

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

His Last Bow Adventure XLII -- The Adventure of the Bruce-Partington Plans

The Adventure Of The Bruce-Partington Plans--Victorian Spy Thriller!!

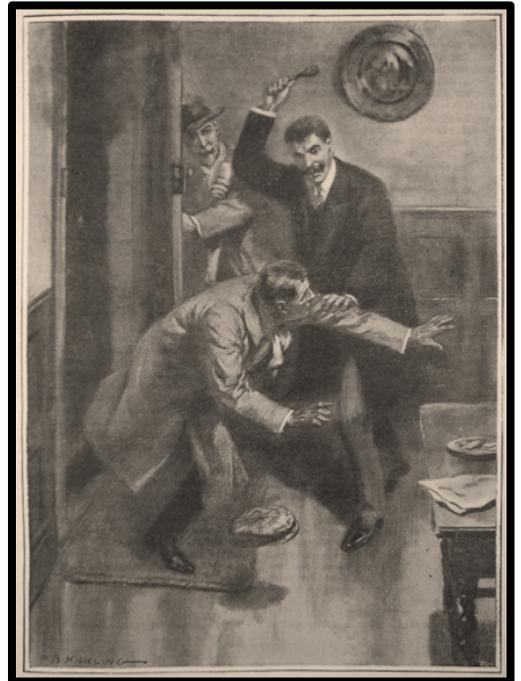
The Adventure Of The Bruce-Partington plans is the third leg of an informal **Sherlock Holmes** trilogy. Together with **The Adventure of The Naval Treaty** and **The Adventure of The Second Stain**, Bruce-Partington Plans tells a familiar story: *a secret of vital importance to the British government is stolen. Holmes must recover it, lest the be devastating repercussions. And Holmes does succeed.* They all follow the same outline.

By looking at these three stories, both the similarities and their differences, we can learn a fair amount about the state of espionage, and the quality of government security, back in the day.

First, I think it would help to have a brief recap of the stories. In **The Naval Treaty**, a "*secret*" treaty between England and Italy is stolen from the desk of a fool at the Foreign Office. The clerk promptly goes into a two month bout of "*brain fever*." When Holmes gets involved, he discovers that the culprit was the brother of the clerk's fiancée, who had large debts, who had stolen the document. Holmes thrashes him, and recovers the treaty.

In **The Second Stain**, an "*imprudent*" letter from a "*foreign potentate*" is stolen from the home of the European Minister, and seems certain to lead to war if it becomes public. Holmes discovers that it was taken by the minister's wife, who was being blackmailed by a spy over some indiscreet letters she wrote in her youth. Fortunately, the spy is murdered by his jealous wife, and the letter is recovered with nether war nor divorce.

In **Bruce-Partington**, *top-secret plans for a new submarine* are stolen, presumably by a clerk found murdered. It turns out that the brother of the department's head, who had large debts, had taken the plans



and sold them to a spy. Fortunately, the spy was tricked into returning to England with the plans, and all was well that ended well (*except for the poor murdered clerk!*).

So what nuggets of wisdom can we tease out of these stories?

A) In all three mysteries, *relatives* (or soon-to-be relatives) steal the secrets. In *Naval Treaty*, the brother of **Percy Phelps'** fiancé just strolls into Percy's office and takes a treaty that was sitting on top of the desk. In *Second Stain*, **Trelawney Hope's** wife is blackmailed into taking the letter for her husband's despatch box. And in *Bruce-Partington*, **Sir James Walters'** broke brother copied his keys and used them to steal England's most valuable military secret.

What can we take away from this? ***Family is trouble!***

Or, to state it somewhat more seriously, a real weakness in any security system is when you relax your standards around the people you think that you *should* be able to trust the most.

In two of the stories, close family members were used by foreign agents to get access to what would otherwise be inaccessible. And in all three tales, *personal weaknesses*--debts and past (perceived) immoralities--led brother, brother-in-law (to be) and wife to violate family trust.

So don't be upset if you have a sensitive job and they run security checks on your loved ones. They're the ones most likely to betray you.

B) In all of the mysteries, ideology was *not* a motivating factor for the thefts.

This struck me as a bit surprising. Being weaned on WWII and Cold War thrillers, I've come to expect that at least *some* spies were true believers or fellow travelers, that they acted out of patriotism or the belief in some political/philosophical system.

But in *Naval Treaty*, **Joseph Harrison** is motivated simply by an opportunity to clear up investment debts. In *Second Stain* and *Bruce-Partington*, **Lucas** and **Oberstein** were seeking to auction off their ill-gotten secrets to the highest bidder.

Of course, international politics were different in the Victorian era, and competitions between states were less about competing ideological systems and more about national power. Still, it was surprising to see that *no one* in these stories was acting out of a particular antipathy for Britain or fondness for another country. It was all about the cash.

And watch out for those Stock Exchange investments. You'll lose your shirt, and have to turn to treason.

C) In all 3 mysteries, the security arrangements to protect these valuable secrets were *woefully inadequate*, if not *criminally negligent*.

In Naval Treaty, the Foreign Office has only *one elderly commissionaire* to watch the main entrance...and his main concern seems to be getting coffee for employees working late. Meanwhile, there is *an unlocked, unguarded employees' side entrance*, which leads directly to the offices and doesn't have to pass the commissionaire.

Seriously--*anyone* can just walk in!! That has to be concerning, even if Phelps was negligent by leaving the treaty on his desktop and not locking his office door!!

In Second Stain, Trelawney Hope did not trust the governments' security, so he carried the letter with him in his locked despatch box...which he kept *in an unlocked room at home*, unguarded, because his family and servants were supposedly beyond suspicion.

In Bruce-Partington, **Cadogan West** complained that "*that we were slack about such matters...that it would be easy for a traitor to get the plans.*" Indeed, there was *only one watchman* on the building--"*but he has other departments to look after as well.*" And we learn that the shutters on the window don't even meet completely--so anyone can look into the safe room from the outside!! Granted, a thief would need to have three separate keys to pull off the crime. But once he got those, there was literally *nothing* left to protect England's most vital military secret!!!

Three huge secrets--each supposedly dangerous enough to lead to war--didn't have as much security as your average shopping mall shoe store!! Certainly, we can't expect advanced technology here, but how about real guards, on every entrance, 24/7?? Don't take earth-shattering documents home with you?

Given the level of government security shown in these stories, it's a wonder Britain had any secrets left to protect...

D) In two of the cases, both Holmes and the governments had lists of "*known foreign spies and international agents.*"

Seriously, England just let these guys wander around?

I can understand the principle. It's better to have a spy you know about--so don't deport these guys immediately. Let them wander free and keep them under observation. Maybe they'll lead you to other operatives. Maybe you can use them against other governments, under the right circumstances. And if you kick them out, they'll be replaced, and you might not recognize who the new spies are until it's too late.

The problem, of course, is the all too familiar problem of departments not communicating with each other. In Bruce-Partington, Oberstein had been under some level of observation, and **Mycroft's** report said he

had left town sometime after the plans were stolen. Well, you don't have to have a Sherlock-level intellect to figure out that when a major government secret is stolen, and the top foreign agent leaves London at the same time, there *might* be a connection. But no one in the government did make that connection. Three days later, apparently Oberstein's watchers *still* had no idea that anything untoward had happened, or that maybe they should kind of put out an urgent bulletin!

Given that level of intragovernmental cooperation, Britain would have been much better off rethinking the policy of just letting known spies wander around.

E) In two of the three stories, it was a *diplomatic* secret, not a military or technological one, that was stolen.

Again, this may seem a bit surprising to us--modern spy fiction is centered around *stuff*, gadgets and science and technology. Who goes around stealing letters from one monarch to another? Who thinks secret treaties (do they still have those?) are worth so much struggle?

A condition of our age is that those "*diplomatic*" secrets are leaked to the public fairly regularly--think **Wikileaks**, or **Hillary's** emails--and war never seems to be a terribly likely result. But military secrets, or intelligence methods? Now, that *will* get the **NSA** involved, and have people howling treason!!

We can certainly put some of this off to **Sir Arthur Conan Doyle** exaggerating for effect, or perhaps even ignorance, but the perception at the time seems to have been that diplomatic secrets were just as valuable and dangerous as military classified tech. It was believed that a poor choice of words from a potentate or word that two countries were talking was just as likely to set off *a cataclysmic war as* giving one side unbeatable naval superiority.

Of course, that was at least partially true, as contemporary European history was soon to prove.

F) In each of the mysteries, it was only *blind luck* that kept the secrets from falling into the wrong hands.

That's not to make light of Holmes' deductions and contributions. But consider that in Naval Treaty, it is only that fact that Joseph Harrison chose a *particularly* unlucky place to stash the treaty that kept it from being sold to a foreign power two months before Holmes became involved in the mystery. In Second Stain, if Lucas' wife doesn't choose *that exact moment* to show up and go into a jealous killing rage, the letter is in the hands of a foreign government before Holmes gets involved. And in Bruce-Partington, the plans *have already left England!!* It is only because Oberstein falls for a ruse--and brings the plans back with him to England--that disaster is averted.

In other words, having the world's greatest detective on your side is meaningless, because by the time you think to get him involved, it is already too late--unless your spies are ridiculously unlucky (and stupid).

So what can we learn through Sherlock Holmes' "spy" trilogy? Don't trust you're family. Don't invest in the stock market. Stop being so secretive and get the smartest man in the country involved more quickly. And for heaven's sake, England, if these secrets ask so ****ed important, invest in some decent security!!

OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:

**You know, I have another suspect in this case: Sir James!!

I know, it's *crazy*. No, I don't seriously believe that.

But please consider this:

Sir James had access to the building and safe.

Sir James' alibi for the early part of the evening comes *from his brother, Colonel Valentine*, who will prove to be a very unreliable source: "*Yes; his brother, Colonel Valentine Walter, has testified to his departure from Woolwich...*"

We know Cadogan West saw someone he recognized in the fog that night and took off to follow him. But we never hear from his own lips whom that was, as West is inconveniently dead. It could have been James Walter, not his brother, could it not? And West's cryptic remarks to his fiancé--that security was slack, and that it would be east for a traitor to get the plans--could apply as well to Sir James as the colonel.

But Sir James died, you're probably saying. Well, perhaps. But Valentine is keen to tell us how sensitive James was about his honour. Suppose, just suppose, that Sir James felt that sting of dishonour over his brother's vast debts, which would shame the family. And Sir James decided to avoid that public shame by copying the plans and selling them. But West saw him, was killed, and that *murder* is the shame that killed Sir James?!?

Or, maybe *he isn't dead*. We never saw the body, and only have Colonel Walter's word on his death. They were in it together, and he was helping James fake his death, to escape with the profits for their endeavor. And when Valentine fell into Holmes' trap, he decided to take the heat himself to preserve his brother's name and freedom!

OK, not bloody likely.

**Still, it is legitimate to ask how Sir James *did* die.

His brother gives this explanation: *"My brother, Sir James, was a man of very sensitive honour, and he could not survive such an affair. It broke his heart. He was always so proud of the efficiency of his department, and this was a crushing blow."*

Oh, yes, the "he died of a broken heart!!" How very **Amidala** of him! (Of course, that type of death *could* be interpreted as a stress-induced stroke or heart attack...)

Holmes isn't completely sold on the cause of death, either: *"I wonder if the death was natural, or whether the poor old fellow killed himself! If the latter, may it be taken as some sign of self-reproach for duty neglected?"*

Of course, there is a third option--*Colonel Walters killed his brother*, when Sir James threatened to turn him in. The traitor had no qualms at betraying his nation and destroying his brother's reputation for a mere £5,000. That hardly makes you believe that he might stop at murder to preserve himself.

When you look at it in this light, the colonel's statement that, *"He said nothing, but he had caught me once with his keys, and I think that he suspected. I read in his eyes that he suspected. As you know, he never held up his head again"* seems much more sinister, doesn't it?

Just putting that thought out there...

****Watson is no friend of the British Travel Bureau!**

[W]e saw the greasy, heavy brown swirl still drifting past us and condensing in oily drops upon the window-panes...

Ah, that makes London sound *so* appetizing!!

****As the greasy, oily fog has Holmes and Watson trapped in Baker Street, Sherlock is "cross-indexing his huge book of references."** Ah, to get my hands on that book!

Or, to have Sherlock able to do all that on a modern device. Holmes able to fit his entire library on an iPad?!? Someone get me a time machine...

****Sherlock's take on the sinister fog: "This great and sombre stage is set for something more worthy than [petty thefts]," said he. "It is fortunate for this community that I am not a criminal."**

Oh, Sherlock, the way your mind works...

****Holmes: "It is well they don't have days of fog in the Latin countries--the countries of assassination."**

Wait--does he mean Latin America? They *do* have fog there, right? And why are they particularly *"the countries of assassination?"* Some facts here, please, Sherlock!

****Hmm, a curious death, and Holmes *isn't* following the case in the papers? **Watson** has to be the keeper of this knowledge?! "There has been an inquest," said I, "and a good many fresh facts have come out. Looked at more closely, I should certainly say that it was a curious case."**

One would think that, being so bored, Holmes would at least read about local inquests, if for no other reason than to criticize the coroners' decisions. That *is* how he became interested in **The Black Peter** case before Scotland Yard came to him.

***"No ticket! Dear me, Watson, this is really very singular. According to my experience it is not possible to reach the platform of a Metropolitan train without exhibiting one's ticket."*

So they don't have turnstile jumpers and free-riders in Victorian England?!?

***So, if we are to believe Holmes--that he downplayed Mycroft's role in the government in the **Greek Interpreter** because he didn't fully trust Watson yet--can we trust Sherlock *now* as to Mycroft's job? Is he exaggerating to puff up his brother? Or to have a little fun at Watson's expense?*

***Watson, playing up Mycroft's prodigious size:*

A moment later the tall and portly form of Mycroft Holmes was ushered into the room. Heavily built and massive, there was a suggestion of uncouth physical inertia in the figure, but above this unwieldy frame there was perched a head so masterful in its brow, so alert in its steel-gray, deep-set eyes, so firm in its lips, and so subtle in its play of expression, that after the first glance one forgot the gross body and remembered only the dominant mind.

Watson is a bit *obsessed* about size. "Uncouth physical inertia"? "Gross body"? "Unwieldy frame"? Tell us what you really think, John...

***When Mycroft arrives, he is shocked that John and Sherlock haven't heard of the Bruce-Partington submarine: "I thought everyone had heard of it." A few sentences later, Mycroft describes the craft as "the most jealously guarded of all Government secrets."*

In the first **Annotated Sherlock Holmes**, **William S. Baring-Gold** suggests that those two statements *can't* be easily reconciled. **Leslie Klinger**, in the *second* Annotated Holmes, echoes the footnote.

Poppycock!! The secret is not the submarine's *existence*, it's the technical details of *how it works!*

Compare with the modern stealth bomber. It's not a secret. **Everyone** has heard about it! We've seen photographs!! But the technical details of how it works? *That* is what is top secret.

***Mycroft declare that there are "thirty separate patents, each essential to the working of the whole..."* Of course, by the time he's done with his briefing, we're down to needing only 3 of the blueprints to make the device work. If all 30 are *essential*, Walter and Oberstein wouldn't have limited themselves to just 3!!

(And yes, we're later told by the clerk that maybe you need 4 things, and in fact that is what draws Oberstein back to England. 4 is still a far stretch from all 30 being essential, though...)

****Mycroft the lazy:**

Possibly, Sherlock. But it is a question of getting details. Give me your details, and from an armchair 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 metier.

****Holmes on the possibly of being knighted: "I play the game for the game's own sake..."**

****He won't get credit for it, but **Lestrade's** reasoning is fairly sound:**

"It seems to me perfectly clear," said Lestrade. "I have no doubt at all as to what occurred. He took the papers to sell them. He saw the agent. They could not agree as to price. He started home again, but the agent went with him. In the train the agent murdered him, took the more essential papers, and threw his body from the carriage. That would account for everything, would it not?"

"Why had he no ticket?"

"The ticket would have shown which station was nearest the agent's house. Therefore he took it from the murdered man's pocket."

"Good, Lestrade, very good," said Holmes. "Your theory holds together.

His theory turned out to be wrong, but it fit the facts they had at the time. And much better than the usual theories of the crime that Lestrade would come up with and stubbornly stick to!!

****Understatement of the **Canon**: "It was one of my friend's most obvious weaknesses that he was impatient with less alert intelligences than his own."**

****Watson watching Holmes become alert and on the hunt:**

His eager face still wore that expression of intense and high-strung energy, which showed me that some novel and suggestive circumstance had opened up a stimulating line of thought. See the foxhound with hanging ears and drooping tail as it lolls about the kennels, and compare it with the same hound as, with gleaming eyes and straining muscles, it runs upon a breast-high scent--such was the change in Holmes since the morning. He was a different man from the limp and lounging figure in the mouse-coloured dressing-gown who had prowled so restlessly only a few hours before round the fog-girt room

"Fog-girt"? Wonderful stuff, Doyle!

****Holmes is shocked that, while right on the crime, he was wrong on the criminal: "Holmes gave a whistle of surprise. 'You can write me down an ass this time, Watson," said he. "This was not the bird that I was looking for.'"**

We're not told *whom* Holmes thought the criminal was. The only other viable suspect we meet is **Sydney Johnson**, the senior clerk and West's superior (unless, of course, you buy my "Sir James did it" theory above...).

Still, there is *nothing* in particular to make us suspect Johnson. He's only in one scene, and has very little dialogue. He says and does nothing to make us suspicious of him. There's really nothing there, at least on the page.

Obviously, given Holmes' surprise at the colonel showing up at the ambush, *he* must have suspected Johnson. Sir Arthur needed to do a better job of making *us* suspect him, as well.

****Mycroft:** *"The whole force of the State is at your back if you should need it."*

Thus, Holmes is emboldened to bend the laws on their urgent quest:

"Could we not get a warrant and legalize it?"

"Hardly on the evidence...It's not a time to stick at trifles. Think of Mycroft's note, of the Admiralty, the Cabinet, the exalted person who waits for news. We are bound to go."

Contrast with Lestrade's disapproval of Sherlock and John's breaking and entering:

"We can't do these things in the force, Mr. Holmes," said he. "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."

"For England, home and beauty--eh, Watson? Martyrs on the altar of our country."

That makes for a pretty good encapsulation of the arguments on whether or not legal niceties and civil rights can be set aside in a time of crisis.

In other cases, Holmes (and Watson) acknowledged the potential dire legal repercussions should they be caught in burglary, and kept the police in the dark on such activities. Here, though, Holmes openly admits to law-breaking in front of Lestrade. In this case, he is working not as a private citizen, but as a *de facto* agent of the state. No doubt the certainty that the whole power of the Home Office, and the **Queen** herself, would step in to protect him against prosecution emboldened him to speak openly in front of the police.

Score a point again for Lestrade, though, for noting that civilian status left Holmes less bound by laws and regulations than the police--*"no wonder you get results that are beyond us."* **Meow!!**

****Holmes:** *"I will do nothing serious without my trusted comrade and biographer at my elbow."* Of course, there were plenty of times when you have done so, Sherlock...

****So,** *why* did Oberstein leave copies of the personal ads lying about? He seemed to have destroyed all of the other evidence. Did he forget about them? Was he planning to use them and come back to blackmail Valentine later? It seems *unbelievable sloppy* (and lucky for Holmes).

****Holmes** upbraiding the colonel: *"How English gentleman could behave in such a manner is beyond my comprehension."*

Oh, Sherlock, you've seen many gentleman (*especially* colonels!!) do this and far worse!! Has he forgotten? Or was he just trying to shame a confession out of Walters?

******Many have questioned Watson's account that Oberstein received only a *15 year* sentence for espionage and murder.

I think that the murder charge is perhaps not so certain as many think. A case can be made out for *manslaughter*.

Valentine tells us, "*As West forced his way after us into the house Oberstein struck him on the head.*" The colonel is certainly not an unbiased observer. But if West were trying to force his way into Oberstein's home, you can make the argument that he was justified in his use of force. I'm no expert on the law of the day, but West is described earlier as "*hot-headed*," and he could be portrayed as the aggressor in this fight.

The **Granada** adaptation removes all doubt about it being manslaughter. Oberstein does not use a "*life-preserver*," and West merely falls and hits his head on the ground during a scuffle.

Of course, Oberstein may also have given all sorts of information to the government in exchange for a lighter sentence. I imagine he had a tale or two to tell...

******Oberstein "*came to the lure and was safely engulfed...In his trunk were found the invaluable Bruce-Partington plans, which he had put up for auction in all the naval centres of Europe.*"

Why in heaven's name bring them back to England with you!?!

I can understand not wanting to leave them behind, in France or wherever. If some other spies find them, you lose your big payday.

But bringing them back into England *ensures* that you will be convicted if you're caught!! Surely there must have been some safe drop box you could have left them in, some unsuspected hiding place!!

******Finally, it should be noted that, *despite* Mycroft's histrionics, obviously naval warfare did **NOT** become obsolete because of Bruce-Partington submarines.

Whether the invention turned out to be a failure, or other nations developed their own versions, or military strategists devised counter-measures, all the *sturm und drang* turned out to be for nothing.

As **Spock** said, "*Military secrets are the most fleeting of all.*"

Brian Keith Snell

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