

The Adventure of Sir Scrope

Just days after I sent the last tea chest, containing documents pertaining to my long association with the Great Detective, to Scotland Yard, I received an intriguing package.

It should be stated that I am inundated with letters from readers, who have been compelled to put pen to paper after reading the published accounts of the mysteries Holmes and I have solved, asking whether they might have an audience with me or some such. Yet, the individual who had sent the package didn't appear to want anything from me. Quite the contrary. He offered to reveal the details of a case which, by his reckoning, Holmes hadn't shared with me. It pains me to say that this wasn't a unique situation either, as disreputable journalists and trophy collectors have tried to befriend me in the hope of obtaining information for their own nefarious purposes or memorabilia from which they hoped to profit, using similar tactics.

The gentleman had signed his letter 'Nathaniel Willis, decorator of churches, palaces and great houses'. I swear some days Holmes still steers my focus or grabs my attention from beyond the grave. I might have dismissed the letter and thrown it into the fire had I not recognised it as an invitation which would have intrigued my dear friend. Thus, I turned the gentleman's wording over in my mind for several hours until, at last, I had it, the order of my correspondent's achievements were decidedly odd. Surely, if he had meant to impress me, he would have ranked 'palaces' above 'churches'. His order suggested he considered the Church more important than the Crown, therefore there was a good chance he was a religious man and someone in whom I could place my trust.

Furthermore, he had enclosed some sketches and drawings. I recognised a young Holmes and his equally young brother Mycroft. They sufficed to pique my interest. Could it be that Willis really had been acquainted with my dear friend and associate Holmes? If so, where had they met? What could have brought them together?

I lifted another protective sheet of tissue paper, revealing an annotated sketch of Sir Scrope of Martlethorpe-on-the-Wye. The drawing had been executed whilst the deceased was laid out on a mortuary slab – along the bottom in neat print the illustrator had written 'Scrope is pronounced Scroop' as well as the particulars of his fatal and defensive wounds, which had been drawn again in detail in the spaces around the edges of the paper.

On the reverse, Willis had written, 'The corpse was a bloodied mess. The ragged edges of his fatal wound to the neck framed a terrible, blackened cavity in which one could detect the shocking, brilliant-white of bone'.

I supposed I was looking at the answer.

Confronted with evidence of Willis having been the proto-Watson, I was conflicted. As ill-judged as it may

seem, I was jealous of him, having missed out on their adventure and, at the same time, overwhelmed by a strong desire to meet the only other person who had worked with Holmes as I had, that is, on the same footing. Therefore, he represented someone with whom I could talk about Holmes the collaborator, not Holmes the Great Detective as others had known him.

Willis had sent his package to my editor at the Strand Magazine's offices so it might be forwarded on to me. According to his sender's address, Willis lived at 186 Gwydir Street, Cambridge. In his letter, he offered to call upon me. He must have supposed I still lived in London, therefore, by his reasoning, he faced neither a great distance by train nor an inconvenient onward journey once he alighted at Liverpool Street Station. As I could not expect him to make the effort and as I welcomed every opportunity to re-visit places where Holmes and I had worked, naturally, I would write to the gentleman suggesting we meet in Cambridge. Moreover, once we had conducted our business, I hoped to take an excursion to Trumpington, where one of our cases had concluded.

After an exchange of two further letters the matter was settled. I checked into the University Arms Hotel and waited for him in the bar, where we were to meet at six.

The hotel was more than adequate for our purposes being close to where he lived and being only a short onward journey for me at the end of a wearisome day meeting three trains and crossing London to get from one station to the next.

At the appointed hour, a tall man with a soldier's bearing walked in. He was wearing an Ulster and a deerstalker. My heart sank.

Complete strangers come up to me and tell me how much they have enjoyed reading about Holmes's exploits, but an undesirable consequence has been that some presume to know us, and, in several extreme cases, they have adopted his wardrobe. I find myself becoming tetchy and irritable with those who are particularly forward and gushing, controlling even. Some have grabbed me by the arm and steered me across rooms, foyers and horse enclosures just so they might present me to their acquaintances.

Aside from his stature and his attire, his appearance did not match that of Holmes. Nevertheless, this unpromising start did not bode well.

"Dr Watson?" he asked, approaching me as, unlike the other newspaper-reading residents, I had risen from my chair.

"Indeed, sir, and you must be Mr Willis," said I, pleased that he hadn't taken the liberty of slapping me on the back as though he were a longstanding friend, or squeezed my arms or pulled me into a fraternal embrace as men of the Church are prone to do.

"Yes, sir. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

As we shook hands, I noted he had neither removed his hat nor doffed it as is proper.

“May I invite you to a drink before we dine? I’m sure one of the attendants will take your hat and coat,” said I, looking around for a member of staff.

“That would be most agreeable, thank you,” said Willis.

“Good man! I think we owe it to our friend to drink a toast in his honour for bringing us together.”

“I thought you might appreciate taking in the deerstalker,” said he, removing his hat. “It was a gift from the great man himself.”

“Holmes gave you the hat?” said I, somewhat taken aback.

“Indeed, sir. He asked me what I wanted by way of a token of his gratitude and without a moment’s hesitation I settled upon his deerstalker. He tried to persuade me to opt for a concert in London followed by dinner, but I was adamant. He had been given a pair of tickets for the Bach Choir’s performance at St. James’s Hall in which the Swedish Nightingale famously sang and had asked me to accompany him.”

He must have seen my shocked expression as Willis continued, “Do I regret my decision? Only in as much as it would have pleased Holmes to do me a good turn. His look of disappointment when I declined still pains me to this day. He admired perfection and efficiency in all its forms and valued simplicity. He assumed that, as I am a religious man, there was no better reward than listening to an earthbound choir achieving celestial heights.

“I never did get to visit St. James’s Hall before it was demolished. I believe it’s been replaced by the Piccadilly Hotel. As for the hat, it is showing its age, but it endures.”

I nodded without comment.

Willis was a dolt for not going to the concert, but I was not going to stoke the sting of his regret.

As a member of staff relieved Mr Willis of his coat and took our drink order, I held his prize and flipped it over to read the maker’s label. The sentimental fool that I was, I was hoping a strand of Holmes’s hair had got caught in the weave. One would have sufficed. The hat was damp, suggesting it had been mizzling as Willis walked to the hotel from his home.

“Holmes’s original deerstalker,” said I. “He got through several. Yours boasts the most handsome check and colouring by far. I can see why he was sorry to part with it.”

“Now I feel truly wretched.”

“Forgive me! That was not my intention. Quite the contrary, by this token, I can tell that Holmes must have held you in high esteem, something that was not easily won. I suggest we find a quiet corner so you can tell me how you earned your prize and recount the adventure behind the drawings you sent me.”

Once we had settled into two highbacked armchairs, overlooking Parker’s Piece – a large, square, expanse of grass - the waiter brought us our drinks.

Willis and I looked at each other.

“We ought to be upstanding,” he said, having read my thoughts.

We both got to our feet and raised a glass.

“Holmes. May he be with us in spirit this evening,” I proposed.

Willis repeated, “Holmes.”

“How did you become acquainted with him?” I asked, as we both sat down again.

Willis smiled, “The company I worked for was commissioned to redecorate the old hall of Mr Holmes’s Cambridge college, following a decorative scheme designed by an associate of William Morris. Including the building works, it took about three years to complete.

“I often sketched students in my lunch break as I liked the challenge, which is how I came to draw both the Holmes brothers. Mycroft was in his final year when I started working at the college and Sherlock went up the following year. Sherlock was six or maybe it was seven months older than me. His intelligence eclipsed that of everyone around him and he was very knowledgeable on a whole range of subjects.”

“You’ve not revealed Holmes’s alma mater. Did he swear you to secrecy?” said I.

Willis smiled.

“No, but you are sure to write up my account and submit it to the Strand Magazine for publication. I wouldn’t wish to compromise my former employer’s association with the college. Therefore, I insist that, other than Holmes and myself, all names associated with the college are changed.”

“And, you don’t think Holmes’s faithful readership deserve to know important details of one of his formative investigations?”

Willis laughed.

“They do and you would make a far better job of marshalling the facts than I, but I know from ‘The Adventure of the Gloria Scott’ that you are prepared to sacrifice superficial accuracies in order to focus on the crux of the problem.”

“How so?” I asked.

“Well, when Lord Byron came up to Cambridge, a dog ban had already been introduced. Byron was so incensed he famously kept a tame bear in his rooms, which is why I, like most Cantabrigians, know this statute and that Holmes couldn’t have been bitten by a dog at his college.”

“I didn’t want to test the reader’s patience by spending pages and pages describing the tedious circumstances by which Holmes and Victor Trevor became acquainted.”

“Perfectly understandable,” Willis said, reaching for his glass.

Our negotiations completed Willis launched into his tale, which began with news of a murder.

A writer always keeps a notebook to hand. As soon as I boarded the train back to London, I began writing a draft version of Willis’s account.

I wrote:

'Willis was in the Old Hall, working up a ladder, when Holmes, a student with whom he'd become acquainted, rushed in and urged him to join him as he had something of great moment he wished to discuss.

Willis called down, "If word gets back to my employer that I have neglected my duties, I will be dismissed." Holmes said, "The master sent one of the porters to your employer with a message asking if you might be released for the day to assist in important college business. He made certain to add that neither you nor he will suffer any financial losses as the college will cover your wages.

"Mr Willis, there's no time to lose. The game's afoot."

When Willis had descended from his ladder he glanced around and found Holmes had grabbed his drawing pad and pens.

"Follow me!" the student boomed, proffering him his art equipment, which Willis took.

As they crossed the Quad, Willis matching his long strides with ease, he suspected that, from behind, they could be mistaken for siblings as in height and stature they were equals. Otherwise, Willis supposed Holmes outclassed him in all other respects.

Holmes ascended the winding stairs to his rooms two steps at a time. Willis copied him.

Just inside the door were a series of coat hooks. Holmes thrust an Ulster coat at him and a deerstalker, then chose a long tweed coat and suitable hat for himself.

"My father bought these then promptly died without getting any wear out of either, so I make a point of wearing them whenever I can," he said by way of an explanation.

The winter still held the country in its grip, so Willis buttoned himself up against the biting chill and damp air, before complaining, "But, you haven't told me what this is all about other than we must catch the next train to London."

"Sir Scrope was found murdered on the Chelsea Embankment last night. He was the college's most influential board member, or, as some would have it, the power behind the throne. It is an open secret that he was not a popular man. The master has tasked me to identify the perpetrator."

"If he was murdered in London, then it's unlikely that someone from Cambridge is involved," said Willis.

Holmes shook his head.

"Anyone with adequate means can buy a train ticket and make their way to the capital, anyone who might wish to draw attention away from Cambridge.

"The master has been asked to identify the body. He suggested I accompany him. He's hoping to gain information from the police and any evidence they can be persuaded to show us. Afterwards, I might take the opportunity to visit the site of the murder to see what it reveals."

"Why am I required?"

“Mr Willis, your assistance is earnestly sought as illustrator and note-taker. If the murder weapon has been recovered, I will need you to make a drawing of it. I trust you are not squeamish as the same goes for the victim’s wounds and anything else which may be significant. Your work will provide a useful steer in my investigations and may serve to corroborate my conclusions.”

Given his tender age and limited life experience, Willis was ill-equipped to face a corpse in a London mortuary, let alone draw one that had been brutally murdered, but being in the employ of the college, albeit indirectly, meant he couldn’t question Holmes’s decision to pitch-fork him into the investigation. He felt unequal to the task and suspected the unpleasant smells in the mortuary alone would make him feel ill. Conversely, Holmes was all bright eagerness.

Holmes must have caught his look of disgust as he said, “Your contribution may save an innocent man from the gallows and bring the perpetrator to justice.”

“Is that why you agreed to accompany the master, Mr Holmes?” Willis asked.

Holmes laughed.

“I’m in thrall to the intellectual challenge. It’s a problem and I’m going to do my utmost to solve it. I wish to see justice served, of course, but I shall engage all my mental and observational powers simply for the satisfaction of identifying the murderer.”

“You like to do puzzles?” enquired Willis.

Holmes snorted a laugh.

“Puzzles are created purely for entertainment and to vex bored Chinese emperors. Problems are created by murderers, blackmailers and swipers of official secrets.

“As for the master, he wants to avoid, as he put it, ‘...the police trampling all over college’. And, if there are any links between the murderer and the college, he wants me to be the first to uncover them so he can guard the institution from any unwelcome headlines and criticism.

“All the master has shared so far is that, true to form, Scrope made himself exceedingly unpopular at yesterday’s board meeting. He demanded the college leads a formal attack against Charles Villiers Stanford for establishing a mixed choir in direct competition with the University’s male choir, claiming that Villiers Stanford’s actions will prompt the University’s musical director to launch an appeal so that ladies might join its choir.”

“What does Villiers Stanford hope to achieve by having ladies in his choir aside from attracting controversy?” Willis asked.

“It would allow the full range of choral compositions to be performed.

“I also happen to know that Scrope’s son put himself forward for the position of organist at Trinity College but lost out to Villiers Stanford.”

“Do you think that Scrope was killed by his own son, knowing that the police would suspect Villiers

Stanford?" Willis asked.

"I was simply trying to paint a picture of Scrope as a man who attracted enemies.

"He comes from a self-made family. His mother lost their accumulated wealth, estates and title when she left her husband to marry a man who gambled away her fortune. Scrope was set to inherit a title and estates from an heirless uncle, who paid for his education and set him up. As these will now pass to Scrope's son, it certainly provides motive.

"If Scrope's attire and properties were anything to go by, he was not short of funds, yet, no one quite knows how Scrope came by his money. I suspect he sat on various influential boards to ensure he was well positioned for any opportunities which might arise and was quick to exploit them.

"But we mustn't jump to conclusions. It's important that we pursue every avenue and are not blinded by the obvious."

They heard footsteps ascending the staircase.

A porter said, breathlessly, "Sir, I am to tell you that the master awaits you and Mr Willis in the cab. It's holding up the traffic in the lane and the drivers stuck behind it aren't best pleased."

Willis followed Holmes as he rushed down the stairs and struck off across the Quad. They ducked through the small door in the college's vast, wooden gate, which a porter held open for them, and stepped into the waiting hansom. Being made to seat two, albeit amply, it was a tight squeeze, but, as the master pointed out, any discomfort was nothing compared to having one's throat slit.

Willis felt intimidated by the illustrious company pressing against him and remained respectfully silent. In Cambridge it was obligatory for town to make way for gown by stepping off the pavement. Never in his wildest dreams had he thought he might share a hansom with a college master.

As the hansom turned the corner and its wheels jolted over some ruts, the master asked Holmes how his studies were progressing.

Holmes was quick to answer with a question.

"The Philosophical Society's prime purpose is to 'keep alive the spirit of inquiry', is it not?"

"Indeed," the master answered.

"Last week, I'd arranged to meet Thoday in their offices. He was going through the post. The society had received a letter from Sir John Herschel's son, William, in which he put forward the case that everyone's fingerprints are unique and unchanging, therefore they can be used for identification. He recommended further study and their findings fashioned into a weapon of penetrating certainty for the sterner needs of Justice.

"Well, Thoday, dismissed the contents and threw the letter into the bin. I think he is still sore that Sir John Herschel was buried in Westminster Abbey and his father wasn't."

As Holmes talked, he became more and more animated. Willis didn't understand much of what was being

said but found it fascinating to be given a glimpse of what occupies the minds of university men.

At the station, their train was waiting. Willis veered towards a second-class carriage, but Holmes pulled at his coat and urged him onward.

He whispered, "The college has paid for you to sit in first class and, if we're to work together, is it not better that we travel together?"

The master caught up with them as they boarded the train. Willis noticed the newspaper he was clutching carried the Scrope murder as a headline.

They found an empty compartment so they might talk about the murder without being overheard. Holmes invited Willis to sit next to him, thereby Willis ended up diagonally opposite the master, who had claimed the window seat, the one facing the engine.

Shortly after, a man entered.

Willis noticed the master's head turn, but before he issued any words of protest, his stern look changed to one of recognition, which promoted a greeting. However, when the newcomer, Professor Maxwell, spotted Holmes, he tried to beat a retreat.

"Morning, Professor," said Holmes. "Please join us. Your appearance is most opportune."

He introduced Willis as his collaborator then asked Professor Maxwell if he had reconsidered whether he might study chemistry under him at the Cavendish Laboratory.

Still standing, the professor responded, "No I have not, Mr Holmes. Nothing you have to say will ever convince me of your suitability as a chemistry student. As I concluded the last time we spoke, that you hunger for knowledge and that you are driven is not in doubt, but what interests you is... somewhat eccentric. Moreover, you cast your net too wide. Even if a student of chemistry lacks purpose, he must have focus. Chemists do not give up one line of inquiry and pursue another on a whim. I wish you a good day, gentlemen."

The professor left before Holmes could respond.

The master turned to Holmes and said, "You may be possessed of the most extraordinary powers of deduction after your brother, but may I remind you to conduct yourself in a manner which will reflect positively on the college."

Turning to Willis, he said, "And, the same goes for you, Mr Willis. Mr Holmes maintains your assistance in this matter will prove invaluable. I ask that you live up to his high expectations.

"For my part, I will do what I can to aid Mr Holmes's line of enquiry. I take it there is nothing else we need to discuss in preparation?"

Willis looked to Holmes.

"There are two small matters, sir" said Holmes. "Firstly, you agreed to bring the minutes of the recent board meetings so I can see what issues might have brought the deceased into conflict with an assailant.

“Secondly, I would like to negotiate an agreement.”

“An agreement!” said the master, flabbergasted. “You are in no position...”

“Sir, if I identify the deceased’s assailant and discover the motive behind the attack, such that it leads to a successful conviction, I would like to complete my studies at Cambridge at the end of my second year.”

The master took his folded newspaper and whacked it against the window. Willis turned and looked at Holmes. If the student had been given a fright, he wasn’t showing it.

Pinching his lip and staring out the window, the master took a moment to compose himself.

Finally, he said, “You’d only have one more term before taking your final exams. That’s simply out of the question.”

“Sir, there’s nothing my course can offer me in my third year that I might require or don’t already know. If Professor Maxwell had accepted me at the Cavendish Laboratory, then I would have applied to change my degree. Last time he and I spoke, he claimed the investigations I proposed would neither further our understanding of the universe, nor support the learning of other scientists. On that occasion, he called me a ‘dabbler’. Given his damning appraisal of me, I doubt even you could persuade him to reconsider.

“Having read Darwin, I am no longer up to becoming a parson-naturalist, I have no interest in politics or going to the Bar or following my brother Mycroft’s lead and flitting from one government office to another as commanded. Now that Maxwell has scuppered my chances of pursuing chemistry, to what can I apply my enquiring mind?

“Ever since Justice of the Peace Trevor pointed out last summer that I should apply my talent to solving murders, I have been consumed with the idea of becoming a consulting detective. Knowledge of chemistry will be essential if I am to uncover evidence poisonings and so forth, which is why I hoped Professor Maxwell would take me on. As it is, I might as well sit for the Tripos early. Society likes to assess everyone’s standing within it and is quick to scorn failures, therefore, it would serve me well if I left with a degree.”

Willis’s gaze darted to the master, whose frown suggested he was chewing on Holmes’s request, then back at Holmes, whose satisfied countenance suggested he had posed a most reasonable request. He feared it hadn’t crossed Holmes’s mind that the University of Cambridge didn’t bow to the whims of undergraduates, especially ones who considered themselves to be beyond its teachings.

Despite having poked at a hornet’s nest, Holmes appeared to be perfectly at ease. Willis concluded that his unfaltering faith in his own abilities meant that to him it would be a waste of mental energy to contemplate failure, even though it would have been considered polite to do so.

The master’s silence suggested it pained him to submit to Sherlock’s request. Yet, he was unlikely to succeed without his assistance, therein lay his dilemma.

“Very well,” said the master, reluctantly. “If you succeed and the matter is handled to my complete

satisfaction, then you can sit for the Tripos early..."

"To your complete satisfaction?" challenged Holmes before the master had finished speaking.

The master held up his hand to silence him.

"I will not defend your decision to leave Cambridge. Your brother may not have served the Government for long but, in time, he will progress up the ranks, and one doesn't want to draw attention to his alma mater for the wrong reasons. Moreover, one hopes he won't be the last student to be invited to take up a position within its illustrious corridors."

Willis watched as the master reached for his briefcase and pulled out several clumps of papers, which he proffered to Holmes.

"These are the minutes of the most recent board meetings," said the master. "Your absolute discretion is required."

Sherlock handed half of the papers to Willis. The master looked horrified.

"Mr Willis is a man of absolute integrity." Pointing heavenward, Holmes added, "His judge sits up upon high. Besides, he needs to see examples of how the deceased exerted his influence and to draw our attention to anything which may have caused upset. As Mr Willis is not a member of the college, we can rely on his objectivity. He may even spot something which strikes him as peculiar."

"Oh, very well," conceded the master, picking up his newspaper.

Holmes turned to Willis and gave him a weak smile.

"We'd better start on our reading. There's a lot to get through."

By the time they reached Liverpool Street Station, Willis had read all the entries pertaining to Sir Scrope. As instructed by Holmes, he had read the minutes taken at that week's board meeting and the preceding minutes with a keen eye. Given the brevity of the recorded arguments and decisions, Willis wasn't clear if Scrope had exerted his influence unduly. It was, however, apparent that Scrope had put a significantly higher number of matters before the board compared to the other members, each time making a perfectly reasonable case why the decision should go his way.

As for Scrope's attempts to blight Charles Villiers Stansford's standing at the university, the language and tone suggested Scrope had acted out of concern for the institution's reputation, therefore reasonably.

Willis had immersed himself in the reading matter so deeply that he was startled by the squeal of the brakes when the train pulled into the station, whereupon the chuffing reduced to a hiss of steam. Both he and Holmes handed their papers back to the master, who stowed them away in his briefcase. Aside from putting on their hats and coats, no preparations were needed to leave the carriage.

They were made to wait an hour before they were invited to enter the morgue, time that was spent waiting in a busy corridor whilst sat on hard chairs, not that the master had suffered their treatment with good

grace. He had stood up and, with his patience rung out, was on the point of demanding to see the most senior officer present when the investigating officer and his assistant finally appeared. Introductions were brief. Once completed, they were whisked in, with the master at the head of the Cambridge visitors.

Willis was glad to leave the stale air of the corridor only to find himself in a room which reeked of formaldehyde.

The morgue was the size of his former school hall. Similarly, it had tall windows running down one side and a line of hooks down the other.

They were led along a row of evenly spaced tables. All the tables were occupied. By whom was not clear as the bodies were covered with sheets, save for the one at the far end.

They walked past clothes which had belonged to the deceased and were hanging limp from the hooks. Whilst they didn't reveal the victim's identities, they offered Willis an indication as to their age, gender and social standing. He saw lace-up boots in varying states, from new to having had a series of patches applied, bonnets with ribbons chosen to match the accompanying dresses, and heavy winter coats of varying degrees of wear. No under garments were on display as if a decision had been made that it was unseemly. Curiously, there were no clothes hanging from the last few pegs, where Sir Scrope's ought to have been placed.

The master, who had implied on the train he would use delaying tactics to buy Holmes extra time to consider the evidence, was so overcome by the sight of his fellow board member's corpse he blurted out, "That's him. That's Sir Scrope."

Willis was reminded of Holmes's prediction, spoken in a whisper as they left the train, 'A man who studied the Classics is unlikely to boast an iron constitution or the composure of a body snatcher'.

The dead were often described as looking 'waxy', which had suggested to Willis's mind the colour yellow. However, Sir Scrope's skin was the same sickening shade of bluey white as one sees in the Fitzwilliam Museum's collection of medieval paintings, the ones which show Christ being lowered from the Cross.

As Willis looked at the ragged gash which ran across Scrope's neck and penetrated down to the bone, he was surprised to find he was up to the challenge of drawing the dead man. Having been told that Scrope may have invited his own death, helped him cope. He took his pad out from under his arm and a pencil from his top pocket and began to draw.

The mortician said, crossly, "I was just about to clean him and stitch up the wound to his neck."

"Did you not receive my telegram? I asked for the deceased to be left in the state in which he was found," said the master.

He placed his briefcase on the floor, thereby indicating they were not in a hurry to leave.

To Willis's mind, Holmes was looking at Scrope as a botanist might, one who had discovered a new species, that is, with an intense curiosity whilst remaining wary that the plant could be poisonous. Thereby, Willis

could see Holmes was alert to anything which might indicate the identity of his killer or killers, whilst guarding himself against being taken in by erroneous evidence.

“Was the deceased found lying supine or prone?” asked Holmes.

“Supine,” answered the officer.

“The bruising to his chest and abdomen, does it also appear on his back, and is it consistent?” asked Holmes, pointing out various patches of discolouration.

The mortician approached the table. He looked where Holmes was indicating, then answered, “Yes.

“Was he wearing a corset?” asked Holmes.

Willis could hazard a guess at the answer. Scrope’s willingness to be sketched, furthermore, having commissioned a portrait, which Willis had executed in pastels, had been a sure indication that he was more guilty than most of succumbing to the sin of vanity.

“Yes,” answered the officer.

“What about his personal effects? I need to see what you found in his pockets and his wallet. And, what happened to his clothes?”

“You wouldn’t be wanting those, sir. They’re stiff with blood,” the officer answered. “They were taken away to be incinerated.”

“Bring them to me!” Holmes demanded.

No one moved.

“Bring them to me before they are destroyed!”

No one moved.

“Blood or no blood the deceased’s effects remain the property of his family,” said the master, approaching the table. “As their representative, I decide what happens to them.” No one moved. “It seems I haven’t made myself plain. We have another engagement. The Commissioner of Police is expecting us to take tea with him.”

“Gibbs,” said the officer to his assistant. “Get to it!”

Willis lifted his head and noticed Gibbs throwing a look of contempt at Holmes’s back, as he shuffled past him.

Holmes continued, “These sickle-shaped cuts to his forearms indicate he tried to shield himself from attack, so we know he was attacked from the front. Scrope was a large man. If his murderer had been an opportunist, he could only have overpowered him by attacking him from behind, thereby denying him the chance to fight back. And, if it had gone wrong, Scrope wouldn’t have been able to give a description of his assailant to the police. I strongly suspect Scrope was somehow acquainted with his attacker.

“And, why the Chelsea Embankment? What or who could have lured him there?”

The mortician interrupted his flow.

Looking at Willis, he said, "You're wasting your time. We have a photographic record. You were made to wait because the police photographer needed room to work."

Willis hadn't meant to attract the attention of the officials, quite the opposite, but he was using a moderately hard pencil which produced scratching sounds as he worked.

"Mr Willis is here at my behest," said the master. "The college requires its own record."

"For what purpose?" enquired the officer, raising his chest.

"The college's *raison d'être* is that it is a seat of learning. Not only am I here to represent the college and the interests of the deceased's family, Sir Scrope commanded a position of considerable authority at the college for several years. Therefore, the board owes it to him to support *your* investigation.

"As for Mr Holmes, I have invited him to apply his powers of reasoning to the problem. Just to be clear, neither we nor the college seek recognition for services rendered, merely the satisfaction of seeing the right man brought to justice."

The officer walked over to the master.

Aware he had moved, Willis looked up from his sketching. He noted with admiration that the master did not allow himself to be intimidated but stood his ground and held the man's gaze.

"Your contribution to this investigation is most unnecessary," said the officer. "We have the deceased's murderer in custody."

Willis looked at Holmes then the master. They looked astonished, that is, both had raised an eyebrow.

"Who is it?" asked the master.

"The murderer is the wine merchant who supplies your college," answered the officer.

The master turned to Holmes.

"What do you make of this news?"

Holmes surmised, "Sir, the sickle-shaped cuts on his arms and the jagged cut across his throat were made by a broken bottle.

"The college's wine is imported in casks then bottled by the wine merchant at his London premises. As there has been insufficient time since the discovery of the body to establish which wine merchant uses bottles with the maker's marks matching those found on any shards the police might have been able to recover from the scene of the murder, I can only conclude the college's bespoke label must have been recovered."

Holmes turned to the officer.

"The evidence you found at the site of the murder, we need to see it!"

Before the officer could act, Gibbs returned carrying a bundle wrapped in newspaper and tied with string.

"Here's his bloodied clothing!" he said, dropping it on the floor at Holmes's feet.

The officer said to Gibbs, "The gentlemen would like to see the broken wine bottle that was recovered from

the scene of the murder.” Gibbs didn’t move. “Off you go!” he said, waving him off with a down-ward facing hand and flicking his fingers up and down in unison.

As Gibbs disappeared through the door, Holmes said to the officer, “That leaves his wallet and anything recovered from his pockets.”

The officer huffed and followed Gibbs out of the room.

The silence in the room prompted Willis to look up. Holmes and the master were staring at the Mortician. Unable to withstand the intimidation, the mortician moved to the other end of the room where he busied himself.

Holmes said in a low voice, “The vintner has been convicted in haste. Yet, the truth is often hard won. As things stand, the wine merchant might as well have signed his name in blood at the site of the murder.

“I read in the most recent board meeting minutes that an agreed action was to change wine supplier. Has the decision been made official? Was the college’s wine merchant informed that he is no longer its preferred supplier before the murder took place? Your answer may well point to his innocence or whether he had a motive to kill, so think carefully.”

The master began slowly, “Well, let me see now...”

Holmes glanced at the door then looked back at the master and said, “It’s no secret that the college bedders know everything that goes on behind the scenes. Seemingly, Sir Scrope led a campaign against the college’s wine merchant for several months. One shouldn’t believe gossip, but it would be worth investigating claims that he paid a member of staff to spoil the wine at an important function. Another tactic he used was to get his son to complain about the wine at the Founder’s Dinner, thereby spreading discontent.

“Yet, it was another member of the board who proposed that the wine merchant be replaced. That the board agreed to the proposal so readily, suggests Sir Scrope had brought his influence to bear in advance of the meeting. His underhand tactics suggest he didn’t want it known or perhaps documented that he had orchestrated the change of supplier. Why?

“What was Sir Scrope hoping to gain for his efforts? Why take away a man’s hard-earnt reputation and undermine his livelihood?

“And, what of the wine merchant ‘Vamberry’ whose wine bottles appeared a month or so ago for the members to sample?”

Willis glanced up. The master’s eyes were darting back and forth. They weren’t focussed on anything in the room, suggesting he was revisiting incidents he was calling to mind.

Holmes continued, “Suppose someone on the board had made a deal with Vamberry so that, in return for bringing the college’s business the vintner’s way, they were set to earn a hefty commission and upon each repeat order.”

The master let out a short moan, an unmistakable expression of regret.

“What is it, sir?” enquired Holmes.

“Straight after the meeting the bursar asked if he could place an order for wine. He caught me as I was on my way to chapel. I assumed the bursar was placing it with our regular wine merchant. Now I’m not so sure. If he didn’t want me to pay an interest in what he was doing, he chose just the right moment.

“I didn’t appreciate being overruled at the meeting into changing supplier, especially as our vintner has been able to supply the same Hock as supplied to the Queen, which was not an insignificant feather in our cap. I wasn’t going to action the board’s decision. I was going to get the vintner to change the college’s wine bottle labels so it would look as though we had switched supplier. Or, I was going to host a blind wine-tasting to convince the other board members to change their minds...”

Willis looked up when the master suddenly stopped talking. He was standing stock-still as if struck by a thought.

The master continued, “...Without a supply of the college’s bespoke wine labels, Vamberry can’t fulfil his first order, at least not until arrangements have been made by the bursar with the printer, which requires my authorisation, thereby disproving your theory.”

Holmes countered, “Sir, we both know that Scrope was the type of man who, having manipulated the board into changing vintner, would treat it as a blanket approval which covers all associated arrangements. Any half-decent workshop could print copies of a wine bottle label. All they would need is a college label as an exemplar for their draughtsman to work from.”

The master winced.

“If your theory is correct, Mr Holmes, then both Vamberry and Sir Scrope would want the college to place a large order at the earliest opportunity to realise the profitability of their scheme, especially if Vamberry is out of pocket, having filled his warehouse with wine bottles carrying the college’s label.”

“Indeed,” said Holmes. “If my suspicions are correct, it shouldn’t take much investigating to expose their scheming.”

“We must insist the officer seeks out this ‘Vamberry’ character,” said the master.

It was Holmes’s turn to wince.

“We must first see what the police evidence tells us. Until something concrete is established, what I have shared with you remains a theory. Remember, we must not make the evidence fit the theory! It is the surest way to be drawn down a blind alley.”

Holmes paused.

The break in conversation prompted Willis to look up from his sketchpad. He saw the mortician approaching, but, when the man saw all eyes were upon him, he turned and skulked back to the far end of the room again.

The master said in a low voice, "If we don't tell the police what their suspect's motive is for killing Sir Scrope, we may be held in contempt. It is only a matter of time before it comes to light."

Holmes countered, "And, if we do tell them, they'll be even less likely to entertain the possibility that someone else murdered Scrope."

The master pressed his fingers to his forehead, wrinkling his skin.

He said, "In answer to your earlier questions, the minutes will confirm that the decision to change supplier had only been reached the day before Scrope was murdered. I hadn't informed the bursar, but it doesn't rule out the possibility that one of the other board members had told him, even if it wasn't their place to so.

"As for the suspect, news rarely travels to London from Cambridge that fast, unless it's in print or telegraphed."

Holmes, who was looking at the victim as he considered the facts, murmured, "As I said, if Sir Scrope was confident that the board members' decision would go his way, he would have made preparations, thereby leaving a trail of evidence. It befalls us to find something in the presence of police witnesses to convince them that they have the wrong man and that Vamberry and Sir Scrope were in cahoots."

"If one were to suppose the college's wine merchant didn't murder Sir Scrope, it begs the question: who did?" asked the master.

"Vamberry!" exclaimed Sherlock in barely more than a whisper.

"What motive could he have, if Scrope was about to bring the college's business his way?"

"Greed. Vamberry murdered Scrope so he wouldn't be tied to him indefinitely and to retain any profits for himself."

Willis sensed eyes were upon him and looked up. Holmes was looking at him.

"Mr Willis, do you have any sketches of Sir Scrope in your book that were drawn from life?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. We may need them.

"In that case," said Holmes, turning to the master, "please can you furnish Mr Willis with sufficient monies to pay for say three hansom cab journeys."

"Why?" enquired the master.

Holmes ignored the question and turned back to Willis.

"Mr Willis, if at any point I instruct you to fetch the police commissioner, you must hasten to the Foreign Office and fetch my brother Mycroft. It is fortunate we bear little resemblance to each other so he will pass for the police commissioner's representative, whom he has sent in his stead.

"Tell the cabby to take the back way to the Foreign Office and to wait. At the side gate, ask the attendant to have my brother fetched by relaying the phrase: 'The Gloria Scott'. This will serve to alert my brother

that the summons is legitimate, and his presence is required without delay.”

The door handle rattled.

Willis turned and saw the mortuary door open. The investigating officer stepped into the room and held the door for Gibbs, who was carrying a tray.

As the men approached, Willis could see the tray was covered in shards of green glass of varying sizes, although, as one might expect, the smallest fragments and splinters hadn't been recovered.

“I think you'll find, gentlemen, that the evidence speaks for itself,” the officer said, proffering a wallet to Holmes.

Holmes rifled through it with the alarming speed of a pickpocket, producing some banknotes, Sir Scrope's outbound, first class, train ticket from Cambridge to London and a return ticket. Seemingly satisfied, he handed the items to the master so he might inspect them.

Willis noticed a hand. It was Holmes helping himself to a pencil from his top pocket.

Looking up only momentarily as he worked, Willis, nevertheless, had a good sense of what was going on and who was positioned where in the room. Therefore, he was aware of Holmes stepping closer to the tray, which Gibbs was still holding as there was no available surface upon which to place it. Holmes used the pencil to turn over the largest shards, the ones held together by the wine bottle label.

Willis became aware of Holmes hanging onto his breath and looked up. Holmes had turned to look at the master. They exchanged wordless glances which conveyed the horror of discovery.

The label was damning.

Willis had been at the college long enough to have picked up bottles which had been discarded by drunken students and to have studied the labels. An artist always looks at the work of another artist in the hope of picking up ideas. He recognised every stroke of penmanship on the label and was satisfied it was genuine. Despite the evidence supporting the theory the police were nursing, he was confident Holmes would, nevertheless, cut a swathe through the briar in which they had become even more entangled, so remained silent on the matter.

Despite his inner turmoil, Willis knew he must maintain his inscrutability, and mirrored Holmes and the Master.

Holmes moved side-ways, thereby inviting the master to peer at the label so he might consider every minute detail. The master even rubbed a corner lightly with his fingertip so he might gauge the quality of the paper.

Finally, the master looked up and said to Holmes, “If it is a copy then it is a remarkable achievement but, as I doubt they would have reproduced every little detail exactly or the colour perfectly, I would say, albeit reluctantly, it comes from the stock of labels that were supplied to the college's long-standing vintner.”

Turning to the officer, he continued, “Given the identity of the murderer might come to rest on the label, I

can arrange for a bottle to be taken from the college's cellar and sent to you so you might compare the two."

"I fail to understand your meaning, sir" said the officer. "Are you suggesting the wine label isn't genuine, but a copy made to implicate someone else? Doesn't that strike you as farfetched? It seems a whole world of trouble just to slash someone's throat with a broken wine bottle on the Chelsea Embankment."

"Well, if the murderer didn't take Sir Scrope's wallet or banknotes, pray tell what is the motive for the killing? Does it not point to something worthy of a whole world of trouble?"

Before the master or the police officer could speak, Holmes asked, "What about this button?"

He pointed to it using the pencil.

The button had a grained effect as though made from wood, but it was only an illusion created by ridges of dried blood left by a thumb or finger.

It prompted Willis to reflect on the suggestion Holmes had made earlier in the day, when they were driven to Cambridge train station, that fingerprints could be used as a means of identification.

Holmes, who typically did everything in his power to ensure his composure was never shaken, had become more and more animated, one might even reach for the word 'excited', as he had discussed the applications of such a technique and how, most important of all, it could be applied to police procedural work.

He had concluded, "As Thoday has decided there's nothing to be profited from the scientists at the Philosophical Society investigating Herschel's claims, I'll do the research myself. Mark my words, it'll be more useful than anything Professor Maxwell discovers at the Cavendish Laboratory."

The master had responded by saying, "Holmes, speaking ill of a professor, even if you believe it to be the truth, will win you no friends at the university. You've already alienated too many would-be allies. Heed my words, the acquaintances you make at Cambridge will continue to serve you well beyond your life as a student. I've heard you argue that acquaintances are a distraction at best and a burden at worst. It's time to make friends."

Something clanged behind him, startling Willis. The coroner had dropped a metal bowl. Fortunately, it had been empty.

Willis focused on the matter in hand and observed the officer leaning in towards Holmes, his face puckering into a terrible gargoyle as he squinted at the button.

"I don't recall a button being recovered."

"It was on the tray under the glass shards," insisted Holmes. "Therefore, it must have been recovered from the scene of the murder."

The officer looked at Gibbs and asked, "Is that right?"

Gibbs hesitated as if deliberating which response might serve him best.

"It is, sir," he said quietly.

The officer replied, "That may be, Mr Holmes, but you won't find any buttons missing from Sir Scrope's clothing."

"Who's to say the murderer isn't missing a button?"

"There were none missing from the clothes he was wearing when we took him into custody," said the officer.

"Given the location and depth of the fatal wound, the murderer's clothes would also have become drenched in Sir Scrope's blood. He would have had to remove them. He might have had the presence of mind to discard them into the river."

"Let's take a look at Sir Scrope's clothing," Holmes said, taking Willis's sketchbook and handing it to the master. "If you would open the parcel, Mr Willis."

Willis knelt on the floor and took out a pocketknife with which he cut the string. He folded the sheets of newspaper back to reveal a bloodied bundle of clothes.

Holmes bent down and picked up Scrope's shirt and held it up. As to be expected, it was encrusted with dried blood around the collar and much of the front. The buttons were smaller than the one Holmes had found on the tray. Next, he picked up Scrope's trousers. It was evident that the pockets had been checked as the linings were hanging out. Willis noted all the trouser buttons were present. Similarly, Scrope's jacket pockets didn't yield anything and no buttons were missing. Showing no hint of frustration, Holmes picked up Scrope's brogues and, in turn, angled them towards the light so he could inspect the soles. There was no tell-tale mud or sawdust or stains, just some non-distinguishable dirt.

Holmes cast his gaze around the room as if for more evidence. His expression became more serious hinting at his dissatisfaction.

"Mr Willis, see if there is a receptacle for waste either in this room or next door and bring it to me!" Holmes asked, quietly, as he turned Scrope's socks inside out.

"Yes, sir," Willis said, casting a glance under the line of tables before getting to his feet. "I can see there's one at the far end of the room."

"You've taken up enough of our time and I don't know what you are hoping to find," the officer said, angrily.

Willis heard Mr Holmes respond in a soft tone, "Common courtesy demands that we wait for my associate to return."

When Willis returned with a waste receptacle Holmes took it and emptied its contents on the floor.

There was a sharp intake of breath.

"What do you think you are doing?" the mortician roared from the other end of the room and hurried towards them.

“My duty,” replied Holmes as he bent down and began picking through the detritus using Willis’s pencil. Most items were quickly discarded and flicked away, leaving pieces of cloth, various tickets, a box of matches, a theatre programme, an envelope and various other pieces of paper and printed matter. Some were covered in blood. Some were smeared with blood and some had at least one fingerprint made with blood. He then teased open various scrunched and folded pieces of paper to reveal their contents and considered them.

Finally, he pulled his handkerchief out and used it to pick up a piece of paper by its corner so those looking down on him might see it.

Willis espied a crest.

Upon understanding what the implications of the scrunched piece of paper were, he glanced at the officer, who, in turn, was scowling at Gibbs with the implied threat that he would speak to him later.

Willis wondered if the officer kept a cane in his office just as his former headmaster had, so that troublemakers and dolts might have learning beaten into them.

“I have recovered the carbon copy of an order for five hundred ‘Cambridge college’ wine bottle labels placed at Brookes & Bowes of Haymarket, countersigned by Sir Scrope. Interestingly, an additional payment was made for them to be delivered to the warehouse of a Mr Decimus Vamberry at Three Barrels Walk. Note the date! The order was placed eight days *before* the college board met to discuss whether to change wine supplier.” Willis noticed Holmes catching everyone’s gaze in turn, silently demanding their rapt attention. “Just to be clear, it is college protocol for the bursar to place any such order. He may only act on instructions from the master. This order was placed with neither the master’s knowledge nor his consent. That Scrope should order wine bottle labels without seeking approval raises serious questions as to his reasons and whether or not Vamberry is connected, and, if so, how deep do their ties run?”

“Well, sir,” Holmes said, directing his attention to the officer, “this calls for visits to Brookes & Bowes and Mr Vamberry’s warehouse. Perhaps the vintner is missing a button.”

Willis was irked that Holmes didn’t demand to know how the copy order had ended up in the waste receptacle but supposed that, having finally shifted the focus of the investigation onto Vamberry, he didn’t want to undermine his achievement.

“Sir Scrope and Mr Vamberry conducting business together, no matter how irregular, doesn’t point to murder,” the officer argued. “Rich men are known to be partial to wine and, as a long-standing member of the board, why wouldn’t Sir Scrope serve its interests by taking advantage of a commercial opportunity?”

“As Mr Holmes explained, the board agrees college business, that is its function. The members decide upon it and enforce it. They most definitely do not direct, conduct or administer it, those duties fall to myself and my staff. Forgive me, but I think the distinction is perfectly clear.

“You’ve just acknowledged that Sir Scrope’s dealings are highly irregular. The receipt points to Vamberry

and Scrope having conducted business dealings without the board's knowledge, most likely the culmination of months of plotting and scheming," said the master.

"And, you can provide evidence for this?" asked the officer.

In order to free his hands, the master handed Willis's sketchbook and Sir Scrope's wallet to Holmes, allowing him to pick up his briefcase and rummage through its contents.

He produced the minutes of the most recent college board meeting. As he did so, he gave examples of various incidents which suggested Scrope had contrived over several months to direct the board to agree a change supplier and what the possible motive behind it was.

The officer gave a joyous laugh.

"Sir, what you've told me supports our case, that it was the college's wine merchant who killed Sir Scrope. Not only that, you've provided us with his motive. It is clear a day that the vintner Vamberry has been unwittingly caught up in the whole sorry affair."

"But,..." stammered the master.

"Where *exactly* is the evidence that Sir Scrope contrived to profiteer from the college?" said the officer, thrusting the minutes back.

The master responded in a slow and deliberate manner, "The order for the five-hundred wine bottle labels is proof enough. If you do not agree to pursue this new line of investigation, I will go directly to the police commissioner and complain in the most strongest terms about how you conduct business here, allowing important evidence to be discarded and incinerated."

"Whilst I wouldn't wish to delay your visit to the police commissioner," the officer began in tones laden with sarcasm, "I wish to save your blushes by pointing out another hole in your argument. If Vamberry was the murderer, how do you suppose he got hold of the wine bottle that was used to kill Scrope, which you confirmed could only have come from the college's wine supplier or its cellars?"

Holmes answered calmly for the master, "As has been stressed more than once, Sir Scrope spent months putting his scheme into effect, allowing Vamberry ample opportunity to place someone on the inside of the supplier's warehouse... Perhaps Vamberry went along and had the bare-faced cheek to ask to buy a bottle of his best vintage. All he had to do was say 'Is that the best you've got?' until he was handed a college bottle. As I'm sure we all know to our cost, get a man riled and he'll do anything to prove his worth... Or, the method I would have opted for, which would have run no risks, would have been to persuade Sir Scrope to provide a bottle..."

"Get the victim to provide his own murder weapon!" the officer said, chortling. "I can see we're going to have to keep our peepers on you. Has anyone ever told you your mind has the workings of a master criminal?"

Willis turned to look at Holmes to see his reaction and noted a hinted smile, which suggested he wasn't at a

loss as to how to respond, rather, he was enjoying the possibilities of the officer's revelation.

Holmes answered graciously, "Given my choice of career, that would be infinitely useful. I shall take that as a compliment, Sir, I'm much obliged."

His words and their delivery confused the officer, so, for a moment, he was like a chicken which had been shocked out of its coop.

"Pray go on!" he finally said, very much out of sorts.

Willis was just grateful that the officer neglected to ask Holmes what career he intended to take up.

Holmes brushed his thumb nail against his lip, as if giving himself a moment to recall what he was saying before he'd been interrupted.

"...I was in the middle of suggesting another way Vamberry could have got hold of a bottle of college wine. Vamberry could have convinced Sir Scrope that, if he tested the college's wines against his own, he could match it with one that would yield a bigger profit, so, you see, Vamberry could have secured a bottle of college wine with minimal effort on his part. Not forgetting that, for criminals, fashioning a good lie is but a mere trifle.

"Even if we haven't proven our theory conclusively, you cannot ignore the possibility that Vamberry murdered Scrope, and further investigation is required," concluded Holmes.

"I beg to differ," said the officer.

The master turned his back on them.

Willis observed the master's arm come up and his hand scrunch up into a tight fist. If he was not mistaken, he bit his teeth into his own hands as if it were an apple, although he didn't take an actual bite. He then let out a muffled squeal, like the sound of someone cleaning glass. Willis felt his frustration. He had had quite enough of standing next to Sir Scrope's corpse and breathing in smells driven by the putrefaction process.

"In that case," said Holmes, drawing a lung-full of air. "Mr Willis, please go at once to the police commissioner. Invite him to meet us at Vamberry's warehouse and explain the particulars of the case to him so he is fully briefed upon arrival. This will allow the master and I to call in at Brookes & Bowes on the way."

Holmes turned to the officer.

"Sir, should we find evidence that points to the identity of Sir Scrope's murderer, we will make it clear to the commissioner that all credit for solving the case goes to you. We won't take up any more of your time as I'm sure you have other cases demanding your attention."

The officer and Gibbs exchanged glances.

Tugging at his jacket hem, which made the subtle creases down his front vanish but only for a moment, the officer said, "The police commissioner will expect me to be there to meet him."

"We do not wish to stand in the way of your duties," commented Holmes.

“Just to be clear, the protocol is that I brief the police commissioner, not you,” said the officer, glancing at the master, who was facing him again, then back at Holmes.

“Ah, so you are familiar with the workings of protocols,” said Holmes in a dreamy, far-away tone as though it were a thing of wonder, so as not to invite a backlash.

Willis resisted showing even a hint of enjoyment, then said, “I will proceed directly.”

He suspected they didn’t have long before it dawned on the officer he’d been manipulated.

“I anticipate we’ll arrive before you,” said Holmes. “However, should you arrive before us, wait outside so you don’t encounter any danger and you don’t disturb any evidence.”

“Sirs, you can depend on me,” said Willis.

The master gave an approving nod.

Willis turned and left.

He headed back through the fusty corridor, the main artery which cut through the overcrowded building, and out the door. He looked up and down the road and caught sight of a cab heading towards him. He raised his arm to flag it down. Thinking that this might not be enough, he began running so the hansom cab driver wouldn’t have the opportunity to pick up another fare before it reached him.

Once he was settled inside and had instructed the driver to head to the Foreign Office, he could spare a thought for his companions, whom he had left in the company of the officer and Gibbs.

The image of Sir Scrope’s corpse came uninvited. He pushed it back with thoughts of the Cambridge college where he was engaged in painting the ceiling. How he wished the day would end so he could get back to his work.

Willis had never been to the London docks before. Vamberry’s warehouse was just behind them. The opposite bank of the Thames was almost a mirror image being lined with similar warehouses. He could make out a steamship in a recess, which was being unloaded.

They were standing on a rough ground directly in front of the warehouses. The river was populated with ships and boats, many with yellow sails, which were being loaded and others unloaded. Above the sound of the water lapping against the bank, indicating the tide was still coming in, Willis could hear men calling out instructions to other workers.

St. Paul’s Cathedral was just a stone’s throw away on the same side of the river and, further along the bend, Willis could see the Tower of London, illuminated by a few shafts of gleaming sunlight which had broken through the grey cloud. It brought King Henry VI to his mind. The monarch had had the warehouses and dwellings along Cambridge’s riverbank demolished to make way for a college to be built in his honour together with an ambitious chapel. The Holmes brothers’ alma mater and the old hall where Willis was engaged as decorator had to be an easy number of plunges of a punt-pole further along the river.

For hundreds of years, his hometown had been served by its narrow, sluggish river. Willis wondered if it had once been just as busy and noisy, with men yelling instructions until King Henry had stamped his foot.

“Fascinating, isn’t it?” said Mycroft, taking in the view.

They heard a commotion and turned to see a man being led away in the direction of the police wagon they had seen parked further along the Thames.

Too late, Willis had been spotted by the investigating officer, who, upon seeing Mycroft standing next to him, shouted some orders, then broke away and headed towards them instead.

Willis went down on one knee and fiddled with his boot laces so he could murmur under his breath that the man approaching them was the investigating officer.

“The commissioner sends his apologies, sir,” said Mycroft, extending his hand. “Mr Willis tells me you have been conducting an exemplary investigation. I am pleased to learn that you have been exploring all lines of enquiry no matter how unpromising they may seem at first.”

“Delighted to make your acquaintance, sir,” the officer said, shaking Mycroft’s hand vigorously. “When you see the commissioner, sir, be sure to tell him I’ve taken Vamberry into custody and that he confessed to Sir Scrope’s murder.”

He held up his hands, palms facing us. His finger and thumbs were blackened with ink.

“When I called in at Brookes & Bowes on my way here, the owners were able to confirm from Mr Willis’s sketch of Sir Scrope that he was the same gentleman what placed the order for five hundred wine bottle labels some eight days ago.”

As the officer spoke, Willis noticed that any foghorns sounding up and down the Thames kept yanking Mycroft’s attention in the direction of the river.

The officer kept his podgy hands aloft and waved them about as he regaled them. Willis supposed that any onlookers might think he was keeping them amused with a nursery rhyme which had to be accompanied by actions.

“Just as I was leaving Brookes & Bowes, I sees a cloth blackened with printer’s ink and asked if I could take it with me. You see,” he said, presenting his fingers as if they were about to have a flat dish placed upon them, “the lines on our fingertips are unique and can be used for identification.”

“Are they indeed,” said Mycroft Holmes, encouragingly.

Willis thought he detected the merest hint of disbelief, suggesting Mycroft knew full well that the officer was trying to take credit for some inspiration his brother, Sherlock, must have had conducting his investigation.

“We turned Vamberry’s lodgings upside down but found nothing save for numerous crates of wine bottles carrying the Cambridge college’s bespoke label.

“Just when I thought we weren’t going to get a conviction, the men I’d sent to scour the Thames, turned up

with a jacket they'd found with blood stains. It was missing a button. The button found at the murder scene matched those on the jacket. Vamberry didn't admit to his crime straight away, so I conducted an experiment."

"What kind of experiment?" asked Mycroft, humouring him.

"I used the printer's cloth to blacken his fingers and thumbs and took prints from them. The ridges on the button were a partial print from his right thumb. Confronted with the evidence, Vamberry, said it could be anyone's thumb print. I then took prints from several of the men who were in attendance. We studied them and concluded only Vamberry's thumb had left the bloodied ridges on the jacket button, proving he had been on the Chelsea Embankment at the time of the murder. Confronted with the overwhelming evidence, he collapsed in a heap. All his fight left him. Ten minutes later we has us a confession."

Mycroft Holmes bowed his head slightly in admiration.

"Well done, sir! What a shame your new discovery won't stand up in court, but it's no matter as the man confessed.

"Once you've conducted further research, gathered more evidence and assigned scientific terminology to every aspect, I urge you to present your discovery as a scientific paper. The trick is to present it to the members of the most eminent philosophical society in the country. Their stamp of approval will garner the attention of the police commissioner."

As Mycroft spoke, the officer's eyes had grown larger and larger in fright, suggesting he wouldn't be pursuing Sherlock's pet project, having come to the realisation that he was out of his depth and lacked any interest in academic rigour.

"Thank you, sir," the officer said, timidly. "I really must be going. My superior will be expecting me to brief him on today's events."

"Good day, sir," Mycroft and Willis chorused, raising their hats a fraction.

They watched him go.

When the officer was out of earshot, Mycroft said, "What a diverting character! I'm so pleased my brother summoned me. I was stuck in a most tedious meeting."

They found Sherlock Holmes and the master waiting for them inside the warehouse.

Mycroft shook hands with his former college master and his brother.

"Well done, brother!" Mycroft congratulated. "Don't be surprised if a representative from the government comes knocking on your college door."

"Alas, dear brother," responded Sherlock, "today's success will be credited to the investigating officer and we have his assurance that he will play down any connection to the college. My involvement won't come to light."

The master smiled at Mycroft.

“Mr Holmes the younger has proven himself very capable, as for that matter so has Mr Willis. Your brother must follow his own path and apply his talents to solving other cases. I would support such an undertaking unreservedly. To this end, I will petition the university’s chancellor to allow him to sit his final examinations early. I recommend you secure him suitable lodgings in London for when he quits Cambridge.”

The master checked his pocket watch.

“We really need to be heading back to the station.”

Mycroft said, “Well, as it happens, I too am travelling to Cambridge so I might attend a debate – I find them useful as a means of assessing the mettle of future politicians and rebels. We can discuss my brother on the train.”

“Mr Willis,” said Sherlock, “I feel I owe it to you to invite you to dinner. I believe I know just the place. Even better, I have tickets for next week’s concert at St. James’s Hall.”

Willis looked at the master.

“Mr Willis,” said the master, handing him back his sketchbook, “You would be more than justified in taking up Mr Holmes’s invitation.”

“What would please me most would be to join you all for supper at the college,” said Willis.

“Good man!” said the master. “I would be honoured if you and the two Mr Holmes were to join me at the high table.”

With that the master checked his pocket watch again and suggested they got a move on, if they wanted to make the five o’clock train back to Cambridge.

As they headed back to the main thoroughfare behind Vamberry’s warehouse, Sherlock turned to Willis and said, “Today’s events suggest that a consulting detective would do well to have a collaborator.”

Before he could utter another word, Willis said, “Thank you, sir, but I’m more than content to spend the rest of my working life as an artisan decorator. I have never sought adventure. I enjoy my work and it provides plenty of variety.”

Holmes laughed.

“I understand. If you should chance upon the right person, please direct them to me.”

“I will.”

With barely a pause, Willis exclaimed, “I don’t have a suit for dinner!”

Holmes gave a chuckle.

“My father can help there too. He didn’t just own warm winter coats. As we’re on the subject, seeing his Ulster and deerstalker on you, I see now that it’s the perfect outfit for a detective. Don’t be surprised if I copy you.”

“But, they’re your coat and hat,” exclaimed Willis.

“I insist you keep them. You’ve earned them.”

They turned the corner ahead of the master and Mycroft. As luck would have it, two hansoms were heading back to the city. Moreover, they were in want of fares.