

6. By good fortune, our solicitor-actor would be available for several days, to play the part of a genial if rather befuddled elderly farmer who, indeed, happened to bear a resemblance to one Sherlock Holmes. With him in place, the Americans could batter themselves against our doors until they were convinced that their information was faulty, at which time they might go back to the Plains or prairies whence they had come. Behind our drawn curtains, Holmes returned to his experiment and I to my manuscripts. Before padlocking the trunk, however, I went through the house and collected an armful of treasured memorabilia that called to mind our cases and adventures over the years. They were, with certain exceptions, items of little commercial value—a friend's trademark monocle, one of Holmes' more disreputable pipes, some newspaper clippings—but were they to be spotted by any sharp-witted Sherlockian (if that be not an oxymoron) they could not only give lie to our ruse, they would be themselves vulnerable to the predations of the horde outside: Sherlockians are inveterate collectors. I arranged them atop my memoirs, and padlocked the lid. When I had more leisure, I should write a letter of explanation to the recipient of the trunk, but today, I had much to do.

7.

With the trunk of manuscripts and memorabilia securely packed, I went upstairs and assembled a pair of valises for us, that we might at least keep dry and comfortable in exile during the American siege. I doubted that they had found my own house in Oxford—I would have heard, had there been strangers climbing over the walls and loitering out front—but Holmes and I have not made it to our respective ages by making easy assumptions.

Night came. The cook did the washing up and grumbled her way towards bed. The downstairs lights were turned off, then those in the laboratory, and finally the bedroom went dark. All this time, Patrick sat prominently behind the wheel of the Land Rover while the dogs prowled the grounds.

Except that shortly after dark, Patrick's outline in the car was in fact a scarecrow made of stuffed shirts and a hat. Leaving the more obedient of his two dogs to guard the dummy and the car, and the less obedient one inside the house to bark warningly, the three of us set off across the dark landscape.

One advantage of having walked the Downs for the better part of a century—daylight and dark, rain and snow—is that one's feet know the way when one's eyes do not. We strolled in easy silence over the cropped grass, keeping to the sheep-tracks to reduce the sound of crackling frost. In half an hour, we came out in the roadside car-park near the road to Eastbourne, and Patrick went forward to tap at the window of the Mercedes sedan that waited there.

9. The house in Oxford to which we retreated was in the northern district of the town, a tree-studded neighbourhood of large brick houses inhabited by dons and their families. It is close enough to town that a stroll to the Bodleian and Radcliffe libraries, even with an arm full of books, is a pleasant interlude; it is far enough from the centre that the wrangle of bells of a Sunday morning is amusing, not headache-inducing. My house is like its fellows from the outside, with high walls on all sides, a spacious gravel drive at the front, and a narrow turret ghed onto one corner. The house and its garden are too nondescript for any passer-by to bother with a second glance, and as far as the neighbours are concerned, the owner is an independent older woman who spends much of her life travelling and working on her academic studies, which (it being Oxford) could be Romanian campanology or liver flukes of the upper Nile. Once upon a time, Holmes had arrived at my student flat through an upper window, setting off an elaborate and circuitous traverse of Oxford's roof-tops in the snow. Fortunately for us, this time I was permitted to drive through the elaborate and circuitous city roads in the actor's Mercedes.

8.

The door of the waiting car clicked open and the gravel crunched. Our actor greeted us in low whispers as we handed over Holmes' outer garments (which the Americans might recognise, if they had been keeping watch for some days) in exchange for his keys. In under two minutes, we were in the car and Patrick was leading the actor back the way we had come.

He was, I thought, already dressed and made up for his role, although anyone paying attention to his gait would know his middle-aged strength—he was a competitive runner, which gave him the necessary thinness to enact Holmes. In fact, I learnt later, this fleetness of foot came in useful the very next afternoon, when the waiting Sherlockians saw "Holmes" set out for a walk along the cliffs, set off baying after him, only to be utterly confounded when Sherlock Holmes broke into a brisk sprint and left them panting in his wake.

(The following day, Patrick withdrew his guard, and within the hour, knock came on the door. The actor was suitably taken aback by these Americans who imagined his stone cottage was inhabited by Sherlock Holmes. With exquisite rural politeness he asked, Were they not aware that Sherlock Holmes was a fictional character?)

By the time the confused and downhearted pack walked back up the drive, we had been gone for three days, and our trail was cold.

Or so we thought.