



**MURDER AT THE
MANCHESTER MUSEUM**

JIM ELDRIDGE

Allison & Busby Limited
11 Wardour Mews
London W1F 8AN
allisonandbusby.com

First published in Great Britain by Allison & Busby in 2020.

Copyright © 2020 by JIM ELDRIDGE

The moral right of the author is hereby asserted in accordance with
the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

*All characters and events in this publication,
other than those clearly in the public domain,
are fictitious and any resemblance to actual persons,
living or dead, is purely coincidental.*

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by
any means without the prior written permission of the publisher,
nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover
other than that in which it is published and without a similar
condition being imposed on the subsequent buyer.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library.

First Edition

ISBN 978-0-7490-2449-9

Typeset in 11/16 pt Adobe Garamond Pro by
Allison & Busby Ltd.

The paper used for this Allison & Busby publication
has been produced from trees that have been legally sourced
from well-managed and credibly certified forests.

Printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

CHAPTER ONE

1895

‘Crewe next stop!’ called the train conductor. He then began to list the various stops after Crewe the train still had to make before it reached Manchester, before adding in ringing tones, ‘For all other destinations, change at Crewe!’

Daniel Wilson studied the telegram he and Abigail had received the day before.

‘Murder at Manchester Museum. Please come urgently. Bernard Stegges, Director,’ he read, then folded it and put it back in his pocket with a weary sigh. ‘But who’s been murdered? When? And how?’ asked Daniel. ‘There’s been nothing about a recent murder at the Manchester Museum in the newspapers.’

‘Because they’re the London papers,’ Abigail pointed out, turning a page in her magazine.

‘But they carry news from further afield,’ said Daniel. He

tapped the copy of *The Times* that lay on his lap. ‘There are stories in here from Glasgow, Newcastle, Paris and Berlin. But nothing concerning Manchester.’

‘Which suggests whoever was murdered was not seen as an important figure.’

‘So why bring us all the way from London when they have a perfectly adequate police force capable of investigating a local crime?’

‘Do you know much about the Manchester police force?’

‘No,’ admitted Daniel.

‘It’s a pity the telephone service hasn’t yet been connected nationally, otherwise you’d have been able to talk to Mr Steggles and got the answers you wanted.’

‘The telephone?’ repeated Daniel with a frown.

‘Yes,’ said Abigail. She held the copy of the *Museum Digest* she’d been reading towards him. ‘It says here—’

The scream of a woman in terror from the corridor cut through the rattling background chug-chug of the train. Immediately, Daniel was out of his seat, had pulled the door of their compartment open and was in the corridor, Abigail close behind him.

A middle-aged man was at the end of the corridor, holding a young woman viciously by her hair. In his other hand he held a knife, which he was pointing at the two uniformed railwaymen, a guard and the conductor, who stood watching the pair nervously.

‘Leave us alone!’ shouted the man. ‘It’s not your business.’

The man was drunk, realised Daniel. Not drunk enough to be easily overpowered, but drunk enough to do something dangerous. Like stab someone. And the young woman he was holding tightly on to looked the most likely victim. The man was short but stocky, his jacket barely able to contain his muscular upper body. The young woman was wearing a skirt and short-sleeved blouse. There

was no sign of a coat or a bag or other outer garments. Daniel guessed they must have been left behind by the woman when she fled the compartment.

‘Sir . . .’ began the guard uncomfortably.

‘Go away!’ yelled the man. ‘This whore took my wallet. I want it back!’

‘I never!’ sobbed the woman. ‘He must have dropped it!’

‘Dropped it?’ sneered the man, adding vengefully, ‘I’ll drop you, you whore!’

And he slashed at her, the blade opening a wound in her upper arm that sprayed blood towards the two railwaymen, who hurriedly pressed back as far as the corridor would allow them to as the woman screamed.

Daniel moved. He took his wallet from his pocket and threw it at the man’s face. Instinctively, the man let go of the woman and threw his hand up to protect himself. As he did so, Daniel chopped down hard on the wrist of the hand that held the knife with the edge of his right hand, at the same time following it with a hard left hook that smashed into the man’s face, sending him crashing backwards into the wall of the corridor. The man crumpled as he and the knife fell to the floor. Daniel put his foot on the knife and kicked it away to a safe position, but the fact the fallen man hadn’t moved showed the danger was over.

Abigail went to the terrified and sobbing young woman, taking a large handkerchief from her pocket, and placed it against the knife wound, staunching the flow of blood.

‘Here,’ she said. ‘If you come to our compartment I can clean and bandage that.’

The guard stepped forward, his face grim.

‘I’m afraid that won’t be possible, madam,’ he said. ‘This man accused her of stealing his wallet. This is now a police matter. We

have to take her into custody and hand her to the police when we reach Crewe.'

'In that case you can have her once I've dealt with her wound, and not before,' snapped Abigail.

As Abigail led the young woman to their compartment, Daniel gestured at the fallen man and the knife.

'I'd advise you to secure his hands in case he tries anything else when he comes round,' he said to the two railway officials.

'Thank you, sir, I'd already thought of that,' said the guard curtly. 'Everything was under control before you intervened.'

Daniel nodded and headed back to their compartment, where he found Abigail cleaning the wound. Once she was sure there was no chance of infection, she took a small bandage from her bag and proceeded to bind it around the woman's upper arm.

'It might need stitches,' said Abigail. 'Unfortunately, the needle I carry in my sewing kit is only suitable for cloth.' She looked at the conductor, who had appeared in the doorway of the compartment and was studying the scene with a look of some discomfort on his face.

'I hope you have more compassion than your oaf of a colleague,' she said. 'When you hand this young lady to the police, inform them that she will require stitches in the wound.' She fixed him with a steely glare. 'I shall check with the railway company later to make sure my instructions were carried out. If I find they weren't, I shall report you to your superiors.'

'Yes, ma'am.' The conductor gulped nervously. 'They will be.' His tone changed to one of officialdom as he turned his attention to the young woman. 'I must ask you to come with me, miss.'

Daniel followed the young woman into the corridor as the conductor took her gently by the elbow and escorted her along the corridor to the guard's quarters. The man that Daniel had hit

still lay on the floor, and although he was conscious, he was firmly secured by a rope at the wrist and ankles with the guard standing over him.

Daniel returned to the compartment and pulled the door shut.

‘All’s well that ends well,’ he said. ‘Well done for the swift way you acted on treating her knife wound.’

‘It wasn’t as vital as the way you acted in disarming him,’ said Abigail. She gave an angry snort of derision. ‘I heard what the guard said to you. “Everything’s under control.” Ha! Lunacy! And not a word of thanks!’

‘You can’t please everyone,’ said Daniel wryly.

‘He might have killed that woman. And the guard and conductor!’

‘It’s all sorted out now,’ said Daniel. He looked at her inquisitively. ‘You were talking about telephones before all that.’

Abigail stared at him in amazement. ‘You’ve just saved a woman’s life, overpowered a dangerous knife-wielding maniac, and you want to talk about telephones?’

‘I’m interested,’ he said. ‘They say that the telephone is going to be the thing of the future. That there are already plans to put in telephone lines that will link Europe and America, and even Australia. Imagine, being able to talk to someone at the other side of the world without leaving your house!’ He nodded towards the *Museum Digest* on the seat beside Abigail. ‘You were about to read me something before the trouble began.’

‘Yes,’ said Abigail. She opened the magazine and began to flick through the pages. ‘Last night, when you said we were going to Manchester, I decided to look through some of the recent editions to see if there was anything in any of them about the Manchester Museum, and I found this article. Ah yes, here it is.’ She began to read. ‘The museum in Manchester is among the latest to subscribe to the newly installed telephone exchange in that city. It is believed

the number of subscribers has now passed seven hundred, many of them private customers. This means that people as far apart as Stockport, Oldham and Bolton can now communicate with one another through the telephone system, making Manchester the first city in England to have a fully operational telephone exchange, with plans to extend the lines to Liverpool, Leeds, Sheffield, and even as far as Birmingham.'

'But not to London,' observed Daniel.

'That day will come, if the rest of the report is to be believed,' said Abigail. She offered the magazine to Daniel. 'Would you like to read the rest of it?'

Daniel was about to take it, when they heard the conductor's shout of: 'Crewe station! Crewe station!'

'Later,' he said, passing the magazine back to Abigail. 'I've been told that Crewe is one of the busiest junctions on the whole network, and if that's so then I feel this compartment might suddenly become rather crowded and we'll be spending most of our time stopping our comfort being encroached on by hordes of travellers bound for Manchester.'

'Don't worry.' Abigail smiled. 'I'll protect you. If anyone tries to sit on you, I'll deal with them.'

CHAPTER TWO

As it turned out, although other travellers joined them in the compartment, it did not turn out to be the free-for-all that Daniel had envisaged, just three apparently respectable businessmen and a husband and wife. When Daniel had sometimes taken a train in central London, especially one travelling east towards Southend, he'd often found himself besieged by families with numerous children of all ages who seemed to only want to fight with one another and generally cause mayhem, while their parents sat seemingly oblivious to the distress their offspring were causing the other passengers. The quiet mood of their fellow passengers meant that Daniel was able to take time to read about the Manchester Museum in Abigail's magazine. As a result he learnt that, as well as the museum enjoying telephone access in the area of Manchester and surrounding cities, the museum was a relatively recent establishment. Although it

incorporated material from the earlier collections of the Manchester Natural History and Geological Societies, the newly designed building that housed the Manchester Museum had only been opened to the public seven years before, in 1888. The article highlighted the large number of mounted animals on display, many of them from someone called Brian Houghton Hodgson, who seemed to have discovered many species during his travels in India and Nepal which had been previously unknown to the West. The museum also seemed to have one of the largest collections of beetles and other insects outside of London's Natural History Museum.

'Not much here about your particular area of expertise,' commented Daniel, referring to Abigail's reputation as one of Europe's leading Egyptologists, a reputation based on her archaeological work at the pyramids in Egypt, as well as her explorations of ancient temples in Greece and of Roman sites.

'It is expanding,' she said. She laid her finger on a paragraph. 'You'll see it mentions new finds being brought in from the excavations at Gurob and Kahun, as well as from Flinders Petrie.' She gave a smile of reminiscence as she added, 'I worked with him, you know.'

'Who?'

'Flinders Petrie.'

'In Egypt?'

'Yes, at Hawara in 1888. Then again in Palestine at Tell el-Hesi. 1890.'

'What was he like?' asked Daniel.

'Much the same as he still is today. A big bear of a man. It's astonishing to think that he's still so comparatively young for an archaeologist and he's achieved so much! He was in his late thirties then. In his early days the archaeological establishment considered him a bit of a maverick. He didn't always stick to

the rules. For example, when he began the dig at Tanis in the New Kingdom site he took on the role of foreman in charge of the workers himself. He said it was one less level of bureaucracy which would otherwise slow things down.'

'Attractive?'

Abigail laughed. 'Very.' Then, with a glance at the other passengers, she whispered to him, 'But you have nothing to fear on that aspect. It was purely a meeting of two minds with one aim.'

On their arrival at the main London Road station they elected to walk to Oxford Road, where the museum was situated, rather than take a hansom. His years as a police officer had led Daniel to believe that the best way to see any new city was on foot, and he was fortunate that Abigail, with her many experiences exploring exotic towns and cities, was of the same opinion. The museum was a large, rather ornate building.

'It looks like a slightly smaller version of the Natural History Museum in London,' observed Daniel.

'It was designed by the same architect,' said Abigail. 'Alfred Waterhouse. But don't say anything to them about it being slightly smaller. Museums can be very sensitive about unfavourable comparisons.'

'I wasn't being unfavourable,' defended Daniel. 'I just said it looked slightly smaller.'

'But it may not be inside,' said Abigail. 'Sensitivity is all. We don't want to get off on the wrong foot with our new client.'

'Perhaps if I say it looks larger?' suggested Daniel.

'Better not to say anything,' advised Abigail.

Inside, they found a uniformed commissioner on duty at the door and asked him for directions to the office of Mr Steggle, the museum's director.

‘Would you be Mr Wilson and Miss Fenton?’ asked the commissionaire.

‘We are,’ confirmed Daniel.

‘Mr Steggles asked me to watch out for you. If you’ll follow me I’ll take you to his office.’

The commissionaire summoned a similarly uniformed man from inside the museum and indicated for him to take over on duty at the main entrance, then led the way to a narrow stone staircase to one side of the entrance doors. Daniel and Abigail followed him, carrying their overnight bags, and soon they were standing outside a dark oak door on the first floor. The commissionaire knocked at the door, then opened it and announced, ‘Mr Wilson and Miss Fenton, Mr Steggles.’

‘Thank heavens!’ said a cultured voice from within. The door was thrown wider and Daniel and Abigail beheld a small, thin man in his fifties dressed in a close-fitting soberly dark suit. With his neatly trimmed hair and tiny moustache, he reminded Daniel of a senior bank clerk rather than the man in overall charge of a large and important museum.

‘Do come in!’ said Steggles. He led them across the plush, thickly piled carpet to two chairs waiting by his large desk. ‘I’m so sorry,’ he apologised as they put their luggage down. ‘I should have thought and suggested you go to the hotel we’ve booked you into first before you came here, but I’ve been so worried over what happened that the distraction has played havoc with some of my thought processes.’

‘What has happened?’ asked Daniel, as he and Abigail seated themselves. ‘Your telegram just said a murder had been committed here at the museum.’

‘It’s now two murders,’ said Steggles grimly.

‘Two?’

‘The first we discovered on the day it happened. The

second only manifested itself this morning.’ He looked at them apologetically. ‘I’m forgetting my manners and common courtesy,’ he said. ‘Can I order tea for you? Or anything else?’

‘Tea would be perfect, thank you,’ said Abigail.

Steggles pressed a button on a large black machine on his desk, at the same time lifting what looked like a small metal speaker from it, which was connected to the machine by a length of wire. A woman’s voice came from the black machine.

‘Yes, Mr Steggles?’

‘Tea for three, please, Mrs Wedburn. With biscuits.’

‘Certainly, Mr Steggles.’

As Steggles replaced the metal speaker on the machine, Daniel commented, ‘We were reading about the telephone system here in Manchester.’

‘Ah, this isn’t that system,’ said Steggles. ‘It’s a variation. Internal only. It uses similar technology, but it doesn’t have to go through an operator as it’s only connected to my secretary in her office.’ He smiled. ‘It saves me having to walk along there if I have something to tell her about.’

‘The murders?’ prompted Daniel gently.

‘Yes,’ said Steggles. ‘On Thursday last week, four days ago, a young woman was stabbed to death here in the museum. She’d been sitting at a table in the reading room, apparently doing some research work, and been stabbed in the back, the knife penetrating into her heart and the point of the knife coming out through her ribs at the front of her chest.’

‘That would have taken a lot of strength,’ said Daniel. ‘There were no witnesses?’

Steggles shook his head. ‘She was in an isolated corner of the reading room. She was found lying face down on the table, with blood by her.’

‘You say she was doing some research,’ said Abigail. ‘Was she a student of some sort?’

‘No,’ said Steggs. ‘In fact, she seemed to have been someone from a poor background, to judge by her clothes. Her clothes were clean, but very worn and repaired many times. Indeed, her shoes had holes in the soles and newspapers had been put inside to give protection against cobbles.’

‘Do you know her name?’

Again, Steggs shook his head.

‘No. She gave no name, and there was no form of identification on her. She did have a bag with her, but that had gone. I assume whoever stabbed her took it.’

‘A robbery?’ hazarded Abigail.

‘Unlikely,’ said Daniel thoughtfully. ‘Whoever did it was obviously strong. If they simply wanted the bag all they had to do was take it from her. At worst, a punch to knock her out if she resisted. What do the police say?’

‘To be honest, that’s why we’ve asked you if you’d look into it. As far as the police are concerned, there is no case to investigate. A woman no one knows has died. There were no witnesses, so no sighting of a suspect. Her obvious poverty means to them she is of no importance. They say they haven’t the resources to waste investigating something that can’t be solved.’

‘That’s very harsh,’ said Daniel.

‘That’s what we thought. The board of the museum, that is. Although there’s been a museum in Manchester since 1821, this building was only opened seven years ago. It is our ambition to provide the resources for education not just for students and staff of the university, but for the wider public. Especially those from poor and deprived backgrounds. We are an establishment with a social conscience, as are many others in Manchester. We feel

that the violent death of someone should not be ignored simply because they are poor or are not recognised as important to society. If the police won't agree to look into this poor woman's death, then we feel it is up to us to do something.'

A gentle knock at the door interrupted them.

'Ah, that will be the tea,' said Steggles.

He got up and walked briskly to the door, opening it to admit a kindly looking woman of middle age carrying a tray on which were cups and saucers and all the other accoutrements for tea, including a plate of mixed biscuits.

'On the desk, please, Mrs Wedburn.' Steggles smiled.

Once Mrs Wedburn had deposited the tray and departed, Steggles busied himself with pouring the tea to their specifications – milk for both, sugar for Daniel but not for Abigail – and served them, placing the biscuits within easy reach.

'You said there was a second murder,' said Abigail.

Steggles nodded. 'That was only discovered this morning. There'd been reports of a foul smell inside the cellar. This morning Walter Arkwright, one of our attendants who also acts as our storeman, traced it to behind some packing cases. The body of a woman was there.' He gave a shudder as he said, 'Someone had sliced her face off.'

Abigail and Daniel stared at him, shocked.

'How?' asked Daniel. 'What with?'

'The police just said it must have been with a large, sharp blade. Someone had sliced off the front of her face, right back to the bones of her skull.'

'Where is the body now?'

'At the hospital mortuary, along with the body of the young woman.'

Daniel and Abigail were silent for a moment as they took

all this in, then Daniel said, ‘Surely there are private enquiry agents here in Manchester, Mr Steggles. I say this because Miss Fenton and I are unfamiliar with the city. A local enquiry agent would have easier access to sources of information and local contacts.’

‘True,’ said Steggles. ‘But we have been following the successes the pair of you have had when murders have occurred at other museums. The Fitzwilliam in Cambridge, the British Museum, the Ashmolean in Oxford. On every occasion you succeeded when the local police force had failed.’

‘I wouldn’t say “failed”,’ said Daniel carefully. ‘On those occasions we worked with the local police force and were able to bring a different eye to the investigation. I have a policeman’s experience, but Miss Fenton is the one who is at home in a museum setting, and her instincts proved invaluable in those cases.’

‘Yes, we are very aware of Miss Fenton’s reputation,’ said Steggles. ‘I have read your articles concerning your excavations at Giza, and your recent work on Hadrian’s Wall. And we have some artefacts here from your own work at Hawara. We are privileged to have you here with us. I would deem it an honour for you to spend some time exploring the museum and letting us have your comments and recommendations.’

‘With the greatest respect, Mr Steggles, I feel that sometimes my reputation as an archaeologist has become somewhat inflated, possibly due to the rather purple prose of the popular newspapers.’

‘I am basing my opinion on reports on you and your work from other archaeologists and curators, Miss Fenton. Your peers hold you in high esteem.’

Abigail coloured, and Daniel had to hide a smile at the idea of Abigail blushing.

‘Thank you, Mr Steggles. But, as far as conducting investigations, Mr Wilson gives me too much credit. The truth is, we complement one another and so bring different observations to cases.’

‘As we hope you will to this.’

‘But those other cases were connected to the museums,’ stressed Daniel. ‘We’re not sure if that’s the case here. We have to look at the possibility that these women may have been killed for reasons that have nothing to do with the museum.’

‘In which case, that will be a relief to us. The idea that in some way the museum may have been the cause of their deaths hangs heavy on us.’ He gestured at the plate. ‘Biscuit?’ he offered. He selected one himself and looked at it in a guilty fashion. ‘My wife says I eat too many of these and they’re bad for my health, but with the stress we’ve been under lately over this murder, it’s a relief to have some kind of solace.’