

**MRS HUDSON AND THE
BELLADONNA INHERITANCE**

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

Mrs Hudson and the Kensington Clairvoyant



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PROLOGUE

London, June 1951

It is a warm summer evening. My windows are open, and from my desk I can watch the dusk gathering in the park. I have promised to look through some papers for an old student of mine, but although it really shouldn't be, my mind is elsewhere.

This afternoon, walking home after a long and sociable lunch, I passed a still-uncleared pile of rubble where a house had once been. Growing out from between the stones, bright and defiant in the sunshine, was a little plant with silver leaves. A plant I recognised.

And now, although I have a great deal to do, my thoughts simply refuse to go where I tell them, and drift instead to another summer, another June, more than fifty years ago – when the world knew a lot less about bombs and high explosives, and I was a girl of seventeen with chores to do, hurrying homewards under a blue London sky . . .

CHAPTER ONE

It was a summer of thunderstorms – a terrible summer for drying washing – and on that particular morning the streets of London were still damp from the downpour of the previous night. Even so, the day had dawned cloudless, the skies were picture-book blue, and the sparrows nesting in the eaves above Dr Watson's bedroom were in such high spirits, exchanging a sort of loud and joyous chatter, that the doctor, had he been at home to hear it, would almost certainly have considered them a terrible nuisance. On the corner of York Street the flower girls were doing excellent business, and even the newsboys appeared to be a little more cheerful than usual as they hawked the late morning editions.

In short, it was not the sort of day when a young girl expected to see a gentleman viciously robbed outside her front door; or to find herself, a good hour before noon, mopping blood from her doorstep.

The young gentleman in question was rather a handsome one. Even before it happened, he'd caught my eye. I was making my way homewards cautiously, wary of the damp and slippery cobblestones, intent on keeping my skirts out of puddles, so it

wasn't until I was preparing to cross the road that I first noticed him. But then, when I did . . . Well, there was something striking in the way he moved along Baker Street – purposeful and confident but unhurried, with a yellow carnation in his buttonhole – something that made him stand out from the pedestrians around him. So it honestly wasn't his good looks I noticed first. At least, not *only* them. After all, a young lady does not admire strange men in the street. And I was almost certain that rule applied to housemaids, too.

But even from the opposite pavement it was difficult not to notice his balanced features, and his unruly fair hair, and his easy smile. So when I saw him pause at the front door of Mr Sherlock Holmes – when I realised that he was calling at my address – I confess I felt a little thrill of curiosity, and looked swiftly left and right, anxious for a gap in the traffic.

I was out of luck, though, for just at that moment a brewer's dray lumbered past, drawn by two weary-looking Shires, and for five or six seconds the young gentleman was obscured from view.

In those few moments everything changed, and the serenity of that morning was splintered into violence and panic and confusion.

I don't think I actually saw the cosh fall; I think I was spared that by the height of the horses and the bulk of the beer barrels. But as the final cask passed by, I saw the rest all too clearly – the young man slumping forward, two scowling men in workmen's clothes crowding in on him as he fell, their caps pulled low. Before he had even reached the ground, one of them was reaching inside his jacket, while the other helped

him downwards with two or three blows of a clenched fist. And then, before the first shouts of the passers-by, before the falling man had even come to rest, they were off at a run, swerving through the Baker Street crowds, out of sight around a corner before anyone had even begun to give chase.

I was not the first to get to him. The flow of cabs and carriages, their drivers unaware, prevented me from crossing for what seemed like an age, and by the time I did a crowd had gathered, deep enough to keep me from seeing anything but the backs of onlookers.

‘Murdered!’ I heard one man declare, his voice frothing with outrage. ‘Right under my nose! In the middle of the morning!’

‘Savages!’ a woman chimed in. ‘Animals! Brutes! Fenians!’

‘Nonsense.’ This was in a much calmer voice, and one that spoke with authority. ‘Nobody’s been murdered. The poor fellow’s a little concussed, that’s all. Look, he’s coming to.’

‘Constable’s here!’ a small boy yelped gleefully, and I turned to see the familiar figure of Constable Dobson looming behind me, muttering the obligatory, ‘Now then, what’s all this?’

The crowd parted for him the way a flotilla of small boats might part for an ocean liner – the constable was a large and imposing man, and even more so when red in the face from rushing – and I took full advantage of his arrival by slipping into his wake, so that the two of us arrived together at the scene of the crime.

By then the victim was already sitting up, supported by a very large woman in tweeds, while another lady – similarly dressed but pinker in the cheeks – fanned him energetically with a copy of *Horse & Hound*. An elderly and elaborately whiskered

gentleman was pressing a blood-stained handkerchief to the young man's forehead, and when he spoke I recognised the calm voice I'd heard before.

'Nothing too serious, Constable,' he announced. 'In fact, he's been remarkably lucky. Just a glancing blow. It's taken the skin off, and I daresay he'll have a headache for a day or two, but it looks worse than it is. Was anything taken, sir?'

In answer to this, the young man's hand moved to his jacket pocket and I saw him patting at it urgently. I could see him properly now, and even with a handkerchief obscuring much of his face, and with blood in his hair, and rather pale, he was still very pleasing to look at.

'Yes, I'm afraid so. Something important . . .'

He tailed off, and I thought perhaps he was going to faint, but the tweed lady redoubled her fanning and the whiskery gentleman, who I later discovered to be a retired police surgeon from Penge, cleared his throat.

'Better get him inside, Constable. Perhaps one of these houses . . . ?'

'Yes, sir. This young lady works here,' he added, nodding in my direction. 'Perhaps if we can get him down those steps to the kitchen door, that would be a better place to patch him up?'

And so the young man was prised from the grip of the lady in tweeds, who seemed a little reluctant to let him go, and helped down the area steps by old Dr Ferriby-Martin, with me in attendance carrying his hat and cane, while Constable Dobson remained behind to take the names of witnesses and oversee the dispersal of the crowd.

Our kitchen in Baker Street was a cool and welcoming

room of generous proportions, ruled over with a firm but not unkindly hand by Mr Sherlock Holmes's housekeeper, Mrs Hudson, a woman well known on both sides of Baker Street for her impeccable domestic standards and her sturdy common sense. Confronted with a bleeding stranger and a slightly out-of-breath medical attendant, she would have known exactly what to do, and would have done it briskly, without fuss; so you might suppose that her absence from home that morning caused me some regret. But I was a girl of seventeen coming to the aid of a very comely young man in his hour of need, and I confess I barely thought of her at all. I hastened to bring water and soap, and a clean towel, and hovered at the old doctor's elbow as he cleaned the victim's wound.

The doctor talked as he worked. 'Yes, sir, only a glancing blow . . . More a graze than a wound . . . The sort that bleeds a lot, but not too excessively . . . A fortunate escape . . .'

The young man himself said very little, apparently still a little shocked by what had befallen him. Gradually, though, the colour returned to his cheeks, and when the doctor suggested a little brandy, the patient drained it readily and declared himself much recovered.

'For which I owe thanks to you both,' he told us, looking properly at us for the first time. 'I shall be eternally grateful to you for your kindness,' he added, and favoured me with a smile. His eyes, I noticed, were a rather striking shade of blue. Before I could reply, however, Constable Dobson appeared at the kitchen door with his notebook in his hand, anxious to ask questions, and Dr Ferriby-Martin, who had finished with his patient and was drying his hands, made his excuses and left us.

‘Now, sir, these here ruffians . . .’ the constable began, without ceremony. ‘Two of them, I gather. I’ve got their descriptions here . . .’ He tapped his notebook with the blunt end of his pencil. ‘But what I’m wondering, sir, is whether you got a good look at them yourself? And whether perhaps you recognised them at all?’

With these words, he opened his notebook, licked his pencil, and waited, but the young man simply shook his head.

‘It’s all still a little unclear, Officer,’ he explained. ‘It happened very quickly . . . But I’m sure they weren’t anyone I recognised. Yes, certain. But forgive me . . . Perhaps if you were to give me a little time to regain my composure? I would be happy to report to the police station at, say, one o’clock this afternoon?’

For a moment the pencil continued to hover, but apparently Constable Dobson could see the wisdom of this. He rose ponderously, pocketing both pencil and notebook as he did so.

‘A very sensible suggestion, sir. You’ll no doubt feel a good deal more able to answer questions after a little lie-down. And I daresay the superintendent will be pleased to meet you, to hear all about it. Now, sir, if you really feel well enough to be on your way, we should probably leave Flotsam here to her chores. You can give me your details as you go.’

The young man rose hastily. ‘Yes, of course. I’ve a headache that could win prizes, but I’m sure I’ll be able to find my way back to my hotel. Flotsam, you say? Well, my thanks, Flotsam. I’d imagined my visit to Sherlock Holmes playing out rather differently, but I’m grateful for your kindness.’

‘Then you *were* calling on Mr Holmes, sir?’ I asked. ‘I

thought you were. I saw you from across the street. He's out of town, I'm afraid.'

'Then my visit would have been in vain anyway.' I saw his hand go to the pocket of his jacket. 'And there seems little point now.'

I watched them from the kitchen door as they climbed the area steps, back towards the street, Constable Dobson leading the way. When the young man reached the top of the steps he paused, and as he knelt to tighten his bootlace, I called out to him before he disappeared.

'Please, sir! You never gave me your name. Mr Holmes is bound to ask. Who should I say called?'

He smiled at me then, with the bright sky behind him and the sunshine full on his face.

'Ah, Flotsam! That was precisely the reason for my visit.' Still smiling, he touched his hat to me and added, before turning away, 'I had come to ask Mr Holmes that very question.'

By the time Mrs Hudson returned to Baker Street some half an hour later, I had removed all traces of the morning's excitements, and our doorstep was as spotless as any in the street. It was still a little before noon, and I was upstairs wondering if I had the strength to begin on Mr Holmes's study, when I heard her arrive. By the time I had wrung out my cleaning rags and made my way downstairs, she had already removed her bonnet and was rolling up her sleeves to begin work.

'Ah, Flotsam!' she greeted me. 'I trust you're feeling energetic. It seems our two gentlemen will be returning home earlier than we thought. This evening, in fact. And we've barely

made a start on the mess they left behind.'

I think I must have gasped rather loudly. 'This evening, ma'am? But I thought they were going to be gone for another two weeks at least!'

'Indeed. Mr Holmes seemed fairly sure of it, did he not?' She produced a paper slip from her apron pocket. 'But I bumped into the telegraph boy at the top of the steps, and this rather hasty communication suggests they'll be returning to London on the late afternoon train. It would seem the trawlermen have all agreed to give evidence after all, thereby saving our gentlemen the trouble of pursuing their quarry to the Faroes. Which leaves us with a great deal to do, and not very much time to do it.'

If anyone unacquainted with Mrs Hudson wished to understand why she was held in such great esteem in so many servants' halls, they could have done no better than to watch her at work that afternoon. Within twenty minutes of her arrival, notes had been written to at least half a dozen different tradesmen, and next door's boot-boy had been summoned and charged with their delivery. I had been sent out twice, once to Mrs Macfarlane's to borrow extra supplies of white vinegar, and once to ask the staff at No. 49 if they could make quite sure the ice-man called on us when he passed on his delivery round. Within an hour, our quiet, calm kitchen was a chaos of comings and goings, with deliveries appearing, tradesmen calling and all sorts of delicious comestibles piling up on the kitchen table, only to be swept swiftly away again to the cellar or the pantry, or to wherever Mrs Hudson decided was their proper and rightful place.

Yet Mrs Hudson moved through it all with her composure unruffled, never flustered, never rushed, instilling in those around her a sense of calm and order. Her substantial figure moved with surprising lightness amid the tumult, and her roundly muscled arms could heft the weightiest of boxes apparently with no effort at all. Even when she reprimanded me sternly for attempting to store the apples next to the cucumbers, there was something in her expression – perhaps even the trace of a smile – that reassured me that all would be well and that the storm would pass.

Which, of course, it did. There came a moment, a little after three o'clock, immediately after the ice-man had called, when I realised that no further deliveries were expected, and on looking around I found – to my astonishment, for I was not at all sure how it had happened – that everything else had already been stowed away, and the table had been wiped, and the kitchen was as tidy and as well-ordered as it had been six hours before.

'And now, Flotsam,' Mrs Hudson declared, once the final delivery had been safely stowed in the ice chest in the cellar, 'it's time for some well-deserved refreshment.'

So we sat together and drank big glasses of generously iced ginger cordial, and Mrs Hudson got out the magnificent round of Cheshire cheese, and a jar of the hawthorn chutney sent to us by the housekeeper at Beaulieu, and I was finally able to tell her about the events of the morning – a story she heard in silence until I repeated the young man's final remark.

'And that is *all* he said, Flotsam? To leave no name of any sort would seem a little ill-mannered, would it not?'

‘Ah, but remember, ma’am,’ I told her, quick to leap to the young man’s defence, ‘he *had* received a blow to the head. And he was terribly nice about it. Quite charming in fact.’

Mrs Hudson acknowledged this with a nod but made no reply, instead rising to fetch down a jar of piccalilli.

‘I bumped into Scraggs this morning,’ she said, apparently changing the subject. ‘He sends his regards, and says he hopes to call. It’s been a week or two since we’ve seen anything of him here, hasn’t it? He’s been spending a great deal of time getting things in order with old Mr Trevelyan. But it all seems to be sorted now.’

She settled herself next to me, and helped me to a little more cheese. ‘So I imagine he’ll want us to help him celebrate. And of course neither of us would grudge him his good fortune, now would we?’

‘Oh, no, ma’am!’ I exclaimed, horrified that she might think it even for a moment. ‘I *am* happy for him. It’s just . . .’

I paused. It was difficult to explain. It’s *still* difficult to explain.

You see, I’d known Scraggs since I was a little girl, when he was a boy not much older than myself selling vegetables from a barrow. It had been Scraggs who came across me one foggy night, starving and barely clothed, cowering in the gutter, hiding from a man whose face still troubled my dreams. It had been he who brought me, shivering and wretched, to Mrs Hudson – a decision that changed my life, and that saw me grow, in time, from a frightened and homeless orphan into a really fairly passable housemaid.

But it wasn’t just gratitude that bound me to Scraggs. You

see, although he was quite often teasing me, and was sometimes terribly cheeky to Mrs Hudson, I can't deny he had grown into a rather nice young man. He was often dropping in or popping around, and I looked forward to his visits, and to the walks we took together around the Serpentine. Sometimes, when my chores for the day were completed, I'd find him waiting for me at the top of the steps. We mostly didn't have a plan. We'd walk and talk, and if we got as far as the park, we'd watch the ducks. Sometimes – quite often – he'd take my hand as we walked.

From his early days he proved himself terribly good at buying and selling things, progressing from barrow, to cart, to market stall and finally, risking everything, to a shop. Not just any shop either. With the help of a substantial investment from old Mr Trevelyan, who himself had started out selling Shrewsbury biscuits from a barrel on the corner of Cork Street, Scraggs had secured the lease on dilapidated premises in Bridle Lane and had revived them so successfully that Trevelyan's had quickly become a worthy rival to such grand establishments as Ostermann's and Throok's.

Which, of course, was all very good, and I'd always been overjoyed by his successes. But now old Mr Trevelyan, whose health was declining and who had no other family, was planning to make over the whole of Trevelyan's to his protégé, the only condition being that Scraggs should take his name. It was a remarkable piece of good fortune.

And in addition to that, for several weeks, ever since it had become clear that he was the old man's intended heir and that the future of the business lay entirely in his hands, Scraggs had been courted most assiduously by none other than Mr

Augustus Clairwood, the grocery tycoon, who was proposing to invest a considerable sum in order to marry his own business interests with Trevelyan's. Which, obviously, was also excellent news.

It was certainly no business of mine if Mr Clairwood had a niece, one who played the piano and spoke French and was fair and rather lovely. I'd seen her once, in Hyde Park, very pretty under a parasol. She was helping a small boy who had fallen over. Gently, with a warm smile. She seemed nice.

It wasn't Scraggs's fault if his path crossed hers a great deal, given his frequent invitations to Mr Clairwood's mansion in South Audley Street. After all, I was quite sure – had always been sure – that *my* hand was the hand he most wanted to hold.

Almost totally sure.

So when Mrs Hudson spoke of his good fortune, I hastened to reassure her that I was delighted for him. And I really was. If I didn't always show it properly, I told her, well, hot weather and thunderstorms often made me feel a little out of sorts.

She received this explanation with neither a nod nor a shake of the head, only perhaps the slightest twitch of one eyebrow, then reminded me that our tasks for the day were far from over.

'Come, Flottie. We still have the gentlemen's study to tackle, and it's going to be quite a challenge to know where to start. Those owl pellets can probably be thrown away now, and so can the old tulip bulbs, and it's a good six months since Mr Holmes submitted his report to the Sultan, so that pile of astrakhan hats should probably move to the attic before it starts attracting moths.

'Oh, and Flotsam,' she added, as she rose from the table,

‘we need to have everything ready, and the two gentlemen settled down comfortably, by half past eight at the latest. Mr Rumbelow, the solicitor, sent a note around earlier, saying he intends to call on them then. He seems very worried about something.’

She paused. ‘His note wasn’t entirely clear. But it seems to be something to do with donkeys.’