MRS HUDSON AND THE SPIRITS' CURSE

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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No book can give exact laws and regulations which will be found sensible to every house; but common-sense rules apply to every household in all stations of life.

Mrs Beeton's Every-Day Cookery and Housekeeping Book

PROLOGUE

It was Scraggs the grocer's boy, taking pity on my impoverished circumstances and the collapse of my spirits, who made the introduction that was to change my life. It was to lead me into so many adventures that my life came to be as thick with excitement as the street that night was thick with fog.

Looking back to that fateful evening, it is hard to believe I could ever have run so fast. Nowadays my frame creaks a little as I shuffle between the piles of papers in my study, and if I venture out to lecture at the Institute I must allow one of my students to escort me home, in case, on the way across the park, I should require an arm to lean upon.

But that night I ran like the wind – or, at any rate, like the stinking breath that passed for wind in those foul, dark, harsh backstreets. Clad in rags, with no long skirts to hamper me, I ran until the blood that pounded in my ears began to fill my mouth, until my hollow chest could breathe no more and my legs gave way beneath me. And when I could run no further, I crawled to the darkest doorway I could find and collapsed there, holding my breath and listening for my pursuers.

I expected footsteps. Young Smale's boots, Mr Fogarty's heels,

the laughing clatter of the footmen, confident of dragging home their prey. But nothing came. Somewhere beyond the alleyway there was a busy thoroughfare; carriages and hawkers and the reassuring bustle of a London street. Nothing sinister. Yet I felt no elation. For that minute, for that moment, I was free, but for how long? They say the caged bird forgets the sky; I knew only that I was freezing, penniless and alone.

At the orphan school I had been warned to be a good girl or suffer the consequences. But the months that followed had quickly taught me that virtue came at a price, a price paid in misery and hunger. Which is why, when Scraggs first saw me, I had ventured out of my doorway refuge and was in the process of stealing a cabbage from his ramshackle barrow. In the rags I wore I had nowhere to conceal an object the size of a cabbage, even a cabbage as small and blackened as the sorry item I had set my sights on. My only hope of success lay in flight and in the prayer that I might lose my pursuer in the crowds and the darkness of London's tangled streets.

But exhaustion had slowed my reactions. The cabbage was fumbled, my attempt at escape short-lived and the impact of Scraggs's diving leap dramatic and final. It took my breath away, thumping me into the gutter so hard that only the street's daily delivery of filth and rotten vegetables came between my ribs and instant fracture. And if the physical impact was dramatic, the impact on my spirits was greater. I lay with my face pressed into the rotten-smelling mud, the pain echoing through me, and found myself utterly crushed. Crushed not just by Scraggs's frame, but by the relentless harshness of the world around me and by the absence of any hope that anything would ever be any different from how it had become. Instead of struggling

in Scraggs's grip, I laid down my head and began to cry. Every bruise and knock, all the cold and hunger, seemed suddenly to dissolve into tears. I cried so hard that even after Scraggs had returned his cabbage to the barrow, I still made no attempt to escape from the place he'd pitched me. Gingerly, as if reluctant to touch anything so filth-encrusted, Scraggs rolled me over with the toe of his boot and took a suspicious look at what there was to see.

'Crikey,' he exclaimed. 'It's no surprise you ain't up to thievin'. You're in a worse state than a fisherman's ferret, an' no mistake.'

There followed a brief pause while he continued to look me up and down as if embarrassed as to what to do next. Ignoring him, I lay with my cheek on the rotten end of a rotten turnip and wept for all my life wasn't worth.

'Crikey,' said Scraggs again.

I can't recall how long we continued in this manner but I remember Scraggs levering me upright and resting me, now curled into a ball of defensive misery, against the black brickwork of the alley where my attempted larceny had taken place.

'Now, less of that,' he urged. 'What's to be so scared of? I ain't goin' to eat yer. Too skinny, you see.' He laughed, but I was beyond comfort.

'There's a man,' I told him between sobs. 'Looking for me. I can't run anymore.'

'A man?' Scraggs looked around. We were alone in the darkness.

'From one of the big houses. A servant. He locked me up. He's going to . . . He wants to . . .'

I broke off for want of words to tell my woe. Scraggs just looked bewildered.

'Tell you what,' he suggested suddenly. 'I think you should meet Mrs Hudson.'

He said it with such certainty I felt sure I should know what he was talking about. But who or what Mrs Hudson might be I had no idea. It says something of the state to which I was reduced that when Scraggs commanded 'Wait here', all thought of further flight was gone. He would return and something would happen to me and I didn't care what. All that mattered was that other people would decide it and I wouldn't any longer have to try to lift myself out of the cold, reeking mud.

Scraggs reappeared some few minutes later and by a wave of his thumb signalled for me to follow. He led me down a sequence of alleys and snickleways until we emerged into a broad street where gas lamps inflated the fog with their yellow breath and hansom cabs cut slippery pathways through the mud. Even at that late hour the streets were noisy with hawkers' cries, and the newsboys were calling the latest developments of a mysterious Brixton murder, but such mysteries meant nothing to me then. Around me the house fronts were higher than the fog, and it was to one of these that I was led.

Still following Scraggs, I descended obediently into a dark area below the level of the street where the gaslight falling obliquely onto a white apron suggested a bulky figure awaiting me.

This was Mrs Hudson and never had I met a more striking woman. She was large in dimensions, broad across her shoulders and straight down her sides in a way that spoke of immense strength. Yet there seemed to be no spare flesh on her, and her arms, sticking bare out of her apron and folded across a

formidable bosom, were large and roundly muscled. Her face was also round, with a chin just resisting the temptation to double, yet her eyes and nose, set beneath a constantly furrowed brow, were rather more hawkish than otherwise, combining to produce an effect of shrewd interrogation. It was just such a look that she turned on me when I had been ushered unprotesting into the cavernous interior of a darkly warm kitchen.

'Well, child,' she boomed as she prodded me towards the glowing stove and began to wipe at my face with a damp cloth. 'Scraggs here, who is a good lad and generally truthful, tells me you are in a poor state. Out with your story and we'll see what's to be done.'

It may have been the note of authority, or perhaps a vein of kindness in her voice that I detected under the surface granite, but I found myself doing exactly what she asked, telling her the full story of my years in the orphanage, of my positions since that time and of all the misfortunes that had befallen me. She said little, save for the occasional question darted at me from under her dark frown.

'So this fellow knew you were an orphan, did he?'

'Yes, ma'am. I told him, ma'am. He was so kind, you see. I thought him the kindest person I'd ever met. I caught his eye when I was doing the steps at my first house, ma'am.'

'And where was that, girl?'

'At the Fitzgeralds' house in Berkeley Street, ma'am.'

'The Fitzgeralds', eh? That young wife knows nothing of what goes on below stairs. They should never have sent you there. Go on!'

So I continued, stumbling often, especially when I came to my last days in service, and to the brutalities I had suffered there.

'You see, when I went with him as he suggested, ma'am, he was suddenly different. There was no more kindness once I got to the new house. When the cook and the boot boy beat me, when the footmen were always grabbing at me, pulling at my skirts, he laughed and let them have their way. I was kept indoors, ma'am, and the area door was kept locked.'

'And let me guess . . .' Mrs Hudson had risen and had begun to fold a pile of laundry, but her attention to my story never wavered. 'It was after a few weeks of this treatment that he put to you his proposition? Suggested a way of escaping your tormentors?'

'Yes, ma'am. But I wouldn't say yes, ma'am. I hated him by then. I hated them all, and I told him so. Told him he was loathsome and disgusting, and called him a slug. Said I'd rather die first. That was when he locked me up.'

The very faintest trace of a smile seemed to play across Mrs Hudson's lips.

'Good for you, girl. And your escape . . . ?'

I hesitated. It was still almost impossible to believe.

'He came to me when I was sleeping, ma'am. Unlocked the cellar door and ordered me out of bed. Told me we were alone. They'd taken away my uniform, ma'am. These rags were all I had, and I was so cold. It would have been easy to go with him. But I wasn't having that. And so I kicked him, ma'am.'

Mrs Hudson's eyebrow rose slightly.

'Kicked him, girl?'

'Yes, ma'am. Well, it was my knee mostly, so not really a kick. I got him in the . . . in that part where a gentleman is most easily hurt, ma'am.'

Another smile, rather broader this time.

'I'm extremely pleased to hear it, girl. And you were able to make your escape?'

'Yes, ma'am.'

I told her then of my flight through the pantry, of the area door miraculously unlocked, then of my panicked plunge into the darkest, most confusing alleyways. When at last my tale came to an end, Mrs Hudson said nothing for a short while, continuing to fold laundry with her face set in thought.

'And how old are you now, girl?'

'Twelve, ma'am.'

'And what's your name?'

'Flotsam, ma'am.'

'Flotsam, child?'

'That's the name they gave me at the orphanage, ma'am. Mostly they call me Flottie.'

'Well, Flottie, there's no denying it's a sorry tale. A very sorry tale indeed. The man Fogarty you've talked about, the butler whose particular ways caused you to flee, is already known to me.' She exchanged a meaningful glance with Scraggs. 'Let us just say that our paths have crossed. That happens in service. Not everyone you meet below stairs is always as honest as they should be. Indeed sometimes it seems there is no cruelty, no corruption, no exploitation of the innocent in this whole teeming city in which Mr Fogarty would not be prepared to lend a hand. He does it for the pleasure of it, you see, not out of want, for he is a rich man nowadays and has no need to play the butler.'

She paused again and her eyes moved to the glow of the fire.

'Mr Fogarty is everything I despise, Flotsam, so your tale pleases me greatly. I like to hear of someone standing up to

him. But Fogarty is not one to tolerate defiance, nor to forgive anyone for such a well-aimed kick. So if our paths are to cross his again, young lady, we had better be ready for him.'

'*We*, ma'am?' I was struggling to keep up.

'Of course, Flotsam. Where else would you go? You've no references, no skills, not even any proper clothes. And there will not be many employers who consider kneeing a butler below the belt buckle an acceptable proof of character. So all in all I think you'd be much better staying here. I have need of a scullery maid and a helper. You have need of a good position and a warm bath. I think we shall get on very well, young Flottie. As soon as Scraggs gets back about his business we shall get you out of what you're wearing and into something that bears a closer resemblance to clothing.'

And that is how I found myself as scullery maid to Mrs Hudson, a housekeeper whose fierceness and fairness were legendary in every servants' hall I ever entered. Under her watchful demeanour I learnt to scrub and polish and wax and shine. I learnt to sweep, and curtsy like a real maid, and to answer 'yes, sir' and 'no, ma'am' when spoken to upstairs, instead of blushing and stammering and trembling at the edges.

My education didn't stop there. When I could show that I had mastered my basic duties, Mrs Hudson immediately demanded that I learnt the duties of others. Much to my terror, I was apprenticed to Mrs Siskin, the cook, a silent woman and a Methodist, with the instruction to observe the rudiments of her skills. For Mrs Hudson made it very plain that she thought a girl such as myself, with no family and no education, should at the very least be able to tell a blancmange from a jelly.

With similar force of character, Mrs Hudson decided that I

must learn to read. A series of tearful encounters in the butler's pantry ensued wherein Swordsmith, the kindly, ineffectual butler, endeavoured to demonstrate the difference between vowels and verbs. After three or four weeks it was debatable whether Swordsmith or myself was the more disheartened, but Mrs Hudson insisted and her will carried all before it.

'Reading and writing, young Flottie, means you'll never end up in the gutter. It's all right for Scraggs and his type to go without. They're boys and this world favours boys. There will always be something out there for Scraggs. But for girls, livings aren't so easy to come by. Anything in the way of learning that comes our way is something that needs to be grabbed with both hands. And with our teeth too if we can reach it.'

So Swordsmith and I were required to persevere and, to the equal surprise of us both, after some months of desperation I suddenly found the strange marks on the page forming themselves into decipherable groups. Soon I had outgrown the exhausted Swordsmith and by the time I was fourteen there wasn't a book in the street I wouldn't have been confident of reading aloud. *The Odyssey* was almost learnt by heart and even Mrs Beeton held no mysteries.

It was at about this time, when I had just begun to believe that I was truly safe from the predatory streets outside, that everything changed. The master of the house died by his own hand when confronted with news of a decisive typhoon off Formosa. That meant the break-up of our whole establishment, amidst many tears and bravely gulped farewells. Mrs Siskin moved to a household in Brighton, a town she had been told had a great need of Methodists. Swordsmith, after some vacillation, entered the service of the young Lord Tregavin

who shortly afterwards set off on foot for Mongolia. And Mrs Hudson continued to supervise the closing up of the house as though no fear for the future had ever entered her mind.

It was a night in November, and I was sewing by the kitchen fire for almost the last time, when Mr Rumbelow, the family solicitor, appeared at the kitchen door and asked if he might speak a word with Mrs Hudson.

'Yes, sir, of course, sir,' I spluttered, leaping to my feet. 'Mrs Hudson has just stepped out, but will be back any moment now. Shall I ask her to come up, sir?'

But Mr Rumbelow, it appeared, although hesitant in his manner, had no intention of retreating from the kitchen. His eye was resting on a decanter of dark liquid that Mrs Hudson had placed on the shelf of the dresser only a few hours before.

'Perhaps, child, if I may . . .' He indicated an empty chair by the fire. 'Never one to stand on ceremony, you see . . . Perhaps wait here . . . Wouldn't want to miss out . . . The Mulgrave old tawny! Remarkable! So, yes, perhaps a seat by the fire . . .'

'I'm sure, sir, that if you would care for a glass . . . ?'

I moved to bring him the decanter, but he seemed suddenly overcome by great shyness.

'No, of course, I mustn't . . . Most certainly not. Not without . . . Well, perhaps just a small glass . . .'

And with that he settled himself beside the fire and watched with something almost like rapture as I placed the port on a salver, along with one of the glasses that Mrs Hudson had laid out in advance. And yet, for all his eagerness, he did not rush to drink. Indeed he cradled his glass in his palm for so long that I began to think his interest lay purely in its colour

and aroma. And when he finally raised his arm, his sip was so small that it seemed barely to moisten his lip. Nevertheless he let out a sigh of such pleasure – a sort of blissful, peaceful joy – that I could be in no doubt as to his satisfaction.

'Yes, indeed. A remarkable wine,' he concluded, addressing this verdict more to the fire than to me. 'A very fine wine indeed. Did you know, Flotsam,' he went on, raising his voice and turning towards me, 'that there are barely a dozen bottles of this in London? It is impossible to obtain at any price.'

'Is that so, sir?' I was not, perhaps, experienced enough in these matters to understand the awe in his voice. 'Then how does there come to be a bottle here?'

Mr Rumbelow looked surprised. 'Why, Sir Reginald Birdlip has a virtual monopoly on the remaining supply, and he sends Mrs Hudson a bottle every year. Has she never told you?'

'No, sir.' Mrs Hudson had told me many things, but very few of them related to her previous employment. Of her views on wax polish and grease stains and shoddy fishmongers I knew a great deal. Of her past, nothing. 'Sir Reginald Who, sir?'

'Sir Reginald Birdlip, of the Gloucestershire Birdlips. Mrs Hudson was in service with his uncle at the time of the Italian loans affair. Saved Sir Reginald from certain ruin, she did. Of course she was still only a parlour maid then, and I was a very callow young fellow myself. But when she came to me with her observations there was no doubting her sharpness. Had she not understood the significance of the dust accumulating beneath the stair-rods, the fraud might never have come to light. Sir Reginald pretty much owes her everything.'

'I see, sir,' I replied, although in truth I saw very little. 'I don't think Mrs Hudson has ever mentioned it.'

'Of course, after that she couldn't remain with the Birdlips,' the good solicitor continued. 'Too awkward. She simply knew too much. I was lucky enough to be able to point her towards a rather better position, where she rapidly rose through the ranks. And then of course young Bertie Codlington disappeared from Codlington Hall, and only Mrs Hudson was able to offer any explanation. Had she not realised the importance of the half-eaten omelette and the train ticket for Bodmin, we would never have discovered the bungalow near Scarborough, and Bertie would most certainly have committed bigamy with the under-cook.'

Mr Rumbelow shook his head admiringly as he recalled it.

'And so things went on, Flotsam. Of course you'll have heard most of the stories already. And it's been my great privilege, down the years, to have assisted her from time to time. Indeed it was I who found this post for her, when she told me she wanted a little peace and quiet. That was just after the affair at Baltham Hall, you see. Lord Bilborough never knew who rescued the pearls, but Rothebury knew, and so did Rochester and Lord Arlington, and they all wanted her to come to them. But she's never one for the limelight, you know. She likes to keep to the shadows.'

'Indeed I do, sir, indeed I do.' The voice startled us both, coming as it did from the actual shadows by the back door. Mrs Hudson had let herself in so quietly that neither of us had been aware of her presence. 'And if you please, sir, you won't go filling Flotsam's head with all those stories. Flotsam is a bright girl but she has a lot of learning ahead of her, and she'll learn all the quicker if she's not distracted by nonsense of that sort.'

'Er, quite so, Mrs Hudson.' Mr Rumbelow coughed apologetically. 'Yet you cannot deny that over the years your

position in some of our great houses has made you privy to some remarkable goings-on. She is too modest, Flotsam,' he concluded. 'Always a good deal too modest.'

'I see you have made a start on the Mulgrave, sir.' Mrs Hudson's voice was stern but I knew her well enough by then to detect the warmth in it. 'Is it to your satisfaction?'

'Why, madam . . .' Mr Rumbelow seemed genuinely lost for words. 'It is . . . it is everything you told me and more. When you told me you planned to open a bottle . . . Why, such felicity, Mrs Hudson, such perfect felicity!'

'Yes, sir, I thought you would enjoy it. And of course as my time here comes to an end, it is I who should be thanking you. I asked you to find me a quiet place free from scandal and skulduggery, and this position has been exactly that. Working here has been a pleasure, hasn't it, Flotsam?'

I bobbed my agreement, and Mr Rumbelow allowed himself another sip of the port. Thus fortified, he took a deep breath.

'Which brings me, of course, to my reason for seeking this interview. For it was not, you understand, solely with the intention of relieving you of your old tawny. Mrs Hudson, it has come to my attention that you have yet to find yourself a new position and your tenure here will end all too soon. Now, I am aware that a woman of your talents, for there is never a household run in quite the way that yours is run . . . As I say, a woman of your talents cannot be short of offers of, er, employment, from any number of quarters. But if I could offer any assistance . . .'

'Go on, sir,' encouraged Mrs Hudson, 'your advice is always welcome, although I have a small sum put away and a mind to wait for the post that suits me.'

'Quite. Just as you say, Mrs Hudson. Quite so. But in the last few days I have received a most earnest missive from Lord Arlington renewing his previous offers. I need hardly tell you . . .'

'His Lordship's good opinion is most gratifying, sir, but that house of his at Egremont . . . A most unappealing edifice, and inconvenient in every way. No wonder the soup there is never properly warm.'

'Yes, of course.' Mr Rumbelow allowed his forehead to pucker a little. 'I did indicate to his lordship that I thought your agreement unlikely . . . But if Egremont does not appeal, how about Woolstanton? Or Rothebury Manor? I know you would be welcomed with great enthusiasm at either establishment. Or failing those, I believe a discreet approach to Lady Carmichael . . .'

But Mrs Hudson's face remained impassive as a series of great names were listed to her and, when Mr Rumbelow tailed off, the housekeeper reached into her apron and produced a neat square of paper.

'The truth is, sir, that while the positions you mention are all very well, there is a particular post that I have in mind. I believe this address is familiar to you?'

She handed the paper to Mr Rumbelow with great dignity, but it was very clear from the solicitor's reaction that the address she had given him was not one he had anticipated. His eyebrow twitched, then twitched again, and when he raised his eyes there was something approaching alarm in them.

'Why, yes, Mrs Hudson. I handled this lease myself only a few days ago. The new tenants are two gentlemen, medical men of a sort, who have just taken these rooms in Baker Street. And it is true that they do indeed wish to engage a housekeeper. But I must tell you at once, Mrs Hudson, and in the most emphatic

terms, that the position would be very different from those you are used to. It is but a pair of gentlemen in rooms who require someone to keep their little establishment in order. The gentlemen will mostly dine out, but there would be no cook to prepare what they may require in terms of breakfast or luncheon. I fear that side of things would all devolve to the housekeeper and whatever help she may have.'

He shook his head again and almost shuddered, as if appalled at the idea being put to him.

'Now, I need hardly tell you, Mrs Hudson, that such a post would be very far beneath those to which you are accustomed. Oh dear, yes, very far indeed. And to be honest with you, the gentlemen concerned are very far from being your usual gentlemen. They have certain requirements of their domestic surroundings that are very far from orthodox. Yes indeed. Very, very far. One of the gentlemen mentioned that the housekeeper he was seeking must have no aversion to blood.'

I detected one of Mrs Hudson's eyebrows rise very slightly above the horizontal, but she said nothing.

'That is not to say,' the lawyer continued hastily, 'that there is anything in the least bit ghoulish about the gentlemen in question. They come with the most impeccable references. One indeed has recently covered himself in glory in Afghanistan. But given their unique requirements, I feel certain they will struggle to fill the position, even though they are willing to agree the most attractive terms with the individual they consider suitable. Quite enormously attractive, in fact. But, Mrs Hudson,' he continued, lowering his voice, 'you must see that such a position could not be for you.'

'Blood, you say, sir?'

'Er, blood, Mrs Hudson. But in vials. Always in vials, I am absolutely assured.'

'And what else, sir?'

'There was, I believe, some mention of bones. And indeed various organs, but always, I am told, safely stored in jars. And of certain artefacts from foreign parts that may be considered a little morbid by our modern society. One of the gentlemen mentioned that there would also be visitors of all descriptions arriving at irregular hours; not to mention various experiments of a chemical nature. Some playing of the violin may also take place, I believe. And the gentlemen stressed that they wished to appoint someone with a rational mind and a keen understanding. A self-defeating aspiration, I fear,' concluded the lawyer, shaking his head, 'for anyone possessed of either would surely see that this was a position to avoid at any cost.'

Mrs Hudson's eyebrow trembled for the briefest of moments. Then she rose to her feet and began to refold the laundry in a way suggestive of deep thought.

'You interest me strangely, sir,' she said at last. 'It is not, as you say, the sort of position I would usually contemplate. But I am sure the gentlemen would also be requiring a maid like young Flotsam here?'

Mr Rumbelow looked momentarily disconcerted but then nodded slowly.

'Well, indeed, Mrs Hudson. I am sure they must. And if you are really serious . . . Well, I'm sure Flottie here would be admirably suited to the gentlemen's needs.'

'And no doubt on similarly generous terms?'

'Well, Mrs Hudson, if you really are determined to pursue this strange fancy . . . As I say, if you are so determined, then,

yes, I'm sure the gentleman would wish to recognise Flotsam's unique worth.'

Mrs Hudson folded the last piece of linen with a flourish.

'Very well, Mr Rumbelow. You may inform Mr Sherlock Holmes that he has my permission to call.'

What took place when the gentleman did call, and just what passed between them, was something to which I was never a party. But on returning home on the evening of the following day, I was passed on the steps by a gentleman ascending. He paused for a moment to look at me and I was greatly struck by his restless, inquisitive demeanour. His features were not unusually defined, though many since have described them so. But the movement of his eyes as they passed over me in exacting scrutiny gave a great impression of restlessness, as if exposed to the winds of many different moods.

'You must be Florence,' he concluded, his examination complete.

'Flotsam, if you please, sir.'

'Precisely!' he exclaimed, beginning once again to ascend the steps with an animal swiftness. 'We shall all do very nicely!' were the last words I heard before he vanished into the fog.

And in that way began a whole new existence. The next morning we said goodbye to our familiar basement and were instead marvelling at the piles of strange boxes and mysterious cases that had been sent on to Baker Street. I confess that as I wandered among them like an Israelite among the Pyramids I was subject to a growing curiosity about the strange gentlemen who possessed such exotic personal effects. Next to a large upright packing case the size of a wardrobe lay a small red chest

marked *Poisons*. Beside it was an even smaller box marked *Hair: Northern* and another, *Hair: Asiatic*. Next to the fireplace was an old trunk, inscribed *Various: Strangulation, Asphyxiation, Mesmerism*, which, when moved, revealed the most thrilling of all – a flat case no thicker than a Bible bearing the legend *Blood: Human.*

Mrs Hudson did little to put an end to my ferocious curiosity as she unpacked the various domestic implements that had been sent on by Mr Rumbelow's office according to a lengthy list she had composed the night before.

'Bless you, Flottie, I have scarcely met Mr Holmes and I know very little of the man. Our conversation was confined to my telling him a little bit about myself and what he could expect from me. He strikes me as the kind of man who may benefit from a mite of frankness. Dr Watson, of course, I have yet to meet.'

'And Mr Holmes is a medical man too, is he not?'

'I can't say that he is, Flottie. In fact I understand his interests lie in quite a different direction.'

'Yes, ma'am, it's just that Mr Rumbelow said they were *both* medical men. And from what I can tell, many of Mr Holmes's books are medical books. And he has cases of instruments like I've seen through the windows of the hospital. And many of his cases have markings saying *From the College of Surgeons*, and such like. And the boy from Mr Rumbelow's office who came to check on the deliveries told me that he had heard for certain that Dr Watson and Mr Holmes had met in a hospital.'

Mrs Hudson paused in her unpacking and lowered herself gently onto a box marked *Garments: Old Crones and Naval Officers*.

'Flotsam,' she said, drawing me towards her, 'you're a bright

girl and I'm delighted to say so. There are too many people who will tell you that it is not your place to speculate on things that don't concern you, but I'll have none of that. Where would we be if no one had ever had the sense to speculate a little? And how are we to know what concerns us if we don't do a little investigation first? The older I get, the more I realise that there's very little that passes in this whole heaving city and beyond that doesn't concern us all in one way or another. For if good, decent people don't keep their wits about them, then it is the likes of Fogarty who will benefit.

'So let me give you some advice, young Flottie. At your age I was like you, seeing everything, hearing everything, always looking for the facts beneath things so I could put them together in a way that made sense. Well, Flottie, I've come to understand that in this world facts are very largely used to keep the likes of us in our places. Now I've got nothing against that. I like my place plenty well enough and I'm not looking to move into anyone else's. But I've grown to know that if you start letting facts cloud your judgement you'll spend most of your life being wrong for all the right reasons. No, Flottie, take my advice and learn to heed that little voice inside you that tells you what's right even when all the facts get in the way.'

She stirred from the packing case.

'Now that's enough lecturing, and don't you get the idea that I think it's honest behaviour to go peeking into packing cases that belong to others. If I just went by facts, I'd have clipped your ear and turned you out by now. But right now I need you to unpack the linen. The gentlemen will be here tomorrow night and they'll be expecting the place to be straighter than a sergeant major's trousers.'

But the gentlemen arrived much sooner than we expected. I was making up the beds and looking forward to the bit of bread and cheese that we had brought for supper when I heard Mrs Hudson exclaim, 'My goodness, Mr Holmes, what a shock you gave me! We weren't expecting you till this hour tomorrow.'

A voice I recognised from the previous evening replied, 'Apologies, Mrs Hudson. I fear that Watson and I make a science out of the unexpected. So anxious are we to get down to some serious study in the peace of our own rooms that nothing would deter us from altering our plans and proceeding here at once. Let me introduce the excellent Dr Watson. And where is the inestimable, er, Flottie?'

At that I was called in to perform a curtsy that did Mrs Hudson proud. Despite the proliferation of boxes, Mrs Hudson had created a semblance of order in the principle room, soon known to us all as the study, where the two gentleman were now standing; where, over the years, they were to interview so many visitors and pass so many distinguished hours. It was not a large room but had a good window, curtained now with soft dark drapes, and below it a solid dining table. In the centre of the room, the armchairs faced a welcoming fireplace; behind them a door opened onto a narrow corridor, at the end of which lay the stairs down to the street door and our kitchen; while the gentlemen's bedrooms were gained through a door in the fourth wall. The decoration of the main room was so contrived that by day it was airy and practical but by night the walls seemed closer, the ceiling lower and the space between them dark and comfortable like a cave on a stormy night. In the lamplight, Mr Holmes seemed slightly softer, less lean and angular than before. Dr Watson was a kindly looking man,

though not perhaps in the best of health. He mumbled some warm words and then expressed his intention to lie down for a few moments before supper.

'Supper, sir?' Mrs Hudson's eyebrow turned upwards and twitched dangerously. 'Surely you gentlemen will be dining out tonight? There's not a mouthful of food in the house, I'm afraid, sir.'

'Fear not, Mrs Hudson,' Mr Holmes chuckled jovially, 'anticipating just such an eventuality, I took the precaution on the very day we secured the rooms of ordering some foodstuffs to be delivered immediately. And that, if I am not very much mistaken, is the very box, there in the corner beneath Watson's collection of surprising Oriental art works. It will be the labour of an instant for me to transport it to the kitchen and I'm sure we can then prevail upon you to see us towards a little supper.'

It wasn't until we were alone in the kitchen that I dared look at Mrs Hudson's face. To my surprise, instead of indignation there was a certain resigned amusement.

'Well, Flottie,' she sighed with the suspicion of a smile, 'we took this position because it interested us to do so. And I can see that the gentlemen aren't going to disappoint.'

She was halted by a swift knock at the kitchen door, followed in an instant by the entry of Mr Holmes. Our previous employers had never been tolerated in Mrs Hudson's domestic demesne but at Baker Street things were different from the start. The kitchen there was, for me, the best room in the house, warm and safe whether full of angled morning sunshine or lit only by a flicker from the range. And indeed through the years to come, when Dr Watson was out or resting or keeping his room after one of their disagreements, Mr Holmes

was often to be found beside our fire with a bottle or two of brown ale, listening avidly to Mrs Hudson's explanations of various domestic mysteries. It was, I think, a side of him that Dr Watson never really saw; perhaps it was a side for which the public wasn't ready.

But this time he was here on more important matters.

'Well, Mrs Hudson, I trust that the few things I sent along will prove adequate for a simple repast?'

'Mr Holmes, just when was it that you agreed to take these rooms?'

'At ten minutes after eleven on the morning of the 22nd,' he replied.

'That would be two weeks ago, Mr Holmes.'

'Fifteen days, to be precise.'

'And are you aware what effect fifteen days may have on a box of meat and vegetables? Even one which appears to have been thrown together by someone under the influence of strong drink?'

'Indeed I am, Mrs Hudson. I have had cause to conduct a detailed study into rates of decay of various foodstuffs under a variety of conditions. The results have proved invaluable on several occasions.'

'Well on this occasion the results have proved something of a mess, Mr Holmes.' Mrs Hudson began to produce an array of vegetables from the box, all of them showing very clear signs of decomposition. An uncomfortable smell began to circulate around the room.

Mr Holmes picked up the remains of a parsnip, now mostly pulp and squashed almost flat.

'Fascinating!' he declared, looking at it closely. 'From the

shape to which this has been reduced one could make accurate assumptions about the shapes of the foodstuffs stored close to it, as well as accurate estimates of their sizes and relative densities. Although I would have to concede, Mrs Hudson, that these items are uniformly unenticing. I may perhaps have failed to apply my knowledge in these matters to the practicalities of the domestic arts. Is there anything to be done?'

'Look at it like this, sir.' Mrs Hudson was now engaged in rooting out and discarding an extravagant selection of unrelated comestibles. 'When we have discarded the inedible, what remains, however unlikely, will have to be dinner.'

Mr Holmes paused as though struck by an important thought.

'Do you know, Mrs Hudson, I believe you may have something there.'

No one ever said Mrs Hudson wasn't the woman to rise to an occasion and by eight o'clock there was a distinctly homely feel to our new quarters. Dr Watson and Mr Holmes, the latter suddenly wrapped in thought, were settled among their packing cases making a healthy supper of bread, cheese, a braised bird we had sent out for and a bottle of burgundy. A much greater air of order prevailed in the kitchen where, the day's undertakings completed, Mrs Hudson and I were sitting quietly by the fire, watching the restful excitement of the small blue flames licking through a shovelful of fresh coal. Mrs Hudson was drinking a glass of the old Madeira that Mr Rumbelow had thought to send.

'You know, Flottie, those two gentlemen are innocents. They need a pair like us who are versed in the ways of the world to see that they come to no harm. And we'll see some excitement in

the process, make no mistake. As I've always said . . .'

But she was interrupted by a flurry of sharp raps on the street door, an urgent, imperious knock that burst through our contented calm like a locomotive through fog. At a signal from Mrs Hudson, I hurried to answer. Fumbling with the bolts I became aware of the insidious cold outside, stealing under the door with a frosty menace. And as I swung the door open, I was confronted by a sight more heart-stoppingly chilling than any freezing night. In front of me towered a figure dressed in black, swathed in a cape so dark its edges seemed of the same substance as the night. He wore on his head not a hat, but a soft dark hood that set most of his face in shadow. But not enough to hide from me the cold silver scar that ran from beneath one ear to just beneath his eye. And where his eye should have been, no eye at all, just a deep, monstrous shadow.

Before I could compose myself enough to scream, something was thrust into my hand and the spectre had stepped backwards into the waiting night.

By the thin light from the windows, I could make out what I held in my hand: an envelope addressed in scarlet and a slim silver dagger.

CHAPTER ONE

The Curse of the Spirits

It is my firm belief that Mrs Hudson more than any woman of her generation possessed a special talent for reconciling good domestic practice with outlandish and bizarre events. If any example of this were needed, I could cite none better than her response that evening on my return, silent and half frozen with fear, to the fire-lit kitchen. Moving me deftly to the hearth, she asked no questions but busied herself locating a suitable salver on which to convey to Mr Holmes the strange items still held in my grasp.

'Come now, Flotsam, child,' she warned. 'That's the first caller at our new lodgings so we should be making sure that note is properly presented. Which isn't to say,' she continued, pausing to lay a second tray with whisky and soda water, 'that judging by the look of you he may not have been quite the usual sort of caller. But that's the sort of visitor we have to expect now, Flottie, and very accustomed to it we shall become. Now I imagine Mr Holmes will want to ask you a question or two about these here objects, so there's no point us going in until you've had a chance to rearrange your wits. And I imagine Dr Watson will be glad of a drink or two, so there's no point

us going in until you've fetched down a pair of the heavy tumblers. And then, if you're to be in the gentlemen's company for any length of time, I think we could lay our hands on an apron that presents them with rather fewer clues as to what you had for your supper.

'As for this,' she pondered, unfolding my fingers from the narrow-bladed knife and holding it up to the light, 'we'd better handle this with a bit of care. In my experience, the sorts of people who send you uninvited knives are generally up to no good and could do with a bit of watching.'

Such was the calming effect of Mrs Hudson's manner that in just a very few minutes, when she once more ushered me before Mr Holmes and Dr Watson, her presence at my side allowed me to repeat my tale with a semblance of calm that belied my inner trembling.

Mr Holmes listened to what I had to say with the utmost concentration, his restless eyes suddenly fixed on a single point, behind them an impassioned light flaring from time to time like a kindling flame. He remained silent until I finished and then Dr Watson spoke first.

'What a remarkable business! Chap sounds like a lunatic to me. Shouldn't be on the streets at all, I daresay.'

'On the contrary, Watson, from Flottie's admirable account it is clear that the actions of tonight's messenger are very far from insane. Think what he has accomplished tonight. He has timed his arrival at that hour of the evening when a housekeeper is most likely to be about her post-prandial chores and the chance is highest that an impressionable young girl will respond to his knock. He has succeeded in using his singular appearance to such effect that he has been able to disappear

unmarked into the night. And he has succeeded, I perceive, in delivering his employer's letter to its intended recipient on the very evening of that person taking up a new address. The last of these, although at first glance the greater achievement, is perhaps the least remarkable, for I think I can say without vanity that there are not a few in this great city of ours who could tell you at any time the correct residence of Sherlock Holmes.'

That said, Mr Holmes took a paper-knife from a nearby crate inscribed *Crimes of Passion* and focused his attention on the carefully sealed missive that had been thrust so dramatically into our midst. Before turning to the letter itself, he examined in minute detail its wax seal with the assistance of a magnifying glass that he plucked from the folds of his smoking jacket.

'As I suspected,' he remarked. 'Cheap wax of the sort used by countless people a thousand times a day. But the seal-stamp itself is a different matter. Crude work – of colonial execution, I'll warrant – showing what appears to be some kind of exotic marsupial.'

He held the letter out towards Dr Watson. As Mrs Hudson passed it to where the doctor was seated, I saw her pass an intent eye across the seal in question.

'Bless my soul,' declared Watson, passing the letter back. 'A strange beast indeed, eh, Mrs Hudson?'

'Yes, sir.' She paused, her eyebrow twitching almost imperceptibly. 'Though not unlike a large rat, perhaps, sir?'

'Precisely!' declared Mr Holmes, after peering swiftly at the letter for a second time. 'I can see you will have to be on your mettle, Watson. Mrs Hudson clearly has a sharp eye in these matters!'

Rather hurriedly he slipped the letter open and tilted it towards the lamp. For a short moment, every occupant of the room seemed suspended in a state of breathless concentration and time hung motionless at the edge of the lamplight. Then Mr Holmes gave a short exclamation and thrust the document at Dr Watson.

'If you would be so good, Watson. I'm sure it will benefit from your admirably uncomplicated delivery.'

The letter comprised one piece of paper, folded twice, unevenly, as if in a great hurry. It carried no address but that day's date, scratched in the same scarlet ink across the top of the sheet. Below, scrawled in an unsteady hand at an angle acute to the horizontal, was a message speaking as much of panic as simple fear.

Sir, I find myself in mortal peril and daily fear for my life I beg to be allowed to wait on you tomorrow at the hour of eight o'clock in the evening, I shall presume to call at that hour in the hope that you receive favourably this most urgent request of –

Nathaniel Moran

The room seemed even quieter as his words were absorbed by the cushioning silence of our concentration. Somewhere inside me a tiny thrill of excitement passed through my spine to my feet, making my toes tingle.

'Mystifying,' murmured Watson.

'Transparent!' declared Holmes. 'You have some small notion of my methods, Watson. I beg you to apply my principles and tell me what we can glean from this most irregular epistle.'

'Why, Holmes, I can glean nothing from it except that the

writer is clearly afraid for his life. How else can one explain the frantic style, the lack of care for presentation or punctuation, the oversight of including no address to which you might direct a reply?'

'My good Watson!' retorted Holmes with a chuckle. 'Your openness is such that you find it difficult to penetrate beyond the first face the world presents to you. While Mrs Hudson helps you to a well-deserved drink, let me suggest a few conclusions that I feel can be safely drawn from this missive.

'When our correspondent calls in person, I strongly suspect that we shall find him still some years short of what is described as middle age. In the last ten days he has returned to London from a prolonged period in the tropics and is still affected by an illness he contracted there. He has recently fallen on hard times but hopes that this state shall be a temporary one. And, if I am not very much mistaken, he is also something of an amateur naturalist and has made a careful collection of native fauna while he has been overseas.'

'Really, Holmes!' Watson expostulated. 'You cannot seriously expect us to believe that even a mind such as yours can deduce all that from just a few lines of prose. Why, it's an impossibility!' And in his perturbation he pushed his newly empty glass towards the drinks tray with a gesture more instinctive than conscious. Even Mrs Hudson's eyebrow twitched slightly as she replenished his glass in silence.

'On the contrary, Watson. Nothing I've said requires anything more than the most basic observation. Firstly as to his age: his handwriting shows signs of haste and powerful emotion. It is not impossible that you are correct in surmising it is fear that has made his hand unsteady. Yet beneath the

surface emotion it remains a strong hand. See the vigour of the downstrokes and deep impression his signature has left on the paper. There is none of the uncertainty here that so often betrays the septuagenarian, none of the small weaknesses that suggest a man past his prime. So a man of middle years, perhaps? And yet surely the composition of the letter, the scant regard for the niceties of correspondence, suggest a failure in the writer to master his immediate emotions. One would not expect to find such surrender to his prevailing mood in a man of mature years. So a young man then? Yet a sojourn in the tropics of some years' duration, of which more presently, dictates that he can no longer be termed a youth. And so, Watson, I am forced to conclude that our correspondent's age is somewhere in between. In short, I fully expect him to be a man of thirty.'

'But, Holmes,' rejoined Watson, throwing an inclusive smile at Mrs Hudson as if certain that his friend had over-reached himself, 'how can you deduce that he has so recently returned from the tropics, and after a stay there of some years?'

'Surely, my dear Watson, the reasons begin to suggest themselves? His seal with its grotesque foreign rodent is a clear indication of a time spent in warmer climes. Its rough finish and poor delineation speak of an unskilled local workman. You may also have observed the small palm tree under which the creature rests. The man who has chosen to adopt this as his seal clearly feels an attachment to the motif that argues a period of accustomed usage, almost certainly during a foreign sojourn of some years' duration.

'And yet we know him still to be a relatively young man, so his return must have been comparatively recent, particularly if, as I suspect, his health still bears the imprint of his travels.

For where you see only fear, Watson, I also detect a hand undermined by fever. A vigorous hand rendered strangely unsteady, an unexplained brevity as if the effort of writing was a great one . . . Given what we know already of our friend, a tropical fever, not quite shaken off, is the most likely explanation. Meanwhile, the absence of any return address, far from being the oversight you imagine, suggests to me a man uncertain of his whereabouts from day to day. Clearly he has yet to find permanent lodgings. Yet ten days is ample for a man of average resource to establish himself in the metropolis, so I deduce our correspondent's arrival fell within that period.'

'But what of the rest, Holmes? The depleted funds and the interest in native species?'

Mr Holmes leant back in his armchair and began to light the pipe he had been most carefully filling, his face affecting a look of the most pained surprise.

'Really, Watson, surely the rest is most readily apparent? The cheap wax and cheaper writing paper both argue that he is not currently able to afford the luxury of a reputable hotel. He should hardly be using these materials if the writing room at Claridge's was at his disposal. I suspect he is staying in one of those nameless, semi-respectable East-End boarding houses while seeking daily for lodgings that will suit his reduced circumstances. The services of a servant – for I feel your apparition must be characterised as such, young Flottie – indicates that his fortunes have not always been at their current ebb. And I have yet to meet a man reduced to unaccustomed poverty who does not yet harbour hopes that another minute will see all his fortunes restored.'

'And a naturalist, Holmes?'

'The ink, Watson! The ink! No one outside those publications commonly known as the Penny Dreadfuls ever uses scarlet ink. The only exception of which I am aware is the habit of collectors in some remote parts of the Empire to use red ink for the labelling of exhibits in their cabinets. They generally find that it holds its colour much better than black ink of local manufacture, which fades disastrously when exposed for long periods to the fierce sunlight. And our writer's choice of seal, revealing as it does the preoccupations of the naturalist rather than the anthropologist, would appear to place the matter beyond doubt.'

'Why, I believe that is the finest thing I have ever heard!' exclaimed Dr Watson, draining his glass with a gulp. 'What do you say, Mrs H? I'll wager you've never heard the like of that in all your born days!'

However true that was of Mrs Hudson, I confess that I for one was spellbound by the image Mr Holmes had revealed with such elegant strokes. As he basked in a satisfied atmosphere of admiration and tobacco smoke, I simply didn't have words to express the wonderment that filled me, wiping away the memory of my earlier fear. Everything seemed to make sense. Perhaps there was nothing that couldn't be explained.

And that, I found, was something with which Mrs Hudson could concur, though for reasons that were very far from my own. It wasn't until we had regained the warm fastness of our kitchen that I understood Mrs Hudson did not necessarily share the views expounded so brilliantly by the great detective. As I readied myself for bed I noticed that she could not settle, preferring to refold the laundry rather than take a second glass of Mr Rumbelow's excellent port.

'Tell me, Flottie,' she asked at last, laying the final bedsheet down so folded that it would have served as a study for budding geometricians, 'what are your feelings about Mr Holmes's explanation of that letter of ours?'

'Oh, Mrs Hudson, ma'am! It was the most surprising thing I've ever heard! I thought that stranger appearing at the door was a shock but it was nothing to the way Mr Holmes showed us how all the facts fitted together. Before he began, there were no imaginings I wasn't imagining. But now I know it was just an ordinary gentleman that sent that letter, I know it was silly to be frightened. I feel I almost know the gentleman myself!'

Mrs Hudson looked even sterner than usual.

'And do you not think, Flotsam, that there could be other explanations for all those things Mr Holmes pointed out?'

'Ma'am?'

'You see, there was nothing Mr Holmes said that I could actually say was *wrong*, but it just didn't feel *right* either. In here,' gesturing somewhere in the region of her bosom. 'It's not to say that Mr Holmes isn't very clever and scientific, but I couldn't help seeing it another way.

'I mean, Flottie, what sort of gentleman sends his man around at that hour, at just the time when his startling appearance will appear most sinister? Why couldn't he have used the penny post like anyone else? His letter would have arrived in a nice orderly way tomorrow morning, in plenty of time for Mr Holmes to have prepared himself for a visit that evening. And then there's that dramatic scribbling in an ink that no decent soul would dream of employing. I don't know what they write in out in the Indies, but it's hard to credit that in this country he couldn't have found a more honest colour for

his purpose. However poor his accommodation, I don't believe there was no pot of black ink to be had if he needed it. Don't you think, Flottie,' she continued softly, 'that his reason for writing could have been quite different from the one he claims? If he had deliberately set out to disconcert us all as much as possible and create around himself an aura of mystery, he could have found no surer way to go about it. It occurs to me, young Flottie, that Mr Moran may prove a slightly trickier character than he would have us believe.'

And yet the appearance of the gentleman himself at precisely eight o'clock the following evening seemed to bear out everything that Mr Holmes had predicted. It was a day made busy by the duties associated with new lodgings. Mrs Hudson was up well before dawn and by the time I awoke had already been attended by Scraggs and a small army of similar boys who had been dispatched all over London with different orders relating to our comfort and provisioning. I spent an exciting morning assisting Dr Watson in the unpacking of his many packing cases until Mrs Hudson, deciding Dr Watson was better able to begin the sorting of his artworks without my aid, sent me off to communicate to Scraggs some additional requirements.

It was one of those rare November days when the sun pierced the fog and suffused the streets of London with a golden haze that softened for a few hours the harsh lines of brickwork and stone. Scraggs proved in high spirits and endeavoured to convince me that it was my duty to accompany him to Smithfields where, he promised, he would be able to point out to me an associate of his in the butcher's trade who

could provide Mrs Hudson with the finest Tamworth sausages in the kingdom. However, conscious of events awaiting me in Baker Street, I determined that on this occasion I would return promptly, the better to prepare myself for a glimpse of our mysterious correspondent. For all that, it was growing dark by the time I began to make my way back to Baker Street and the warmth of the day had evaporated into the chill of incipient fog. I shivered as I sensed in the fading light the menace of the night returning, and my footsteps quickened as the shadows grew deeper, while the gradual lighting of the lamps accelerated the gathering darkness.

Imagine then the feelings of relief and happiness on my return to find the shutters closed for the night, fires already blazing in the grates and the warm, rich smell of a deep stew wrapping itself round Mrs Hudson as she surveyed with imperturbable satisfaction the domestic scene.

'Oh, Mrs Hudson, ma'am,' I gulped, half aghast at the evidence of so much labour in my absence.

'Your timing, Flottie, is perfect. I thought you would wish to keep a good eye on that rascal Scraggs to make sure that everything about our delivery was in order, so I took it upon myself to get the fires going and the lamps lit. But now I'll be putting my feet up for a moment or two with a glass of the sherry that Mr Rumbelow's office saw fit to send round this morning. I shall leave it to you to finish off the knives and forks and when you're done we'll go up to the linen room and have a go at the rest of the silver. And I daresay you'll be interested to answer the door tonight should the gentleman with the unusual ink care to call in person.'

So while Mrs Hudson sat by the fire, turning the pages of a

large tome that had been delivered to her by special messenger that morning, I polished cutlery with all my heart and soul, until it shone in the lamplight like the steel of a guardsman's sword. Up in the study, Mr Holmes nestled in thought as deep as his armchair, the drawing of his pipe and the lazy clouds of tobacco smoke the only evidence that the great mind was at work under the inert exterior. Opposite him, Dr Watson leafed idly through one of the illustrated periodicals that were sent to him by subscription. Eight o'clock seemed a long time coming and through both rooms an unacknowledged current of expectation crept like a low draught.

When the knock at the door finally came, I jumped like a startled sparrow for all that I had spent the previous hour anticipating it. It was a very different knock from the previous evening, low but repeated very rapidly three or four times as if the visitor were in a state of barely suppressed agitation. My eyes turned to Mrs Hudson who remained unmoved beside the fire, her concentration apparently unbroken.

'If you'd be so kind, Flottie,' she asked without looking up, but I noticed that her glass had been rested on the hearth and she no longer seemed to scan the printed page in the way she had before.

When my excitement had been mastered sufficiently to allow me to open the door, Mr Nathaniel Moran proved to be a sallow gentleman of around thirty years of age. Indeed so closely did his appearance conform to the image I had created from Mr Holmes's description that any doubts I had harboured about the great detective's perspicacity were instantly and completely set aside. Beneath ginger whiskers his face was unnaturally pale, as if recently ravaged by illness. He was a

strongly built man whose movement and appearance suggested a good deal of natural grace, yet his demeanour and manner betrayed a hesitation or nerviness that did not sit comfortably with his strong features or a pair of cool eyes. When I took his coat I noticed that the clothes beneath were old-fashioned in cut and designed for warmer climes. Inwardly marvelling at Mr Holmes's prescience, I proceeded to announce the visitor to his expectant hosts.

Dr Watson immediately jumped to his feet and made Mr Moran welcome while his colleague made only a desultory effort to rise, then sank back into his armchair, his eyes barely open and his smoking uninterrupted. Before I could withdraw, Dr Watson had already established his guest in a chair by the fire and gallantly followed behind me to hold the door as I passed through it. For a brief moment each of us met the gaze of the other and I fear my wild curiosity must have communicated itself to the good doctor in that exchange of glances for, instead of pushing the door closed, he closed one eye in a half-wink and the door, unseen in the shadows, remained open a good inch or more.

The linen room was little more than a store room opposite the study. Soon after our arrival Mrs Hudson had colonised it for domestic purposes and now the effect of Dr Watson's charity was to enable someone placed in its doorway a narrow line of vision across the slim corridor that separated the two rooms, through the open door, into the heart of the study itself. With a casual nonchalance that only served to reveal my precise motives, I sauntered into the tiny room and edged the pile of waiting silver to the place that best allowed me to follow events in the other room. To my great surprise Mrs Hudson,

on climbing the stairs and finding me in this position, raised a questioning eyebrow but made no attempt to prevent my inexcusable breach of manners, so that when Mr Moran began to speak his words were as clearly audible to us in our niche as they were to Mr Holmes by his hearth.

'Gentlemen,' Moran began, 'I hope you will excuse me for disturbing you at this hour and for the brevity of my note to you last night. I am only too aware how irregular my conduct must seem.'

'Nonsense, sir. Dr Watson and I never stand on social niceties. Besides, you have been suffering from a fever, I perceive.'

For a moment Mr Moran seemed genuinely taken aback and he took a moment before he replied.

'I see your reputation is richly deserved, Mr Holmes. Even in Sumatra, where I have passed the last seven years of my life, word had reached us of your talents.'

'Sumatra, you say?' returned Holmes casually, raising an eyebrow in the direction of Dr Watson. 'A place with a rich native fauna, I imagine.'

Again Mr Moran seemed startled.

'Indeed, Mr Holmes, as I am only too well aware. It is partly just that aspect of the country which has brought me here tonight. That and other attendant details which I trust a man of your talents will be able to make something of.'

'Perhaps if you were to start at the beginning, Mr Moran, and confine yourself to the facts of the case . . .' He settled deeper into his chair and sent another cloud of tobacco smoke drifting out towards the linen room where I had just begun to polish the same candlestick for the third time. Mrs Hudson

had taken up the small candelabra and, with her back turned to me, was working away with crisp, powerful strokes.

'Mr Holmes, the story I have to tell is not one that I tell lightly. Like yourself, I am a passionate believer in scientific knowledge. Yet I now find myself beset with the most unscientific and superstitious apprehension.

'My father, sir, was a successful merchant who found in his dealings in Malaya the means to a substantial fortune. If I had wished it, I could have continued his ventures upon his retirement but my father and I quarrelled and, with the impetuosity of youth, I vowed to make a fortune of my own that would surpass his and prove to him how far short his estimate was of my true abilities. I had acquired a good practical knowledge of trade in the tropics and through an acquaintance I was introduced to four others, young men such as myself, whose daring and determination promised to make up for any lack of capital. After much discussion we decided to seek our fortunes in Sumatra. There is a string of islands there off the west coast which have been untouched by the big trading concerns. We formed the Sumatra and Nassau Trading Company operating out of Port Mary and took an oath on our lives that we would labour shoulder to shoulder until our fortunes were made.'

Down the thin line of light, I saw Moran shiver.

'On arrival, sir, Port Mary proved to be little more than a dispirited collection of huts containing a handful of transitory Europeans and a small population of Chinese families. Around it, the jungle rose like a mountain, swathed in mist, encroaching on the town at every opportunity, and at night the cries of strange creatures invaded your dreams. It was as

if the island itself resented our intrusion and was trying to reclaim our outpost as its own. And the people were no more welcoming. From the Chinese there was blank indifference, and beyond the town we faced the suspicion and hostility of the natives. From the day of our arrival, a dreadful loneliness began to engulf us.

'And yet what we called the town soon became, for all its shortcomings, our refuge. For those islands are a wild place, Mr Holmes. A place of savage beauty and dark, muttering superstitions. The tribes worship the forest and its spirits, each of which appears to Western eyes more cruel and vengeful than the last. Before we had been on the island three days, we received a visit from their chief priest. Our presence there offended the spirits, he told us. If we remained our ventures would fail. If we failed to respect the spirits of the island we would pay with our lives.'

Dr Watson shifted slightly in his seat and I found I had paused in my polishing. Moran coughed nervously. Only Mrs Hudson and Mr Holmes appeared unmoved.

'The jungle which we hoped would provide our fortune is dark and threatening. It contains creatures unknown to European science – spiders the size of birds, venomous snakes no bigger than your thumb, a bestiary of the disgusting and the frightful. And amongst these creatures, taking their animal shapes to work their mischief, are any number of malevolent spirits.

'Three in particular are revered by the savages. First there is the tiger spirit, who represents life and vitality. Then there is *maki*, a spirit who takes the shape of the purple cobra and who represents both death and sleeping. These two are more

respected than feared. But between them comes *enoki*, the stealer of souls, and this is the spirit who truly provokes terror. Just as vermin are drawn to carrion, so *enoki* is drawn to the evil in men's hearts. Where there is vileness, *enoki* feasts. He comes at night and nibbles at the evil in you, growing more rapacious with every visit, until your whole soul is devoured. For those destroyed in this way, there is no death, no sleep, just an empty eternity waiting for *enoki* to return to feed on you once more. In local legend, *enoki*, if he is ever seen at all, takes on the form of an enormous carrion rat, and tales are told of sick men visited in the dark by a foul creature which sits upon their chests to await their passing. They feel its weight, smell its evil breath, but see nothing at all.'

The silence that followed was distinctly uneasy, broken finally by a faint tutting from Dr Watson.

'Oh, come now, sir,' he spluttered, 'that's a bit much, isn't it? Rats of giant proportions stalking invalids and whatnot. It's enough to make one feel quite uncomfortable. Surely you aren't asking us to believe such stories?'

'On the contrary, Dr Watson, I am very much hoping that you and Mr Holmes will show them to be nonsense. But let me continue my tale.

'Mr Holmes, I will not dwell on the early years of our venture. Suffice it to say that I learnt to my cost why the riches of the islands had remained for so many years unexploited. Of the five of us who set out with such high hopes, two were to find nothing but a grave in that unforgiving jungle; the first, Whitfield, was taken by fever within a month of our arrival. That left Postgate, Neale, Carruthers and myself determined to persist in our venture. We stayed afloat by selling a little opium

to the Chinese but the local population remained resistant to our overtures and without their assistance the island's wealth was beyond our reach.

'This stubbornness began to provoke us and we began to sneer at their superstitions. In a light-hearted moment I even commissioned a seal depicting the imaginary rat and used it on company correspondence. Yet we were not to be deterred, and a new line of business suggested by Neale seemed set fair to prosper – only to be overtaken by a sequence of events that led to the ruin of our ventures and may yet, I believe, cost us our lives.'

There was another pause as Moran mopped his brow. Watson shifted uneasily again and a little shudder passed softly down my spine as though something of the damp jungle loneliness that Moran described had crept into the room. Mrs Hudson, habitually stern, seemed sterner than ever, but there was something about the faint nodding of her head that, if she were listening at all, expressed a cryptic satisfaction in the gentleman's tale.

After gathering himself, the visitor continued.

'It was a day in October, just over a year ago, that things began to unravel. Postgate had been on a short expedition into the interior looking for minerals. Postgate liked these expeditions. The cold watchfulness that surrounded our days in Port Mary was beginning to get to him and he was drinking too freely. He used these expeditions to escape our disapproval and to discharge a great deal of ammunition at any target the jungle provided. When he returned that day he was literally whooping with elation, a dead creature the size of a spaniel hanging from his saddle. A small crowd gathered as

he dismounted and in front of everyone he whirled the thing around his head, shouting my name. "Moran!" he cried, "I've shot their precious rat! Come and look at this!" And it was in truth a remarkable specimen, easily the largest creature of its kind I'd ever seen. Its fur was black, its tail furred like a squirrel's. It had mean, powerful jaws and vicious claws. "Eater of souls indeed!" he cried. "Let's see what they make of this!" And before I could stop him, he had attached the carcass to the string of our flag pole and was hoisting it high above our compound.

'That night Postgate got drunk. Neale and Carruthers put him to bed, leaving me on the veranda, eyeing the jungle with unease. Postgate's had been a silly, juvenile gesture but it made me afraid. That may seem absurd to you but in the tropics shadows take strange shapes. That night I slept badly, my dreams full of horrible images, and when I awoke it was to find myself staring at something more horrible still, something on my pillow, little more than an inch from my face.'

Mr Moran broke off his tale to pass a hand across his weary features.

'It was the carcass of a rat, a rat of ordinary size, skewered by a narrow blade through my pillow, into the bed frame below. A carcass so fresh that the blood still seeped from it, so fresh I swear to you that its limbs still twitched. And stuffed in its mouth, cut from my head while I slept, was a lock of my own hair.'

Safe in the linen room by the small pile of unpolished silver, I could see both Holmes and Watson lean forward slightly. Mr Holmes's pipe was long since set aside and now his eyes were alert and searching, trained on the speaker with a vital

intensity. The fire was dying down and flickering shadows played over the faces of the three men. I imagined the dark malevolent night drawing in around Moran's jungle dwelling and I shuddered.

Moran took a deep breath and continued his tale.

'I quickly learnt that I was not alone in this horror. My colleagues had all received the same visitation, and I think it's fair to say that all of us were badly spooked. There was an old man in Port Mary, native to that island, and we sought him out in hope of an explanation. He told us that the meaning of the objects we had received was clear. It was the curse of the high priest, calling down upon us the spirit *enoki*. Now, he told us, coolly as you like, the spirit would visit each of us in turn and would begin to eat away at our souls. When he had taken enough – enough for him to claim possession of us – we would die. We would die by the knife of the high priest, guided by the spirit's hand, but death was only the beginning. After death, our torment would begin in earnest, as *enoki* would return to feast upon us for the rest of eternity.

'The following morning, I found that Postgate had risen early, taken a mule and was gone. Two days later he was back. A rubber prospector called Cartwright emerged from the interior with his dead body strapped across the mule. Cartwright brought the body to our offices and told us how he had been disturbed in the night by the sound of a man's screams. In the islands off Sumatra, a scream in the night is not necessarily something to investigate, but there was something in these screams that Cartwright could not ignore. "It was as if a man's soul was on fire," he said – and Cartwright is not a man given to poetry. At dawn he had set off in the direction

of the noise and in a small clearing he found Postgate, still bent in agony but cold to the touch. Around him lay the few things he had taken with him – his gun unfired, some food untouched, an empty bottle or two of liquor.

'Beyond, but for the marks of birds and animals, the leaf mould was unmarked by any footprints save those of Postgate and Cartwright himself. And when he turned over the body, Mr Holmes, he found blood on the man's fingers and face. But it was his eyes that caused a hardened man like Cartwright to recoil in horror. For where his eyes should have been there was nothing. Nothing but thick-caked blood. The spirits had taken his sight, Mr Holmes, and he had died in the agony of their vengeance.'