

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. Dr Watson had initially believed that the perpetrator of the crime was to be found among the town's low life. But he had to accept that springing jewels from a secure room without forcing entry required intelligence and panache. This, so it seemed, was the work of a master criminal – perhaps the sinister Lady Incarnadine whom he had met, and instinctively disliked, at the annual Boxing Day Swim. Just as Dr Watson was (as he thought) moving towards a solution of the crime, he realised that the violinist playing by the Moot Hall was none other than Sherlock Holmes in disguise. Holmes explained to Watson that the life of the princess was in danger, and that Watson must take her into hiding. So began Dr Watson's adventures with the princess, as they fled pell-mell across the town with Lady Incarnadine in hot pursuit. She was within a gnat's breath of catching the pair in the town's Ursuline Convent, but they escaped back to the seafront and took refuge in Stafford House mingling with guests at a party for local artists. There the guests were discussing the Paganini, the devil's violinist: had he, as was suspected, murdered his mistress and used her guts to string his violin? While distracted by these disturbing speculations and concerned that they might be offensive to the gentle princess, Dr Watson's attention wandered – and he took his eyes off his charge. When he turned round, the princess had vanished..... Dr Watson continues the tale:

She was nowhere to be seen, and it was as if she had been the victim of spontaneous combustion – except there was not even a puff of smoke. As a medical man, and one who had served with the army in the First Afghan War, I had been taught not to panic at moments of crisis. But I was now clammy with apprehension about the fate of the princess. She had surely not left my protection of her own volition. If not though, who had spirited her away – and how, and why? And what was I to do? If I were to raise the alarm, I might make her perilous situation even more dangerous. And if I were to rely on my own resources, surely those would be insufficient for the task. I was at a loss, and bereft. I had failed the princess, and perhaps even worse I had failed in the undertaking entrusted to me by Sherlock Holmes.

I left Strafford House with seagulls squawking overhead like a murderous rabble, and hardly knowing where my footsteps would take me, made my way to the Church of St Peter and St Paul. Inside the Church I knelt down to pray for guidance, and while doing so my eyes caught sight of a red admiral butterfly, quite out of season, fluttering hopelessly against the stained glass of the window in the Chapel of The Holy Trinity. What a window, I realised. Only recently consecrated, it was a scene of feminine scholarship dedicated to the memory of Griselda Hervey who had been headmistress of Belstead School.<sup>1</sup> Miss Hervey, surrounded by a galaxy of female saints, is seen teaching a young girl

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<sup>1</sup> Belstead House, formerly a school for girls of "breeding and means" still exists on Park Road, Aldeburgh. It is now a holiday home. What is now the church hall on the north side of the church car park was originally the school chapel. The connection of the school with Belstead, a village on the south west side of Ipswich, is

from Holy Scripture<sup>2</sup>. The text, in Latin, is open at the page which foretells that a virgin shall conceive and give birth<sup>3</sup>. The interior of the school room, with its tiled floor, is like a painting by a Dutch master. And the view from the schoolhouse window is of a shining city upon a hill<sup>4</sup>. The glass engraver was, I humbly appreciated, a master of perspective and he seemed to use it to invoke a world of classical as well as religious learning. Next to the window was a memorial to the blind Member of Parliament, Henry Fawcett<sup>5</sup> whom I knew to have been married to the suffragist Millicent Fawcett<sup>6</sup>. Was there a connection I pondered between the formidable Mrs Fawcett and Griselda Hervey and Belstead School?

As the light drained from the church in the late afternoon and the damp chill struck at the wound to my leg I had suffered in the First Afghan War, I realised that once again my mind had – unforgivably – wandered from the task in hand. What was I doing, contemplating these alarming modern women, when I had a princess in distress to find and protect?

And then, I had a flash of inspiration. Suppose the princess was not just a helpless member of the weaker sex but an educated and intelligent woman with ideas of her own? What if she were in greater danger (for whatever reason) in my company than would be the case otherwise? Goodness, what was the world coming to if there was no room for chivalry? No, I reassured myself. The world was not changing that fast, and in any case I had my given my pledge to Sherlock Holmes that I would look after the princess and if necessary lay down my life for her. And even if the princess thought she could preserve herself from the perils of the encircling gloom, could she really do so?

Where had she gone? If she had intended to leave Aldeburgh, she would have made her way to the station<sup>7</sup> and from there she would take a train to Saxmundham via Thorpeness and Leiston. If I drove straight to Saxmundham, I could perhaps still get there first. And that is what I did, beetling

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unclear. Bela Bartok gave a concert at the school in 1923, where to his surprise he found that some of the pupils had been well enough taught to master his Romanian dances.

<sup>2</sup> Actually it is St Anne teaching her daughter The Virgin Mary, but Dr Watson couldn't have known that.

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 7:14, referenced at Matthew 1:23. I hope you appreciate the connection to the Christmas theme!

<sup>4</sup> This phrase "shining city upon a hill" is attributed to the early colonist of Massachusetts John Winthrop. He emigrated to America from Groton, near Hadleigh in Suffolk. On the outward journey aboard the ship Arbella, Winthrop gave a sermon in which he took as his text Matthew 5:14: You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. He wished the capital of the new colony, the appropriately hilly Boston, to be a moral beacon to the world.

<sup>5</sup> Henry Fawcett (26 August 1833 – 6 November 1884) although blind had a stellar career. He was Professor of Political Economy at Cambridge, and later became an MP and Postmaster General. In the latter position, he was responsible for innovations including parcel post and postal orders. His most important contribution to public life however was to make financial instruments such as savings accounts available to working men and women. There is a moving portrait by Ford Maddox Brown of Henry and Millicent Fawcett in the National Portrait Gallery. Their daughter Phillipa was a remarkable mathematician, who finished top of her year at Cambridge by a 15 per cent margin. This was at a time when formal academic recognition was denied to women. The top mathematician at Cambridge in any year is described as the senior wrangler. Phillipa was therefore described as being "above the senior wrangler."

<sup>6</sup> Dame Millicent Garrett Fawcett lived on until 1929. She was an early suffragist (as opposed to the more militant suffragettes). She was founder and President of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies which later changed its name to The Fawcett Society and which still campaigns with distinction for women's rights.

<sup>7</sup> The station, closed in the 1960s by Dr Beeching, was of course next to The Railway Inn on Saxmundham Road Aldeburgh.

down the wintry lanes through the long abandoned parish of Hazelwood and onto Friston and Sternfield in my Dietrich-Bugatti<sup>8</sup>.

I had been right, and on Saxmundham station, I caught sight of the princess once again. Just a few steps behind her though was the sinister figure of Lady Incarnadine, with two wolf hounds at her heels which so it appeared she was about to unleash onto the unsuspecting princess.

I had to act quickly, and driving right onto the station platform I bundled the princess into my car and turning on my hand brake ( a manoeuvre I had not done before) we hurtled out of town. I decided that we should take refuge, and knowing that the Long family<sup>9</sup> lived at Painanckle Hall we veered into the drive of their mansion. Under the moonlit sky, I could see that Painanckle Hall was not unlike Baskerville Hall, the scene of a previous adventure with Sherlock Holmes: gothic in style, with stone casement windows, battlements, turrets, corbels, gargoyles and an ivy clad tower. Mists swirled up from the River Fromus and surrounded the house, so that it appeared as if an island cut off from the town and, more ominously, the rest of the humanity. Ravens, disturbed by the noise of the car, flew out of the tower and circled overhead.

After frantic knocking, we were let into the house by a servant and introduced to the master, Major Samuel Long. Imagine my delight and surprise to find that Major Long and I shared an army background, Major Long having served with the Rifle Brigade at the Relief of Ladysmith.<sup>10</sup> But Major Long was suspicious of foreigners, and that suspicion extended - much to my consternation - to the gentle princess. Even before I was able to explain to Major Long about the reason for our unannounced and breathless arrival at his door, he was working himself up into a bombastic denunciation of the German Kaiser. He had, so he told us, just read Erskine Childers' novel *The Riddle Of The Sands*<sup>11</sup>, which exposed covert plans by the German High Command for the invasion of Britain. Major Long now saw German spies stooges and sympathisers around every corner. And even though I attempted to impress upon Major Long that the princess was in fact Bohemian, not German, it made no odds in the Major's febrile imagination: if they were not German, they were likely to be conspiring with Germans and all foreigners in England were to be assumed to be secret agents unless they could show otherwise. By now, the Major's mood had darkened: his eyes were bulging, his cheeks had flushed crimson and the temporal vein on the side of his head was throbbing with anger. There was a distinct danger I realised that the Major would call the police. If this was to be averted I had to change the subject of conversation to something more benign, and at that moment my eyes alighted upon an unusual stoneware vat. What was it for, I asked the major? It was an heirloom and the source of the family fortune from which gold doubloons flowed like honey, he explained: it was in this vat that the family's first shipment of sugar had arrived from Jamaica nearly

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<sup>8</sup> Watson drives a 60hp Dietrich-Bugatti with a top speed of 35 miles.

<sup>9</sup> The Long family made a fortune as slave and plantation owners in Jamaica, and despite catastrophic investments in the South Sea Bubble thrived thereafter and continued to live just outside Saxmundham for 250 years. Several generations of the family served as Members of Parliament. Dudley Long (born 1749) changed his name to North in order to inherit Little Glemham Hall. He was a kinsman of Lord North, Prime Minister from 1770 -1782. Painanckle Hall is fictitious.

<sup>10</sup> As well as owning their mansion outside Saxmundham, the Long family flourished across the entire country as well as in the Americas. In real life Major Long appears to have lived near Carshalton, Surrey.

<sup>11</sup> *The Riddle Of The Sands* by Erskine Childers was published in 1903, and tells the story of two friends on a yachting holiday in the Frisian Islands who stumble upon German plans for the invasion of Britain. The novel was seen as predicting war with Germany and well as advocating preparedness. Erskine Childers himself was eventually shot for treason by the Irish Free State, and his son became President of Ireland.

two hundred years ago – sugar for the working classes. The major purred with satisfaction. The Long family motto<sup>12</sup>, loosely translated, was: god-fearing though naught fearing. While the major was contemplating the good fortune of his family – the sun shines on the righteous, he reminded me - I was able to bid him farewell and the princess and I were soon speeding back to Aldeburgh.

On the way back, we stopped once again by the church. A new grave had been dug and in the light of the gas lamp I could see the initials: J R, and an epitaph: *even the seagulls will fly at half mast*<sup>13</sup>. Where would we be safe for the night? And what arrangements could I make for the night which would secure the princess's safety without any impropriety on my part or hers?

Part 8 continues next year.

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<sup>12</sup> The motto is in fact: Pieux Quoique Preux – pious though valiant.

<sup>13</sup> The words of my dear friend Lizzi Thistlethwayte following the untimely death of a mutual shipmate.