

## Sherlock Holmes And The German Ocean 2013 Part 8

The story so far. It is late evening on 27 December 1906. On Christmas Eve, 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, as well as to Saxmundham and back, with Lady Incarnadine in hot pursuit. Dr Watson, with the princess as his passenger, has just arrived back in Aldeburgh driving his state of the art Dietrich-Bugatti with a top speed of 30 miles per hour. He needs to find somewhere safe for the princess to stay and make contact again with Sherlock Holmes. Dr Watson continues the tale:

An open top motor car on a cold winter's night is not for the faint hearted. There was no wind, and the temperature had dropped away to well below freezing in the still air. As the hedges and verges along the roadside from Saxmundham had flashed past in the glare of the car's headlights, I had noticed that they were white with hoar frost - as if turned to ice sculptures by a witch's spell. The frost on the surface of the road sparkled like crystals of mica and quartz in ancient granite boulders, or perhaps like a scattering of lost jewels beyond my grasp. As a veteran of the First Afghan War, I had known extreme cold in the mountain passes of the North West Frontier – the bitter pinch of cold on one's ear lobes, the numbness which creeps over one's face like a palsy and causes one to slur one's speech and the sudden loss of sensation in one's feet and hands. I felt all this again on the drive back to Aldeburgh. And then I felt for the princess. She was wrapped in furs, and her muff dogs<sup>1</sup> warmed her hands. But she was in distress, rocking back and forth in the passenger seat of the car and weeping silently - both from cold and perhaps from shock as she re-lived in her mind the events of the last three days and apprehension about what the future might hold.

Even worse, the physical assault of the cold meant that I was losing the ability to concentrate. I felt as if my mind was closing down - just at the moment when the ability to think lucidly was critical for the princess's safety. Where would be a safe place for the night? We had to stay in Aldeburgh, as the car would be too cold for a longer journey and the last train had already departed. I still of course had my room in the Cross Hotel, but for the sake of propriety she could not spend the night with me and in any case the hotel was, I had noticed, frequented by surly and hostile local folk who would

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<sup>1</sup> The Chinese used small dogs, known as muff dogs, as handwarmers. Until quite recently, there was a pair of stuffed muff dogs in a glass cabinet in the snug of The Jolly Sailor at Orford.

surely see the distress of a vulnerable outsider as an opportunity for criminal predation rather than noble rescue.

As we alighted from my motor car by the Moot Hall, the situation suddenly became even more perilous. Rolling out of the Mill Inn was a rubicund giant of a man, seemingly drunk, unsteady on his feet, and bawling out a lewd song about the “foggy foggy dew<sup>2</sup>.” When he saw us across the road, he stopped in drunken puzzlement – and then lurched towards us. I had assumed he was spoiling for a fight, one unfortunately that we had little chance of winning given my war wounds and the debility we were suffering as a result of the cold. The giant announced to us, alarmed as we already were, that his name was Satan Smith. Who were we, he wanted to know – the one piece of information I didn’t of course want to give him. But I had noticed in the past that telling people I am a doctor often engenders spontaneous goodwill, and that is what I told Mr Smith. For a moment, our fate hung in the balance. The words took some time to sink into his befuddled and spinning brain. He appeared to think about swinging his fists at us. But then he changed his mind and expression: he was delighted, and before we could say no had invited us to his flint walled cottage in Hertford Place.

Satan Smith<sup>3</sup> it turned out was a fisherman, and the owner of a cod smack known as the Gypsy Moke, built a few years earlier at the Slaughden Boatyard<sup>4</sup>. He had taken the Gypsy Moke as far as Iceland and the Faroe Islands on fishing trips, and had the reputation as a fearless seafarer and also one who had the luck of the devil (hence his nickname). Mr Smith was a generous host, and a trencherman in the service of good food and ale who (as I subsequently found out) could down one pint of ale in less time than it took to pour the next one. He recommended to us that we should drink the locally brewed ales of Flintham Hall & Co<sup>5</sup>, and of course I did so. Even the princess was persuaded to imbibe. As we thawed out before Mr Smith’s coal<sup>6</sup> fire, he told us about his unusual domestic arrangements. He had one common law wife for the weekends – herself able to spit six inch nails with deadly accuracy over 25 yards – and another for weekdays, as well as a girl in every port he visited. He was a regular visitor to Kronstadt<sup>7</sup> in Russia, he said, and the names of his conquests (some crossed out after bitter altercations) were tattooed in a long list down his back. The “wives” were in fact married to other men, and hated one another. The estranged husbands were

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<sup>2</sup> Satan Smith sings a ballad of seduction or sexual exploitation of a vulnerable person, famously arranged by Benjamin Britten using a traditional 17<sup>th</sup> century tune. The “cheeky chappy” persona of Britten’s balladeer does not in the writer’s view do justice to the dark themes and undertow of melancholy in the story he tells.

<sup>3</sup> Satan Smith is an ancestor of – well that would be telling. The family lived at 6 Hertford Place, Aldeburgh. Local legend has it that Satan Smith, whose fishing expeditions included a spot of piracy, hid buried treasure on the beach in the vicinity of what is now Haven House. His descendants have tried to dig it up, but so far have achieved little more than undermining the foundations of the house.

<sup>4</sup> There is a long and distinguished history of boat building at Slaughden. Among ships built at Slaughden was The Pelican (later renamed The Golden Hind) in which Sir Frances Drake circumnavigated the globe from 1577 to 1580. The Pelican’s sister ship, Marygold was also built at Slaughden.

<sup>5</sup> The Albert Brewery was established in Aldeburgh some time before 1883. By 1892, it had been absorbed into the business empire of Flintham Hall & Co Ltd brewers, wine and spirit merchants, corn millers and merchants etc with premises in Station Road (Victoria Road). Flintham’s Ales were sold in a number of local hostleries including The Cross Hotel (now the offices of Fairweather Stephenson & Co).

<sup>6</sup> In those days there was a thriving maritime trade between Newcastle and Slaughden and Snape with coal being brought south and cereals and malt from Snape Maltings being transported north. There was also a spur from the main railway line to a siding in Dunningford, opposite Snape Maltings.

<sup>7</sup> The Baltic home port just outside St Petersburg of the Imperial Russian navy under the Tsars.

also baying for Mr Smith's blood, although they did so from a respectful distance – not wishing to bring down on themselves even greater physical violence than they wished to inflict on Mr Smith. Despite his strength, Mr Smith was not, I came to realise, without fear about his own safety and he had asked the local policeman P.C. Ken Wall<sup>8</sup> for special protection. This was provided in the form of an oversized and underfed wolf hound that was leashed to a chain in the garden of the cottage. Only someone who could assert authority over the dog by calling out its name<sup>9</sup> could get past it to the front door without being eaten alive. When Mr Smith offered us accommodation for the night, I decided that we should accept: we were as safe here as we were likely to be anywhere else.

When I awoke in the morning, I was amazed notwithstanding the canine deterrent in the garden to find a note under my pillow from Sherlock Holmes. He asked me to meet him on the beach opposite the fishermen's huts. I slipped away, and met Holmes in a state of feverish excitement as was often the case when all his intellectual energy was focussed on a single problem. He showed me a hawser one end of which was tied to a capstan on the beach and the other end of which disappeared out to sea. According to Murray's Handbook<sup>10</sup> (which I had just read) these hawsers were for importing cheeses and possibly tulip bulbs across the seabed from Holland. But Sherlock Holmes said that they had another more sinister purpose, because they could also be used to send and receive secret messages in waterproof pouches between England and the continent. This, I confessed to Sherlock Holmes, had not occurred to me although now belatedly it struck me with the force of revelation. The question of course was what messages were being sent back and forth, and by whom – and what relevance this would have to finding the stolen jewels and not least security of the princess. How on earth though would we find out what was going on? Holmes's answer was that we should make use of local talent in the form of the Aldeburgh Town Irregulars, the gang of youths often to be seen swarming round the streets and over the beach. They would be asked to watch the hawsers, and follow anyone seen in the vicinity of the capstans. We would, so Holmes assured me, soon be lead to the mastermind behind the robbery.

Meanwhile however Holmes had a mission for me. He advised me that we had to be on the lookout for yachts that might sail for the continent from their moorings in the river. I was to ask the secretary of the recently established yacht club<sup>11</sup> for a list of future sailings and the names of the owners. So it was that during the morning, I made my way southwards to the clubhouse. There, while waiting for an appointment with the secretary, I scanned the glass cabinet of cups and trophies. The miscellany of silverware included awards for races in Whitewings, Redwings, and cruising yachts steered by amateurs. There was the 1900 Champion of the Alde, the Vaughan Brown<sup>12</sup> Trophy awarded in 1898 by Aldeburgh's mayor, The Maurice Cowell Challenge Cup,<sup>13</sup> the

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<sup>8</sup> P.C. Wall has been somewhat dragged out of true historical context, being the Aldeburgh policeman in the 1960's and 70's.

<sup>9</sup> The dog's name was Tinkerbell. It shared a kennel with a pet rabbit called Hercules.

<sup>10</sup> The first edition of Murray's Handbook for Essex, Suffolk, Norfolk and Cambridgeshire was published in 1870. Murray's guides were immensely popular, the English equivalent of the Baedeker guides being published in Germany. Murray Guides were renamed in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century as Blue Guides to distinguish them from the red bindings of Baedekers.

<sup>11</sup> Aldeburgh Yacht Club was founded in 1897, and the inaugural meeting was held at the Brudenell Hotel.

<sup>12</sup> Mr G Vaughan Brown was mayor of Aldeburgh at the time of the club's foundation.

<sup>13</sup> The Maurice Cowell Challenge Cup was awarded for the Whitewing class. Major Cowell was killed in the First World War and his name is commemorated on the Aldeburgh War Memorial.

Orford Challenge Cup<sup>14</sup> - and there, encrusted with jewels, and shimmering with menace was the Incarnadine Cauldron. The citation explained that the cauldron had been presented by Lady Incarnadine "for the fastest crossing from Aldeburgh to Ostend without regard to the safety of crew or competitors." The club secretary explained to me that Lady Incarnadine's 8 metre yacht The Valkyrie<sup>15</sup> was due to sail for the continent that very evening. There was no time to lose....

And at that point I realised that in discharging Sherlock Holmes's mission I had abandoned the princess to the mercies of Satan Smith.

The story continues next year.

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<sup>14</sup> The Orford Challenge Cup was donated by H Fazer in 1898, and appears to point to racing taking place from Orford before the foundation of Aldeburgh Yacht Club in 1897.

<sup>15</sup> Valkyrie was in fact owned by Lord Dunraven and was sailed on The Clyde. While racing in 1897, the yacht was involved in a collision causing loss of life. The House of Lords decision in the resultant legal case established that the rule of law applies to the conduct of sport.