

THE MAN IN GREY

CHAPTER I *The Lyndhurst Murder*

*From the Journals of Harry Dickson
Monday, June 6, 1910.*

“It’s exactly 1:23 p.m., Mr. Dickson.”

“Thank you, Captain.”

And we simultaneously repocketed our time pieces.

The *Columbia* was entering Southampton harbor.

I had just lost a ten pound bet with the Captain, but truthfully, I was not sorry, since the accurate time of our arrival—the object of our bet—would enable me to catch the express from the South Western Railway which would have me in London at 3:57 p.m.

The gangplank was lowered and the ship came to a groaning standstill with a last hiss of steam.

On the docks was the milling throng that always accompanied the arrival of any transatlantic steamer. I looked at its diversity with the satisfaction of a man whom, by trade, must learn to recognize and memorize every minute detail around him.

As a matter of fact, I was thrilled to be back in England after three sweaty months spent in New York, the unpleasant city of my birth, with my cousin Frederick.

I said my good-byes to the Captain, whose company I had genuinely enjoyed, and stepped briskly onto the gangplank.

Before me, a clergyman was cautiously making his way with carefully measured steps, grasping the guardrail with a shaky hand. In front of him was an imposing woman, dressed in the bright colors favored by some of the less tasteful citizens of my native America; she carried a small handbag decorated with bizarre flowers intertwined with monograms.

I was forced to follow the measured steps taken by the clergyman in the wake of the imposing lady.

On the docks, the porters began hassling us, but far from being bothered, I was thrilled to recognize in their strong accents the sounds of an England which I had always cherished.

While we made our way towards customs, slowly, in a beeline, someone came up from behind me and tried to elbow his way through. I heard the muttered protests of the other passengers who, like me, had been politely staying in line behind the imposing woman.

The man rushed past me, swearing under his breath against everything and everyone, making irritated gestures; he was dressed in the type of old-fashioned waterproof coat that the English only wear in vaudeville shows.

Once on the ground, he began hailing the porters, calling loudly—but unsuccessfully. By his accent and poor pronunciation, I knew him at once to be French.

I approached the man and, thanks to the time I had spent on holidays in *la belle France* with Antoine de Hautefeuille, I was able to address him in reasonably fluent French.

“Monsieur is visibly in a hurry,” I said, while hailing a man, “and needs a porter to help him with his luggage.”

The Frenchman expressed his gratitude profusely, even grabbing my arm in their typically familiar manner, but I disengaged myself and, after tipping my hat, I left him with the rest of the crowd.

After going through customs, as I made my progress towards the railway station, I heard the shouts of the paper boys hawking the noon edition of the newspapers, which featured in big bold letters the words: *The Lyndhurst Horror*, promising all kinds of gory revelations inside.

That was enough for me to become a detective again. I bought a paper and quickly began reading it.

It was indeed a murder, and an exceptionally challenging case by the look of it.

“Good,” I thought. “*He* must certainly be there already.”

I changed my mind; I wouldn’t be going to London after all. I shouted to the porter who had been carrying my trunks:

“Take these to the left luggage, please.”

In the train, I carefully reread the newspaper article. A woman’s body, horribly mutilated, had been found that very morning on the commons in the nearby town of Lyndhurst, about nine miles southwest of Southampton. The police had been summoned and were already busy questioning potential witnesses.

This is a unique opportunity to distinguish myself, I thought. *I couldn’t have imagined a better case. He will have a chance to see me at work, and won’t regret his invitation.*

A couple of hours later, I arrived in Lyndhurst and set out towards the scene of the crime on foot. Many other curious onlookers had stepped off the train with the same purpose in mind, and I had but to follow them.

Lyndhurst is, as is well known, a town favored by golfers and tennis players. The discovery of that awful murder had shocked, even frightened, the local community. Then, morbid curiosity had taken over and compelled the locals to come out in droves to take a peek at the grisly scene.

Englishmen are not by nature prone to being overly emotional, at least not in public. I felt that this display of macabre curiosity was driven less by ghoulish appetite than by the need to ascertain the situation for themselves and, hopefully, see justice done and order reestablished.

The circumstances behind the murder were still a complete mystery, and the good citizens of Lyndhurst sought an explanation, which is why they were converging *en masse* towards the commons.

I walked alongside them and, soon enough, I arrived at a vast grassy rectangle that looked exceptionally well tended and that was bordered by a thicket of woods on one side.

The crowd had gathered in a neat circle around the commons, and was kept at distance from the crime scene by a few local Bobbies. At the center of that circle was a body, or rather something that had once been a body. Kneeling besides it was a man, alone, looking pensive.

I was right. He is here already, I thought

I stepped forward with assurance.

“No stepping through,” said a huge policeman, extending two arms as wide as beams to bar my way.

I showed him the card upon which *He* had scribbled a few words, extending his invitation.

“Ah, I see... That’s another thing then, if you’re *his* guest,” said the policeman, looking impressed.

He pushed aside a few gawkers, who had seized the opportunity to move forward, in order to let me through.

I walked briskly towards the center of the circle and was, at last, able to get a good view of the body, and of the man who had been studying it—my mentor and spiritual master.

“Mr. Sherlock Holmes!” I said.

“Ah! Mr. Harry Dickson!”

We shook hands vigorously, as two long-lost friends, even though we had only met once before, four years ago.

“I’d guessed that I’d find you here, sir. That’s why I came straight from Southampton to Lyndhurst, instead of going to Baker Street.”

“An excellent deduction, my dear Harry... I recognize in that the flair of the man who recently solved the murky affair of Green Park.”

I bowed, flattered by his acknowledgement of my first big case.

Holmes nodded and put the briar pipe that he had stopped smoking in order to chat with me back in his pocket.

He was a man in his late fifties or early sixties; yet no one would have called him an old man, despite the silvery grey hair that shone beneath his cap. His eyes were so sharp and penetrating that something of their remarkable acuity seemed to linger on a person for a few seconds, even after he had stopped looking at them. He wore no facial hair and his cheeks had been hardened by the use of a steel razor. His jaws occasionally tightened in an involuntary reflex, as if he were grinding his teeth.

I noticed his nervous hands, with heavy veins bulging under his tightly-drawn skin. He was tall and thin, but that, by no means, conveyed the idea of physical weakness; on the contrary, there was a surprising amount of strength in his lanky frame.

I remained silent out of deference to his thoughts.

“What do you think, Harry?” he suddenly asked me, pointing at the corpse.

“It could be a crime of passion.”

“That is possible indeed, but look further.”

“It’s the handiwork of a brute.”

“Yes—a man endowed with tremendous strength.”

“Almost superhuman, in fact.”

We kneeled to take a closer look at the unfortunate thing that had once been a woman. The bone white of her skull showed under her unrecognizable, ravaged face, having resisted the vice-like squeeze that had crushed the rest of her body.

“The victim was a blonde,” said Holmes. “Look at the roots.”

The ripped hair, like a blood-soaked rag, had been left discarded amongst the viscera and the stomach, taken from a belly gutted open, just below the thorax.

“Yes.”

“Judging by her neck and shoulders, she was young.”

“I agree.”

“And also of modest condition.”

My frown signaled my puzzlement, so, with a movement of the chin, Holmes pointed at the little grey boots the victim wore. I bent forward to take a closer look.

“You’re right, Mr. Holmes! It’s the kind of cheap article that cost less than five shillings. The manufacture is poor. No society lady would wear such shoes. And the heels are well worn too...”

“So, she was a working class woman... Perhaps a servant...”

Prompted by a thought, I looked at the victim’s dislocated hand and did not see a wedding band. The direction of my eyes had not escaped the Great Detective, who had at once deduced my purpose.

“Maybe it fell off?” he said. “We must look for it.”

“Or she wasn’t wearing one. Not every woman wears her wedding band.”

“In America, perhaps, my dear Harry, but not here, in the heart of the British countryside.” Holmes smiled. “You are no longer in New York, you know. You forgot the patriarchal traditions of our British society.”

We each took a closer look at the deceased woman’s hands. The right was mostly intact, even though the skin of three fingers had been peeled off. The left hand, however, had been partially torn off, crushed, and—

“The ring finger is missing,” said Holmes, already looking for it in the blood-soaked grass.

But, suddenly, the energy seemed to leak out of him, and he became pale and tired-looking. He wiped his forehead with his hand.

“Mr. Holmes! Is there anything wrong, sir?” I inquired.

“Nothing serious... A dizzy spell, nothing more... I overdid it a little today. It pains me to admit it, but I am not as strong as I used to be. My friend, Doctor Watson, warned me that I would pay for my addictions some day... That time has come, I’m afraid, which is why I’m very happy that you answered my invitation.”

“I could do nothing less.”

“I need more than a collaborator now... I need an heir—a successor perhaps. Someone with whom I can share my methods. You are young, intelligent, your deductive abilities are unmatched... I have followed your cases. You have a great future ahead of you!”

I lowered my eyes before such fulsome praise, and, by so doing, I accidentally caught a glint of something golden.

“I think I’ve found our missing ring,” I said, happy to divert his mind from his morbid thoughts. “Here it is!”

The gold band that had caught my eye was lying a few feet away from the body, partially hidden by the trampled grass. It was still attached to the ring finger.

I presented the gruesome artifact to Holmes.

“That finger was not torn off,” he observed. “It was bitten off.”

I could not repress a shudder.

“That unfortunate woman may have been fighting off her aggressor,” I suggested. “Trying to push him away, her hand may have slipped into his mouth and...”

“...And she lost her finger that way. Yes, it is possible, I suppose,” finished Holmes, nodding, but in a listless manner.

“We have already gathered quite a few clues,” I continued, trying to engage his interest. “We know that the victim was young, blond, of modest condition, and married. Undoubtedly, she lived or worked nearby, and her husband or her employer will be looking for her, if he isn’t already. We should soon learn of her identity.”

“My dear Harry,” said the Great Detective, “in a case like this, the identity of our victim shall not be of much help to us. This is something we can safely leave to the police. Our task is much more difficult. We must find the murderer.”

Then, with some of his old energy back, he continued:

“The victim’s friends and relatives can indeed be of tremendous help—if the assassin is among them. But what if he is a complete stranger? Rather than helping us, the same friends and relatives can then turn into impediments, smokescreens that the real murderer can use to better hide from the Law—and the police often don’t have enough acumen to see beyond them...”

I sighed and Holmes threw me one of his penetrating glances.

“Of course. You have even better reasons than I to question the police. I read about their mishandling of the Green Park case...”

“Your invitation was not the only incentive I needed to return to England, Mr. Holmes,” I said with great sincerity.

Now, Holmes looked pensive. Perhaps his prodigious mind was reviewing the details of my first big case, but somehow I did not think so. His next remark confirmed it.

“Do you know what I’m thinking, Harry?” he asked suddenly.

“I believe that there is something about this case that seems familiar to you. You came to Lyndhurst because you wanted to be sure of something, and now you are. However, what that thing is, I do not know.”

“Very good, Harry! You are indeed quite perceptive! The fact that the victim is a poor woman... Young... The horror... The sheer savagery of the crime... Her abominable mutilation beyond human imagination... All this, my dear Harry, reminds me of another dark and sinister case...”

“Which one, sir?”

“Could it be a coincidence? No. I do not believe in such things. It must be *him*,” he continued, lost in his thoughts.

Then, he turned his attention towards me again.

“We must look at every fact... Investigate every trail... because, if my theory is correct, this is only the latest in a long series of similar crimes... But before I can be sure, one fact must be ascertained... One fact alone... Is *she* back?”

“She?”

“The *Matilda Briggs*.”

“What is the *Matilda Briggs*?”

“What I am going to tell you, Harry, I have shared with no one else before—not even my good friend Watson. This is how much I trust you...”

Now, Holmes was back to being his old self. His penetrating gaze drilled into my eyes and touched me deep in my soul.

Around us, the crowd could not overhear our conversation; yet, a hushed silence seemed to have fallen over the commons, and all conversation had become muted, as if they could sense that a tremendous revelation was about to be made. The onlookers watched us closely, feeling that the answer lie within their reach, trying to divine it from our unreadable faces.

“The *Matilda Briggs* is a ship, Harry,” said Holmes. “Not the best of ships, for sure—an old schooner that has sailed every sea, stopped in every harbor, with nothing clean about her. A ship of smugglers, thieves and felons... And every time she moors at a British harbor, blood is spilled. Four years ago, in June 1906, she stopped in London. You were attending the University of South Kensington, at the time, doing odd jobs for Nick Carter. Remember the horrible crime of June 13? A school mistress from Hammersmith, found gutted, crushed, mutilated, just like that poor woman here...”

“Yes, I do remember reading about it at the time!”

“And a year later, the *Matilda Briggs* was in Portsmouth, and the body of another woman was found, ripped, torn apart... The police investigation led nowhere, found no clues...”

My mentor’s words struck me as true. There was something here that indeed warranted further inquiry.

“Then, she was in Glasgow in December 1908,” Holmes continued, “when a young Irishwoman was found near the harbor, gutted of her bowels, hideously disfigured, her bones crushed as if by giant hands. And last year, in March, the *Matilda Briggs* relaxed in Dover... Just at the same time as the police found two young prostitutes, similarly murdered and dismembered, a day apart from each other... It was quite a scandal in the press. You can’t have missed it...”

Indeed, I had not.

“No one connected the murders to that ship?” I asked.

“No,” replied Holmes. “In every instance, the investigation was perfunctory because of the social status of the victims, and the cases were closed each time without even a single serious suspect taken into custody.”

“I can’t say I’m surprised,” I replied, still feeling some resentment towards the police.

“However, Scotland Yard secretly put together a description of the murderer. He was obviously a madman, endowed with herculean strength, and, unofficially, some of their inspectors gave him a nickname—one harking back to the most terrible unsolved case in all the history of British law enforcement...”

“You don’t mean...?”

“Yes, they nicknamed him—the new Jack the Ripper! But little do they know how right they are...”

I looked at Holmes, dumbfounded.

“What do you mean, *how right they are*? Surely, you can’t mean that Jack the Ripper is still at large?”

“I can’t say anymore right now, Harry. *This is a story for which the world is not yet prepared.*”

So, the elusive monster, the ghostly murderer, was back, just when I had undertaken to assist Sherlock Holmes! He was not a myth, not a legend... Jack the Ripper was a man... He had an identity... And now, we knew he might be a sailor, with a known address: the *Matilda Briggs*, and the monster always sailed in search of new victims, but the police had never found his trail...

A new question arose in my mind.

“But you, sir, why haven’t you tried to capture that monster?”

“I did, once,” replied Holmes, cracking his long fingers. “I thought the case had been closed. I will tell you the full story at another time... But it is only in the last few years that I became aware of the return of the *Matilda Briggs* to our shores...”

“Return?”

“Yes. She was tied to the original murders too. Then, two years ago, I took notice of the murders in Glasgow. That’s when I became convinced...”

“Convinced of what?”

But he ignored my question and continued:

“...But, by then, she was already gone and forgotten, like a ghost ship. I kept an eye out for her, watching for her return. My attention was now fully focused on her, but no matter what I did, I could not prevent the murders in Dover... And today, my dear Harry, as I stand before this body, as hideously mutilated as the others, I have almost all the answers to my questions... I only need to find if the *Matilda Briggs* is moored at Southampton.”

“But you agree that the author of these crimes is one of her sailors?”

“Of course. It’s elementary.”

“Then let’s call Scotland Yard and arrest them all, and we’ll...”

“No, not yet, Harry. I have *almost* all the answers, as I said—not all. I still need proof, and it is you who are going to find that proof for me.”

“I?”

“Yes, you. First, you are going to verify that the *Matilda Briggs* is indeed in the port of Southampton. Then, I’ll have other tasks for you, but I will give you my instructions later. At this stage, the presence of the *Matilda Briggs* in the waters of Southampton is all the information I need. Now, good bye! Go, go quickly, Harry! Time is of the essence if we are to finally put an end to this dreadful business, once and for all...”

Leaving Holmes to his cogitations, I crossed the commons and left in a hurry, walking as fast as I could towards the station. I did notice, however, that this time, I was no longer treated as an anonymous stranger, but that everyone saluted me with deference.

Such was the benefit of being identified as the Great Detective’s latest assistant.

Half an hour later, I was traveling at full steam towards Southampton on the South Western Railway.