MRS HUDSON AND THE CAPRICORN INCIDENT

By Martin Davies

Mrs Hudson and The Spirits' Curse

Mrs Hudson and the Malabar Rose

Mrs Hudson and the Lazarus Testament

Mrs Hudson and The Samarkand Conspiracy

Mrs Hudson and The Blue Daisy Affair

Mrs Hudson and The Christmas Canary

Mrs Hudson and the Capricorn Incident

Mrs Hudson and the Belladonna Inheritance

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Allison & Busby Limited
11 Wardour Mews
London W1F 8AN
allisonandbusby.com

First published in Great Britain by Allison & Busby in 2025.
This paperback edition published by Allison & Busby in 2025.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN 978-0-7490-3211-1

Typeset in 11/16 Adobe Garamond Pro by Allison & Busby Ltd.

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Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd. Elcograf S.p.A

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E-mail: Contact@logoseurope.eu

PROLOGUE

London, May 1951

It's easy not to notice how quickly London changes. So much of it is old and seems so permanent. But its avenues and alleyways are constantly renewing themselves, putting on new faces. Shops open and close, fashions alter, and the names in lights above the theatre doors are taken down and replaced with those of newer stars.

Yesterday I dined in a very fine restaurant not far from Somerset House. I was the guest of a former student, now an eminent academic at a university overseas, who talked at length about how good it felt to be home for a few days, to wander along Aldwych and up Drury Lane, to hear the rumble of lorries and the roar of the traffic, and feel himself back in old, familiar London.

I smiled and let him talk. He's a clever and good-hearted young man, and it's kind of him to spend an evening with an old lady like me. I felt no need to tell him I could recall a very different London, where there had been no Aldwych, where in its place there had been a tangle of seedy alleyways and dark courts, as grim and as dangerous as anything from Dickens.

No need for him to know that only a few yards from the spot where we sipped our wine, I'd once stood in candlelight, in a smoke-blackened backroom off a stinking alleyway, surrounded by strangers, feeling certain those flickering candles would be the last lights I'd ever see.

Before we left the restaurant, while he settled the bill, I shut my eyes for a moment. Even after such a long time, if I listened carefully it wasn't impossible to make out, behind the clinking glasses, the rattle of hansom cabs; strangely easy to see myself stepping out over cobbles with a bounce in my stride, on a bright May morning more than fifty years before…

CHAPTER ONE

Spring came late to London that year.

All through March and well into April a bitter east wind scoured the streets, numbing the fingers of the flower girls and mocking their little posies of daffodils and forget-me-nots. In the windows of the big shops, the displays of bright walking-costumes and fresh spring bonnets looked forlornly out of season, and on the Serpentine, the little rowing boats, which came out in time for Easter every year without fail, had all been hastily stowed away again to protect their fresh paint and polished brasses from the elements. Even by St George's Day, the cabbies on their hansoms remained grimly gloved and muffled.

And then, quite suddenly, one morning in early May, winter was gone. Its hasty retreat took the city unawares, trapping its inhabitants under far too many warm layers, so that for one awkward afternoon even the most proper pedestrians could be seen dabbing and mopping, and perspiring far too freely, and smart ladies in furs began to turn an alarming shade of pink.

I remember that day well because I had ventured out

especially early, in my warmest winter petticoats and thickest skirt, determined not to be fooled by the blue skies that for weeks had been promising a warmth they utterly failed to deliver. It was the day when Scraggs, the grocer's boy, was leaving for the north – although, of course, by then he wasn't actually a grocer's boy any more, or indeed any sort of boy at all, but a tall and rather pleasing-looking young man, and the part-owner of a successful London store.

We were very old friends. When I'd first encountered him he had been a boy selling goods from a barrow, on a foggy night still vivid in my memory. I had been a homeless and desperate fugitive, perhaps a year or so younger than he was, and he had guided me towards refuge. So, yes, we were certainly old friends. And if more recently, when people mentioned his name to me, I would sometimes blush a little; and if from time to time, when I had a break from my chores, I would find him waiting for me by the area steps so we could walk together in the park; and if, on that particular morning, I thought I might make a little diversion by way of St Pancras station to see him off . . . Well, it didn't do to dwell on such matters, not when life was so busy and there was so much to get done.

Even so, I admit I might have rushed things a little that morning. I certainly walked everywhere rather quickly, and had to bite my lip when old Mr Musgrave spent such a *very* long time weighing out the rice. I might even have run a few steps, just on the way into the station, to be sure I was there in time to say goodbye.

It wasn't until after that – after I'd said my farewells and waved off the train, just as I was stepping out of the shadow of

St Pancras – that the wind dropped, and a stillness descended, and for the first time that year I felt the warmth of the sun on my cheeks. By the time I was halfway to Baker Street, I was already uncomfortably hot, and my petticoats had begun to cling to my legs in a most unladylike manner.

Nevertheless, there was nothing for it but to hurry home despite the stickiness; I had chores to complete and a floor to scrub, and there really was no excuse for moping around on train platforms, not when the stair-rods were in such urgent need of dipping.

But somewhere on the other side of the park, church bells were ringing, and on the corner of Wimpole Street the newsboy's cries seemed strangely in tune with their peals.

'Fairy-tale wedding brought forward!' he called cheerfully. 'Read all about it! Read all about it!'

Looking back, it seems strange how little notice I took. Instead I paused to shrug off my heavy coat, and then hurried onwards with it bundled clumsily over my arm. I had things to do – and if perhaps there was something weighing on my mind as I made my way home that day, it was nothing to do with fairy-tale weddings.

The first warm breath of spring did little to lift the mood of my employer, Mr Sherlock Holmes. The final day of April had been a momentous one – the day the great detective revealed to the world the solution of the Seven Otters Mystery, a case so demanding mentally and so exhausting physically that for almost a week afterwards Mr Holmes and Dr Watson barely stirred from their beds. As was often the case after a particularly

draining engagement, a period of recuperation was followed by a spell of lassitude and low spirits, and it was just such a mood that prevailed in Baker Street that day. In Mr Holmes, it manifested itself in much staring out of the window and some listless playing of the violin; in Dr Watson, it took a rather different form. He had become oddly fretful, as if struggling to remember how he had previously filled his days – constantly taking up his stick and gloves as if to set out on a good walk, then putting them down again and pouring himself a measure of brandy and shrub instead.

Downstairs, however, things remained as calm and serene as ever, and I found Mrs Hudson waiting for me in the kitchen, with a jug of spiced lemon water on the kitchen table and a Shrewsbury biscuit on a saucer next to it.

'Because it occurred to me, Flotsam,' she explained briskly, 'that anyone out and about today in a coat as thick as yours must be in need of a cold drink. Especially if they happened to have come home by way of St Pancras.'

Mrs Hudson's reputation for excellent housekeeping and for sound common sense had long been recognised in servants' halls well beyond Baker Street, and on the fateful night when Scraggs had found me weeping in a gutter in barely enough rags to cover me, it had been to Mrs Hudson that he'd brought me – a decision that changed my life so utterly that my previous existence seems strange and indistinct to me now, as though all those ordeals were part of a dimly remembered story lived by someone else.

Under Mrs Hudson's stern eye, I had been transformed in a surprisingly short time from a homeless orphan to a neat and tidy

housemaid; and not content with teaching me the correct way to mop a floor and to polish silver, she insisted on all sorts of other education too, employing an array of acquaintances to tutor me in subjects not generally considered necessary, or indeed suitable, for housemaids. To my great surprise, I found myself learning Latin from the Irish knife grinder and French from a succession of different ladies' maids. The task of teaching mathematics fell to the local costermonger; and history to various ancient butlers who, I often thought, must have witnessed a great deal of it personally. Before long, I had read every book I could find in Baker Street, and an elderly neighbour's collection of novels from the previous century had been devoured with such appetite that a subscription was obtained for me at Mudie's library.

'You see, Flotsam,' Mrs Hudson would tell me, if I ever questioned the need for Latin verbs or algebra or capital cities, 'without an education a young girl is trapped below stairs as surely as if she were tethered to the broom cupboard. And there will always be plenty of people out there in the world who are certain they know much more about everything than you do. So it's important that you, at least, know otherwise.'

The kitchen at Baker Street was below street level and remained pleasantly cool even during the hottest summers. That day it felt like a welcome refuge from the unexpected stickiness of the streets, and I discarded my coat without ceremony, then wriggled free from two further layers of wool, before falling upon the lemon water in a slightly improper state of undress. As I drank, Mrs Hudson rolled up her sleeves and began to wipe down the stove, her roundly muscled arms moving rhythmically, in long, even strokes.

'So, tell me, young lady, did you in fact manage to say goodbye to Scraggs?' she asked as she worked.

I told her that I had, and that he sent her his regards, and would send a note when he knew the date and time of his return – just in case, I conjectured casually, either of us felt inclined to meet his train.

'But until then, ma'am, he'll be a great deal too busy to write,' I told her decidedly, 'what with all his business meetings and things. And I suppose he'll be out a great deal in the evenings, what with all the music halls and theatres up there. They say Vesta Tilley is performing in Manchester at the moment, and I know Scraggs is a great admirer of hers, so I imagine he'll go to see her more than once. And there'll be all sorts of different plays on too, and I imagine there'll be a great many people wanting to spend time with him whenever he has a moment to spare.'

Mrs Hudson listened to this solemnly, her gaze firmly on the stove, and if I'd been secretly hoping that she might contradict me at least a little bit, I was to be disappointed, because any reply she intended to make was cut off by the jangling of the study bell.

'That will be Mr Holmes again,' she told me with a sigh, 'and this time he'll be impatient for the afternoon post. You had better take it up, Flotsam – it's over there, by the door, so do up some buttons and find a clean apron, and jump to it. And let's keep our fingers crossed that there's something in those letters to interest the two gentlemen, or to get them out of the house for an hour or two at the very least. Because if you and I don't have an opportunity to give that room a proper clean in the

next day or so, Flottie, it won't be Turkish jugglers or one-eyed publicans or dishonest dukes they'll be worrying about this month, it will be rats.'

I found Mr Holmes pacing listlessly in front of the fireplace in the study, while Dr Watson watched him glumly from his armchair, a crumpled copy of *The Times* lying discarded at his feet.

'Well, I'm dashed if I can find anything there to interest us,' I heard him saying as I entered the room. 'Only the latest on the hunt for Mrs Whitfield, the fraudster, the one who tricked the Count of Ferrara out of £10,000 in Monte Carlo last February. A few days ago Inspector Lestrade was telling me she's still in America, but now the New York police are saying she sailed for Europe in May under the name Madame Emma St Aubert. Left her six Siamese cats behind, apparently, in the care of a one-armed Irish butler, which is why they didn't notice till now.'

'She has made fools of cleverer men than Lestrade, Watson,' his friend observed loftily. 'I like to think, however, should she ever be foolish enough to return to these shores, I could run her to ground in no more than a day. Two at most. Every great criminal has their flaws.'

'Well, Holmes, apart from Mrs Whitfield, it's just the usual litany of pub brawls and domestic shenanigans. Most of the column space is taken up with talk about this Rosenau wedding.'

'Wedding?' Mr Holmes seemed unimpressed. 'Oh, yes. A minor affair, diplomatically speaking, but no doubt of interest to readers of magazines and the makers of expensive hats. Ah, Flotsam! Come in, come in. You have the post?'

He paused in his pacing but remained by the fireplace, signalling with a wave of his unlit pipe that I should take the tray to his friend. The fire in the study had been allowed to die down, but the sun was streaming through the open shutters, filling the room with a pleasant, golden light. Even so, with the windows closed it was perhaps a trifle stuffy, and as I placed the letter tray next to Dr Watson I couldn't help but notice a distressing quantity of crumbs on the arm of his chair and rather more on the floor below. Mrs Hudson was quite right to think that a good clean was in order.

The doctor eyed the large pile of letters with enthusiasm.

'It's a good haul, and no mistake. Must be something for us here, eh, Holmes? Will you take a bundle for yourself?'

But his friend dismissed this suggestion with another swirl of his pipe.

'You know how greatly most of our mail irritates me, Watson. When you have discarded the banal, the tedious and the frankly witless, we shall be lucky if we are left with even one piece of correspondence worthy of our attention. No, my friend, you shall read and I shall listen. But by all means feel free to give my share of the pile to Flotsam here, if you think that will help. She is generally less easily shocked than you are by some of our seedier correspondence.'

In any other house, in any street, in any city in England, a housemaid would have been astonished – and not a little alarmed – to hear such a suggestion being made, but I had long since understood that Mr Holmes was not a man to be governed by convention. Indeed, once he'd realised that I could open a letter, and read it, and make sense of its contents, he

had been more than willing to put me to work in such a way whenever it added to his convenience. To the great detective, a quick mind was more important than good birth, and efficiency was everything. He would have had the ironmonger make his breakfast and the coalman wash his sheets if he thought either of those things would help solve a puzzle or assist him in bringing a criminal to justice.

So I made no protest, but seated myself in my employer's armchair as directed, and meekly accepted a dozen or more crisp envelopes from Dr Watson. And of course any protestation on my part would have been a terrible falsehood, because I was thrilled to be employed in such a way, partly because each fresh envelope held the promise of a new mystery or a new puzzle, and partly because reading the post of Britain's most famous detective was a great deal more enjoyable than dipping the stair-rods.

Even so, it was hard not to be a little disappointed by most of the letters I opened. As Mr Holmes had predicted, a great many of them concerned the most trivial things imaginable, and those that did not were quite simply rather odd. Judging by the grunts from the seat next to mine, Dr Watson was experiencing similar frustrations.

'Good Lord, Holmes! This one here is from a man whose cat has developed a strange rash from walking through his neighbour's onion patch. And there was another about a dog with a limp. It beats me why so many people mistake you for a veterinarian! Are you having any better luck, Flotsam?'

I confessed that I wasn't. 'There's the usual letter from the lady in Cornwall, sir, the one who believes the Bishop of Truro

has been kidnapped and replaced by an impostor. And one from a lady south of the river who is suspicious of her new neighbour's gloves, which she considers to be too fine to be respectable. They have led her to conclude that the lady in question must in fact be a fallen woman of the worst kind, and that her so-called husband, far from being a dealer in woollen goods, must really be a disreputable aristocrat in disguise.'

Dr Watson chuckled. 'We should introduce her to this gentleman here, who claims to have irrefutable evidence that his neighbour is the Buxton Forger, even though it's at least two years since old Templeton was found with the press in his cellar and a barrel full of notes in the garden, and confessed to everything.'

And so it went on until there were only two envelopes left. The last letter I opened, a missive in violet ink on thick, creamy writing paper, was written in an elegant and feminine hand. It was little more than a note, really, and my eye quickly reached the signature at the bottom.

'Why!' I exclaimed. 'This one is from Miss Mabel Love!'

Mr Holmes fixed me with that stern gaze of his, as if waiting for an explanation, and I found myself flushing, a little embarrassed by my own enthusiasm.

'Popular actress, Holmes,' Dr Watson explained, gently taking the letter from my hand so that he could study it more closely. 'Romances and comedies and whatnot. I believe she's all the rage at the moment, is she not, Flotsam?'

'Yes, sir. She's much admired. She dances too, and everyone was talking about how good she was in her pantomime over Christmas. She's supposed to be very beautiful.'

'Let's see . . .' Dr Watson continued to peruse the letter. 'She asks if you could call on her, Holmes, about a matter causing her considerable anxiety. Doesn't say what, though. Still, it's a very courteous letter.'

But Mr Holmes was unimpressed, and I could see his gaze drifting towards the window. The energy that had animated him briefly upon the arrival of the post was ebbing from him now, and I resigned myself to an evening of much mournful violin music.

'Really, Watson,' he sighed. 'The fact that this lady is a prominent and reputedly comely thespian clearly prejudices you in her favour, because there is nothing in her note to suggest that her particular anxiety is any more substantial, or any less fanciful, than those of our other correspondents. Still, you may call upon her if you wish. And be sure to take Flotsam with you.'

'You feel I will need assistance, Holmes?' The good doctor looked somewhat nettled.

'On the contrary, my dear fellow, I know you to be more than capable of holding a conversation with an attractive woman without any assistance whatsoever. But judging from the colour in Flotsam's cheeks, and by the way her usually very sensible voice became strangely idiotic when speaking the lady's name, I conclude that an invitation to call on Miss Mabel Love would be very much to her liking. Now, if we have finished . . .'

'Not quite, Holmes,' the doctor corrected him. 'There's still one more.'

He sliced open the final envelope with a flourish of his paper-knife, and pulled from it a sheet of thin, densely written

writing paper. As he did so, a small newspaper cutting fluttered to the carpet, and I leant forward in my chair to pick it up.

CHESTER TRAIN MYSTERY

A sensation was caused at Chester General station last evening on the arrival of the 3.30 p.m. train from Llandudno by the discovery, underneath the seat of a first-class carriage, of a lady's dressing case. On the seat of the carriage were a lady's hat, coat and satchel, all of very good quality. No person came forward to claim these items, and found with them was a hand-written note of a tragical and desperate nature. A search party was dispatched along the line, but failed to find any body.

Dr Watson took it from me, ran an eye over it, then returned to the letter.

'It's from an Inspector Hughes of the Flintshire Constabulary,' he told us. 'He's asking permission to travel to London to consult you, Holmes. Seems a woman's disappeared. And I don't mean gone missing. From what Hughes writes here, he seems to think she has quite literally vanished into thin air.'

These words had a very noticeable effect upon my employer. It wasn't so much that he changed his position – he remained leaning nonchalantly against the mantelpiece – but something in his face or in his eyes was altered, and I could tell that his attention, which had been so obviously wandering, was now fixed fully upon his friend.

'And, Holmes, before you tell me that Inspector Hughes must be some ignorant country policeman with an over-active

imagination, you should read his letter. He takes pains to place four incontrovertible facts before you.

'Firstly, that the woman in question was helped into an empty first-class compartment at Llandudno station just moments before the train pulled away. Secondly, that she did not leave the train at Chester station, where it terminated, nor at any of the stations in between. Thirdly, that searchers found no traces of the woman on the train itself at Chester, nor of any corpse along the tracks. And fourthly, that it was impossible for anyone to have jumped or fallen from the train while it was in motion without leaving traces of such an action behind them.'

Outside, the warm spring sunshine still pressed against the windows, and now, finally, something of its reviving brightness seemed to have reached the occupants of the room. Mr Holmes still hadn't changed his position, and his gaze was focused very intently on his pipe, but I could almost feel the intensity of his concentration, and perhaps even a sort of underlying joy at once again having a problem worth engaging with.

When, after a few more seconds, he did move from the mantelpiece, it was to take the letter and cutting from his friend. He read them in silence, nodding as he did so.

'This cutting is dated only three days ago,' he remarked when his examination was complete, 'and the letter was written yesterday, so the inspector has wasted little time in contacting us. Which suggests, of course, that he is either hasty in his work, or that he is an unusually thorough man, and one who has understood with commendable alacrity the point at which traditional police methods have run their course.'

He lowered the papers for a moment and appeared to fix his

gaze instead on an unfortunate burn mark on the opposite wall, one caused some months previously by a misguided experiment with Chilean saltpetre.

'Let's see . . . That line runs along the coast of North Wales . . .'

He considered for a moment.

'We must reply to the inspector at once and urge him to call upon us without delay. Until he does, we simply do not have sufficient information to draw any firm conclusions.' I watched him pause for a moment, the trace of a smile playing on his lips. 'But I rather assume, Watson, that when we meet Inspector Hughes, if he is the competent fellow his letter suggests, that he will be able to confirm three significant pieces of information.'

'And what are they, Holmes?'

'Why, that the missing woman was somewhat taller than average. That on the afternoon in question, a strong wind was blowing across the Irish Sea. And that one of the search parties sent out to look for her body has discovered, or will discover, in a rural location and around twelve yards from the track, a pair of discarded boots in very good condition.'

'But, Holmes!' Dr Watson rose and took the letter from his friend's hand, as if to check it was the same document. 'You cannot possibly expect us to believe that you have discovered any of those things from the inspector's letter?'

'I don't expect you to believe anything at all at this point, my friend, and yet I'll wager I'm not far out. I think, to speed things up, a telegram is in order. Perhaps you would be good enough to wire Inspector Hughes this afternoon, Watson? And I suppose a note to Miss Mabel Love would be appropriate. As for the

others, when time allows, perhaps the usual response. I have no doubt that Flotsam here will help with the correspondence. And now some sandwiches, I think, Flotsam, if you would be so kind. And perhaps a bottle of brown ale. We have maps to look at and railway timetables to study, and I feel a thirst coming on.'

It was good to see Mr Holmes in high spirits once more, and if he occasionally mistook me for a secretary instead of a housemaid, it was an error I was more than happy to leave uncorrected. I carried the tray downstairs that day pleased that the two gentlemen were finally occupied, and content that Mrs Hudson and I would be able to get to work on the stair-rods without any accompaniment from Mr Holmes's violin.

But if I had learnt any lesson from my time in Baker Street, it was that a quiet afternoon was rarely followed by a quiet evening. It was nearly ten o'clock when our peace was shattered by a crisp, sharp rapping on the front door, and I found myself face to face with an elderly gentleman of ample proportions wearing the most extraordinary military uniform I'd ever seen, a disturbing confusion of scarlet and purple and gold, with a row of enormous medals pinned across the chest, and epaulettes so huge it looked as though he were trying to sprout wings. Behind him, in the empty street, stood an ornate carriage guarded by two footmen, their livery so colourful and exotic that they seemed to have stumbled out of a May Day pageant.

But those weren't even the first things I noticed about our caller.

The first thing I noticed was that he looked white as a sheet.