

Sherlock Holmes and The German Ocean Part 3

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

You can read the two previous instalments on our website:
www.aldeburghchristmasswim.org.

The story so far. It is the morning of Christmas Day 1906. The previous day, a mysterious and beautiful young lady - believed to be a princess of the royal family of Bohemia - 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 dispatched 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 townfolk, 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 to the windswept beach where a crowd was assembling and the traditional Christmas Day swim was about to take place.

Dr Watson continues the story....

While I soon learned that the Christmas Day swim was a traditional event with a long history, I was also surprised to find that it was not without controversy. The curate of St Peter and St Paul's Anglican Church, The Reverend Dr Montague James, condemned the swim as a pagan rite by which local folk who should have been at church instead amused themselves by frolicking in the waves.

Dr James took his revenge by ringing the church bells even more vigorously, insistently, disharmoniously, and longer than usual. I recognised several of the peals: the nine tailors; plain bob triples; bowbells and weasels - each of them rendered with ear-crunching discords. Even the new Roman Catholic Church of Our Lady and St Peter joined in, although whether in competition or in solidarity it is hard to say. The Salvation Army, sensing the presence of potential converts, mounted a band of drums, brass and tambourines on a little wooden stand known as Libardi's Mount, from where they handed out copies of The War Cry and sang "Throw out the lifeline, someone is sinking today." Bizarrely, the tall lean violinist whom I had seen at the railway station the evening before - so strange and yet so familiar - had also set up and was playing The Devil's Trill alongside the pier. The crowd steadily increased and flowed to the water's edge.

Here was my chance. As a medical practitioner and reader of The Lancet, I had every confidence in the theory that criminality can be deduced from physique. There are of course brilliant criminal minds, such as Professor James Moriarty, and by contrast many more numerous criminal types who possess only low cunning and an inclination to violence. The abstraction of a box of jewels from a locked room in a busy hotel would appear to require some considerable intelligence. But I was as sure as I could be that this was an 'inside job' by a local villain - perhaps someone who had been admitted to the room with a duplicate key. This would not require the perverse ingenuity of a master criminal, only the chameleon-like ability to blend into the local scene. And who better to perpetrate the crime than a familiar face in the town, perhaps protected by a network of collaborators to provide alibis and dispose of the stolen goods? If, however, the villain was one of the swimmers (and he would be far more likely to be on the beach than in either of the local churches), then he would be betrayed by the familiar characteristics of the criminal class: the low forehead, beady, watchful eyes, bad teeth, lobeless ears, feeble physical condition, poor

swimming technique and, from what I had seen in photographs, a tendency to stare straight at the camera.

The male swimmers were lining up in their woollen knee-length bathing costumes. Meanwhile, there was a commotion on the beach as the bathing machines from which the ladies would take the plunge were dragged into the shallows by nervous ponies. I am a family man, and I honour the fairer sex with what I believe to be the chivalry one would expect from a gentleman, a soldier and a medical practitioner. But I have, I confess, been discombobulated by the struggle for female emancipation. What true lady, I asked, would swim in the sea - let alone on Christmas Day? I was amazed to be told that the female swimmers would be led by the lady mayor, Dr Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, and her sister, an infamous suffragist by the name of Millicent Fawcett. Shocking! Not only did Aldeburgh harbour petty criminals, but now I realised that that there might also be a link to social radicalism. These well-meaning townsfolk were perhaps more subversive than they looked, since they seemed willing to support first a female medical practitioner (even Florence Nightingale had known her place) and now an irresponsible campaigner for women's votes. Where would it all lead? Even the great William Gladstone, with his well known sympathy for fallen women, had never advocated women's suffrage.

The immediate dilemma I now faced was acute. I had to scan the physical features of as many of the swimmers as possible for the telltale signs of delinquency, while and at the same time averting my eyes from any exposed female flesh. What if the female and male swimmers, in breach of all codes of decency, swam from the same length of beach? What would my dear wife say if she were to discover me in this compromising situation?

It was while these thoughts were racing through my mind that I noticed our client, as radiant as ever in fox furs trimmed with ermine, her little muff dogs gambolling at her heels. Although I regard most poetry as dubious and unmanly, lines from Robert Herrick came into my mind, 'How sweetly flows the liquefaction of her clothes.' The brilliance of her smile fell on me like the sun in full splendour. I was struck by its contrast with the sullen skies, and by another contrast - between our client's naïveté and the indecency unfolding - undressing - on the beach. "You must avert your eyes, madam," I said; "if you see any...." and here I could hardly bring myself to say the words, and so I continued sotto voce... "any nudity." "A new ditty, Doctor Watson?" The siren lady fixed me with her piercing emerald eyes "You are going to sing for me?" I blushed deeply, and tried to explain the notion of nude bathing - something everyone should try once (I blushed as I recalled my student days), but not in front of crowds, especially crowds that might include ladies. I also tried to explain my plan. "We must be alert for anyone acting suspiciously, especially the swimmers - and also for anyone asking for money". "In Bohemia," replied the lady "we cut off the hands of beggars. How can I help?" "No, no" I said, "In this country, street collection for good causes - for charity, you understand - is not a criminal offence. Believe me. Just keep an eye out for suspicious people. Talking of which - just look at that violinist over there. Why would anyone want to play a violin out in the open air on Christmas Day?" "Vile inn? Oh no, Dr Watson, Captain Wentworth's hotel is no vile inn. I had a veerry commodious night in this sin. Ah, zair ees ze captain, such a charmant man....I want to tell him how much I lurved his sin. And tonight I want to have this sin again"... And before I could restrain her from approaching Captain Wentworth, she was off and at his side.

I was left to observe the swimmers as best I could. "Are there any criminal elements here?" I enquired of the Town Clerk. She (yes, another she!) did not think so. In fact, she seemed to treat my line of questioning as downright offensive, as she explained that the regular swimmers included a much-respected local doctor, an eminent barrister who specialised in cases against the government (I was troubled lest this might be unpatriotic, but let it pass), a retired army officer and about forty other citizens. And no, she would not assist me in inspecting their ear lobes. I was mortified. The swim was over. Swimmers were picking their way back over the shingle. Members of the Salvation Army band were emptying the spittle from their trombones. As for me,

I was still no nearer to identifying anyone with a criminal physique, let alone the perpetrator of this heinous crime.

Then suddenly the storm broke and everyone rushed for shelter. I noticed the sundial on the wall of the Moote Hall and the inscription underneath 'O lente lente currite noctis equi' which I recognised as a quotation from Ovid 'Oh slowly, slowly, let them run, the horses of the night!' I too needed more time, much more time - even though I had promised our client that I would solve the crime by the end of the day. Perhaps I needed help after all. It was at that moment that I glanced again at the tall thin violinist, still playing while the rain lashed around him. Raindrops formed into translucent globes at the end of his aquiline nose, before teetering on the brink and falling over. His long bony fingers darted over the strings. How strange, and yet how familiar he seemed. I went over to satisfy my curiosity...

To be continued.