver</i> | <i>Thursday, November 21, 1895</i> |
| <i>Klinger</i> | <i>1895</i> |
| <i>Zeisler</i> | <i>Thursday, November 21, 1895</i> |

Please note that Canon chronologists may differ on pivotal dates and comparative periods between cases, thus a simple majority is not necessarily correct. Most Canon scholars settle on a single chronologist’s results for their research framework.

“It is fortunate for this community that I am not a criminal.”

“It is as if you met a tram-car coming down a country lane. Mycroft has his rails and he runs on them. His Pall Mall lodgings, the Diogenes Club, Whitehall—that is his cycle. Once, and only once, he has been here.”

“One has to be discreet when one talks of high matters of state. You are right in thinking that he under the British government. You would also be right in a sense if you said that occasionally he is the British government.”



“Why do you not solve it yourself, Mycroft? You can see as far as I.”

“Possibly, Sherlock. But it is a question of getting details. Give me your details, and from an arm-chair I will return you an excellent expert opinion. But to run here and run there, to cross-question railway guards, and lie on my face with a lens to my eye—it is not my *métier*. No, you are the one man who can clear the matter up.”

“I play the game for the game’s own sake.”

“I am going out now. It is only a reconnaissance. I will do nothing serious without my trusted comrade and biographer at my elbow. Do you stay here, and the odds are that you will see me again in an hour or two. If time hangs heavy get foolscap and a pen, and begin your narrative of how we saved the State.”

“We must fall back upon the old axiom that when all other contingencies fail, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.”

“We can’t do these things in the force, Mr. Holmes. No wonder you get results that are beyond us. But some of these days you’ll go too far, and you’ll find yourself and your friend in trouble.”

“How an English gentleman could behave in such a manner is beyond my comprehension.”

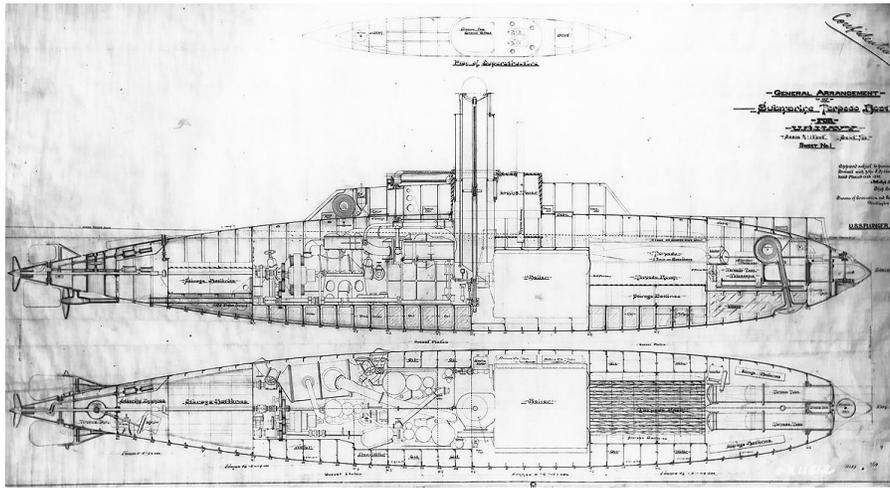
Some weeks afterwards I learned incidentally that my friend spent a day at Windsor, whence he returned with a remarkably fine emerald tie-pin. When I asked him if he had bought it, he answered that it was a present from a certain gracious lady in whose interests he had once been fortunate enough to carry out a small commission. He said no more; but I fancy that I could guess at that lady’s august name, and I have little doubt that the emerald pin will forever recall to my friend’s memory the adventure of the Bruce-Partington plans.

The Bruce-Partington Submarine

At the time that this adventure took place a massive naval arms race was taking place between Great Britain and the German Empire. Wilhelm II had fired Otto von Bismarck, his savvy minister, and in 1890 he began a weapons program aimed at having the German Imperial Fleet surpass the Royal Navy in the number of dreadnoughts—heavily armored floating forts with increasingly large cannon. The result was that both sides started launching battleships as fast as they could, so alarming France and Russia that they entered into the Dual Alliance.

It is interesting to note that at the time the British Admiralty considered the submarine as being “only the weapon of a weaker nation.”

In 1895, the only practical submarine was the *Nautilus*, and it is a fair guess that Captain Nemo would not have been inclined to share his knowledge (and blueprints) with the naval powers of the time. In view of the 108 years of depressing history we have had since 1914, it seems incredible that although the Great War loomed only three years in the future, my copy of the 1911 Edition of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* still attached such little importance to submarines that the only mention made of underwater weapons is under



“Submerged Mines.”

After the doubtful success of the *Hunley* during the American Civil War and the often-displayed hesitation shown by later submarines to resurface, it would seem logical that the sub being planned would have been more along the lines of a small version of Verne’s *Nautilus*, ramming ships to the bottom rather than operating as a platform for launching torpedoes. This seems to be confirmed by the quality of the tin fish used over a decade later during the First World War, whose accuracy was more a matter of the crew’s skill in aiming the boat with a generous application of Kentucky windage, rather than the torpedo’s technology.

Submarines were an afterthought for the naval forces of that time, and few were produced because due to their limited range, capabilities, and armament they were considered fit only for coastal defense. During the First World War Germany quickly proved this to be wrong. It is interesting to note, however, that until well after the beginning of the Second World War, while the Battle of the Atlantic was at its worse, Annapolis midshipmen were still being taught the limitations of the submarine.

In view of all this—especially the non-existent art of submarine warfare at the time, what could have been so crucial about the Bruce-Partington submarine? From what little Watson tells us, Oberstein was interested in only obtaining the plans that dealt with the control of pressure. This would have had crucial importance because it would have allowed the boat to remain submerged longer—or at



least until its very short-lived battery required surfacing for recharging. Beyond that, because we know little else, it appears pointless to further speculate on the matter.

In 1895, overwhelmingly Holland was the place where governments went to purchase submarines. These ships were equipped with one bow torpedo tube plus what was proudly described as a “pneumatic dynamite gun,” which was exactly what it sounds like: a compressed air device that shot out a charge of dynamite with a fuse attached to its business end.

It must have been fun to fire, especially for those with a death wish.

The Mysterious Mycroft Holmes

Unsurprisingly, early in their friendship Holmes did not reveal to Watson his elder brother’s true status in the British Government. His reasoning, that he did not know him as well in the early days of 221B is perfectly logical; especially for their time.

Holmes *did* tell the Good Doctor that there were times when his brother Mycroft not only *was* the British Government, but also decided Imperial policy. However, although this sounds like quite a revelation, it really does not say much. In truth, Mycroft might have been a powerful *éminence grise*, who today might have been a cross between the directors of the FBI, CIA, and NSA. Unquestionably, he was part—an essential part—of the permanent government; i.e., his position and activities were unaffected by political parties or elections.

Anyone who has been involved in high-tech would not blink an eye at the elder Holmes’ revelation of how the Bruce-Partington project was implemented: “Two years ago a very large sum was smuggled

through the Estimates and was expended in acquiring a monopoly of the invention. Every effort has been made to keep the secret.” Although names may change, some things never do. All this is very reminiscent of what today we would refer to as “black ops.” As Mycroft describes it, the creation of the Bruce-Partington



project is very reminiscent of how the CIA used black funds to finance the development of Lockheed’s SR-71 Blackbird spy aircraft.

Although Holmes seemed to disdain most honors—particularly those offered him by his own country: “I play the game for the game’s own sake”—this probably was not the case with his elder brother. In spite of his younger brother’s declaration that he “will receive neither honour nor title,” it is doubtful that someone who “remains the most indispensable man in the country” would have settled for apparently so little.

We are asked to believe that someone performing the truly unique (and crucial) services for his country would have been satisfied to serve for a yearly salary of £450 (≈\$170,000); an income some £50

less than that of a head clerk at the Bank of England! Surely Mycroft's services were somewhat more complicated and important than ensuring that the books at your cage balanced at day's end!

We know that Mycroft was not contented with a simple life, as were our two friends. Rents in Imperial London (as in any other great metropolis) were astronomical. A set of furnished rooms at Pall Mall would have rented for about £570 (≈\$214,000) per year. Even the far humbler place at 221B has been estimated to have rented for £312 (≈\$117,000)! It is therefore unlikely that Mycroft would have lived as simply as his younger brother. Just his club expenses would have precluded this. The entrance fee alone for these gentlemanly refuges from daily life averaged £26 (≈\$10,000). Added to this was the annual membership fee plus the expense of drinks and meals, etc. In Mycroft's case, it is not farfetched to assume that he took his meals, at least dinner, at his club.)

We know little about the Holmes family, except for our sleuth's passing comment that "My ancestors were country squires, who appear to have led much the same life as is natural to their class." This would indicate that the family was at least firmly upper middle-class, if not, at some past time, minor nobility; in any case, unquestionably the Holmes brothers were gentlemen, both by birth and their actions.

The Huge Book of References

Aside from references to the many lost cases of Sherlock Holmes, nothing else is more titillating to the true Canon student, than Watson's mention of this unique resource. Here, he tells us that in his boredom, Holmes spent a day "cross-indexing his huge book of references."

Personally, whenever I come across a mention of this massive work, I am mystified by the Great Detective's indexing system. If one strictly goes by canonical mentions to it, it seems clear that the material was in book form; which is why I cannot grasp how our sleuth went about finding whatever information he needed from that collection's vast contents.



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The cross-indexing part seems simple. One can see how, for example, in the case of Irene Adler he might have written below her entry, "Q.v., King of Bohemia." But how would he be able to locate in which volume and page of his collection he can find Irene Adler's entry? Or, for that matter, the King's? When one recollects that, according to Watson the reference to Irene Adler was "sandwiched in between that of a Hebrew

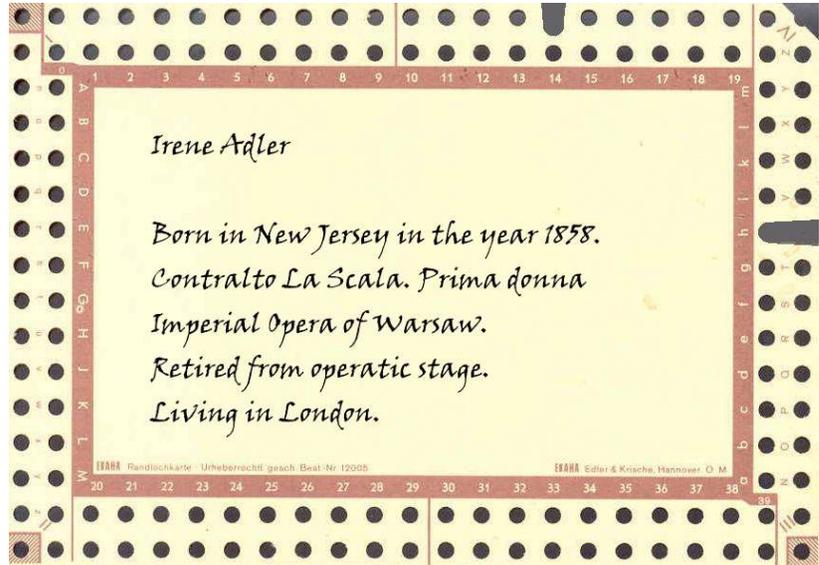
rabbi and that of a staff-commander who had written a monograph upon the deep-sea fishes" this does not appear to be a simple undertaking!

It seems impossible that these entries could have been any sort of alphabetical or numerical order. Once a hardbound notebook begins to be filled, it becomes increasingly less possible to paste newspaper clippings and other references alphabetically. Eventually, all this information would turn into a morass which would cause one to soon lose track of exactly where the information is contained; especially if there is more than one volume.

Perennially I wonder why Holmes did not use index cards—these would have been simple to alphabetize and cross-reference. Even better, why not use punch cards? Ninety-one years before, Joseph Marie Jacquard had demonstrated his mechanism of punched cards linked into a chain, which auto-

mated loom operation. Soon many were using punched cards for informatics for information storage and search. The 1890 U.S. census used punched card technology.

When I was in high school and later in college and computers weighed tons and needed a refrigerated atmosphere to work, I used cards that had knitting-needle-size perforations along their edges. I would write the information on both sides and code it by opening up a number of holes and leaving others intact. It would then go back into the stack in no particular order. Later, when I wished to retrieve the information, I would insert a knitting needle through a hole of a stack and pull out the cards that had that hole intact. After a couple of such passes, I was able retrieve all the cards that had the specific information I wanted, regardless of their position in the stack. As far as I know, this system dated back to well before 1895.



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A Bit of Compassion

Colonel Valentine Walter strikes me as one of the Canon's more tragic figures. Although he justifiably comes out as the villain in the piece, he is deserving of a little sympathy. If ever someone found himself trapped on all sides by circumstances, it was him. His disastrous choice in the Stock Exchange left him with a £5,000 (≈\$1,900,000) debt which, like a bad bet in a game of cards, is considered a debt of honor that in addition to destroying his reputation could land him in jail. There can be no question that he had to have been desperate when Oberstein approached him with what seemed like an escape route from disaster. It is small wonder that he grasped it desperately without fully considering the possible consequences.



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In the end, he lost everything that he cared for. He was disgraced, caused the death of his brother, and ended up in jail, there to die. To end of his days, Holmes' denunciation, "How an English gentleman could behave in such a manner is beyond my comprehension" must have bitterly echoed in his ears.

A Peculiarly Mild Punishment

It is puzzling that Hugo Oberstein received a sentence of only 15 years, considering that very often spies tested the hemp of which the hangman's noose was made out of. Aside from almost obtaining and passing on some of the Empire's most important secrets, crucial to the security of the Realm, he

cold-bloodedly murdered an English subject while the latter was patriotically trying to stop him. Perhaps this miscarriage of justice resulted from his cooperating with the authorities and passing on information on other spies. Mycroft would probably not have hesitated in making such a deal.

A Passing Speculation

I cannot help but wonder what thoughts must have crossed that clerk's mind at the telegraph office, when Holmes handed the (uncoded!) telegram for transmission to Mycroft: *See some light in the darkness, but it may possibly flicker out. Meanwhile, please send by messenger, to await return at Baker Street, a complete list of all foreign spies or international agents known to be in England, with full address.*

Holmes at His Best

"Splendid" is the only way to describe Holmes' performance in this case. We truly see him at his best. His deduction in the subway tunnel, based on the points and curve of the tracks, that Cadogan West had to have fallen from the roof of the carriage is pure vintage Holmes— everything one cherishes from our sleuth. Bravo, sir!

What else happened in 1895:



Empire

Freetown, Sierra Leone, granted municipal status and privileges.

Anglo-French interests begin to conflict in Nile Valley.

◀ U.S. intervenes in Anglo-Venezuelan border dispute, arbitration in Britain's favor.

Construction of Uganda railway commenced.

British East Africa Company surrenders Kenya as British protectorate.

Jameson Raid in South Africa in 1895—failed attempt to overthrow the Afrikaans government.

Britain

First automobile exhibition in London.

Electrification of first mainline railway.

Liberals defeated at general election, Salisbury forms his third Unionist ministry.

Compulsory retirement of aged Duke of Cambridge as C-in-C of British Army.

London School of Economics and Political Science founded.

World

Japan takes Formosa (now Taiwan).

Germany, France, and Russia unite to compel Japan to return Liaotung peninsula to China.

Treaty of Simonoseki, end of Sino-Japanese war.

Cuban rebellions begin, U.S.A. protests brutal suppression.

Dreyfus refused new trial by French President Faure.

National League founded in Poland; aimed at autonomy under Russian suzerainty.

Nyssens Law extended to Belgian provinces and communes.

Armenian demonstration in Constantinople leads to massacre of 50,000 Armenians.

Frontiers of Pamirs fixed by commission of Russians, Afghans, and British.

Introduction of diphtheria antitoxin.

Completion of Kiel Canal (61 miles) makes Germany North Sea power.

Volleyball invented.

French troops capture Antananarivo in Madagascar.

Abyssinia defeats Italy in the First Italo-Ethiopian War (1885-1896).

Art

Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* debuts. Later that year, Wilde is imprisoned.

Corelli publishes *The Sorrows of Satan*.

H.G. Wells publishes *The Time Machine*.

Science and Technology

Wilhelm Konrad Röntgen, German physicist, experiments with Crooke's tubes and discovers X-rays.

Ramsey obtains helium, first identified by its spectrum in the sun, in 1868.

On December 28th, in the Hotel Scribe, in Paris, the first public cinema show takes place.

Thomas Armat, of Washington, develops modern cinema projection.

King Gillette (U.S.) invents safety razor.

Guglielmo Marconi, an Italian electrical engineer, transmits the first wireless signal.

Next week's case: DEVI.

Respectfully submitted,

Murray, the Courageous Orderly

(a.k.a. Alexander E. Braun)

"I should have fallen into the hands
of the murderous Ghazis had it not
been for the devotion and courage
shown by Murray, my orderly..."

All Sherlock Holmes illustrations have been published by courtesy of ITV Granada.

If you would like to join the Hounds of the Internet, email us at CourageousMurray@aol.com.

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