

The Adventure at the London Hotel

My hansom cab came to a juddering halt at the hotel entrance. Doors were opened for me and hats were tipped, ensuring I went swiftly and seamlessly from my conveyance into the hotel. In the foyer, away from the noise of clattering of hooves outside, the attendant bowed, took my hat and cane, then directed me to the bar.

“Good evening, gentlemen!” said I, approaching three men deep in conversation. “I am pleased to make your acquaintance. I’m Mr Gill.”

Joseph M. Stoddart, who was the Managing Editor of the American publication ‘Lippencott’s Monthly Magazine’ and our host, shook my hand then introduced me to Oscar Wilde. Stoddart was a visitor to our shores. Wilde, on the other hand, was well established in London society. Moreover, I had mentioned him in some of my journalistic pieces.

The tall, sturdy Irishman, who wore his floppy hair long - just one of many reasons why he was the talk of the town - shook my hand and said, “It’s always a pleasure to meet a fellow countryman whose praise I’ve enjoyed.”

I was then introduced to Mr Doyle. Mr Stoddart had engineered it so that I was armed with a compliment by forwarding Doyle’s detective novel with my invite.

“I trust there will be a sequel to ‘A Study in Scarlet’. I found your mystery most diverting.”

Before the moustached Scotsman, who had the physique of a prize fighter, could respond, a waiter approached us and asked us for our drink orders. Wilde, who wore a green carnation in his buttonhole, ordered absinthe.

When our drinks came, it was impossible to tell whether Wilde’s tipple or his flower was of the more startling hue. He pointed out two portraits which hung in the bar. One showed a beautiful young man, all dark curls and dark eyes, and the other was of an old cove, sporting an ill-fitting wig, whose blotched, sunken face was as wrinkled as a bedsheet in the morning. He went over and read the legends on the frames, then reported back to us that they were the same man.

“If I had been born with heavenly beauty, I would not have made the mistake of growing old,” he commented.

We had talked for a good hour when a waiter approached us and asked if he could show us to our table in the dining room.

It was just as well we were in the best of humour as a lady of Wagnerian proportions and her pretty daughter were occupying our table. Stoddart said to the waiter that he had asked for the central table in the

bay window when he had made the reservation. The head waiter was summoned. He not only remembered Stoddart but had noted the request. A short exchange with another waiter followed. The man insisted he had shown the lady to the correct table. Therefore, she had moved across to our table when his back was turned.

The lady in question could not have failed to have noticed the commotion, yet, to my astonishment, she lifted her chin and fixed her gaze at the view through the window as though it didn't concern her. At least, her daughter had the decency to look mortified.

The head waiter asked her politely to move to back. Lady Gore declined.

"One does not ask a lady who is an adornment to your establishment to *move*. If I were a German or from a lower class, then you would be doing the other diners a great service by having us re-seated to a dimly lit corner of the room and out of earshot as one doesn't want to be reminded of such ills when one eats."

The head waiter turned to Stoddart and murmured he would bring us two bottles of Champagne on the house if we took her table.

All eyes were upon us.

If we capitulated, the old trout would be rewarded for her outrageous behaviour. And, if we insisted upon our preferred table, we would become tarnished as unchivalrous cads, even though we had been wronged.

Stoddart acquiesced.

We took our seats. Menus, bottles and ice buckets were brought to us by a flurry of waiters, who popped the Champagne corks and flicked the folded napkins loose and placed them on our laps.

"I've seen the lady before, but I can't think where," mused Wilde. "No matter. I will endeavour to ruin her meal by quoting Goethe and Schiller very loudly," he quipped.

Without even glancing at the menu, Wilde ordered for us, starting with a consommé soup accompanied by a Hock.

As to be expected, Wilde held court, giving free rein to his famed flamboyant manner and affectation. He had the good manners not to single anyone out but tried to impress us all equally. For our part, we were in awe of his dazzling brilliance. That's not to say he completely dominated the conversation.

Stoddart informed us that Wilde's father had been Ireland's foremost ophthalmologist and that Doyle had until recently been a general practitioner and had trained to become an ophthalmologist, a fact which delighted Wilde.

When listening to Doyle, I admired his forthright, no-nonsense manner.

As for Stoddart, he was a genial host. His motive for inviting us men of letters was to commission us to write something for his magazine, so I had envisaged the evening to be conducted along the lines of an interview, but he was content to be amused by our anecdotes.

Even though I had the good fortune to be with the most interesting people in the room, I was still aware

of the other diners, so it didn't escape my attention when a gentleman and two elderly ladies were shown to a table adjacent to Lady Gore. His tailored suit hinted that he was a rich industrialist or a banker. Other indications suggested the gentleman was not married to either lady, rather they were his young aunts or spinster cousins.

Lest she became invisible to the public gaze, Lady Gore commented loudly to her daughter, "A hotel's cucumber sandwiches are indicative of the quality one can expect. Here they are cut into mean squares and curl at the edges. One waits for London society to find a new establishment to patronise."

As though determined to make everyone feel outclassed, she continued to broadcast other examples of how she was an august lady of refined taste.

Wilde excused himself, adding he would be back before the boeuf bourguignon was served.

Indeed, he returned just as a large, covered dish was set down.

He had a brief, hushed conversation with Doyle, which was odd given they were newly acquainted.

Without warning, Lady Gore shot up, climbed heroically onto her seat, and shrieked that she'd seen a mouse.

All conversation stopped.

Unlike the other diners, whose attention was fixed on Lady Gore, I happened to glance in the direction of her daughter, whose serviette shot out sideways, as if propelled by the unseen hand of a Poltergeist, and landed next to the chair of the rich gentleman. He bent down to pick it up, exposing a fan. I caught his look of surprise.

Before he could utter a word, Lady Gore pointed an accusing finger at him and bellowed, "You're the blackmailer!"

The diners looked confused as, indeed, was I.

She reached into her bag and took out some letters, which she held aloft.

"This man wrote that he was in possession of my daughter's fan and that his unique trophy was proof of their intimate acquaintance. Look at her! Is she not all innocence?" she asked.

We all stared at the daughter, who was shielding her eyes with her hands.

"Sit up straight, child!" her mother urged. "Let them see how pretty you are!"

She signalled to a waiter, who helped her down from the chair.

Doyle got up and walked over to Lady Gore.

"May I," he asked, snatching the letters from her grasp.

Lady Gore tried to snatch them back but failed. She heaved her intimidating chest and opened her mouth. I observed Doyle squashing her foot, preventing her from declaring his actions an impertinence.

She slumped into her chair and cried out, "He stood on my foot!"

“Apologies for my clumsiness, Your Ladyship,” he said, then addressed the room.

“Ladies and gentlemen! I beg your indulgence as I prove whether this gentleman is innocent or guilty of the accusation. My name is Doyle. By employing the same methods as used by London’s most highly esteemed consulting detective, Sherlock Holmes, I’m sure we can quickly resolve this matter.”

I noticed he had already won Stoddart’s rapt attention.

Doyle turned to the accused, “Sir, do you have a letter or some other example of your handwriting about your person?”

The gentleman answered, “I left a letter at the reception desk for posting in the morning. It’s addressed to a Mr Mayhew-Brown in Budleigh Salterton.”

“Allow me,” said the hotel manager, who was monitoring the developing situation from the wings. “I’ll check with my colleagues at the desk.”

Lady Gore stood up and appealed to the other diners, “It’s an outrage that my word should be called into question.”

A waiter interrupted her.

“Your Ladyship, there’s a gentleman in the foyer who wishes to speak with you. He asked me to present you with his card.”

“You must be mistaken,” snapped Lady Gore, lifting her spectacles, which she kept threaded on a chain. Upon seeing the name, she commented, “He’s chosen a most inconvenient hour and it is most improper to conduct one’s business outside of office hours. This is most vexing!”

“If you wish for him to be sent away, write your instructions on the reverse of his card and I will take it to him,” suggested the waiter.

Lady Gore took the pencil handed to her and took a moment to write a brief message. She thrust the card at the waiter. As he left the room, the hotel manager returned with a letter, which he handed to Doyle.

“Sir, can you confirm this is your envelope?” asked the author, holding it up for the accused gentleman and the other diners to see.

“Yes, it is,” he answered.

“Would you mind if I open it? I’m not interested in the content so much as the style of your handwriting.”

“You may,” the gentleman agreed. “I have always conducted myself honourably, so I have nothing to hide.”

Doyle approached the table in front of him. The diners looked alarmed but did not protest.

He extracted the letter and took out a watchmaker’s loupe from his pocket, which he put to his right eye. As everyone in the room held their breath, Doyle studied the gentleman’s letter and the blackmail letters. He turned to the waiter, who handed him the calling card Lady Gore had annotated, which he also compared against the blackmail letters.

“What trickery!” Lady Gore complained.

“The evidence speaks for itself,” Doyle retorted, handing the documents and the loupe to the hotel manager so he might study them.

A bearded gentleman entered the room. I noticed Wilde and the stranger exchange a nod, but he did not join us. I also observed how Lady Gore stiffened at the sight of him and her daughter’s pretty face hardened into a mocking sneer before she checked herself.

“Here are my findings,” Doyle announced to the room.

“The accused’s Budleigh Salterton letter is written on quality, watermarked paper as one might expect. The gentleman wrote using purple-black ink.

“I won’t bore you with all the flourishes unique to his handwriting because it is unnecessary as the one significant feature of his letter is the consistent use of the ampersand. Rather than the figure of eight form, his is a squiggled capital ‘E’.”

“The blackmail letters are all written on low quality paper, with different ink and with a different hand. You would be right to argue that a blackmailer would try to distance themselves from their crime, the most obvious precaution being the use of a different supply of stationery and ink. Another being to disguise their handwriting.

“All precautions aside, it is extremely hard to break the force of habit, therefore, one would expect to see at least one ampersand or for one or two to have been blacked out. I didn’t spot any in the blackmail letters.

“Without their envelopes and accompanying postmarks, we can’t establish when the letters were posted. What is known is that superior quality ink holds its colour. The ink used for the blackmail letters has turned a pale brown, suggesting it was made from inferior ingredients. The significance being that it, nevertheless, takes time to fade, suggesting the blackmail letters were written some years ago and, indisputably, before Her Ladyship’s daughter entered society and had need of a fan.”

“Comparing the blackmail letters to the business card Lady Gore annotated, we find the curious lower case ‘e’s and ‘a’s are the same. Do you concur that they were written by the same hand?”

The hotel manager agreed.

There was a gasp followed by excited chatter, which rippled through the room.

Doyle continued, indicating to the gentleman standing in the wings, “The calling card belongs to Mr Stoker who has kindly joined us.” The diners turned to look at the bearded gentleman. “Please come forward!”

Mr Stoker brushed past me as he made his way to the front.

“Please tell us your occupation and what connects you to Lady Gore and her daughter?”

“I’m the business manager at the Lyceum Theatre and Mr Henry Irving’s personal assistant. I know these ladies as Ivy Finch and Fanny Harper. They approached Mr Irving hoping to be cast for parts in his productions, but neither was successful. After they had departed the theatre, we discovered two costumes

were missing. The very ones they are wearing.”

Doyle quelled the renewed excitement by raising his hand, then concluded, “Like others of their ilk, with each successful scam they became more daring, targeting a succession of wealthy men, who would hand over their money so they’d go away. And, if they executed their plan in a restaurant, the dupe would get stung with their bill.

“The ruse only had to be believed for as long as it took to eat, get their ill-gotten gains and leave the scene. By playing their parts to perfection, their snaffled theatre costumes passed for fine clothes but will now link them to previous incidents.”

With that a waiter opened the door and a line of policemen rushed in to make the arrests and haul the cursing and struggling ladies out.

Wilde stood up and led the other diners in applauding Doyle.

“C’est magnifique!” he congratulated.

Addressing everyone in the room, he said, “Given Ivy Finch’s cutting remarks about the hotel’s excellent cucumber sandwiches, I’ve ordered a platter and insist you all try one.”

The vindicated gentleman said, “And, I invite you all to a glass of Champagne, so we might toast Mr Doyle for proving my innocence and Mr Stoker for rushing to my aid.”

Wilde, who must have recognised the ladies from a previous encounter, had done much behind the scenes to set the trap, so he was due the lion’s share of the credit. Consequently, he was to be admired all the more for being content to let his efforts go unacknowledged.

As we parted company at the end of the night, Doyle summed up our enjoyment when he described it as a ‘golden evening’.

Author’s note: As a direct result of the meeting at the Langham Hotel on 30th August 1889, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s ‘The Sign of the Four’ (which became ‘The Sign of Four’) and Oscar Wilde’s ‘The Picture of Dorian Gray’ and were published in Lippencott’s Monthly Magazine in February 1890 and July 1890 respectively.

Mr Stoker was introduced purely for the purposes of my narrative and is a reference to Mr Bram Stoker who wrote ‘Dracula’ and was, indeed, the business manager of the Lyceum Theatre and the actor Henry Irving’s personal assistant.