Crowded Hours in Post-Victorian Britain

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Arthur Conan Doyle embodied the ideal, honed during the late-Victorian period, of the "professional" author. The professional author approached the world of letters with the same attitude as their salaried, white-collar predecessors in the fields of law, medicine, architecture and engineering. Their work was characterized by the associational bonds of institutions such as the Society of Authors and the Authors' Club, by regular working schedules, by their reliance on firm legal principles guarding their literary property, by assiduous attention to the demands of the market and by fiduciary arrangements with literary agents. By the 1910s, Conan Doyle was established as one of the most well-known and well-remunerated authors in the world. Having completed the thirteen Sherlock Holmes stories comprising the *Return of Sherlock Holmes* (1903-4), funded by enormous payments from the American magazine *Collier's Weekly*, and the last of his grand historical romances, *Sir Nigel* (1906), he settled into a more leisurely working pattern. He would continue to produce Sherlock Holmes stories, still avidly awaited by the editorial teams at *Collier's* and the *Strand Magazine*, but these stories would now be produced on an *ad hoc* basis rather than the more rigorous monthly publication schedule of his three previous collections. This freedom appeared to revitalize his previously ambivalent attitude towards the character and the Holmes stories became an occasional, profitable essay rather than a weekly grind.

Conan Doyle's work in the 1880s and 90s had been characterized by an aggressively double-minded pursuit of commercial success through both popular genre fiction and more superficially high-minded attempts at historical fiction (modelled on Walter Scott) and domestic naturalism (modeled in part on George Moore and, later, on H. G. Wells). This dichotomy did not wholly collapse after his exertions through the years 1903-6, but his loftier ambitions certainly became foreshortened. 'One Crowded Hour' formed part of this new working pattern

alongside several of the Holmes stories that would eventually makeup the collection *His Last Bow* (1917). It is an essentially ephemeral story, worked up from a slight, amusing conceit (a modern "highwayman" using a motor car instead of the traditional steed) and developed with all the consummate ease and light humor that *Strand* readers had become familiar with in his noncanonical short fiction over the preceding two decades. The story also forms an instructive contrast with the Sherlock Holmes stories that were published during the same period. It is easy in some respects to imagine 'One Crowded Hour' as a Holmes story without Holmes. Either Ronald Barker or Sir George Wilde could have been, respectively, earnest or cynical clients arriving at Baker Street looking for help in identifying their mysterious attacker. The trail of clues surrounding Sir Henry Hailworthy's signature Rolls Royce with its battery of semiotic indicators (tire tracks, engine sounds, headlamps) could furnish the narrative with clues interpretable by Holmes, if not by Watson. But of course, according to most timelines, Holmes retired from active detective work in 1903-4 and relocated from London to the Sussex Downs after the dissolution of his partnership with Watson.[1] While some of the later Holmes stories such as 'The Red Circle' (April, 1911), 'The Disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax' (December, 1911) and 'The Blanched Soldier' (November, 1926) are set in the very early 1900s, none of them feature a motor car.[2] The only Holmes story to do so is 'His Last Bow' itself, an idiosyncratic story set during the second half of the First World War. Conan Doyle was an avid observer of new technological, social and political trends but, if we wished to incorporate them in his fiction, he would generally find himself incapable of doing so alongside Sherlock Holmes who would remain locked in the world of rapidly receding Victoriana.

By 1911, the year in which 'One Crowded Hour' was published in the August issue of the *Strand Magazine*, British society and culture were changing with alarming rapidity. When

[1] William Baring-Gould (ed.), *The Annotated Sherlock Holmes Vol. II* (New York: C. N. Potter, 1967), p. 769.
[2] These publication dates refer to the initial publication in *The Strand Magazine*, in some cases this occurred shortly after their first appearance in American periodicals.

Victoria died, according to H. G. Wells' doubtful clergyman Edward Scrope, "[i]t was as if some compact and dignified paper-weight had been lifted from people's ideas, and as if at once they had begun to blow about anyhow."[3] The country had become locked into a national identity crisis regarding its position in the global economy, the management of empire, its relationship with Ireland and the increasingly violent campaign for female suffrage. The Liberal administration elected by a landslide in 1906 sought radical changes to the taxation system and laid the first foundations of the modern welfare state, marking a historic breach with the calcified Victorian class system. Long-standing commitments to free trade were called into question by the rising economic power of America and Germany, and Britain's shifting balance of trade towards imports. Different visions for a future Britain, disembedded from nineteenth-century economic dominance vied for public attention.

1911 was also significant for authors. It saw the enactment of new copyright legislation which swept away a clutter of obsolete and contradictory statutes from the preceding two centuries. It established a much longer term of copyright, fifty years beyond the author's death, which allowed literary productions to be inherited and managed by the writers' heirs or legatees. The new law also extended legal protections to adaptations of work produced in sound and visual recordings. This proved hugely beneficial to Conan Doyle whose varied attempts at mounting theatrical adaptations of his work had veered between outright disasters and loss-making non-events. In 1909 he had taken on the huge expenses associated with mounting his play *The House of Temperley* in London, adapted from his 1896 novel *Rodney Stone*. Despite promising early signs, the play was shuttered before it could come close to turning a profit or recompensing its author's initial outlay. Cinema adaptations would prove much simpler and remunerative affairs. By leasing film copyrights to British firms like the London Film Company (whose adaptation of *The House of Temperley* was released as its first prestige, feature-length

[3] H. G. Wells, *The Soul of a Bishop* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1917), p. 26.

release in 1913) and the cash-rich American studios now agglomerating in Hollywood, he could contemplate a more pleasingly passive and risk-free approach to the exploitation of his work in other media. For all his other successes, the Holmes stories held the most value in this arena and a trickle of new entries in the canon would continue to keep the character's name before the public while American and British film adaptations also appeared continuously until Conan Doyle's death in 1930. By 1910, though, American films had already come to predominate in British cinemas much to the chagrin and anxiety of the domestic trade. When, in the early stages of 'One Crowded Hour', Hailworthy's car headlamps "cast two vivid circles [...] like some golden cinematograph," the story immediately signaled to readers both a more contemporary setting than the Holmes stories and a changing culture industry increasingly underpinned by American capital.[4]

That capital was also challenging the *Strand*'s own position in the British cultural field. The periodical marketplace was beginning to show the first signs of the upheavals that would slowly lead to the magazine's marginalization. The market was tending towards fragmentation, specialization, Americanization and a new media ecosystem that would be radically uprooted by the emergence of the cinematograph and radio. Seasoned observers of American magazines in this period were in little doubt over the differences between the two: the British illustrated magazine boom of the late 1880s and 1890s had aped the form but not the content of their American counterparts, being made up instead of old-fashioned "tit-bits" and "pettifogging antiquarianism."[5] *The Strand* was able to preserve much of its existing readership for the time being, but that readership was aging and it struggled to attract younger readers. The most popular new writers, nursed in the rich American periodical marketplace, were beyond its financial reach. By the 1920s, indeed, the domestic magazine market would struggle to fully recover from wartime constraints and subsequent economic turbulence. Conan Doyle's reliance

[4] Arthur Conan Doyle, 'One Crowded Hour', *The Strand Magazine* (August, 1911), pp. 122-131, p. 123.
[5] William Archer, 'The American Cheap Magazine', *Fortnightly Review* (May, 1910), pp. 921-932, p. 921.

upon American money for the resurrection of Sherlock Holmes in the early 1900s would prove to be an early indicator of a bifurcated marketplace where the most famous British authors such as W. Somerset Maugham and John Galsworthy would sell first to American magazines and allow their work to be shaped by the expectations of American editors. This new dynamic formed a small part of the much wider story of America's emergence as a world economic power which, in the early century, was most visible in the fields of new technology: the radio, the phonograph, the cinematograph and, of course, the motor car.

A survey of *The Strand*'s content in 1911 reveals some of this turmoil. In a large symposium on 'What Reform is Most Needed' (September, 1911) Conan Doyle took the opportunity to articulate his views on divorce reform, a cause that would much preoccupy him as he reformulated many of his long-standing political views on trade, home rule for Ireland and female suffrage. These weighty issues were all covered in the symposium alongside more niche concerns relating to the institution of daylight savings time and the radical idea that children should be taught the importance of breathing deeply "through the nostrils".[6]

'One Crowded Hour', like much of Conan Doyle's lighter fiction, bears the traces of his day-to-day concerns; most obviously his fascination with, and love of, the motor car. He bought his first vehicle, "a medium-sized 10-horsepower Wolseley" in early 1902, joining the Royal Automobile Club and vociferously arguing for the car's vital significance as a symbol of technological development and of the emancipatory potential of progress.[7] The motor car was both a symptom and cause of drastic changes that were remapping the lived environment of London in the Edwardian period. The "outer rings" of greater London grew in population by nearly 700,000 during Edward's reign,[8] with significant inflows and outflows of commuters and

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[6] 'What Reform is Most Needed', *The Strand Magazine* (September, 1911), pp. 269-274, p. 271.
[7] See Andrew Lycett, *Conan* Doyle (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2007), p. 279 and John Lellenberg, Daniel Stashower and Charles Foley (eds.), Arthur Conan Doyle: *A Life in Letters* (London: Harper Perennial, 2008), pp. 491-2.
[8] Jerry White, *London in the Twentieth Century* (London: The Bodley Head, 2008), p. 26.

pleasure-seekers being conveyed by private vehicles and communal motor buses all supported by dramatic road-building programmes. The entire plot of ‘One Crowded Hour’ depends upon these developments, taking place on one of the main arterial routes taken between London and the popular Sussex seaside towns. In the story, the current of London week-enders “sweeps back from the watering-place to the capital from pleasure to duty”. The flow of centrifugal motor traffic to and from London via the countryside was another example of the national diffusion of metropolitan culture. A *Punch* cartoon from 1910 (Figure 1) shows an elderly shop-owner gazing dismayed at the havoc wreaked by a passing car and remarking that “the place grows more like London every day.”

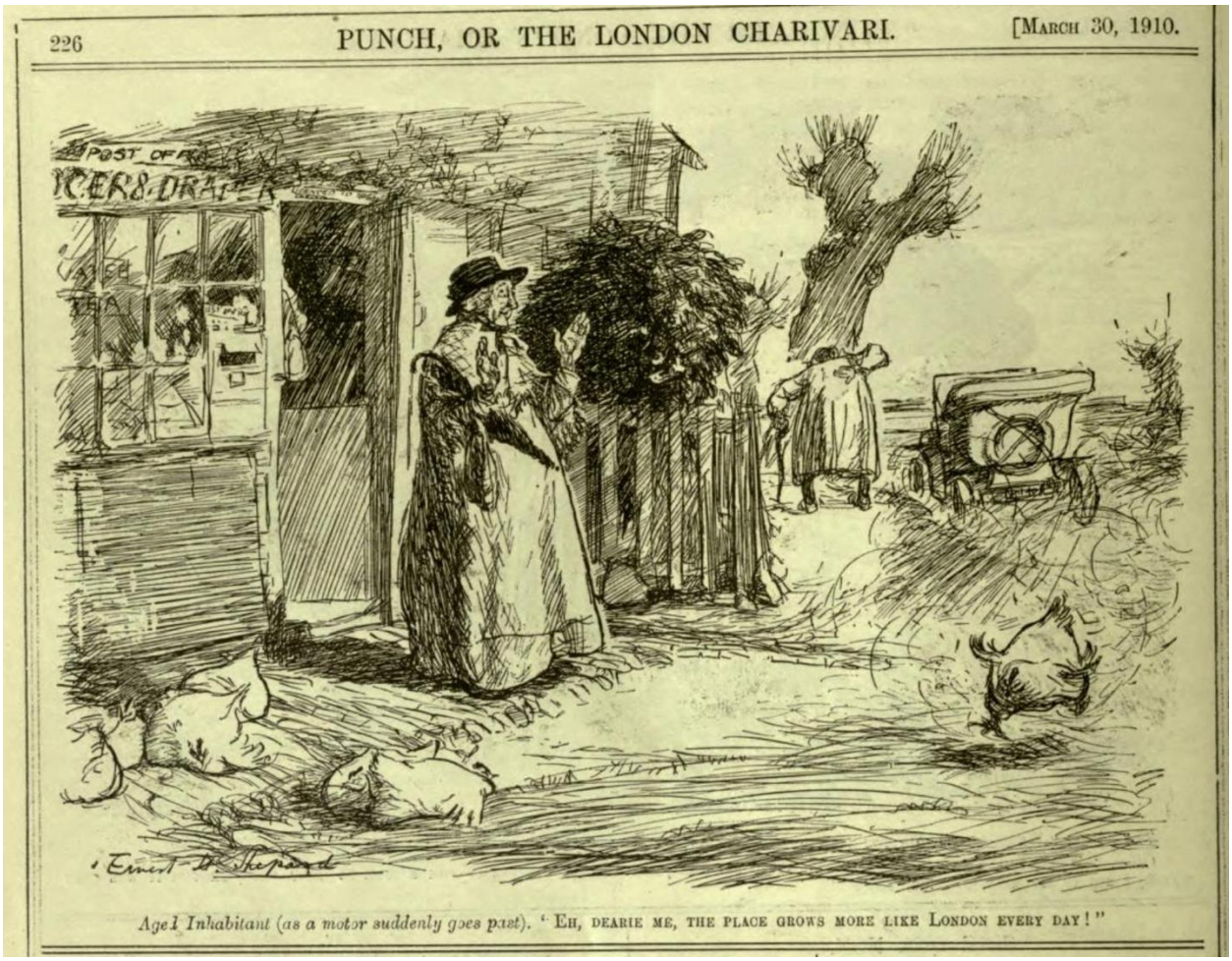

Figure 1: Taken from *Punch* (30 March, 1910), p. 226

The route from London into Sussex was familiar to Conan Doyle, passing near enough to the home that he shared with his second wife, Jean, in Crowborough. Conan Doyle was an ambitious motorist, both in terms of his speed and range of travel. He needed little encouragement, for example, to drive his first car all the way home from Birmingham on its maiden journey. The car made vast distances collapse while also negating the inconveniences of communal travel on public transport: it provided an admixture of personal autonomy, thrill and convenience precisely calibrated to appeal to Conan Doyle. These changes to the capital were augmented by dramatic demolition and rebuilding schemes in central London as low-cost family housing was replaced with office buildings designed to serve a growing administrative state and knowledge economy. These changes rendered Holmes' London a thing of the past. The city expanded and diffused in the Edwardian period, spreading its tendrils out into surrounding counties and dissolving the sense of an organic whole that was graspable, knowable and traversable by horse-drawn carriage and railway lines alone.

The specific series of cars identified within 'One Crowded Hour' hold significance. Ronald Barker, the first victim of the initially anonymous masked highwayman is a vehicle of the same make as Conan Doyle's first purchase, though of even weaker engine power (10 horse-power to Conan Doyle's 12). Barker's devotion to the old Wolseley, he spends "half [his] life on a car and the other half under it," suggests that his enthusiasm is not merely the idle pursuit of novelty and speed for its own sake. Sir George Wilde's monstrous, brass-mounted "sixty-horse Daimler", by contrast, suggests his nakedly dishonest acquisitiveness. If Conan Doyle had really wanted to emphasize this point, he could have had Wilde being conveyed in a car produced abroad (in France or America). The motor car had indeed become a symbol of economic nationalism. Previously an ardent "free trader", Conan Doyle had argued in the press that heavy duties should be levied on car imports to preserve the market for domestic vehicles.[9] His

[9] Arthur Conan Doyle, 'Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and the Motor Car', *The Spectator*, (1 August, 1903), p. 165.

attitude was widely shared in Britain, but was held with special fervor in the wider empire, where the sudden predominance of American-manufactured cars, like American films, would prompted deep-seated anxieties over the relative economic status of the two countries.[10]

The motor car also formed part of a suite of technological innovations with which Conan Doyle was much concerned in the 1910s, particularly with reference to the threat of a forthcoming conflict with Germany. The aeroplane, the airship and the submarine figured prominently in his public writing on the souring of the Anglo-German relationship. Germany, he claimed, was investing heavily in this technology and instituting a "naval revolution" by integrating them into its official forces at far greater speed than Britain.[11] *Strand* readers enjoying 'One Crowded Hour' in August 1911 had been warned, in the previous month's issue, about 'The Aerial Menace' that might soon threaten England, complete with lavish and brutal illustrations (Figure 2) of the possibility:

[10] Matthew Parker, *One Fine Day* (London: Abacus, 2023).
[11] Arthur Conan Doyle, 'Great Britain and the Next War' The Fortnightly Review (February, 1913), pp. 219-236, p. 231.

"A FLEET OF TWO THOUSAND AEROPLANES DROPPING BOMBS ON LONDON."

(See page 8.)

Figure 2: Taken from Claude Graham-Wright, 'The Aerial Menace', *The Strand Magazine* (July, 1911), pp. 2-8, p. 2.

Germany was described in this article as "ever shrewd and watchful" regarding the bellicose possibilities of new technology and its author, Claude Graham-Wright, sought to "arouse England" (or at least the *Strand*'s readership) from its "apathy" on the subject.[12] Conan Doyle, ever the optimist, was relatively sanguine on the prospects of War in comparison to some of his peers but the issue was on his mind as early as 1908 when 'The Bruce-Partington Plan' depicted the theft of prototype submarine plans by the German secret agent, Hugo Oberstein.

[12] Claude Graham-Wright, 'The Aerial Menace', *The Strand Magazine* (July, 1911), pp. 2-8, p. 4.

The story, however, takes place in 1895, predating Kaiser Wilhelm II's enormous and politically provocative navy-building programme. This is further evidence of the difficulties faced by Conan Doyle in deploying Sherlock Holmes as a means of addressing twentieth-century concerns.

The humorous, anachronistic conceit at the heart of 'One Crowded Hour' turns out to be replete with wider political significance. If the England of the early twentieth century was becoming, in the words of various critics, a "shrinking island" or a "sinking island," then Sir Henry Hailworthy's actions were justified not just by his personal losses.[13] He becomes further ennobled as the advocate of an English identity on the verge of financial subjugation by America and technological dominance by the German war machine. The comic image of Hailworthy, liberated from consequence, leaving to "try some petty larcenies on the county bench" is amusing on its face, yet also serves as a reminder for Conan Doyle of the enduring strength of the old English social order. This "great chain of being" was historically run, in the absence of standing armies and professional police forces, by tiers of voluntary office-holders across social ranks from magistrates (like Hailworthy), grand jurymen, constables and churchwardens.[14] As early as 1906 Conan Doyle could found arguing that fleets of privately-owned motor cars could be used to provision and field a paramilitary defense force in the event of invasion, with volunteer citizens housing firearms and ammunition in their garages against the ill-fated day.[15] Such concerns might seem far removed from the quiet and faintly absurdist milieu of 'One Crowded Hour' but Conan Doyle's grand vision depended upon the skill and character of men like Roland Barker and even the masked highwayman himself, Hailworthy.

And what of Wilde, "senior partner of Wilde and Guggendorf," who has knowingly defrauded Hailworthy of his meagre fortune through a failed bank "of infamous memory"? Wilde recalls a lineage of financial criminals in literature stretching back at least as far as Trollope's

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[13] See Hugh Kenner, *A Sinking Island* (New York: Knopf, 1988) and Jed Esty, *A Shrinking Island* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013).
[14] Jonathan Healey, *The Blazing World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), p. 36.
[15] Arthur Conan Doyle, 'Motor Cars and Coast Defence', *The Times* (12 April, 1906), p. 8.

Augustus Melmotte in *The Way We Live Now* (1875). But Melmotte would have been astonished at the new possibilities for financial exploitation inaugurated in the twentieth century by an increasingly liquid and globalized money market centered on the City of London.

> [T]he City of London was the hub on which the money of the world spun. There was never a time, before or since, when the world's finances were more in thrall to the City of London than in the twenty years or so before 1914.[16]

By setting global prices for commodities and underwriting loans of business credit across the world, a London bank was the ideal perch for such malevolent practices. In 1912, the year after the publication of 'One Crowded Hour, the Liberal MP Horatio Bottomley (Figure 3) was finally felled by the latest in a long-running series of criminal investigations for such crimes.

[16] White, *London in the Twentieth Century*, p. 175.

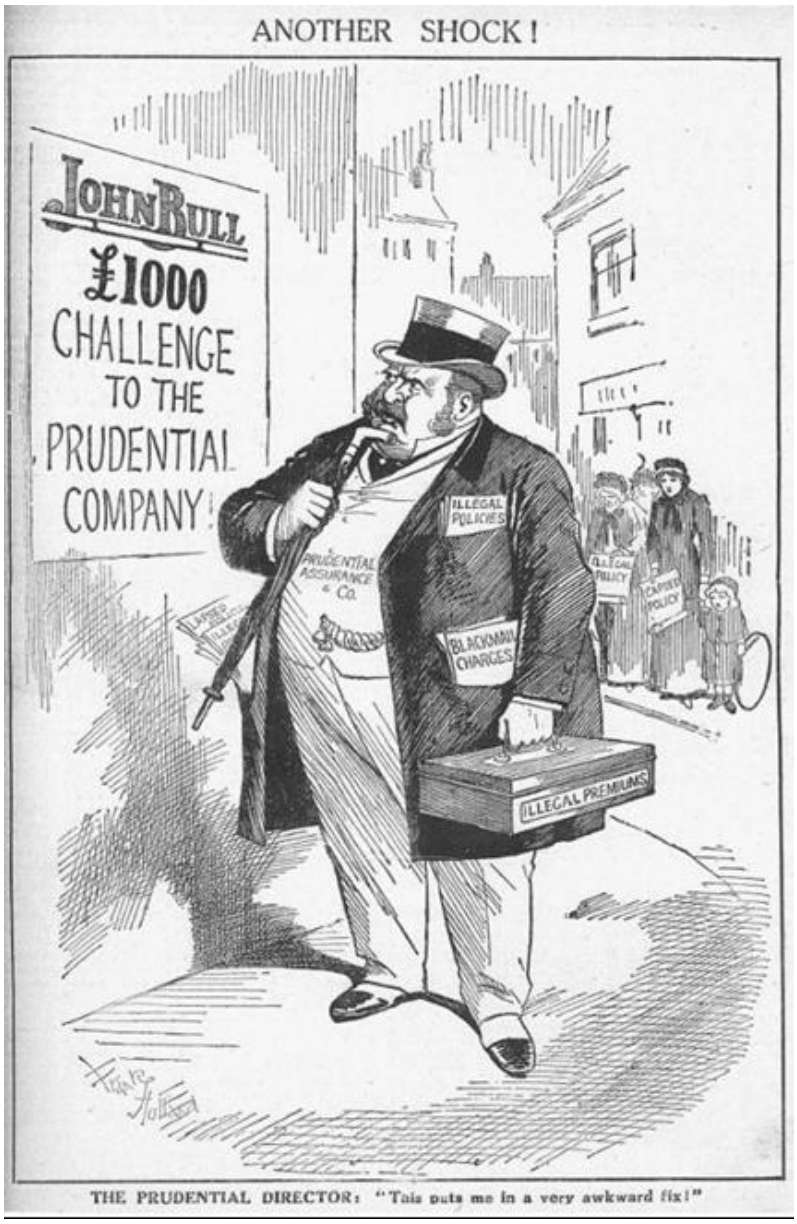

Figure 3: 'Another Shock', taken from *John Bull* (9 March, 1912), p. 317

Wilde's knightly title would have been a helpful shield to legitimize these activities, but the ambiguously-coded surname of his partner "Guggendorf" is also suggestive. It is the name of a small town in eastern Austria and carries both Germanic and Jewish connotations. Trollope's Melmotte was likewise depicted as suspiciously concealing his semitic heritage. More literally, the name could be a satire of the American metals magnate and philanthropist Solomon R. Guggenheim. If we are charitable to Conan Doyle's intentions, then he imagined the name to

embody anxieties over the rise of American financial power, if not, then it merely reiterates crude, ancient insinuations and stereotypes regarding Jewish business practices.

Hailworthy's response is to resurrect the spirit of Dick Turpin, the legendary masked highwayman of eighteenth-century England who became immortalized through retellings of his life and crimes which, through broadsides, ballads, fiction and films, kept his name alive as an avatar (accurately or inaccurately) of righteous transgression against the rich. Like the Turpin and Robin Hood of domestic myth, Hailworthy assumes the mantle of common criminality as a way of delivering extrajudicial justice in the face of structural inequality. Turpin's popularity led him to be included by the historian Eric Hobsbawm under his category of the "social bandit": one who "simultaneously challenges the economic, social and political order by challenging those who hold or lay claim to power, law and the control of resources."[17] They rely upon their popularity amongst the working classes to help shield them from the auspices of the law who the poor recognize as a much more imminent threat to their own wellbeing through the upholding of exploitative social systems such as feudalism or colonial rule. Rather than the peasantry that helped to conceal Robin Hood from the officers of Prince John, Hailworthy relies upon the discretion and good sense of Barker who is easily convinced of the rightness of his friend's actions and refuses to expose him to their legal consequences.

Sherlock Holmes himself was no stranger to extrajudicial justice. The character's early popularity in the 1890s occurred contemporaneously with a number of public scandals relating to the conduct and probity of the Metropolitan police. Readers were evidently more likely to place their faith in a professional like Holmes who could be trusted to respect the privacy of his clients and exert common sense discretion over the application of formal legal penalties. In 'Wisteria Lodge' Holmes gives his blessing to the actions of a secret "society" dedicated to revenge upon a South American dictator whose crimes were committed far from the purview of

[17] Eric Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (London: Abacus, 2003), p. 7.

"the law of England."[18] Meanwhile in 'The Red Circle' the persecuted Luccas find that they have nothing to fear following Gennaro's killing of an Italian mobster. In an earlier story, 'Charles Augustus Milverton', Holmes and Watson go so far as to don masks and make burglarious entry to the house of the notorious blackmailer in pursuit of justice (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Taken from 'Charles Augustus Milverton', The Strand Magazine (April, 1904), pp. 373-383, p. 379

Modern readers of 'One Crowded Hour' will find a story that adopts many of the attitudes and tropes familiar from the Sherlock Holmes stories. These features are however, transposed into a

[18] Arthur Conan Doyle, 'II: The Tiger of San Pedro', *The Strand Magazine* (October, 1908), pp. 363-373, p. 371.

much changed cultural, political and social context and the narrative offers no presiding intellect able to parse and comprehend events. The post-Victorian world was sufficiently disarranged that the Holmesian purview would no longer be sufficient to capture its scope and implications for the future.