

A WAR IN TOO MANY WORLDS

by Elizabeth Crowens

EXCERPT

CHAPTER 2

CONFESS THE CRIME

Arthur Conan Doyle made a reservation for H.G. Wells to dine with at Simpson's-in-the-Strand, one of the poshest establishments London had to offer. Both Arthur's and Wells's cars pulled up to the curb at the same time. Dressed to the nines, each gentleman appeared as if he were bound for the opera with top hats and the finest of formal wear.

"I almost feel guilty dressing for the occasion." Wells adjusted his dinner jacket and mumbled that they were tailored for men who were far less pudgy. "Like it's anti-patriotic to be celebrating while others are in misery."

"I thought *something nutritious at Simpson's would not be out of place*," Arthur said.

"Didn't Sherlock Holmes say something like that?"

"He mentioned Simpson's in *The Adventure of the Dying Detective*. After feigning a fatal illness and starving himself for three days to look the part, he looked forward to breaking his fast by dining here. Rest assured, I planned this so we wouldn't arrive on their mandatory meat-free day of the week."

"Oh, how I hate wartime rationing."

"Agreed. At the beginning of the war, Simpson's managed to be exempt. In fact, an article in *The Times* said in an obituary of its head chef, 'Thomas Davey was a culinary patriot. He commanded a brigade of 100 men, and under his supervision 1,400 pounds of English meat, 300 pounds of turbot, 100 pounds of Scotch salmon, and two wagons full of vegetables were prepared every day.'"

Wells added, "P.G. Wodehouse once wrote, 'The God of Fatted Plenty has the place under his protection.'"

“Come,” Arthur said. “They’re strict in enforcing penalties on latecomers. My hunger is talking, and I’d hate to be turned away due to a ridiculous rule. I’ve been so looking forward to their famed silver trolleys piled high with meats-a-plenty. *Allons-y!*”

The maître d’ ushered them to a back table where the gentlemen settled in and got comfortable. He returned with menus and apologized for their abbreviated wartime menu. Although food was on his mind, Arthur’s main objective of the evening was to ferret out any information possible whether his theories held water that Wells was the prime suspect in the theft of his time machine.

“Bertie, besides whatever you’re tied up doing for the Ministry of Information, what have you been writing, especially in the realm of fiction?”

Wells took a sip of water and carefully placed his napkin on his lap, his words calculated and deliberate. “My publishers requested I steer clear of controversial politics. They suggested I try my hand at detective stories since yours have been so popular.”

Speechless, Arthur raised a brow.

“No need to worry.” Wells laughed. “You’ll find no competition in my corner. My brain has refused to wrap itself around such a concept divergent from my true nature. Try likening it to a fish trying to swing from trees with a simian’s prehensile tail.”

Arthur took a moment for the scientific analogy to sink in. “Or like Sherlock Holmes insisting on following the advice of a bunch of gypsy fortunetellers?”

Wells nodded. “Pretty much along the same lines. With this bloody war dominating everything in our daily lives, it’s impossible not to speculate about utopian futures and what life should be, or how it would turn out if certain actions were taken. What about you?”

“The political scene doesn’t seem to be my calling. You know... with my unsuccessful attempt at running for a Parliamentary seat in Edinburgh back at the turn of the century. Whether I like it or not, Holmes stocks the larders of my extended family. I have, however, been writing a series of non-fiction books on the history of the Great War. With so many members of my clan putting their lives at stake on the battle lines, I wonder how many more mouths I might have to feed. There’s my brother Innes, my brother-in-law, Malcolm Leckie, a few cousins and, of course, my oldest son, Kingsley, from my first marriage are all serving over there. Maybe Kingsley will make a success of his medical career as opposed to my failed practice in ophthalmology.”

“I’m surprised that your son Kingsley isn’t going to take up the pen like his famous papa.”

"I've been fortunate to have received an expositor's blessing, but as you know, it can be a lonely, difficult, and penurious road."

"But surely, he wouldn't be going it alone. He's got his father's footsteps he can follow, not to mention his influence."

"There are others who'd like to take advantage of those favors, and I've refrained."

"Oh, there are?"

On that cue, Arthur changed the subject, not wanting to tread on an unwanted path. "Ah, here's our waiter. How about a bottle of wine? It's not often that anyone gets to forget a war is going on. Let's pick a claret or a hearty pinot noir from Beaune for our carnivorous celebration!"

He looked around at the half-empty dining room in dismay, aware he needed to distract his dinner companion from further inquiry on a subject he wanted to keep secret.

"So few patrons...it's sad. One would assume Simpson's was shutting its doors and going out of business," he said with a sigh and glanced around the room. "I don't recognize a single soul."

Wells laughed. "This place will survive after the Martian invasion has obliterated half the population of London."

The men placed their orders and continued their conversation. As much as pleasantries and small talk were always welcome, Arthur knew he had to stick to an agenda.

"Bertie, have you ever considered writing any sequels to any of your successful pieces of fiction?"

"Surely you don't expect me to follow up with a happily ever after to *Anna Veronica*, a story which has summoned nothing but controversy...not to mention my condemnation by the heads of the Fabian Society."

"Over Amber Reeves, I presume."

"And others. I'm lucky my wife Jane has the capability to turn off her sensitivity like a spigot. We might have our differences, but she is a good mother to our children, and the resulting firestorm could've been even more disastrous. I'm a staunch proponent of feminist free-will and liberation and wholeheartedly have supported the Suffragette Movement, but I resent being branded as a libertine. In the end, the Fabian Society was comprised of socialist idealists with their stuffy Victorian mores."

"Having the financial clout to speak my mind on the page has had its advantages, but I doubt if the full expression of sexual passions is in vogue when the *war to end all wars* takes precedence. Rebecca West, my darling, has written literary critiques in my defense, but others have not been so forgiving."

Maybe it's an attack—a class war of sorts—that I've achieved notoriety and success where others haven't, and it's always easier to cut another down than to improve upon one's own shortcomings. I could come up with plenty of theories. However, with such scathing attacks on *Mr. Polly*, *Togo-Bungay*, and *The Research Magnificent* from several corners, I don't think the public craves a sequel on the promotion of extramarital sex."

Breaking out into a sweat, Wells started to grab a gravy-soaked napkin by accident but reached for his handkerchief to wipe off his damp forehead, instead. "Our unfolding history will dictate an encore to *Mr. Breitling Sees it Through*, and I mentioned it in one of our earlier conversations that I'm concerned my political and technological predictions will bode ill for mankind. Don't consider it farfetched that our German enemies might've raided my garbage and invented weapons of doom and destruction from the outtakes of my manuscripts. We already have tank warfare to answer for after I wrote my story, *The Iron Clads*."

"Bertie, you're making this way too personal. Let's appeal to the simple, Troglodyte mind and communicate in plain English." Arthur took a moment to savor the smells of his special-prepared mutton curry. He'd have to choose his words with care—a sensitive topic, to say the least. "I was thinking more along the other end of the spectrum—of capitalizing upon the success of your scientific romances."

"Like what you did with Professor Challenger in *The Poison Belt*?" Wells asked.

"Precisely. I've even considered writing a third novel in that series. Have one of your heroes go back to the scene of the crime. Ha! Here, I'm speaking in terms of Scotland Yard. Suppose you have Bert Smallways embark upon another aerial adventure in a follow up to *A War in the Air*. Jules Verne created the *Mysterious Island*, a sequel to *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. Why don't you have hapless Edward Penrick from *The Island of Doctor Moreau* shipwrecked again? Better yet, have your time traveler return from his journey and fire up his time machine one more time."

Arthur gave a hard stare, convinced his friend was skirting the subject. His brief silence was broken by the waiter asking if they cared for any dessert.

Wells viewed Arthur with serious concern. "Please don't be redundant about your friend who has invented a time machine, and you're inviting me over to try it."

Alarmed, Arthur gulped down his coffee. "You said the words, not I."

"Good, because I have no interest," Wells replied.

A street urchin, clutching a loaf of bread and followed by several irate members of Simpson's kitchen staff, rushed toward their table just as Arthur was about to elaborate.

"Who do we have here?" Wells asked, surprised but amused at the unexpected interruption.

"He reminds me of one of the Baker Street Irregulars whom Holmes uses as confederates to get information on his suspects." Arthur added.

The boy's cap fell on the floor. Arthur bent over and picked it up.

"Alms for the poor?" the waif asked.

"Cute kid," Arthur said, reaching in his pocket for spare change. The kitchen staff scolded the child and swiped back the bread, but when they noticed his grubby hands caked with grease and soot, they declared it ruined and unfit for their customers and gave it back with disdain. The maître d' caught up with the gentlemen, accompanied by his security detail, who apologized and escorted the intruder pell-mell out the door.

In the end, Arthur was no further from his objective than whence he started. He still couldn't prove Wells had stolen his time machine and, to make matters worse, he realized their diminutive beggar was also a sly pickpocket. His wallet, along with his cherished gold timepiece, which he hadn't secured on a chain, was gone. Wells had to pick up the tab.