

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 Casebook of Sherlock Holmes Adventure XLVII – His Last Bow

His Last Bow--On His Majesty's Secret Service!!

We've covered 4 novels and 43 short stories of **Sherlock Holmes** solving mysteries and dispensing justice.

Which brings us to **His Last Bow**.

His Last Bow is a tale that I've always found a tiny bit *frustrating*. Neither fish nor fowl, it tries to straddle two genres, and put our hero in an unfamiliar situation for his final *coup de grace*.

Because His Last Bow is most certainly *not* a standard mystery--it is a *spy thriller*, an espionage tale, a story not of Sherlock Holmes fighting crime, but of his protecting England from spies on the eve of The Great War.



Not that there aren't often many similarities between spy stories and mysteries. Indeed, espionage tales often involve a mystery--who is the spy? Who is the traitor? How is the information getting passed to the enemy?

But there can be just as many differences between a spy story and a crime thriller as there are congruities. We have to overgeneralize, of course, because there are as many sub-genres of spy story as there are for mysteries.

But allow me to explore a couple of ways we can expect spy stories to differ from mysteries, and whether **Sir Arthur Conan Doyle** does a good job of positioning Holmes within that milieu.

First, while many espionage tales do not include a mystery. *Whodunnit* or *howdunnit* is often less important than stop them from doing it *again*, or finding a way to lessen or even reverse the impact of the nasty business.

We have seen Sherlock in mysteries involving espionage and the theft of government secrets three times before Last Bow--**The Naval Treaty**, **The Second Stain**, and **The Bruce-Partington Plans**. But in each of those cases, Holmes was involved only in the *mystery* side of things--find the papers, and find who stole them. He wasn't involved in the deeper matters of mitigating the impact of their thefts, or penetrating enemy organizations.

But in His Last Bow, there is *no* mystery. We *already* know who the spy is, we know what he is doing and whom he is working for. Hell, the first half of the tale is spent with the spy and his master *telling us everything!!* (Although I must confess, when I first read this story, I suspected that **Von Bork** was really Holmes in disguise. So young, but so stupid...). The only mystery at all is the reader wondering where the hell was Sherlock Holmes in this story!!

The second difference between many spy and mystery stories is the stakes. Not to suggest that murder and blackmail and the like are trivial. But espionage tales generally *eschew* the individual level tragedies and are focused on the national or global threats. We have to maintain the balance of power! We have to safeguard our country!! At their most absurd level, of course, we have to save the globe from a monomaniacal billionaire who wants to kill everyone. Mysteries? The hero just wants to catch the crook, and perhaps stop him from murdering or stealing again. Important stuff, to be sure, but without the *geopolitical implications* that characterize many a spy thriller.

And that is the case with His Last Bow. Holmes is not acting at the behest of some mere client, but the **Foreign Minister** and **Prime Minister** of Great Britain! Sherlock is *not* out to catch some predator--as far as we know Von Bork has never hurt a fly--but to prevent England from being at a massive disadvantage in the forthcoming war! Rather than saving a life or two or rescuing a damsel or recovering some bank's fortune, Holmes is trying to save *thousands of lives*, potentially!! Higher stakes, indeed!!

So His Last Bow is very much in the spy mold, and not the standard Sherlockian mode. But does that make for as satisfying a tale?

Not only is there no mystery in this story, but there is precious little use of Holmes' *brilliant, deductive mind*. Consider that when he detected a "*deep organising power*" behind much of the crime in London, Holmes used his powers discover that his foe was **Professor Moriarty**. In this story, however, there was *no* flight of brilliance--Holmes went deep undercover, until he "*caught the eye of a subordinate agent of Von Bork*." In other words, instead of tracking down the master spy *himself*, he made himself an attractive tool and waited for the villain to come to him. I don't want to denigrate that--it took two years of hard work, and not breaking character, and heaven knows what other hardships. But people don't read a Sherlock Holmes story expecting **Donnie Brasco**, and it is a little bit jarring.

Furthermore, the format of the short story is perhaps too *constraining* for this type of tale. Holmes' undercover work here obviously parallels that of **Birdie Edwards**, the **Pinkerton** who infiltrated the **Molly Maguires** in **Valley Of Fear**. But Birdie's story was given *7 chapters in a full novel*.

Yes, I did criticize that approach for being too great of a digression. But that was mainly because a) it didn't involve Holmes *at all*, and b) so much detail really wasn't necessary for explaining a mystery that was already solved. But Doyle *over-corrected* here to the other extreme. Holmes' entire two years undercover is covered in *half of one paragraph*! Perhaps we didn't need seven chapters, but this is the hero of the **Canon**, and we wanted much, *much* more detail here, especially as in this case it wouldn't be distracting us from the main story--it *was* the main story!! This is too much like **The Final Problem**, where all of Holmes' investigation has been done "*off-screen*," before the reader ever got there, lessening our involvement in the stakes of the hunt. And Von Bork is *no* Moriarty, so we don't have the satisfaction of that clash of brilliant minds to distract us from the sketchiness of the plot.

Also jarring is the narrative style--His Last Bow is the first Holmes tale not to be narrated by **John Watson** (excluding, of course, the historical digressions in **Study In Scarlet** and **Valley Of Fear**). That's not to say that it is bad--the story is well written, the characterizations of our villains well done and interesting. But for me, one of the best things about the Canon is Watson, his personality and perceptions. In His Last Bow, he has at best a **glorified cameo**, and an oft-quoted Holmes phrase about him does little to ease our unrest at his absence. And given that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle seemed to plan this to be, once again, the last Sherlock Holmes story, it is off-putting to have to experience it with so little of Sherlock's own **Boswell**.

So while His Last Bow does make the necessary moves to position itself as more of a spy story than a mystery, it does so at the expense of making it a *less* good Holmes and (especially) Watson story. The experimentation by Sir Arthur is welcome, and contemporary world events perhaps justified changing Holmes' focus. And it is a very engaging read. But His Last Bow is not done as well as other Holmes' "*espionage*" cases, and it is done in a manner to deny us what we want most in what many must have thought must be the last Sherlock story--our heroes being celebrated for what caused us to love them in the first point, rather than being virtual guest stars in Van Bork's schemes.

OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:

Meanwhile, there is a great deal of controversy over the *quality* of Holmes' tradecraft in this story. Should Holmes have revealed his identity to Von Bork, and revealed that much of "*secrets*" he had been passing on were misinformation? Should Holmes have let Von Bork leave, and keep up the relationship, so "Altamont**" could continue passing bad information?

What should have been done with Von Bork? Some even seem confused as to whether or not Von Bork was actually arrested or not.

Part of the confusion lies in Doyle's writing of the scene, which leaves things purposely vague. He is the *sum total* of what we're told about Von Bork's fate:

No, Mr. Von Bork, you will go with us in a quiet, sensible fashion to Scotland Yard, whence you can send for your friend, Baron Von Herling, and see if even now you may not fill that place which he has reserved for you in the ambassadorial suite.

We should remember that, perhaps emboldened by suddenly being able to be himself after 2 years, Holmes was being particularly *ebullient* and *pawky* with his prisoner. Can anyone *seriously* think that by this taunt Holmes actually meant that, after a night at Scotland Yard, Von Bork would be released to go visit his diplomatic master? He's teasing and tormenting his prisoner, *not* predicting his future.

The second thing to remember is that, in this tale, Holmes is most certainly not a "*private actor*." This isn't a case where the police dismissed his help, or where Holmes could dispense private justice with a deserving criminal. Holmes was quite clearly working *for* the Crown, and against a foe who was trying to undermine his country. Decisions about what to do with Von Bork, and when to bring him in, were surely "*above his pay grade*." He was no doubt acting under instruction--perhaps even from **Mycroft**, who was surely involved in such dealings, given how deeply he was involved in security matters in the Bruce-Partington affair. If Holmes "*blew his cover*" and brought in Von Bork "*too early*," it was surely at the direction of someone higher-up.

Why? Let's look at what we do know, and what many have overlooked. While Von Bork was expected to drop off his signal book the next day, Von Herling suggested that, "*So far as I can judge the trend of events, you will probably be back in Berlin within the week*." That means Von Bork wasn't thought to hopping the fastest route home--especially given the events of the next few days, travel could be tricky for a German national. If he fell out of contact for a day or two, or was late, it wouldn't be that remarkable, given the chaos about to grip the continent.

And what about Von Bork's family? "[M]y wife and the household left yesterday for Flushing..." And our narrator tells us "for his family and household had been a large one. It was a relief to him, however, to think that they were all in safety."

But he never actually *knows* that they are safe, does he? And given that Holmes knew the truth of Von Bork's activities, so did the British government. How likely was it, then, that they would allow a master spy's family to leave for home? Wouldn't you detain them, and hold them as leverage against a dangerous enemy? Search them, and find the "*less important*" but nonetheless incriminating materials she was carrying?

It might be playing dirty, but this was a time of (incipient) war. Mightn't the authorities charge Von Bork's wife with espionage, and threaten to imprison her for life unless Von Bork himself *agreed to turn double agent*?

That would be reason enough to reveal the truth about Altamont to him--Von Bork's night in **Scotland Yard** would be spent with counter-espionage people blackmailing him to work for them now, cutting "Altamont" out as the middle-man. And that would be more effective if Von Bork already knew how *miserably* he had failed.

I can picture Mycroft laying out the very logical case to the prisoner: "You care deeply about your family, you'd hate to have them come to harm. Well, if word got out how badly you've been gulled, I think you and your family can bid adieu to the triumphant reception you were expecting home in Germany. Disgrace, or worse, will be your fate. Even more, we have your wife on espionage charges, with a 100% chance of conviction and a lengthy prison stay. Yet all of that could be easily avoided, if you agree to keep passing on bad information to your masters--and perhaps send us some sensitive information from your side. Really, it seems to be the only way to protect your family and keep your reputation and freedom."

That sales pitch is stronger if Von Bork knows the whole truth, and if he agrees to turn, there is no more *need* for Altamont. Holmes' revealing himself was a *feature* of the plan, not a bug.

****Who is the "author," the narrator of our story?**

For the first time in the Canon, it is *not* explicitly John H. Watson, M.D.

Well, I think it still is. But why hide the fact? Why tell the story in third-person?

Well, 75% of the tale occurs *outside* of Watson's presence. If he maintained his previous style, telling us only what he had personally witnessed, this would be a *very* short story indeed.

Another factor to consider is that this story was released in wartime, more than a year before the war's end. Perhaps Watson, returning to service for the war, was occupying some sensitive position, and therefore wished to deemphasize his role in the events of this story.

Or, perhaps, someone saw the propaganda value in the tale, and wrote it up without Watson's permission?

[Realistically, of course, if Watson is narrating the tale from the beginning, the "*surprise*" of Holmes' revealing himself is totally spoiled, so Doyle felt it necessary to mix things up a bit.]

Still, much of the descriptive writing bears the marks of Watson's prose, evocative and very English:

It was nine o'clock at night upon the second of August--the most terrible August in the history of the world. One might have thought already that God's curse hung heavy over a degenerate world, for there was an awesome hush and a feeling of vague expectancy in the sultry and stagnant air. The sun had long set, but one blood-red gash like an open wound lay low in the distant west.

And

They stood with their heads close together, talking in low, confidential tones. From below the two glowing ends of their cigars might have been the smouldering eyes of some malignant fiend looking down in the darkness.

Delicious stuff!

****This was a patriotic story released in a time of war, and clearly marketed as such:**

I think the desire to boost public morale, to belittle the enemy, and yet protect classified secrets from the affair, are all the explanation we need to elide over some of the more dubious and less clear points.

****For example, yes, Von Bork is made to look like an *idiot*. He's arrogant and dismissive, and he looks like an amateur when Holmes takes him down. And of course, his cocky derision of the English comes back to bite him in the arse: *Von Bork laughed. "They are not very hard to deceive," he remarked. "A more docile, simple folk could not be imagined."***

But, Von Bork is given a lot of crap from commentators for showing his safe to Altamont, and sharing the combination.

Well, not to argue against the herd, but let's remember that Von Bork was *leaving the next day*, and would presumably never be back again. Who cares who knew the combination? *The safe was going to be empty!!*

Plus, most people overlook the fact that you needed more than a mere combination to open the safe--you needed a **key**, as well: *"Von Bork detached a small key from his watch chain, and after some considerable manipulation of the lock he swung open the heavy door."*

As to getting fooled by Holmes, well, let's not cast aspersions on Holmes skills. Watson *lived with* the dude, and never recognized him in disguise. After 2 years undercover, without once breaking character, "Altamont" would have convinced almost anyone. On their last day together, Von Bork let his guard slip. As

Holmes said, "*it is better than to fall before some ignoble foe.*" Don't diminish Holmes' achievement by casting Von Bork as overly dull.

****Baron Von Herling** described: "*He was a huge man, the secretary, deep, broad, and tall, with a slow, heavy fashion of speech which had been his main asset in his political career.*"

A "*slow, heavy fashion of speech*" is a political asset? In Germany, I guess...?

****Shades of the Second Stain:** Von Herling passed on something he overheard at a cabinet minister's social gathering, and "*Unfortunately our good chancellor is a little heavy-handed in these matters, and he transmitted a remark which showed that he was aware of what had been said.*"

So, this is a **second** case where an indiscreet upper official caused problems. And in Second Stain, most observers think that the indiscreet potentate was **Kaiser Wilhelm**.

Kaisers and chancellors...always making life difficult for diplomats and spies!

****Von Herling** believes that Von Bork's cover is so perfect, that the British never suspect because, "*You yacht against them, you hunt with them, you play polo, you match them in every game...*" So athletes are the best spies?!?

****Despite** obvious propaganda going on here, it is important to note that Doyle presents the Germans cynical and manipulative, but *not* out-and-out evil. "*We live in a utilitarian age. Honour is a mediaeval conception,*" says Von Herling.

Doyle clearly gives the Germans the blame for starting the war. But he also doesn't portray as inhuman monsters, but as worthy opponents. And he also shows the British playing some of the same games.

****Von Herling** also says that Germany tried pretty hard to keep England out of the war, by stirring up internal problems: "*We have stirred her up such a devil's brew of Irish civil war, window-breaking Furies, and God knows what to keep her thoughts at home.*"

So, women's suffrage: a German plot. Try running that by your female friends!

****Who** hates Britain most of all? "*I assure you that our most pan-Germanic Junker is a sucking dove in his feelings towards England as compared with a real bitter Irish-American.*" Certainly at that time, Von Bork may well have been right...

****Von Herling** and Von Bork debating the use of paid underlings:

"Five hundred pounds for this particular job. Of course he has a salary as well."

"The greedy rouse. They are useful, these traitors, but I grudge them their blood money."

"I grudge Altamont nothing. He is a wonderful worker. If I pay him well, at least he delivers the goods, to use his own phrase."

Hatred and politics are a wonderful motivator, but money usually seems needed in these cases to clinch the deal...

**That does raise the question, though...what did Altamont *do*? Did he have a *job*? How did a *bitterly anti-English Irish-American* supposedly get access to all those deep English secrets?

**Oh, Sir Arthur, tell us how you really feel about Americans? *"If you heard him talk you would not doubt it. Sometimes I assure you I can hardly understand him. He seems to have declared war on the King's English as well as on the English king."*

At least we don't say "maths."

***"That is Martha, the only servant I have left."* The secretary chuckled. *"She might almost personify Britannia..."*

You're more right than you know, Von Bork.

As for those who suggest that **Martha** is **Mrs. Hudson**, please. The universe is not that closed...there are many woman in England who would help Sherlock Holmes in a patriotic effort, and for him to use someone who had a *known personal attachment* to Sherlock Holmes risked discovery. Besides, it's not likely that *neither* Watson nor Mrs. Hudson would acknowledge the other when meeting again after so long.

** *"I'm bringing home the bacon at last."* OK, maybe Von Bork was right about Altamont's war on the King's English.

Seriously, though, Sherlock's contemporary Americanisms are pretty good...

**It's too bad no one has adapted this story to TV or film: *"and a small goatee beard which gave him a general resemblance to the caricatures of Uncle Sam."* Oh, man, I would pay to see that!

**How long have the Germans been planning this?

"Well, I chose August for the word, and 1914 for the figures, and here we are." The American's face showed his surprise and admiration. *"My, but that was smart! You had it down to a fine thing."* *"Yes, a few of us even then could have guessed the date."*

Well, that was certainly prescient, considering he got the safe four years ago!

Of course, short of **Asimov's** psycho-history, it's *impossible* to believe that Germany could have micro-managed events--both with allies and enemies--to such an extent that Von Bork could have predicted to the very month when hostilities would break out.

Unless, of course, you choose to believe that Germany was actually behind the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand...

***Citizenships are no protection when one is charged with espionage: "Well, so was Jack James an American citizen, but he's doing time in Portland all the same. It cuts no ice with a British copper to tell him you're an American citizen. 'It's British law and order over here,' says he."*

***He sat down at the table and scribbled a check, which he tore from the book,*

*Wait wait **wait wait**.*

Von Bork paid his agents...with checks?!?!?!?

Jesus, maybe he was a pretty stupid spy!

***The reveal: "Only for one instant did the master spy glare at this strangely irrelevant inscription. The next he was gripped at the back of his neck by a grasp of iron, and a chloroformed sponge was held in front of his writhing face."*

***Our heroes reunited: "Another glass, Watson!" said Mr. Sherlock Holmes as he extended the bottle of Imperial Tokay. The thickset chauffeur, who had seated himself by the table, pushed forward his glass with some eagerness.*

***More evidence that Holmes was winding Von Bork up. When the spy is still unconscious, Holmes tells Watson, "I may say that a good many of these papers have come through me, and I need not add are thoroughly untrustworthy."*

That "thoroughly" vanishes, though, when Von Bork wakes up, and Holmes is using understatement to let Von Bork realize the depth of his predicament: "It is certainly a little untrustworthy," said Holmes...

"Your admiral may find the new guns rather larger than he expects, and the cruisers perhaps a trifle faster."

***Oh, it is good to see these two together again:*

How have the years used you? You look the same blithe boy as ever."

"I feel twenty years younger, Holmes. I have seldom felt so happy as when I got your wire asking me to meet you at Harwich with the car. But you, Holmes--you have changed very little-- save for that horrible goatee."

Pawky, Watson, pawky!!

"These are the sacrifices one makes for one's country, Watson," said Holmes, pulling at his little tuft. "To-morrow it will be but a dreadful memory."

***Holmes is very proud of his bee book:*

Here is the fruit of my leisured ease, the magnum opus of my latter years!" He picked up the volume from the table and read out the whole title, Practical Handbook of Bee Culture, with Some Observations upon the Segregation of the Queen. "Alone I did it. Behold the fruit of pensive nights and laborious days when I watched the little working gangs as once I watched the criminal world of London.

****The very (very) brief summation of Holmes' time undercover:**

When I say that I started my pilgrimage at Chicago, graduated in an Irish secret society at Buffalo, gave serious trouble to the constabulary at Skibbureen, and so eventually caught the eye of a subordinate agent of Von Bork, who recommended me as a likely man, you will realize that the matter was complex.

Since then I have been honoured by his confidence, which has not prevented most of his plans going subtly wrong and five of his best agents being in prison. I watched them, Watson, and I picked them as they ripened.

Again, that took **7 chapters** in Valley Of Fear. Perhaps there is a happy medium somewhere between the two?

****Holmes:** *"Though unmusical, German is the most expressive of all languages,"*

****Apocryphal case:** *"It was I also who saved from murder, by the Nihilist Klopman, Count Von und Zu Grafenstein, who was your mother's elder brother."*

****An unlikely assessment from Holmes:**

But you have one quality which is very rare in a German, Mr. Von Bork: you are a sportsman and you will bear me no ill-will when you realize that you, who have outwitted so many other people, have at last been outwitted yourself.

Somehow, I *doubt* that will be Von Bork's attitude...

****A telling discussion of civil liberties and wartime:**

"I suppose you realize, Mr. Sherlock Holmes," said he, "that if your government bears you out in this treatment it becomes an act of war...You are a private individual. You have no warrant for my arrest. The whole proceeding is absolutely illegal and outrageous."

"The Englishman is a patient creature, but at present his temper is a little inflamed, and it would be as well not to try him too far."

While Von Bork is a bit blustery here--certainly detaining an enemy agent who has admitted espionage is *not* an act of war, and Holmes is working for His majesty's government, so he is *no* private individual here--he does raise some important points.

I won't pretend to know the legalities of 1914 British law on detaining suspected criminals, assault, and the such. I would suppose that Holmes' position as proto-**M15** might give sufficient leeway to capture the spy.

But Holmes' reply--the English are a bit pissed at foreigners right now, so you'd be better off not crying "oh my rights" right now--sounds a little bit too much like the **ad hoc** justifications that lead us to **Guantanamo** and other abuses. Rights shouldn't be determined by popularity, or public temperament...

***Saddest line in the Canon? "Stand with me here upon the terrace, for it may be the last quiet talk that we shall ever have."*

***Classic:*

"There's an east wind coming, Watson."

"I think not, Holmes. It is very warm."

"Good old Watson! You are the one fixed point in a changing age."

***Sadly, these words, while well-intentioned, were destined to be very, very wrong:*

There's an east wind coming all the same, such a wind as never blew on England yet. It will be cold and bitter, Watson, and a good many of us may wither before its blast. But it's God's own wind none the less, and a cleaner, better, stronger land will lie in the sunshine when the storm has cleared.

That's what believing in a divine hand in the affairs of man gets you--a belief that everything, no matter how awful, must really be for the best. *Phooey.*

Brian Keith Snell

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