

## Arthur & Oscar

I had expected friends and family to turn up for the funeral in droves but not at the deceased's house and most definitely not looking like they were attending a garden party. Why weren't they gathering at a church and why was no one dressed in black?

I had got there early and grabbed the best parking spot, ensuring I had a good view of his imposing home at the end of the drive. Given Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's status, one would have expected a funeral cortege comprising of a hearse and at least two cars of mourners. I checked my watch. The service was due to commence in just under thirty-minutes, yet no vehicles had arrived to pick the family up and take them to the church.

I stared out from behind the steering wheel in disbelief. The paper I worked for might get its facts wrong, but would a broadsheet like The Times make such an embarrassing mistake, especially in respect of such a revered author? It was unlikely.

I had wedged a copy of the respected paper under my briefcase on the passenger seat. I read the announcement, which I had ringed, again. It suggested I had got the right day.

Just then a photographer and his assistant walked in front of my car. Between them, they were carrying a large camera, a tripod, a case and a collapsed 'A' frame step ladder. I recognised them as staff from a rival paper. They were wearing black, but that didn't prove anything as they could be going straight onto another assignment.

It seemed the only way I was going to find out what was going on was by going up to the house. I might have lied and told them I was a friend of the family but, given my black suit, it was immediately apparent I hadn't received an invitation. I needed a cover and the rival staff had given me an idea. I would pose as another assistant. I just hoped their boss hadn't negotiated exclusivity. Getting a scoop was so fiercely competitive, I'd known brawls to ensue. If they spotted me, they would shop me in an instant. Then again, they were unlikely to cause a scene in front of mourners. I had only put the suit on in case I was caught red-handed, not that I had reckoned on encountering anyone. A funeral typically afforded me a good two hours on my own in the deceased's house.

I checked my watch again. It was now or never.

I told myself I could always beat a retreat, if it looked like I might get caught, as it stood to reason that one day my luck was going to give out. I heard myself say, "Please don't let it be today".

I angled the rear-view mirror and checked my tie was straight. I grabbed my black briefcase, got out of my borrowed wheels and headed up the drive at a pace.

According to his file at the office, Doyle had displayed little pretention. Likewise, his house reflected him perfectly. It sported enough gables to give it an interesting appearance, but it was by no means a residence fit for a lord. His home was a new build. Therefore, it was not weighed down by its own history, crumbling masonry, the cost of its upkeep and the expectations of a long line of ancestors. The trees were in leaf, the grass had been recently cut and the sun was shining, which contributed to a favourable first impression.

There was a man positioned at the door, whom I took to be Doyle's former assistant or a family friend who had volunteered to be an usher. No doubt, he was also a gatekeeper ensuring that any riff raff, such as myself, weren't permitted to enter. I told myself to act calm, knowing I would have to satisfy his checks. I lifted my briefcase slightly, patted it.

I said, "The office have sent me with additional kit for the photographer. It's not essential, just a precautionary back up."

The man handed me an order of service, then directed me into the garden.

The guests had gathered around the edge of a tennis court-sized lawn. As to be expected, given the nation's regard for the author and his achievements, they included many distinguished gentleman and elegant ladies wearing cloche hats. And, his dog.

I hadn't failed to notice his daughter's floral dress, which jarred with the solemnity of the occasion but, I had to assume, met with her father's wishes. She was holding onto the dog's lead.

The casket, which was laden with floral tributes, had been placed at the house-end of the lawn.

Doyle's 'Sherlock Holmes' stories had given me hours of reading pleasure, something that was shared by so many given the nation's outpouring of grief. Under different circumstances, I would have liked to have gone up and rested a hand on the casket so I might murmur words of appreciation and gratitude, but everyone was standing back at a respectful distance. Besides, the worst thing I could do was invite all eyes upon me.

If the newspaper I worked for hadn't helped to expose the various schemes which Doyle had been duped into supporting and, in some cases, promoting, casting all its workers in a bad light by association, I might have gone up to him and introduced myself. Now it was too late. I should have spoken to him when I had the chance.

At the far end, the rival staff had already put up their 'A' frame ladder. They were too busy checking

their equipment to notice me.

I turned and went back in the house. The hallway was crowded with late arrivals so I found myself going against the flow and had to hug the wall to get past them.

I asked the gentleman at the door where I might find the bathroom. He directed me left after the staircase and said it was at the end of the corridor opposite the room where the catering staff were setting up.

“You can’t miss it,” he said.

The man looked at his watch.

“You’d better hurry. The service is about to get underway,” he said, eyeing my case.

“Did you give your colleagues the equipment they needed?” he asked.

“Yes. They’re all set,” I lied.

He turned his attention to the stragglers and urged them to go into the garden.

I tried every door along the corridor but they were locked save for the visitors’ convenience and a large dining room or was it a second reception room? I couldn’t tell as it had been given over entirely to the day’s event. The yards of table and bright white tablecloths stacked with white china lent the room a sterile functionality.

The previous day I had gone through the paper’s stock photos of Doyle. One, taken only a year or so ago, showed him at his writing desk. The ceiling sloped behind him, suggesting his office was upstairs, under the roof. It was one thing being caught out of bounds on the ground floor, but no one could claim to have got so lost that they had ended up on the same level as the bedrooms. More to the point, anyone looking through the French Doors back into the house would spot me sneaking up the staircase. It seemed I would have to abort my attempt. What bad luck!

My reputation rested on having uncovered secrets the deceased had wished to be buried with them. Each time I had taken advantage of the funeral and their family’s absence to access their papers. Ironically, it was Doyle’s brother-in-law who had given me the idea through his ‘Raffles’ creation, a gentleman thief who is the antithesis of Holmes.

My tactics gave me no sleepless nights. The public deserved to know what I had uncovered, especially when the person had used their position to take advantage of others to further their own interests. And, the perpetrators deserved their public shaming, albeit in death.

Admittedly, my actions were instrumental in sinking the reputation of all journalists further into the

mud, but, at least, I operated by a code. I was a cracksman only in as much as I broke into peoples' homes, but I never stole, despite my path being littered with temptation. I only took evidence of sins and sinning.

Cynics would argue it was a matter of self-preservation which limited my crimes as a theft would be reported to the police, whereas my victims wouldn't report missing evidence as they would not wish to draw attention to any wrongdoing. Doubtless, they would also argue that I had no right to claim the moral high ground as breaking and entering was a crime.

Doyle's work, both literary and charitable, had gained him respect, equalling that which had helped to undermine his achievements and had invited ridicule. Nevertheless, I had admired the author, not least because of his advocacy of spiritualism, by means of which he had sought to bring comfort to others who, like him, had lost their nearest and dearest.

(Of course, that explained it! Conan Doyle would have specified that no one was to wear black at his funeral service because of his belief in spiritualism. And, being avowedly not Christian, neither the service nor his burial could take place on consecrated ground.)

I hadn't done anything wrong yet, nevertheless, I felt sullied.

Unlike my other targets, I had qualms about finding anything which would undermine Doyle's reputation still further. I didn't want to find evidence which would put a stain on his achievements. Instead, I hoped to find paperwork relating to an unfinished pet project, something he had seen in a newspaper that he was following up on to see justice served, something for which he could be given posthumous credit. Or, perhaps he suspected some peer or pillar of society of wrongdoing, whom I could expose.

I returned to the living room. Standing inside the French doors, I listened to the speakers as they reflected on Doyle's life and achievements.

When the service ended, the mourners began to stream in. Their conversations were animated but muted. I dodged between them and stepped into the brilliant sunshine. At the far end of the lawn, my rivals were packing away their equipment. I slipped past them and through a gap in the tall hedge unnoticed. My aim was to find the garden shed, to see if the family had started burning Doyle's documents.

There are some things in life one can count on: bonfires being lit too close to garden sheds, even though they present a fire risk, sheds being hidden from view, if one has extensive grounds, and, people of wealth and status burning documents. Invariably, they have something to hide, even if it's just from other family members, such as evidence of financial worth, property they secretly own, affairs or second families.

I walked alongside the rose garden, which was in full bloom. I breathed in sweet, sweet air. Four men were back-filling a coffin-shaped hole. I continued across another section laid to lawn and headed towards a gap in the shrubbery. The shed, when I finally came upon it, had been built just inside the perimeter of the extensive grounds behind a screen of laurel bushes. Only a few paces away was a circular patch of ground covered in flakes of ash and pieces of charcoal.

I searched for the right stick and found one that was about two feet long and sturdy, ensuring it wouldn't break under pressure. I used it to investigate the ash, hoping to reveal fragments of paper which hadn't succumbed to the fire, but without any joy. There were some blackened pieces, which may have been the remnants of letters but, as I tried to flick them onto the grass, they disintegrated. Then again, they could have been bits of card or newspaper used to start the fire.

Beyond the sound of bird song, I could hear chatter in the distance, suggesting some guests had chosen to wander outside.

Giving up on the bonfire, I considered the forlorn shed. It was far from inviting, nevertheless, I felt compelled to look inside. As soon as I opened the door, the smell of grass cuttings, oil and weed killer hit me. It looked no different from any other shed save for a tea chest which had 'DESTROY' scrawled on the side in large capitals. Bingo!

I couldn't close the shed door as, aside from a small, algae and grime-covered window, it was my only source of light. If others wandered off-piste, a door standing wide open would, no doubt, attract interest. And, if they demanded to know what I was doing, I'd have to come up with an excuse and damned quick. I pushed the concern to the back of my mind as I started rummaging through its contents, looking for a seam of hidden riches. I knew to skim read and not be drawn in by anything and everything which piqued my interest as I disliked being tormented by the possibility that, if I hadn't run out of time, I might have made an even better discovery. Much of what I grabbed and flicked through was correspondence. A large proportion was neither from our shores nor addressed to Doyle but to his greatest creation.

I stopped. It was all too easy to lose one's sense of time. I had been caught out before. I checked my watch and gave myself fifteen minutes.

By two-thirds down it seemed my search wasn't going to bear fruit. I checked my watch. I had a minute left. As I wasn't in danger of discovery, that is to say I couldn't hear voices approaching or the snapping of twigs underfoot, I pulled out another fist full of papers. Immediately, I was struck by the change in the quality of the paper and the type was crisper and a true black, as if someone had changed the typewriter

ribbon. Skimming over the text, the names 'Oscar Wilde' and the 'Cleveland Street scandal' jumped out at me. One of those names on its own would have suggested I'd uncovered a good story, but, as they littered the first two pages, there was a good chance I had stumbled upon a career defining revelation.

The supporting documentation consisted of a drawing of a man's face and pages cut from newspapers.

My heart was racing but I became as focussed as a surgeon.

I opened my briefcase. Save for some pens, a writing pad and my copy of The Times, it was empty. I loaded it with the documentation and covered it with the newspaper in case anyone asked to look inside.

I checked the tea chest to make sure I had got it all. The next layers were made up of architectural drawings for Doyle's former home, which he had designed and built near Hindhead in Surrey, and more correspondence. I told myself to be content with what I had and to leave it at that.

I closed the briefcase, then quickly put all the piles of discarded paperwork back in the right order, so that the first things I had pulled out went back on top.

The trick was to exit without attracting suspicion, as if I had been sent there on an errand. In my time working at the paper, I had encountered the odd burglar. One had boasted that, when caught red-handed, he had started humming or whistling to give the impression he was simply going about his business. When challenged, he'd say that he'd been sent by the gas board to investigate a report of a gas leak. It was also the excuse that had landed him in jail as the owners weren't connected to a gas supply.

As it turned out, leaving the shed and re-entering the formal garden wasn't a problem. No one had ventured as far as I had, although whistling with a parched mouth wasn't pleasant.

I emerged from the shrubbery, stopping every few yards to look at the planting, giving the appearance of being interested in the borders. Guests were milling on the lawn where the service had been held, although some had returned to the rose garden. I couldn't see my rivals, even so I stepped cautiously through the French windows and headed for the door.

"Ah, there you are!" said a man's voice.

I turned. It was the same gentleman who had been posted on the door before the service.

"I've been sent to look for your colleagues as they should have been given a tip. Would you mind taking it and giving it to them?" He pressed some notes into my hand. "Their professionalism hasn't gone unnoticed" he added.

I had no idea how much he'd given me. I couldn't check as it would be discourteous. I shook his hand, whilst clenching the notes in the other.

“It was a privilege to have been here when the rest of the nation could only be here in spirit.”

“I’ll let the family know. I’m sure they’ll appreciate the sentiment.”

As I continued to the door, he said, “I see your colleagues got you to help them with their equipment.”

I stopped and turned.

“How do you mean?”

“Your briefcase wasn’t as heavy when you arrived.”

“Don’t worry! I’ll make sure they buy me a pint. Mind you, I owe a chap back at the office a pint for letting me be the one who got to come out but it’s a small price to pay all things considered,” I lied.

The ease with which the words had left my mouth was shocking.

The corners of the man’s mouth pulled into a faint smile.

“Make it a whisky and be sure to have one yourself. That’s what the great man would have wanted.”

“Right you are, Sir,” I said, and left.

When I got back to the car, I put the typed papers into order. I checked my watch. There was time to read them to see what I had and still get my supper from the chip shop before it closed. And, so I read.

‘This account supplements the one published in my memoirs describing the occasion upon which I met Oscar Wilde at a celebrated London hotel on 30<sup>th</sup> August 1889...’

It started off as a ‘golden evening’, as I had previously described, during which our host, as well as another guest - Mr Gill, a former Irish MP – and I were entertained by Wilde’s splendid wit.

However, I noticed Wilde stiffen when a lone diner was seated at the adjacent table. They didn’t acknowledge each other but, from the suspicious glances they cast in the other’s direction, they had to be acquainted. How I could not determine. Despite the man’s unsettling effect, Wilde rallied admirably. But, then, there was a lot at stake.

Our host, Mr Stoddart, the managing editor of Lippencott’s Monthly Magazine, had invited us so he might commission us to write pieces of fiction for his publication. If he had been convinced of our talent and suitability from our other publications, there would have been no need to meet. Therefore, we were under pressure to make a positive impression to win our places in the magazine. Wilde held court but didn’t try to ruin my chances or that of his fellow Irishman. He afforded us plenty of opportunities to shine and was generous in his compliments. Moreover, when Stoddart said he had invited me on the strength of

my 'Sherlock Holmes' novel, Wilde enhanced my cachet by steering the conversation onto my previous publication, which was a work of historical fiction, giving the impression I was widely read.

Over dinner, Stoddart mourned the places and buildings he wouldn't have time to see on his trip.

He concluded, "If all one knew about London were the Ripper murders, I would have thought twice about visiting. It seems it ain't so different from the cities back home. Our front pages carry headlines about murders too but that don't stop nobody from going to Chicago or New York.

"What was it I read in this morning's paper something about an on-going enquiry into a theft at the London Central Telegraph Office, which led the investigating officer to a male brothel in Cleveland Street?"

Wilde, who had an opinion on all matters, volunteered none. Mr Gill had stepped out of the room, so I shared what an acquaintance had told me.

"It's a scandal in the making. The authorities have dragged their heels for the last month or so, allowing key witnesses to escape conviction, which smacks of a cover up. The brothel owner and some of the young prostitutes have either gone abroad or into hiding"

"A brothel will incite public outrage, but it's hardly a scandal," argued Stoddart.

"It's alleged members of the British aristocracy were amongst the brothel's patrons," said I.

"Even so, if the authorities are inviting scrutiny and criticism for their handling of the matter, it seems a world of trouble just to protect a few aristocrats," Stoddart commented, pulling a bottle of hock from the ice bucket and proffering it to Wilde's empty glass.

The waiters were still attending to the other diners and he'd grown impatient.

I pushed my glass towards him so he wouldn't have to stretch.

In a loud whisper, I said, "Ah, well, they protect their own. Easily done when their sphere of influence covers the courts and the press. The most shocking revelations have been kept from the public."

"How are the authorities able to exert such influence?" ask Stoddart, topping up my glass.

"Well, it's a rum do. Those that abuse their positions to assist the authorities are rewarded with promotions and honours and the like. Those that don't find themselves demoted, ostracised and, in some cases, imprisoned.

"It may seem like extreme measures have been employed, but the threat is indeed great. It's been alleged the Prince of Wales was a patron but, I suspect it's a cunning threat by the perpetrators to avoid prosecution, knowing the authorities would go to great lengths to stop the matter going to court, thereby preventing a scandal.

“Seemingly, they’re having a hard time trying to disprove that the head of the Prince’s stables was a patron. Not only is he a lord but his close links with royalty could tarnish their reputation by association, as well as causing them considerable embarrassment. As we know, these things have a way of leaking out, so I’m sure it will be in the newspapers before long.”

Wilde seemed distracted, but, as soon as the conversation moved on, he joined in again. It struck me that the man at the adjacent table was exerting his influence on my new acquaintance, thereby my curiosity was piqued.

Between courses, I inadvertently dropped a spent match and searched for it. I pushed my fingers between the seat and the padded back and found a pearl. I found six in all, suggesting a lady must have broken her necklace as she was dining. Presumably, the others had all been recovered. After showing the curious finds to my companions, I slipped them into my pocket with the intention of handing them into the reception desk.

Not long after, the man – I might have referred to him as the ‘gentleman’, but I was already convinced he was unworthy on any such distinction – left his table. Moments later, Wilde excused himself. I gave it a moment or two and followed them out.

They weren’t to be seen in the large foyer.

As my dining companions and I had met in the bar, we had been in the hotel long enough to know the men’s conveniences were situated down a corridor. I peeked around the corner, sure enough, Wilde and the man were in a murmured but heated conversation. To my mind, the only explanation for such a queer meeting was that Oscar was being blackmailed.

I went to the reception desk and approached one of the clerks.

“I wonder if you could help me. I find myself in an embarrassing situation. I’m sitting adjacent to a diner at the next table, whom I recognise but I recall his name.”

I described the man and said that he would return from the conveniences to the dining hall at any moment.

“My table was booked under the name of ‘Stoddart’. If you could furnish me with the man’s name, I would be much obliged,” I said.

I placed a folded banknote on the desk and kept my hand protectively over it.

The receptionist hesitated for a moment. He gave a quick look to his left and right. His immediate colleagues were dealing with other guests. He placed his fingers on the banknote, slid it towards him and

pocketed it.

“Wait there! I’ll see what I can do?”

With that he went to talk to the head waiter and together they consulted the seating plan.

Just then, the man walked across my line of sight and approached the dining room. He had his back to me so I could signal the clerk to confirm he was the subject of my enquiry.

When the clerk returned, he said, “The man goes by the name of ‘Kirkby-Snyde’. The head waiter says he works for a newspaper.”

“I don’t suppose you know which one?” I asked.

“I believe it’s the ‘City Courant’,” he answered.

“Thank you,” I said, and returned to the dining room.

As we left the dining room after the meal, I turned to Wilde and asked, “May I be so bold as to share a Hansom?”

I made my voice sound bright, suggesting it wouldn’t inconvenience him.

“Of course,” Wilde answered, with a bemused look.

I engineered it so that Stoddart and Gill took the first two cabs. Stoddart shook our hands and said we’d hear within the week, if we were successful.

I pulled Wilde to the side so the doorman wouldn’t overhear us.

I said, in a low voice, “Blackmail must be nipped in the bud. Allowing it to continue only serves to delay the inevitable. As I see it, you have two choices: you can either go to the police or find something with which you can undo the blackmailer before he can undo you. With the threat of exposure hanging over your head, you won’t produce your best work and I suspect Stoddart won’t take a chance on me if you are forced to withdraw, so it’s in both our interests that we make it stop.”

Wilde looked at me in alarm. He raised his chest as if he was about to protest, but not a word passed his lips.

I continued, “Your blackmailer goes by the name of ‘Kirkby-Snyde’ and supposedly works for the ‘City Courant’. There’s always someone on duty. Perhaps for a banknote or two, we can get some dirt on Kirkby-Snyde. Come on! The game’s afoot.”

As soon as, our cab lurched into motion, Wilde turned to me and said, “What you are proposing is too risky. I want no part in the matter. There’s too much at stake.”

I was very aware of our driver, as I'm sure Wilde was too.

In a low voice, I said, "There's no need to bail. We're just getting the measure of your *friend*. Until we have established what we're up against, it would be unwise to act."

"What distresses me is that I'm not suitably attired for sleuthing. Instead of a green carnation for my lapel to compliment the Chartreuse I drank, I should have picked a common thistle for slumming it in Fleet Street."

"The only green anyone will be interested in is the ink on our banknotes and, as a Scotsman, I'm obliged to point out that there is nothing common about the thistle."

Wilde looked suitably embarrassed.

"I stand corrected, Sir."

The Courant's offices were dark and foreboding. There was a lamp burning under the porch and in some of the downstairs windows. I paid the driver but asked him to wait in case we weren't invited into the building.

As we approached the door, a matchstick seller stepped out from the shadows.

"Allow me," Wilde said. "Since the matchgirls' strike I can't walk past a seller without buying a box of matches."

I rang the doorbell and, as I waited, I observed Wilde's interaction with the seller.

"Thank you, Sir," she said, as she gave a little curtsy before stepping back into the shadows again.

Wilde passed the box of matches to me.

"Something for your filthy habit," he said, jokingly.

It took three rings but, just as we were on the point of giving up, we heard the scraping of a heavy bolt and the door opened.

"What do you want?" asked the man.

"We wish to speak to the duty manager," said I.

"I am the duty manager," the man said, glowering at us. "What's it to you?"

Wilde was a tall man and we both had sturdy, muscular physiques. As for the burly duty manager, he had his sleeves rolled up and we could see his veined forearms were as solid as the thick branches of a tree. We outnumbered him, nevertheless, I suspected he would easily beat us in a fight. I recognised him as a man who reasoned with his fists and had been subjected to enough punishment in his life that the threat of having more pain and cuts inflicted upon him would not act as a deterrent.

"May we speak with Mr Kirkby-Snyde?"

"What do you want with him?"

"He said that we were to meet him here. We've got some information he'll be interested to hear."

The man gave a sneering laugh.

"No you ain't. I don't know what your game is, but I can tell you this much, he's got his sources."

"We abandoned our after-dinner cigars and crossed town in good faith," I said between gritted teeth.

Surprisingly, the man said, "Tell you what, gentlemen, how's about I passes on a message."

This put me on the spot.

I was fingering the pearls I had pocketed earlier. I took them out, at least the five I was able to scoop up.

"Tell him I showed you five pearls and that I'll be in touch. He will know me by the 'Sign of the Four'.

That's all you need to know."

The man glanced at the pearls then threw me a perturbed look.

"Right you are, Sir," he said, hesitantly.

"Be sure to tell him!" I said as he closed the door.

I heard a heavy bolt sliding across.

Wilde turned to walk back to the cab, but I tugged his arm to get his attention.

"What was it you said at dinner? 'Work is the curse of the drinking classes'?" Wilde nodded. "I wouldn't be surprised if the Courant's workers are making up for lost drinking time. Given the hour, they'll be inebriated and in the mood to talk to anyone who is prepared to listen." I looked up and down the road. Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese public house is the closest. Let's try that one!" I saw a disdainful look on Wilde's face. "If it was good enough for Charles Dickens, then it's good enough for us."

"Very well, as you are determined to take me from the sublime to the ridiculous," said Wilde with a weary sigh.

He went over to our cab driver to say we were done with his services and gave him a tip.

"Lead the way!" he said, falling in step.

We continued along Fleet Street, where the hawkers of oranges, ginger breads and oysters had closed their booths for the night, until I found the entrance to a dimly lit alley. The public house was on the left behind a glazed panelled exterior. As we entered, we became envelope by the sweet, cloying smell of smoke, sweat, fermented grape and hops. Promisingly, it was still crowded inside. The patrons didn't look like newspaper workers. I saw an opening. It led to another crowded gloomy space, which, in turn, led to

another, suggesting the interior sprawled over several floors. I spotted a man going from table to table collecting spent tankards and approached him.

“Excuse me, Sir!” I said.

The man turned to face me.

He had phossy jaw, an affliction suffered those who worked or had worked at a matchstick factory, supporting Wilde’s conviction that more needed to be done to protect workers.

Whilst most would be repulsed by the man’s deformed face, as a doctor, the medical aspect fascinated me, but this was neither the time nor the place to indulge my curiosity. Even so, I registered that his top lip was oversized and swollen, the bottom of his face and chin had caved in and a tell-tale scar marked where the dead bone had been removed.

I pulled out a generous sized silver coin and held it up.

“Can you tell me where the workers from the Courant are drinking?”

The man spoke with great effort.

“Down in the cellars, they’s gathered in the furthest bar. You can’t miss ‘em. Some of them’s got black stained hands from working with the ink.”

Having had his bottom jaw removed might have saved his life, but, it seemed, he hadn’t escaped the other devastating effect of handling chemicals: brain damage.

I slipped the coin into his top shirt pocket and stepped out of his way so he could take the tankards to the kitchen for rinsing.

We continued to the next staircase and headed down.

The cellars had vaulted ceilings, even so, with the smoke and the noise and having to push through a crush of patrons to get from one bar to the next, one felt hemmed in. The drinkers were still standing but shouting slurred conversation. We had feared we’d run into Kirkby-Snyde again, but it was unlikely he’d spend his ill-gotten gains on beer after he’d tasted better at the hotel.

As we stood by the bar, waiting to be served, Wilde said, “This establishment is very close to the offices of the Courant. Did you see yesterday’s edition?”

“No,” I answered, uncertain where his conversation was leading. “You know I stick to The Crier.”

“Shame. You really ought to give it a try.”

“Yeah, you ought to try it,” a man said at the other side of the bar. “We’re from the Courant and it’s a damn fine paper.”

“Shall we tell them gents why?” said the bearded man next to him. “They don’t look like anything could shock ‘em.”

“We’re all ears,” said Wilde.

“Jack the Ripper works on our paper,” said the first man.

The two men burst into laughter.

“I fail to see what’s so amusing about women being horribly murdered and mutilated,” I retorted.

“Forgive us, gentlemen,” the bearded man said, earnestly, having momentarily regained his composure before snorting and laughing and setting off his friend.

“What’ll it be, gents?” asked the barman.

I ordered a round of whisky for myself, Wilde and the two men. Wilde changed his drink to a brandy, which was a compromise as they didn’t stock his preferred tippie.

Wilde asked the men, “Why do you suppose the Ripper works at the Courant?”

I wouldn’t have credited Wilde capable of handling the situation sensitively, but he had modified his behaviour, there were no grand gestures or statements. Moreover, Wilde had removed his green carnation.

The first man answered, “He’s hoodwinked the lot of ‘em. He has the ways of a city gent but he was plucked out of poverty, so he knows how to walk through them slums without anyone batting an eyelid.”

The bearded man continued, “Them murders ‘ave been good for sales of newspapers. The gorier the better. Our man worked on the Courant’s Ripper stories. He knew things the coppers hadn’t made public. After the third killing he was interviewed by the police, but he told ‘em he got his information off witnesses.

“Our man might ‘ave everyone believe he’s escaped London’s nastiest criminal rookery, but its hooks are still in him. Ask yourself, what happened to the family he left behind? What if he’s using them to be his eyes and ears, and his hatchet men.”

“Why murder to get a good story, if all the papers get to cover it?”

The bearded man answered, “Like I says, there was more than enough spoils for all of them.

“That’s not all. Our man ain’t a grafter. If there’s an easy way, he’ll take it. As a reporter, he gets all the dirt. Only some of it makes the paper. Gets more coin using it for blackmail.”

I turned to his drinking companion.

“How can you be certain he came from Whitechapel?”

“He never sticks to the same story, but I believed ‘im when he told me he’d been taken from his family

as a young lad by that charity - I forgets the name. He was legless so it ought to be true. Started off as a newspaper boy. He'd come in and tells them stuff that's happened. He knew the paper wanted scoops and scoops meant rewards. It didn't take 'em long before they trained him up to be a reporter."

"So why start killing again after seven months?" Wilde asked.

"Last month's murder was a copycat killing," answered the bearded man.

"Why haven't you gone to the police?" Wilde asked.

Both men shot him the same unguarded, fearful look.

"Because, if he ever found out it was us who'd grassed him up we'd end up as dead as them he 'ad murdered," said the bearded man.

"Mind you, the way he's going, they'll find his body washed up at low tide."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"He's making the wrong sort of enemies. Only last week Robert Cliburn was in 'ere wanting to know where Kirkby-Snyde was," said the first man.

There it was! The name we were hoping for. So, the Courant workers had been talking about Kirkby-Snyde, but was he the Ripper?

The police were working on the theory that the murderer was from Whitechapel as only someone who knew all the streets and alley ways and all the comings and goings could have evaded capture. They'd interviewed scores of people, but any suspects had either been eliminated from their enquiries or the police lacked evidence to pursue a case.

"Who's Cliburn?" I asked.

Wilde looked at me aghast.

"You must have read about him in the papers. He's a blackmailer," he said.

"Oh, that Cliburn!" I said.

Indeed, the man was notorious.

"What about the Cleveland Street story? Has your man been covering that one too?" I asked our drinking companions.

"Yes," said the bearded man. "He reckons there's a lot of worried toffs not that you'd know it from what you get to read in the papers. Them's oughta be more afraid of Kirkby-Snyde than the law."

We only got in a couple of rounds before the establishment closed at half-past midnight. Its patrons stumbled out. Wilde and I hoped to hail a cab and started walking.

As soon as we were out of earshot, I said, "Well, that's an interesting development. It stood to reason your blackmailer would have secrets of his own given his devious exploits, but I wouldn't have supposed he was the architect behind the Whitechapel murders. I'll find out which charity took him in and see if I can track down his family."

"If we talk to his family, they'll inform Kirkby-Snyde and he'll send his accomplices to kill us!" said Wilde. "You saw the look of fear in those men's eyes when I suggested they inform on him to the police."

"So, we lay a trap."

A few paces further and we had reached the Courant building. The matchgirl stepped out from the shadows. Recognising us, she disappeared again.

It was a sultry night and the high windows were open. We heard raised voices, drawing us closer.

"Tell me again, what was it the man said to you?" one said.

"It's Kirkby-Snyde!" Wilde mouthed, pointing up at the open window.

Another man answered in a hesitant, stammering voice.

"He showed me five pearls and said I was to tell you he'd be in touch and that you'd know him by the 'Sign of the Four'. I swear on my life that's what he said."

I recognised the voice of the Duty Manager. He'd seemed as tough as old boots. Hearing his whimpering pleas was chilling. Thereby, I knew to be frightened of Kirkby-Snyde. I had fought for King and country, stared danger in the face, so I didn't frighten easily.

"How does he know?" Kirkby-Snyde shouted.

We heard clattering as though he'd thrown something across the room.

"He can't know? Them pearls means somat else," said the Duty Manager.

"It's a message."

"It's a trick I tell you."

"Nah, you want me to think it's a trick so I don't go looking for the person who's ratted me out. When I says 'pearl' what do you think of?" asked Kirkby-Snyde.

A silent pause was followed by the Duty Manager letting out a screamed howl.

"Somat to help you think," said Kirkby-Snyde.

"Pearls of wisdom," the Duty Manager spat out.

"That's what I thinks. I'm supposed to know he's got wise to something. How many pearls did the man show you?"

“Five.”

“Five! That’s one for every whore I had killed. The only way he’d know that is if someone ratted on me. I want to know who?”

Another loud crash as though something had been hurled across the room followed by another agonised cry.

“Did you tell him?”

“I swear upon my life it weren’t me,” the Duty Manager said.

Further along, something suddenly flew through the open window and landed with a heavy thwack. A spanner lay on the pavement.

“I’m gonna start smashing each of your fingers with this ‘ere hammer, unless you start talking,” said Kirkby-Snyde.

I stuck my hand into my pocket and pulled out the pearls.

“I can’t stand here idly by while a man is being tortured,” I said in a low voice to Wilde.

With that I began throughing the pearls through the open window.

We heard an almighty ‘ARGHHHHhhhhhhhh!’.

Kirkby-Snyde was beyond rage. Worse, his battle cry suggested he was charging through the building heading straight for us.

“What the blazes did you do that for?” Wilde asked. “Now he’s coming after us.”

“Give me your cane?” I demanded.

Wilde hesitated as though not trusting in my unspoken plan, so I snatched it from him.

“Stand in line with the door about ten paces back! When he comes rushing out, the first thing I want him to see is you.”

I didn’t have time to explain further and Wilde didn’t have time to protest. We heard footsteps, the bolt sliding across and someone grabbing the door handle.

I just had time to dart to the other side of the door, drop down into a crouched position and swing Wilde’s cane out in front of me, so it was level with the height of the step.

The door flew open.

As Kirkby-Snyde brought his leg forward, I raised Wilde’s cane just enough to catch his ankle. Both he and the hammer he was carrying went flying forward and crashing to the ground. It seemed I had succeeded in winding him as he immediately went into a kneeling position to force breath into his lungs.

Whilst he was incapacitated, we rushed forward and grabbed him. I secured his hands back with my belt. I noticed blood down Kirkby-Snyde's front and smeared on his face. It couldn't have been from the fall, so it had to be the duty manager's blood.

We were startled by a police whistle and looked up. A group of officers came running over.

"What's going on 'ere then?" one of them asked.

Before I could answer, the duty manager called out from inside the building, "Help! I'm in here!".

Kirkby-Snyde immediately went into a panic and tried to get to his feet. Two other officers rushed forward, pushing Wilde and I out of the way.

One gagged him by tying a neckerchief so tight it was like a bit between his teeth.

"Can't have you causing a disturbance at this time of night," the officer said.

His colleagues grabbed Kirkby-Snyde, one on each side and lifted him to his feet. Kirkby-Snyde struggled violently resisting his arrest. Another officer grabbed him by his ankles and together they manhandled him towards the street. Another officer went into the building.

"On your way, gentlemen!" ordered the officer in charge. "There's nothing more to see."

We set off in silence.

As I walked, I ruminated over the evening's curious events. I assumed Wilde was doing the same.

After ten or so minutes, Wilde tugged my arm, stopping me in my tracks, and said, "I fancy they weren't police officers."

"The same queer thought just occurred to me too. They didn't take our details in case they needed statements," I said.

"The prisoner should have been put into a police wagon. Did you see one?" Wilde asked.

"Come to think of it, no."

"Were any of them carrying truncheons or lamps?" he asked.

"Not as I recall. Do police officers gag people when they take them into custody?"

"I wouldn't have thought it would be necessary."

I nudged his arm and said, "We need to keep walking, in case anyone's listening.

"If anything happens, the police will put out an appeal for information. The cab driver might come forward and say he took us to the Courant. I doubt the duty manager has any loyalties to anyone other than himself and may give the police our descriptions. In turn, our drinking companions are sure to remember an Irishman and a Scotsman.

“When did you remove your green carnation?” I asked.

“As we stepped out the cab.”

With hardly a pause, he said, “The matchgirl! She might have witnessed the whole incident. I gave generously for her box of matches, so I’m sure she’ll remember us and vouch for us.”

“Supposing we have to go to the police to eliminate ourselves from their enquiries, what do we tell them? If I say I was being blackmailed by Kirkby-Snyde, it would make me a suspect.”

I pinched my bottom lip and considered the problem.

“By Jove, I have it! As they say, the best policy is to stick to the truth. We can say that Stoddart invited us to submit contributions for his magazine. Kirkby-Snyde was seated at the next table so he overheard the conversation. I know the hotel has a note of his reservation. We can say that Kirkby-Snyde approached us and arranged to meet us at the Courant building after our dinner. We assumed he wanted to make us a better offer and went to see him.

“In the meantime, I’ll start working on a story. I’ll give it the title ‘The Sign of the Four’ and work some pearls into the narrative for good measure, so it doesn’t matter if the Duty Manager goes to the police and tells them about us.

“We just have to hold our nerve and buy the Courant to look for any mention of a missing reporter.”

“I can’t thank you enough,” said Wilde.

“It’s no matter.”

Wilde stopped and said, “It would be a shame to deprive London of the Ripper’s true identity.”

“Indeed, but who would believe us? A Scottish general practitioner and an Irish magazine editor, marvellous though he may be.”

“Former editor but marvellous nonetheless.”

I laughed.

We heard the welcomed sound of horses’ hooves.

“Well, it looks like we might get a cab after all,” said Wilde, stretching out his cane to hail the driver.

I watched as Doyle’s papers went up in smoke.

I cried out and jumped to my feet to bat away my editor’s hand, the one that held a match to the documents, but it was too late.

“What did you do that for?” I whaled.

My editor dropped the burning papers into his bin, then, after giving it a moment, extinguished them with his cup of tea.

He sat back down and, from behind his imposing desk, adopted the look of a disappointed parent.

“If there was anything to be gained by going public, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle would have done so after Oscar Wilde died, but, he didn’t. I suspect he wanted to shield Wilde’s surviving son from another terrible revelation. Blackmail hints at illicit behaviour, albeit unproven. Doyle was an honourable gentleman.

“Besides, you’re too late. There’s no one left alive who will sleep easier, if we revealed the Ripper’s identity. And, what more satisfaction might we have than the presumption that he came to a violent end. Moreover, the inspector leading the Ripper investigation died last year and the chairman of the Whitechapel Vigilance Committee died eleven years ago.

“What is Doyle’s word when his claims can’t be proven? The man was tricked into believing the existence of fairies. You don’t think the police and our readers will demand hard evidence?”

I got up to leave.

“I’ll never get another scoop as good as that again,” I complained.

“Could you have lived with yourself knowing we had gone directly against Doyle’s wishes by publishing his account?” my editor retorted.

“Why do you suppose he wrote it down, if he didn’t mean to do anything with it?”

“He was a writer!” my editor said. “Knowledge of that night must have preyed on his mind and weighed heavily on his soul. If he had been a religious man, he might have gone to a confessional. Now get me a scoop you can back up!”

I stared at him for a moment then skulked out. Deep down, I knew he was right.