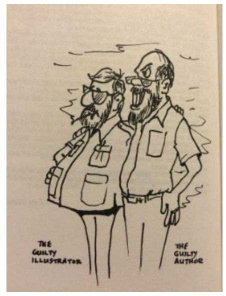

The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure XXV – The Adventure of the Naval Treaty

Through a combination of personal accomplishment and connections in high political places, young Percy Phelps, a form school acquaintance of Dr. Watson, had attained a sensitive position in the Foreign Office. He was engaged to marry, and his future looked bright and assured.

One day his uncle, the Foreign Minister, gave him an important secret treaty to copy. The document, written in French, outlined Britain's naval policies under certain circumstances involving the navies of other countries. His uncle told Phelps that several foreign embassies would pay a considerable sum for a look at the treaty, and instructed him to stay late that night in order to copy it when no other Foreign Office employees were about.

After copying about a third of the treaty, Phelps was feeling drowsy and rang the commissionaire at the bottom of the stairs to make some coffee. When the coffee didn't arrive, he went downstairs to see about it and found the commissionaire asleep and the pot boiling briskly. As he was waking the commissionaire, a bell overhead rang loudly — the bell was sounded from Phelps's office!

Someone was in the same room with the precious treaty! Rushing upstairs, Phelps and the commissionaire found no one, saw no one…but the treaty was gone.

Devastated by this calamitous turn of events, Phelps lapsed into a nine-week bout of brain fever. All during that time, nothing was found of the treaty despite urgent but secret inquiries. Where was it? Why hadn't the thief delivered it to one of the embassies that would pay well to get it? Phelps thought of his school chum Watson and dictated a letter to him, asking him to bring Holmes down to his residence in Woking.

Seemingly, there was no clue to be found as to what had happened to the Naval Treaty. But after he visited Phelps, Holmes said that he had found seven clues in Phelps's story. In a few minutes, the Mâitre de Chasse will send the Hounds out on a quest for a top-secret scroll of paper. The scent begins in Whitehall, but it will end in Woking.

At the very beginning of the Adventure, there is an extended reference to SECO which for the sake of this discussion I shall sturdily ignore in order to focus upon NAVA. For the record, both NAVA (1893) and SECO (1904) made their debuts in the pages of *Strand* Magazine. According to Baring-Gould (and I decline to bicker over Canonical Chronology here), SECO predated NAVA by three years and was not published until eighteen years after it occurred under Baring-Gould's reckoning. NAVA, on the other hand, took place in 1889 and was bared for all the world to see just four years later. One might draw the inference that the significance of military treaties was more ephemeral than that of inflammatory letters from foreign potentates. But for whatever reason, Watson was able to keep SECO under wraps "until the new century."

The Naval Treaty was written in French, although it was an entente between Italy and England. Was French still the language of diplomacy in 1889? In any case, it was a lengthy document comprised of twenty-six separate articles. We do not know when Percy Phelps set to work copying the document, but we are told that it took him until nine o'clock in the evening to copy the first nine articles. Assuming that he began copying at six o'clock, that would be about three articles per hour, or twenty minutes apiece. If the remaining articles were similar in length and complexity, copying them without so much as a break to stretch would have required another six hours and forty minutes, taking Phelps to forty minutes past three in the morning to complete his task. Surely, Lord Holdhurst must have realized the difficulty of the task he was assigning to his nephew; what could have been the "absolute necessity" which caused him to make such a demanding request? And why did Phelps aspire to catch the eleven o'clock train to Woking under those circumstances?

On examining the chart of the offices supplied by Phelps, I note that the main door opens into Whitehall, while the side door which figures so prominently in this affair opens onto "Lane." We learn later on that this street was, in fact, Charles Street. Why is it labeled "Lane" on Phelps's chart? In which direction did Phelps rush when he first emerged into the "Lane," and why? (A note to those using the Doubleday edition or texts based on Doubleday: This is the only edition in which the chart shows the street running in front of the main entrance as "Whitehall." Other editions, including the *Strand*, do not give it a name.)

Holmes tells Watson, "'[Annie Harrison] and her brother are the only children of an iron-master somewhere up Northumberland way.'" How and when did he acquire that tidbit of information since his only acquaintance with Joseph Harrison was the recorded interview when Holmes and Watson arrived at Briarbrae and during the brief drive from Briarbrae to the Woking station? And upon their arrival at the station, Watson tells us, "…we were soon whirling up in a Portsmouth train." How did Holmes have the time to send wires "to every evening paper in London" before entraining?

There is a curious sequence in the conversation that took place between Holmes and Watson as they were returning from Woking. Holmes points out the board-schools and praises them as "'Capsules with hundreds of bright little seeds in each, out of which will spring the wiser, better England of the future.'" His very next sentence is, "'I suppose that man Phelps does not drink?'" Is this an example of Holmes' sometimes erratic thought processes, or is there some obscure but logical link between board-schools and temperance? And why does he refer to Phelps as "'that man Phelps?'"

Finally, who bandaged Holmes's left hand?

Steve Clarkson

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