

Sherlock Holmes and the German Ocean

As recounted by Dr Watson in very advanced old age to a very juvenile Mark Fairweather.

The story so far (see the first instalment, distributed December 2006): It is Christmas Eve 1906. Earlier in the day, a mysterious and beautiful young lady – believed to be a member of one of Europe's most ancient and venerable royal families - had called at Holmes's rooms at 222B Baker St London. She had been staying at Captain Vernon Wentworth's new hotel on Tiffany Corner Aldeburgh, where her jewellery had been stolen from a locked room. Holmes announced he would stay in London. Meanwhile, Dr Watson was despatched to Aldeburgh and had found lodgings at the Cross Hotel, a mean establishment frequented by local fishermen, smugglers, footpads and wreckers. The thief was to be found among the villains in the snug bar of the Cross Hotel, so surmised Dr Watson. With these thoughts in his mind and the solution to the crime seemingly within his grasp, Dr Watson made his way on a cold and crisp night past the Church of St Peter and St Paul to meet his client at Aldeburgh Railway Station.

The second instalment:

As I made my way onto the platform, I saw the station master in the uniform of the East Suffolk Railway - three piece suit with red piping, peaked cap, gold fob watch and chain - waiting to greet the train. He was surrounded by a throng of porters, carters, servants and colliers all motionless, like frozen statues, in expectation of the order to spring into action. Then the lines began to hum, and we could hear the rhythmic clatter and rumble of the train in the distance. The smell of smoke filled the clear night air and flecks of soot swirled round the gas lights. As ever, and to the satisfaction of the station master, the train was on time. Quite suddenly, the spell was broken and the platform was a scene of efficient bustle.

The first passenger off the train – leaping with surprising athleticism from a third class carriage even before the train came to a halt - was a tall, thin man wrapped against the cold in a long coat and cape and carrying a violin case. This was presumably the same violinist who had taken the very last room in Captain Vernon Wentworth's hotel. Before I had the chance to take a closer look at the violinist's features – so unusual and yet so familiar - he had disappeared.

But enough of this distraction. I now scanned the crowd around the first class carriages. There was our client in sable furs and, in the fashion of middle Europe,

with muff dogs to warm her hands. Despite the fuss of servants and porters from the hotel, she was still in distress.

“Dr Watson, if they do not find my jewels I will not be able to live,” she wailed. What could I say or do? Chivalry made me rash.

“My dear madam, in my mind at least the crime is solved, and we will return the jewels to you before anyone knows they have gone.”

“Ze crime is solved? You Dr Watson ‘ave solved ze crime?”

“Well,- not solved as such, solved in my mind. I think I have found the nest of the villains in the snug bar of my hotel; and tomorrow, with the benefit of a warrant issued by Sergeant Bugg of Leiston Police Station, we will search the cellars where I believe the jewels have been secreted.”

“Snog bar, Dr Watson, what is zis snog bar?”

I had the feeling, not for the first time in my dealings with the more exquisite members of the fairer sex, that whatever I said would appear clumsy and cause further confusion.

“A snug bar” I explained “is a cosy place where villainous friends can meet to drink talk – and conspire.”

“ A snog is cosy?”

At a loss for words, I decided that perhaps the answer was to show our client inside the Cross Hotel so she could see for herself.

“Madam, I will show you.”

“Please to do Dr Watson, show me a cosy snog.”

“Later, dear madam, later.”

There was a weak light from the gibbous moon, which gave a silvery edge to the forms of the yew trees and tombstones in the churchyard. At that moment, as we passed by the dilapidated ruins of Thelluson Lodge, I had a sensation of a susurrus around us - as if we were being brushed by a light encircling wind. I felt certain we were being watched. But by whom, and where from? The screech owls hooted, as if signalling to each other. I seemed to catch sight of flitting shapes in the middle distance: too far away to make out, too close for comfort. Did I see lights winking at each other? Although the night was cold as iron, I realised that I was glistening with sweat. I hastened with our esteemed guest back to her hotel and delivered her into the care of the obsequious manager, Mr Edgar Prattfall.

“Give me my scallop shell of quiet,” I muttered to myself, remembering the words of the great Sir Walter Raleigh as I looked up towards the beach.

“Oh you are so verree kind, Dr Watson”, our client exclaimed “Zank you. But I cannot eat a single bite while I am so unhappy about my jewels.”

In the morning my first task was to search the cellars of the Cross Hotel. I demanded to see the landlord, Stanley Grimes. After what seemed like a deliberate delay of some quarter of an hour, Mr Grimes made himself known to me – appearing quite suddenly from behind as he had come out of nowhere. Mr Grimes was short, squat, bulky, surly and uncooperative. I explained my business.

“We keep to ourselves here in this little town Dr Watson, and you should do the same,” said Grimes.

“There will be a reward for you, my dear fellow, if you assist in the recovery of the jewels: a very substantial reward.”

I could see from Grimes’s piggy little eyes that he was torn between avarice and outrage – and that the temptation of the filthy lucre would win. Despite Grimes’s salty protests, I made my way into the dark gloomy underbelly of the building. I could not stand up to my full height; the cellars were obviously built for peoples diminished by poor diet and disease. The walls were made of flint and rubble, which suggested that the foundations of the building were older – far older - than the structures above ground. Watery green slime streaked over every surface, down the walls and over the brick floor. Rotten timbers, shot through with dry rot, were held in place only because they did not have the energy to collapse. There were barrels of ale everywhere, piled in all directions except any which suggested logic and organisation: bitter, mild, broadside, malt, pale, stout, barley mow and tally ho! No wonder the locals were cosy in the snug bar, they must have been pickled in the stuff.

But where were the jewels? I realised that this was not the easy task I had imagined. The cellars stretched through dark tunnels in all directions, and appeared to link with The Rectory across the road to the west, The Moote Hall to the east and Cross House to the north. And where did the cellars go from there? The whole town, possibly, was linked up by this underground web, this honeycomb, of felony and deception. Which way to go? As I pondered my dilemma, rats slithered and scurried around me – even over my shoes - in the darkness. My war wound, from the First Afghan War, started to throb. Then fear gave flight to my imagination. Suppose the malign Grimes were to slam down the trap door over me? Suppose I lost my way and slipped in the slime? Just how many rats were there down here? And were they just rats? I heard echoing through the vaults an eerie howl as if from a ghost hound careening towards me....Like a shot, I raced to the steps and emerged gulping into the air of the hotel scullery. Grimes twisted his lip into a malevolent smile.

There had to be another way. As I was nursing my wounded pride, I remembered the Christmas Day swim. This was another chance. I had read

the very latest medical research which had proven, at least to the satisfaction of the editor of *The Lancet*, that criminality can be scientifically assessed from measurements of the cranium and indeed from general physique. Criminals have low foreheads and bad teeth. They are often deformed, having suffered rickets in childhood. Their faces are ravaged, pitted and scarred by small pox. As we all know from police photographs, criminals look like criminals because they pose in profile and full frontal to the camera.

I would assess each of the swimmers as if through the lens of a police camera, and with this plan of action in my mind I now made my way down Victoria Street into Market Cross Place and (by courtesy of Captain Wentworth, who was the owner) onto the windswept beach.

A crowd had already assembled.....

To be continued.

ALDEBURGH CHRISTMAS DAY SWIM

Over the years the Aldeburgh Shiverers have raised thousands of pounds for medical charities. We would welcome your support for this year's swim. The choice is yours.

Dip in

Turn up with your towel at **11am** on Christmas Day opposite Aldeburgh Moot Hall, take the plunge and persuade lots of people to sponsor you. The money we raise will go to Medécins sans Frontières and East Anglia's Children's Hospice or a medical charity of your choice.

Chip in

Or, if a Christmas Day dip is not your scene, you can sponsor me instead. The most tax efficient way is over the internet, as the government will add 28 per cent to what you give. Just go to: www.justgiving.com/aldeburghshiverers and follow the instructions. Or make your cheque payable to Medécins sans Frontières or EACH and send it to me at 51 High Street, Leiston, Suffolk IP16 4EL. Cash is equally good. In the past most donors have given £10 or so, although bigger amounts are always welcome. The money this firm would otherwise spend on Christmas cards will also go to the charity.

Thank you for your generosity. Enjoy your Christmas.

Mark Fairweather