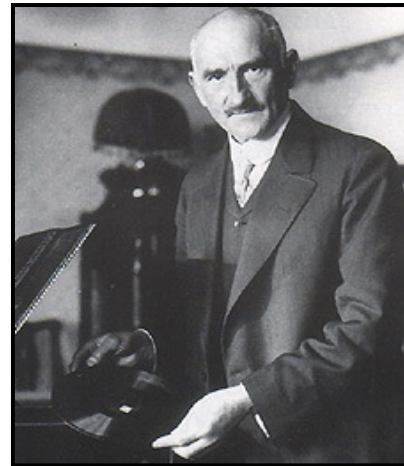

THE CASE OF OSCAR SLATER

Oscar Slater was a petty criminal, not personally liked by Conan Doyle. However, Conan Doyle came to recognise that a greater injustice had been done to him, than what had transpired in the Edalji case. In 1908 Slater was accused of murdering a wealthy 82-year-old woman, Marion Gilchrist, at her home in Glasgow. The body of Gilchrist, bludgeoned to death, was discovered by a downstairs neighbour and a maid. Apparently the only thing missing was a crescent-shaped diamond brooch, but many of her personal papers, which included a recently changed will, had been ransacked.



Oscar Slater

Prior to the discovery of the body, the maid and the neighbour, recalled that as they ascended into Gilchrist's apartment they had passed a respectably dressed man going down the stairs. However, police did not question any of the victim's relatives and did not follow-up on the neighbour's theory that one of the victim's chairs was used the murder weapon. Instead they focused their investigation around the missing brooch and were keen on making a quick arrest. Five days after the murder, the police announced that they were searching for Oscar Slater, who had attempted to sell a pawn ticket for a diamond brooch and was, they claimed, fleeing the country.

Slater was known to the police as an illegal gambling-den operator, and he was also probably a pimp. He had been staying in Glasgow for only 6 weeks, near the Gilchrist residence, before he boarded the ocean liner Lusitania in Liverpool bound for New York. Both he and his female companion had registered under false names on the ship. The Scottish police contacted New York authorities and Slater was apprehended at the dock. Slater carried with him a small upholsters hammer, which the prosecution later maintained was the murder weapon.

Interestingly, Slater waived extradition and agreed to return to Scotland of his own volition to clear his name. Not only did he have an alibi for the time of the murder, he believed he could easily prove his innocence for the crime. Firstly, he and his mistress were travelling under false names so that his estranged wife could not track him down. Second, the pawn ticket with him was for a brooch hocked long before the murder occurred. However, if Slater was expecting a fair trial, he did not get it.

Police were surprised that Slater had returned, since there had not enough evidence to extradite him. However once in Glasgow, they proceeded to establish a case, though full of holes, prosecuting him to the full extent of the law. The trial was a travesty of justice. Slater was not allowed to speak for himself or call on an alibi to testify on his behalf. Other witnesses were called who said he was seen in the proximity of the crime scene at the time of the murder. According to Martin Booth's biography of Conan Doyle, the judge characterized Slater as an immoral man living off the earnings of prostitutes and illegal activities, prejudicing the jury against him, rather than asking them to look solely at the evidence of the case itself. The jury found Slater guilty and he was sentenced to death. Then, to Slater's surprise, two days before his execution, his sentence was changed to hard labour for life, with no explanation.

Conan Doyle published *The Case of Oscar Slater* in 1912. In it he describes how the supposed murder weapon was too flimsy to have been used on the victim and difficult to conceal during a get away. Conan Doyle pointed out that testimony of many witnesses was contradictory and none of them mentioned Slater possessing the murder weapon when they were supposed to have seen him. He concluded that Gilchrist had to have known her attacker and allowed him into her flat. Conan Doyle asked why the police had not searched the premises better. It seemed that relatives of Gilchrist had powerful friends. Evidence seems to be that Slater was named because

murder had to be pinned on somebody, but the police did not expect him to return to defend himself. That had been Slater's mistake. Slater had been expected to stay in New York, and the case would have been clearly "solved." What seemed to transpire was a cover up of the real murder.

It was a slow effort to get public and official interest in the Slater case, but Conan Doyle persisted over the years with more letters to newspapers, his contacts in the government, and direct public appeals. A turning point came in 1927 when Glasgow journalist William Park, published *The Truth About Oscar Slater*. The book re-examined the case and came to the same conclusion that Conan Doyle did years ago—that Gilchrist had likely known the murderer and had invited him into her home. Park speculated that Miss Gilchrist had argued with this person about a document that she possessed, most likely her will. The argument became heated and she ended up dead. The actual murder weapon being the chair grabbed during the altercation as the neighbour, first on the scene suspected. Libel laws prevented Park from actually naming the Gilchrist's murder in his book. However, it is clear Park believed the murderer to be the victim's nephew.

The book was a sensation. Newspapers were full of new information about the case and former witness from the trial came forward stating the police had persuaded them into naming Slater as the man they'd seen around the building that day. In November of 1927 the secretary of state for Scotland issued this statement: "Oscar Slater has now completed more than eighteen and a half years of his life sentence, and I have felt justified in deciding to authorize his release on license as soon as suitable arrangements can be made." Oscar Slater was shortly released.

However the case was not quite over as far as Conan Doyle was concerned because Slater was released, not pardoned. The case was reopened and retried. In the end, Slater was cleared of all charges and awarded £6,000 in compensation.

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