

FIFTEEN MORE



CHAPTER 1

Three women had died under the Red Fiend's knife by the time I was consulted to investigate the series of murders occurring in Whitechapel during the latter half of 1888. I was, of course, aware of the horrific goings-on in London's East End. It was my business to know. I read the papers, and the clippings had been duly added to their appropriate files. I had no intention of participation, however, having considered various aspects of the attacks and deemed them unremarkable apart from their sheer brutality and the general mass hysteria these crimes had caused in that section of town. Watson had even come 'round in the early days of the case to counsel me against involvement.

Perhaps it was this exchange that ought to have aggravated my *pilius erectus* and stirred me from my couch at 221b. For John to come calling during his rounds to forward such a plea was curious enough. Since his marriage to Miss Morstan the prior autumn, his practice had grown to make heavy

demands upon his time. I dare say even his wife was seeing very little of him. I certainly had not. But to have my friend, with his gentle spirit, warn me off assisting in the running down of the perpetrator of these particularly gruesome attacks ought to have inspired me to look all the more. I consider myself wholly to blame on that count. The Watson I knew would never have set justice aside nor asked it from another. In any event, it was Sir Charles Warren's card in my tray and his foot upon my stair that brought me into the singular affair at last.

"It's a bad business, Mr. Holmes." With that abrupt preamble, the hard-faced Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police leant forward through the open door to catch my hand in his. Mrs. Hudson had barely left us to our own when my visitor's military starch wilted, and I felt his grip grow slack.

"Sit. Please." I gestured to the couch and strode across the room to fetch brandy and glass.

He waved me off, and his eyes, begging that I say nothing of the temporary lapse, regained some of their sheen. "You know of the ghastly murders we've had over in Whitechapel?"

"I have some small knowledge of several recent events, yes."

Sir Warren grunted and hunted about his pocket for match and cigarette. With a pause to strike and lay the one to the other, he intoned, "There's been another."

"From your presence here I had gathered as much. That confirmed by the slight asymmetry of your collar and the state of your shoes. Add to that the hour and . . ." I trailed off, leaning back into my own chair and reaching for my nearby pipe. "Surely

the facets of this latest bloodshed are as common and unmarked as those others of your district.”

“That’s the problem, Mr. Holmes! It’s clear as mud and reeks as much. My men and I are completely in the dark, and the public is starting to scream for our own necks. Your name came up. Given me by Inspector Lestrade.”

There was no sense in hiding my own flash of surprised amusement. Far better he see that than the annoyance which often came from linking the inspector’s name to mine. Lestrade was a good enough sort of man. He was even a passably adequate policeman at times. But if I were to be drug out of my flat merely to watch several of the Yard’s finest hem and haw over some dead-end crime of passion? No, I would not allow even Lestrade to bandy my name about so freely.

Still I had to, at the very least, hear Sir Warren through. Closing my eyes, I waved that he proceed with the details. A part of me wondered what Watson would think of it all now that my hand had been forced. Knowing him, he would be shrugging on his coat and taking out his little pen and pad rather than be left out of the action.

“Well, you see, we’re now of the opinion that this whole thing began a month back, with the murder of Mrs. Martha Tabram. Found on the landing of the George’s-buildings, top of George Yard on August 7th. Laid out on her back in a pool of blood, she was discovered by a lodger going out to work early in the morning.”

“An overcast night with some small showers of rain. A new moon, and therefore as dark as could be conceived.” I remembered the incident, remembered

its peculiar lack of leads. "Stabbed thirty-nine times. Two suspects detained and later released."

"Mistaken identity in each case. And, besides, there were the character witnesses for both. Exemplary men."

"No doubt," I commented drily. "Pray continue."

"August 30th. Mary Ann Nichols is found slain in Buck's Row. 'Twas beginning of the last quarter and a partly cloudy night—so not as pitch as on the previous, Mr. Holmes. And a good rain storm the afternoon before so that we had more to work with. Victim was cut up like the other. Throat was slashed almost ear to ear—easy cause of death there. Her clothes had soaked up most of the blood, so much so that the first impression from the constable who found her was that she was merely a downed drunk. Three policemen in the area and nobody heard a sound, you see.

"But it was the post mortem examination that surprised us. The papers, as I'm sure you know, were none too circumspect in their reporting of the woman's further injuries. Abdomen and belly all hacked to bits. Some bruising on the face and throat. Strangulation therefore clearly the reason no one heard a thing."

"Who was it that performed the post mortem?"

"Dr. Llewellyn. His surgery is not more than three hundred yards from the site of the murder." Here Sir Warren gave the slight shudder of guilt for which I had been waiting. As I say, I had followed the reports in the papers with some degree of interest. "There was a small issue with that, I must admit. Two workers came by to strip and clean the body

when the victim was left for a few moments. Honest mistake.”

“But a terrible one. Something, some key fact, might have been missed by this, Commissioner. A hair; a lost button. A smudge of dirt or worse.”

“I wholeheartedly agree, and there has been a dressing down of all involved. But it is about this morning’s murder that I come to you in particular. Those that precede it merely indicate the pattern. Both in timing and in how little we have to go on. But this morning—it has points. It has points, Mr. Holmes. The first man on the scene, Inspector Joseph Chandler, immediately telegraphed the Yard.”

And there the dropping of the name “Sherlock Holmes,” I supposed. I refilled my pipe and waited.

“The woman—we’re still working on getting her name—was laid out like the last. Found in the yard back of 29 Hanbury at just past six this morning. Throat sliced. Stomach opened up. And here’s the ticket, Mr. Holmes. A leather apron was found in the yard by the fence. Wet. As though it had been washed of blood.”

“And before you move against the owner of said leather apron, Lestrade thought it worth your while for me to take a look at the scene and evidence, yes?”

“In following the case, you’ll have heard that we’ve a suspect.”

I snorted, remembering the colourful descriptor in one of the Wednesday evening papers. The man who had caught the public’s eye enjoyed a less than stellar reputation amongst his fellows. No less than fifty people had stepped forward to offer statements, from personal grievances to physical descriptions of

the man who ran by the nickname of “Leather Apron” due to that article generally being a part of his daily costume. According to the press, nobody knew his name but that he moved in shadows on soundless feet, his eyes glittered wickedly, and his incessant grin repelled. While his name was yet a mystery, the police had, apparently, discovered his lodgings—conveniently empty of its inhabitant these past several days.

Sir Warren cleared his throat. “As you know, we are always careful lest we overlook something. The public wants to know why there’s been no arrest. And after this morning’s murder . . .”

At this my eyebrows raised of their own volition. “The woman. She’s been taken to the mortuary for a post mortem?”

“Under strict instructions that the body is not to be touched until after both Doctor Phillips and yourself have made of it what you will. And I’ve left men blocking the yard of number 29. Crowds were beginning to gather, you understand.”

Already I had found my feet and was reaching for my hat and coat. Ringing for Mrs. Hudson, I gave her notice of where the commissioner and I were heading, along with a directive that she pass word to Doctor Watson. His good sense often overrode my intractable ways, and though I did not yet believe the criminal actions in Whitechapel fell within my usual purview, there was something in the events that niggled at the back of my mind. A strange disquiet had seized my spirit, and I came away from Baker Street pondering the threads of uncustomary caution and concluding that if I were to be lured into this case, then Watson must come with me.

The commissioner and I turned our attentions upon a waking London. Neither of us found excuse to talk save to comment obliquely upon the weather. Autumn had sneaked into the air some time during the night, and a bright sun-washed sky met our eyes on the way to the waiting cab. For my part, I merely wondered how long it would be until the morning's freshness fully erased what evidence might be left in the dirt of my crime scene. No matter. The police had likely turned it into their parade ground by now.

At length, Commissioner Warren and I found the traffic slowing and the buildings on either side turning from smart to slapdash. Even arriving from the north, for three full blocks we witnessed an aimless crowd. Curiosity makes a holiday of tragedy, and one could feel the apprehension thickening the already pungent air of Spitalfields. At the market we disembarked, finding that our pace had slowed to the point of uselessness. It would not do for the papers to know more than us before the day was out. We proceeded on foot to 29 Hanbury where Warren's first man on the scene met with the commissioner and me.

"Inspector Joseph Chandler. Mr. Sherlock Holmes."

"The man who made the discovery, yes." I offered my hand and the policeman gave it two hard pumps.

"Happened in 'ere." Turning, he led us up and through the entrance of the house. Ducking into the narrow passageway and out of sight from meddling eyes, we fixed our attentions on the open door yawning into the yard beyond.

While the body had been taken off to the mortuary and some small disturbance of the dirt and

stone had been necessary for that manoeuvre, I could almost believe that efforts had been made to preserve what marks might have been present upon discovery of the scene. Darting my eyes over the small yard, I read the prints as a lady might pore over the latest novel. All description and no plot, I could discern the edits of many a man and many a boot. Inwardly I sighed.

“She lay here?” I pointed.

“With her head almost at the steps, yes. Legs splayed wide and her skirts disarrayed—”

“And someone was here before you—not the murderer—who attended to her and raised the cry for help. Have you found the men who gave the alarm then? Questioned them?” Picking my way gingerly along the fence, I bent and indicated a set of divots and scuffs where someone had clearly knelt beside the body. “I perceive more than one attempt here at ascertaining whether the woman yet lived, and I doubt that any arrivals beyond yourself were mistaken as to the state of things.”

“A Mr. John Davies discovered the body at six and ran for help. It was him who lowered her skirts. For decency. I, er, I grabbed some sacking to cover the woman. Again, it seemed wrong to have her lying thus, what with the crowd pressing and all. I took his statement.”

“Thank you, Inspector,” I murmured and then gestured to the detritus laid about the space. “And the rest of these items?”

“Left as found, sir. Only the body has been moved.”

“And the leather apron.” My eyes met his, and I pointed to the corner where a dripping pump further added to the damp of the ground.

Inspector Chandler flushed. “Yessir. In our excitement of finally having a concrete lead on the scoundrel . . .”

I did not listen to the rest of his explanation. Rather, I was intent on what else the ground had to tell me. “The money. That was left here by her feet? Along with”—eyeing the dirt sidelong, I squinted—“rings? Two rings, Inspector. Where have they gone off to?”

“No idea, sir. Perhaps robbery was the motive.”

A small smile graced my lips. “It is certainly a thought, Inspector, though considering the economics of the surrounding, those coins would have been tempting as well. And at her head? This paper was there?”

“Just so. We left it for you to see.”

I returned to the steps and leaned forward to pick it up. Part of an envelope, it contained a piece of paper wrapped ’round two pills.

“London, 28 Aug. 1888,” I read the post office stamp aloud and peered at the writing scrawled across the front. An “M” and “Sp” were all that remained of any sort of address. On the reverse? The seal of the Sussex Regiment. “Medicine and an envelope of most specific origins, Inspector. If nothing else, it may show us who the unfortunate woman was.”

“Or deliver us the man who done it. Military connexions would make the search easier.”

Offering over the envelope and ignoring the policeman’s quick assumptions, I again moved along the fence, taking out my lens and examining the length and breadth of it. No signs of entry or egress that way. Some blood spatter—as to be expected even were the woman to have been

rendered unconscious before having her throat slashed.

“What does it all mean, Mr. Holmes?”

I straightened and regarded the commissioner. “I have no doubt the coroner’s report will note this latest victim was asphyxiated prior to the murderer drawing his knife over her throat. She was discovered dead, not dying, not crying out for help, and there are no clear signs in the yard of any sort of struggle. After bringing her down peacefully, our man slit her throat and then likely proceeded to attack the other portions of her body which show injury. He was in no hurry. As you see, he has taken the time to arrange her possessions just so. The leather apron is not his. The envelope is of some interest, as I said, if only in helping us determine the name of the victim and next of kin. The full duration of the attack—if the culprit, indeed, is the perpetrator of the previous murders and is as skilled as the papers have suggested—would have taken between five and twenty minutes depending on the extent of the woman’s wounds. Our suspect would be bloodied but by how much I cannot say until we’ve had word from Doctor Phillips. Also, our killer would have left the way he came in.”

Any further sharing of my conclusions was halted by a commotion down the hallway leading to number 29’s front door. A change in its lighting, as well as a discordant shuffling and swearing, advertised a newcomer, and I could see both the inspector and commissioner tense.

“Impossible situation, I tell you. Absolutely outrageous!” The speaker gesticulated wildly as he came at us. Sparking and intelligent eyes sat betwixt wilful eyebrows and hawkish nose. The irate mouth

positively trembled. All this was set amongst curly locks and bushy side whiskers and further framed off by the gentleman's well-cut suit and stovepipe hat.

"Ah, Doctor Phillips. We were just coming to see you."

"Then you'll go away disappointed," he huffed and turned his complaint to the commissioner. "Your PC off and went. And so they've done away with what evidence I might have worked, sir."

"I beg pardon?" Sir Warren appeared taken aback.

"The body's been stripped and washed. Before I could examine her as I ought. It's an outrage."

"The instructions were clear—"

"The instructions were ignored!"

"Gentlemen, I think it would be best if we had this discussion elsewhere. Doctor, perhaps you might be able to tell us what you've already concluded per your initial examination here?"

At last Doctor Phillips seemed to bow to my mollifying influence. He finished his complaint with a gruff, "Come along then," and led the way back out. The three of us followed meekly—two mortified policeman and I, somewhat embarrassed to be party to the parade of errors which plagued the investigation.

"A-ha!"

My triumphant exclamation caused my companions to jump.

"Points, Sir Warren. And perhaps more instructive than someone's washing left along the fencing between back yards. A light, if you please, Inspector." Following my gaze, the man shone his lantern up into the brickwork lintel of the doorway. Scrawled in pale chalk the message ran:

Five. Fifteen more and then I give myself up.

Every man's blood ran cold at the sight, mine included. My adrenaline hurried to catch it up. I hardly knew I had drawn my glass out once more and only distantly noted that Inspector Chandler's light obligingly followed my motions.

"Is it he?"

"As I would doubt this to be the general motif of interior decoration even in parts such as these, yes I believe this the handiwork of our man." I leaned close, sniffing at the writing and gingerly rubbing my index finger along the edge of the last word. I stepped back and considered. "We now can confirm the handedness of our suspect. His general sense of fair play—such as it is. And—hullo there."

I stopped short, eyes drawn downward to a small, whitish cylindrical item upon the ground. The rubbish had a friend. Two cigarette nubs. I picked them up, almost dropping them a moment later. I am uncertain as to whether my shock was displayed for all. If so, no one made comment.

Tantamount to seeing the pale square of a baby's bonnet lying at the bottom of a well, the terror that it cast upon my mind was illogical and somehow sickening. Two stubs said that the man had stayed within this doorway far longer than it would have taken for him to chalk his note. That or—and this I thought the more probable of the scenarios—he had saved his leavings for the express purpose of taunting us further. It was a message, same as the words scrawled on the wall above. The disquieting consid-

eration that I, in particular, was being toyed with, was made then quickly dropped, the action much like the recoiling of one's fingers from the reach of a snapping beast.

"Mr. Holmes?"

I shook myself out of my stupor and gave, what I am sure was, a wan smile. "Apologies, Inspector. Let us continue."

I let fall the two stubs, certain I had been wrong to attach any importance to such a trifle. We continued on towards the mortuary. What I learned there nearly put out of my mind the strange coincidence of the spent cigarettes. Sir Warren's brief summary in 221b proved a grave understatement. Doctor Phillips' findings were, by far, some of the most gruesome I had ever encountered. The man who had laid open 29 Hanbury's victim had not merely hacked and stabbed at her abdominal region. I learned that the woman's intestines had been lifted out of place and arranged with cruel deliberation, much as had the contents of her pockets. Worse still, the uterus had been surgically removed. Clean cuts, the murderer clearly possessed no small amount of anatomical knowledge. And nerve. The doctor believed the mutilations could have taken no less than a quarter hour and quite possibly longer.

We returned to the scene to question what witnesses the police had gathered. By now a queue had formed in spite of efforts to deter gawkers. An enterprising neighbour had taken it upon themselves to profit from the tragedy. People were paying a penny to view the yard out back of number 29.

Mrs. Richardson, who lived above the ground floor shop, was irate. "Tell 'em there's nothing to see.

I've a business here. I've a home. And you, you leave my son alone. He's done no wrong."

This last came with a finger wagged at me, and I looked to Mr. Chandler.

"The apron is evidence against the man we're eager to capture, woman," Sir Warren stepped in to explain. "And so, if you claim the article belongs to your son? Well then, we must see it through."

I turned away from the scene and focussed on the other woman whom the police had questioned. Solid and matronly, her face carried both the wan paleness of a troubled mind and the sharp glint of determination. This was a witness with something to say and would say it to any who would listen. I decided to try her.

"You saw the man. Did you also see the woman?" approaching, I began without preamble, startling her into candour.

She nodded and said, "I was walking westward to Spitalfields at five thirty when I saw a man and a woman standing up against the shutters of number 29. Her face I saw but the man's I could not, as he had his back to me. He was a little taller than the woman. Perhaps a half a foot, but then he wasn't standing straight."

"Did either appear intoxicated?"

"No, sir. Neither appeared the worse for drink. They were just . . . leaning. Talking. I didn't think anything of it. I didn't even have a good look at his face. Only hers."

"They were talking," I prompted. "About what?"

"I am not sure. I heard him say 'Will you?' and her respond with 'Yes,' but that's all I remember. I didn't attach any importance to it until I heard about the murder and knew I might have seen the man

that the woman was talking to, the man who done it."

"You've seen the victim then?" This surprised me.

"No, sir. But the timing—I remember the clock chiming. It couldn't have been anyone else."

"And the man's appearance?"

"Foreign. Maybe. And no older than forty. Again, I didn't get a look at his face. He didn't look like a worker, though, from his manner of dress. He looked like, what I should call, shabby-genteel. He had on a brown felt hat with a low crown and a long, dark-coloured coat."

When it appeared no further details were to follow, I smiled and gave the witness my thanks. I looked around to find the police had lost in the war against curiosity. Sir Warren and the rest were adrift in a growing crowd of onlookers. He caught my eye and sidled close, "Now you see what it is we're dealing with here."

I wanted to point out that, what we had in Hanbury Street at present, was not near what we were truly dealing with. But then he well knew the scope of the situation.

"Fifteen more and then I give myself up."

With little left to do there, I begged leave and promised I would consult with Inspector Lestrade as soon as I had a theory of any value. Returning home, I found that, in my absence, I had missed a visit from Watson. A spent cigarette marked the minutes he had waited before going on his way.

And there my traitorous brain betrayed me. The whole of the ghastly scene had replayed in my mind as I had ridden home, a shadowy figure occupying the role of the mysterious Whitechapel Murderer.

Each time, I had found it harder and harder to get past the damning fact of the cigarette butts left beneath the chalked taunt to the police—to taunt me! And here was that same clue come home to Baker Street.

“Bradley, Oxford Street” had read the stamp upon the two stubs. So, too, read the remnant left behind in my apartment by my friend. This was what had so shocked me at Hanbury number 29. Cigarettes from Watson’s tobacconist. At a murder scene.

The establishment itself lay not even one mile south of 221 Baker Street and had, of course, innumerable customers. Going there would produce nothing save frustration and the eventual sideways glance from both owner and patronage. And though my Watson was hardly the only man to patronize that shop, the evidence spoke to the class of man who had been in 29 Hanbury in the early hours of the morning.

We were looking for a gentleman wholly out of place in that street and yet someone who nobody noticed while everyone was looking for him. A person who would have had blood upon their hands and clothing. A butcher who ripped entrails from women and left them dead in gutters. A criminal who had, by his own claim, struck five times already and hoped for fifteen more. A man who had struck, seemingly, at random and yet also decided to make this case personal . . . for me.

By the time the evening *Star* shone its headlines upon the city, my own mind had sunk into a haze of tobacco and consternation. They, of course, had everything wrong, as the papers often do. But the

overall effect remained stamped upon all of London's psyche, Baker Street's included:

HORROR UPON HORROR. WHITECHAPEL
IS PANIC-STRICKEN AT ANOTHER
FIENDISH CRIME. A FOURTH VICTIM OF
THE MANIAC.