



**MURDER ON THE
LUSITANIA**

EDWARD MARSTON

CHAPTER ONE

Saturday, September 7, 1907

George Porter Dillman caught his first glimpse of her at Euston Station. Even in a crowd as large and volatile as that, she stood out, albeit for the briefest and most tantalising of moments. As he picked his way through the mass of bodies, Dillman was suddenly confronted by a slender young woman in a green straw hat trimmed with white flowers and a blue velvet ribbon that matched the colour of her dress. What struck him was not the sudden beauty of her face or even the delicate sheen of her blond hair. It was her unassailable confidence. Amid the swirling crowd with its buffeting shoulders and its jostling elbows, she was completely at ease, moving with the grace of a dancer and blithely ignoring the admiring or lustful glances that she collected.

Dillman had never met anyone with such an air of self-possession.

He stepped back to allow her to pass, touching the brim of his hat and offering a polite smile, but she did not even notice him. A porter trailed in her wake, pushing her luggage on his trolley and warning people to ‘Mind yer backs, please!’ in a voice that rose above the cacophony. Dillman watched her until she was swallowed up in the throng. Even his unusual height did not permit him to keep track of her for long. The white flowers on her hat soon merged with the vast expanse of floral decoration on the assembled headgear in the station concourse.

It was as if a huge garden was on the move, rippling and surging like a multicoloured wave, bearing, along with it, on the heads of male passengers and well-wishers, a motley collection of top hats, bowlers, homburgs, straw boaters, and flat caps of every description. But flowers predominated on that September afternoon and, in Dillman’s mind, her white posies on that green straw hat took pride of place among them.

Two minutes later, he was climbing aboard the train and making his way along the corridor in a first-class carriage. It was one of the three specials that had been laid on to take passengers to Liverpool to board the *Lusitania* on its maiden voyage, an event that had caught the public imagination in the most extraordinary way. The excitement aboard the train was palpable. Even the most phlegmatic travellers were imbued with a sense that they were setting off on a great adventure. They were not merely sailing to New York on the biggest ocean liner in the world. They would be taking part in a voyage of historic significance. Dillman shared the anticipatory delight, though for somewhat different reasons.

The compartment he chose already had five occupants, and Dillman had difficulty finding a space on the luggage rack for his valise and his hat. When he sat down with a book in his hand, he

distributed a nod among his companions but got no more than one noncommittal glance in return, convincing him that he was part of a wholly English gathering and could expect conversation from none of them until they were well on their way. The magic of the *Lusitania* had no doubt touched their souls but it had as yet failed to break through their natural reserve. He marvelled again at the strange capacity of the English upper middle classes to suppress any hint of the wild enjoyment they must be feeling. In the third-class carriages, he was sure, passengers were already surrendering to the thrill of the occasion, talking volubly, sharing expectations, and forging new friendships. Among those with first-class tickets, pleasure was kept on a much shorter leash.

His back to the engine, Dillman was seated at the corridor end of the compartment. When he looked out at the tumult on the platform, he was able simultaneously to take stock of his travelling companions. Beside him on his left was a short, podgy, well-groomed man in his fifties with thinning hair that had already taken on a silver hue and a snub nose on which his pince-nez was rather perilously set. His head was buried in a copy of the *Westminster Gazette* and a quiet smile played about his lips. Beyond him was a lady whom Dillman took to be his wife, a small, slim woman in a fashionable dress of navy serge edged with black braid. Since she was gazing through the window, her hat obscured most of her face from Dillman.

Seated opposite the American were three people who quite clearly composed a family. Even if the occasional muttered remark was not passed between them to indicate togetherness, Dillman would have linked them instantly. The young woman who sat between the two older passengers so patently embodied the features of both, that she simply had to be their daughter.

Her mother, a handsome woman in a gown of French lace, was alternately scanning the platform and turning to look at the young woman with a distant maternal concern. The father, by contrast, a big, red-faced man with side whiskers and a permanent chevron etched into his brow, was lost in thought, his hands folded across his stomach, his eyes fixed on some invisible object on the rack opposite him.

It was the daughter who really interested Dillman. She had inherited her mother's good looks and her father's prominent chin but she lacked the animation of either parent. Flicking her head to and fro, the one seemed to be buzzing with controlled energy and, even in a reflective mood, the other exuded a kind of dormant vitality. Their daughter, however, dressed in a smart blue frock of striped zephyr, was so lacklustre as to appear almost ill. Her face wore an expression of grim resignation and it occurred to Dillman that she looked less like a girl about to undergo a thrilling maritime experience with her parents than a female prisoner being escorted by two warders.

The pandemonium outside increased audibly as late arrivals hurried to join the train and porters trundled past with the last of the trunks and suitcases. Tearful farewells took place the entire length of the platform before a warning was shouted and a whistle was blown. The engine then came to life, displaying its power with a series of thunderous emissions of steam, inching away, then slowly gathering speed. A great concerted cheer went up from those on the platform as they sent friends and relations off on the first stage of their journey of a lifetime.

It was only then that the young woman came fleetingly awake. She sat bolt upright and flung a wistful glance through the window. Dillman noted the colour that rose to her cheeks. When the train

pulled clear of the station, however, her interest vanished at once and she sagged back into morose introspection. After subjecting her to careful scrutiny, her mother gave a gentle sigh of relief, then traded a knowing glance with her husband, who had been jerked out of his reverie by the movement of the train. He gave a satisfied nod, then reached for a copy of the *Times*, which was tucked in beside him. Letting out an occasional grunt of approval, he read his way through the correspondence columns.

The train steamed on through the afternoon sunshine and settled into a jolting rhythm that was punctuated by the clicking of the wheels over the track. The small woman eventually dozed off to sleep, the two men remained immersed in their respective newspapers and the mother had a muted conversation with her daughter. Unable to hear anything of what they were saying, Dillman opened his novel and began to reacquaint himself with the joys of *Nicholas Nickleby*. No journey was ever complete without Charles Dickens beside him to stave off boredom.

A contented silence soon descended on the compartment, broken only by the rustling of the newspapers and the subdued clamour of the train itself. It was the short, podgy man who finally spoke aloud.

‘By Jove!’ he said, and let out a chortle.

The *Times* was immediately lowered and dark eyes inspected him.

‘You find something amusing, sir?’ said the red-faced man.

‘Extremely amusing.’

‘In the *Westminster Gazette*?’ continued the other with unfeigned contempt. ‘That is a Liberal newspaper.’

‘I care nothing for its politics,’ explained the podgy man, anxious not to give offence. ‘I chose the *Gazette* because of its competitions.’

‘Competitions, sir?’

‘Intellectual diversions.’

‘Indeed?’

‘Some, quite serious. Others, mere trifles.’

‘They would not be enough to entice me to buy such a periodical. It is bad enough to have to endure a Liberal government without paying to read its insidious propaganda.’

‘There is no propaganda in this quotation from Shakespeare,’ said the other defensively. ‘A prize of two guineas was offered for the best rendering into Greek iambics of this passage from the Bard. The winning entry shows remarkable scholarship.’

‘Is that what provoked your mirth?’

‘Good heavens, no. I am a Balliol man. I revere a Classical education. What tickled me was this sublime piece of nonsense under the heading of “Advice in One Dozen Emergencies”. Twelve problems were set and each competitor had to provide twelve pithy answers. The winner has a true sense of the ridiculous.’

‘Oh?’

‘Take number six, for instance,’ said the portly man, eager to share his pleasure. “‘Question: G., engaged to Ethelinda, cannot afford to marry her, and would be relieved if she would break the engagement. How would he induce this?’”

Dillman saw the scowl on the face of the man opposite him and elected to supply the encouragement that the other frankly denied. He turned to his neighbour.

‘What is the answer given, sir?’ asked Dillman.

‘It is so droll.’

‘How *does* a man induce his fiancée to break the engagement?’

“‘Answer: Wear ready-made clothes, and grow a beard.’”

The podgy man chortled again and Dillman gave a quiet

chuckle but the trio opposite were not amused. The mother pursed her lips in disapproval, the father retreated pointedly behind his own newspaper, and the daughter seemed on the verge of tears, but the conversational ice had now been broken and Dillman felt able to speak openly.

‘You mentioned a competition involving Shakespeare, sir.’

‘There are three, my friend,’ said his companion. ‘Apart from the winning entry in Greek iambics, there are two new competitions relating to the Bard. In the first, they are offering two guineas for the best rendering of a Shakespearean sonnet into Latin elegiacs in the manner of Catullus or Propertius.’

‘Which sonnet might that be?’

“‘When in disgrace with fortune or men’s eyes . . .’”

Dillman closed his eyes and whispered the next few lines. “‘I all alone bewail my outcast state, / And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries, / And look upon myself and curse my fate . . .’”

‘Well done, sir! You know it by heart.’

‘Shakespeare is my first love,’ admitted Dillman, opening his eyes again. ‘I was reared on his plays and sonnets.’

‘Then an American education may not be as flawed as we have been led to believe,’ teased the other gently. ‘Ignore my levity,’ he added quickly, removing his pince-nez. ‘I do not mean to be facetious. My name is Cyril Weekes. I am delighted to meet you.’

‘George Dillman,’ said the other, shaking the proffered hand. Dillman was then introduced to Ada Weekes and one side of the compartment was soon engaged in polite but lively discourse. It was only a matter of time before Dillman’s accent parted the red-faced man from his newspaper. He gave a patronising smile. ‘I had a feeling that you were not English,’ he observed.

‘Not for want of trying, sir,’ replied Dillman. ‘I bought my suit

and hat on Bond Street and do my best to ape your behaviour but I will never be taken for a true-born Englishman. I fear that I am stamped for life as an irredeemable Bostonian.'

'With a surprising knowledge of Shakespeare's sonnets,' noted Weekes, giving him a complimentary nod.

'Actually, I am much stronger on his plays.'

'We may civilise you yet, then,' said the red-faced man, baring his teeth in a condescending grin. He gestured at the book in Dillman's hand. 'And I see that you have discovered Dickens as well. Far too unsavoury an author for my taste, but one has to concede the fellow's talent. Shakespeare and Dickens, eh? English literature clearly has charms to soothe the savage American breast.'

Dillman had to endure a whole series of such inane comments from the *Times* reader, but he did so willingly because they broke down the last social barriers and brought the whole compartment into the general conversation. The novelty of his American nationality initiated a flurry of questions from both men and from their wives. Instead of being the outsider in the group, Dillman now became its focal point. In due course, he learned the names of Matthew and Sylvia Rymer. Their daughter, Violet, was less forthcoming but even she took a gradual interest in the tall stranger with the exquisite manners. It was Violet Rymer who asked the most obvious question.

'Which ship did you sail on to get here, Mr Dillman?'

'The *Lucania*.'

'She is leaving for New York today before the *Lusitania*.'

'Yes,' agreed her father, 'and part of me wishes that I were aboard her. The *Lusitania* is the finer vessel but I believe that the *Lucania* has the most precious item in its cargo.'

'What do you mean, Matthew?' asked his wife.

‘It is not a question of what but of whom, my dear. The details are here in my newspaper. Sailing on the *Lucania* is the MCC cricket team. They are having a five weeks’ tour of America.’ Rymer looked across at Dillman. ‘I daresay that you have no idea what MCC stands for, do you?’

‘I fear not, sir,’ said Dillman deferentially, knowing quite well that the initials stood for the illustrious Marylebone Cricket Club but playing the ignorant foreigner so that Rymer could resume his lofty tone and sermonise. ‘Perhaps you would enlighten me.’ Matthew Rymer needed no more invitation. One thumb in his waistcoat pocket, he described the game of cricket in detail and spoke of the MCC’s seminal place in its history. The recital drew a few respectful complaints from his wife and put a glazed look into his daughter’s eye, but he ploughed on relentlessly and Dillman learned even more about the structure of the family who sat opposite him. Matthew Rymer was a preeminent example of a man who was master in his own house.

Cyril Weekes could not be kept silent for long, but his wife was happy to contribute nothing but the odd smile and stray remark. Weekes volunteered the information that he and Ada were sailing to New York to celebrate his retirement from business, though he did not specify the nature of that business. Rymer announced that the trip was a present for Violet on the occasion of her forthcoming twenty-first birthday but Dillman saw no sign of enthusiasm for the voyage in her eyes. The expensive gift instead seemed to depress her. The most she could rise to was a wan smile.

‘What is it like to sail the Atlantic, Mr Dillman?’ asked Weekes.

‘Invigorating, sir.’

‘Are we in any danger of seasickness?’

‘Not in a vessel as large as the *Lusitania*’ said Dillman

confidently. 'You will feel as comfortable as if you were in the Ritz Hotel. It is first-class travel in every sense.'

'So it should be, at those prices,' mumbled Rymer.

'Tell us about New York, Mr Dillman,' said his wife. 'How does it compare with London, for instance? What should we aim to see?'

As the conversation gathered pace and intimacy, Dillman stroked his moustache and basked in the warmth of acceptance. Long before they reached Liverpool, he received separate invitations from the Rymers and the Weekeses to join them for dinner during the voyage. Friendship was secured. Dillman had the camouflage he needed. He was in.

It was a good start.