

Sherlock Holmes And The German Ocean Part 5

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 perpetrator of the crime, Dr Watson came to believe, was to be found among the town's low life. He had one nagging doubt though: spiriting jewels from a secure room, without forcing entry, requires intelligence and panache. Where was the criminal mastermind among the sozzled fraternity frequenting the bar? Later that morning Dr Watson attended the annual Christmas Day Swim on Aldeburgh beach, where he met the sinister Lady Incarnadine. Was she the evil genius behind the crime? Just as Dr Watson was moving towards a solution of the crime, he realised that the violinist playing in the rain was none other than Sherlock Holmes in disguise. Sherlock Holmes explained that the crime was not about the jewels as such: it was about the right of succession to the throne of Bohemia: whoever had possession of the jewels could claim the throne. The life of the princess was therefore in imminent danger, because the usurper might want to kill any rival claimant. The princess would have to go into hiding. Dr Watson decided that the safest place would be the Ursuline Convent opposite the Anglican Church where, with the princess in tow, he has just knocked on the door.

Dr Watson continues:

The knock echoed behind the door inside the convent, like autumn leaves swirling in gusts of wind. There was no answer, and I began to walk away. But on impulse I returned to the door, giving it three vigorous raps. This time the echo on the other side of the door seemed startled and angry, as if a monster had been disturbed. Then silence. And just as the silence seemed to regain possession of the scene, there was the sound of footsteps. And the door creaked open. In the doorway appeared, not the nuns I had expected, but a shimmering tall figure dressed in a coat of vivid fox furs out of which protruded rouge noir fingernails. Lady Incarnadine stood before me.

"I was expecting you, Dr Watson", she trilled, "as well as your royal guest. Ursuline Convents are known for their hospitality. You must come in, Dr Watson. In fact you have little choice, because the princess is in danger and this is a place of refuge."

Although I believe myself to be a stout-hearted man, I reacted with involuntary and atavistic fear to the melisma in Lady Incarnadine's voice as she pronounced the word "refuge." If I had been a dog, every hair on my body would have been standing on end. As it was, I felt my head swimming with nausea at the very moment I had to make the crucial decision to run, or step inside. I faltered, and the moment passed as the princess, seemingly in a trance, crossed the threshold in front of me. The war wound in my leg which I had suffered in the Second Afghan War throbbed with re-ignited pain, I could only follow where the princess led. Lady Incarnadine closed bolted and locked the door behind us, and deposited the key within the writhing, snarling folds of her fox fur coat.

The hall was gloomy, lit only by Lady Incarnadine's swinging oil lamp – so that features loomed up out of the darkness, like ghosts sent to frighten us, and then just as suddenly disappeared from view as if they had never been. After my eyes adjusted to the poor light, I could see that the walls were lined with oak linenfold panels and that high above us there was the glimmering outline of a hammer beam roof. At the ends of the king posts I could make out the carved figures of winged angels, or were they hobgoblins and foul fiends? In my hallucinatory fever of mind I could not tell. We passed a religious painting – which on first glance seemed to be the stylised figure of Christ on the Cross, but then gave the appearance of a real corpse nailed with sadistic force to a cross in the form of an instrument of torture. I nearly fainted with horror.

Still, I recovered the powers of thought and speech. "Lady In-can-can-candine I spluttered, "why are you here and where are the nuns – and how do you know so much about us?"

"My dear Dr Watson, you have such a suspicious mind. This is Christmas Day. The nuns are in the chapel, they are eating the body of Christ and drinking his blood." And then with a complete change of tone from patronising to sinister, she continued with sudden force, " – human flesh and human blood, Dr Watson."

"As for me" she resumed, "I am here to bring the nuns some presents. How fortunate for you that I was crossing the hall when I heard your knock. And I know no more about you than everyone else here. What do you think everyone in the town has been talking about for these last two days, since the theft of the jewels and the arrival among us of the most famous detective of our age?"

What indeed, I realised. It was even bigger news, in Aldeburgh at least, than the royal wedding earlier in the year between King Alfonso of Spain and our esteemed King Edward's niece Princess Victoria Eugenie. Everything that Lady Incarnadine said was plausible, but none of it rang true. Nothing she had done gave me unambiguous cause to regard her as an enemy, except – and as this thought formed in my mind I began to pull more decisively out of her mental control – we appeared to be her prisoners.

"Lady Incarnadine. Are we free to go, if we so wish?"

"Why would you wish to expose the princess to the danger of assassination outside when she can live here in disguise as a nun? You are of course free to go, Dr Watson, if you regard that as a responsible course of action. The princess may go too..... if she does not value her life."

Lady Incarnadine had not answered my question. What did she really mean?. I turned to the princess.

"Your royal highness, do you wish to go or stay?"

"Dr Watson, I do not wish to go anywhere without the jewels. The jewels, Dr Watson. The jewels... If you find the jewels we can elope."

Or was that, "we can have hope?" In any case, the princess started sobbing. How could I comfort her? As the world is aware, I am a happily married man and I did not wish to compromise either my family or the princess's snow white reputation. I risked a fatherly hug, while feelings of the lure of elopement coursed through my veins.

And then I saw our risk, and chance. Holmes, I remembered, had already explained to me that this was a crime about the throne of Bohemia, and that the real danger was from Bohemian spies and their British friends in high places. Lady Incarnadine was not part of this plot. She wished to kidnap the princess for her own ends, and as ever was playing a double game, willing to take ransoms from both sides.

We were now at the far end of the hall, where there was a log basket half full of black logs like the ancient teeth of a fairy tale giant. I had taken my wife a few months before to Daly's Theatre in London to hear an opera, *Hansel and Gretel*. This gave me my inspiration. Although a gentleman who esteems the fairer sex, I used the element of surprise to uplift the writhing coven of foxes that was Lady Incarnadine and bundled her kicking and screaming into the log basket. This sufficiently discombobulated her ladyship to offer the princess and me the opportunity to flee. With scarcely a glance in the direction of the log basket to see the rouge noir talons clawing their way out, I had the temerity to grasp the tiry, kid gloved hand of the Princess and we made our escape – racing out of the hall into the refectory and kitchen and, clambering through the scullery windows,. Once outside it was a pleasure, for once, to be greeted by the icy Aldeburgh wind. We were no longer prisoners. But the princess was still not safe, and we had still not recovered the jewels or solved the crime. Even worse, we had lost contact with Holmes.

Notes.

- There really was an Ursuline Convent in Aldeburgh at the time, opposite the Church on the site of what is now Thelusson Lodge.
- Melisma: in music, giving a single syllable of text more than one note. Benjamin Britten who put Aldeburgh on the musical map, characteristically used sliding melismas to signify evil.
- There really is such a painting by Agnolo Bronzino in the collection of The Musee Des Beaux-Arts, Nice.
- The royal wedding of the year in 1906. There was an assassination attempt on the royal couple as they rode in procession through the streets of Madrid after the wedding. Both of them escaped unharmed, but the bride's wedding dress was splattered with the blood of one of her guards who took the full force of the bomb.
- Would Dr Watson really have gone to the opera? Sir Arthur Conan Doyle certainly did. In fact, he collaborated with J M Barrie in the writing of a libretto of an operetta by the name of Jane Annie Or The Good Conduct Prize. Ernest Ford composed the music. The production, by D'Oyley Carte, was a flop. And where did Conan Doyle and Barrie meet to work on this venture? Aldeburgh, no less.

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