

The logo consists of the lowercase letters 'aeb' in a white, elegant, cursive script font, centered within a solid black square. A thin white horizontal line is positioned directly beneath the letters.

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**A CHRISTMAS RAILWAY
MYSTERY**

EDWARD MARSTON

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CHAPTER ONE

December, 1860

Betty Rodman was in torment. Anxiety was gnawing at her like a rat eating its way into a sack of grain. Unable to sleep, she was suffering both physical and mental pain. Where on earth was her husband? She was used to his coming home late with the stink of beer on his breath but he'd never been out this long before. It was well past midnight. The early shift began at six in the morning. If he was not there on time, he'd get more than a stern reprimand from the foreman. His job might be in danger and that prospect troubled her more than anything else. Though their house was among the smallest, she liked living in the Railway Village. They'd been there long enough to feel that they were permanent members of the community. They belonged. Betty never stopped telling herself that – in spite of everything – they had a roof over their heads and a place to bring up their three children.

Suddenly, their whole future was in doubt. She felt it in her bones. After brooding for hours, her fears were drowned beneath waves of fatigue and she drifted off in the vain hope that she'd open her eyes to find her husband snoring beside her. It was the baby's cry that eventually brought her out of her slumber. The child was shivering in the biting cold. Betty clambered out of bed to take her daughter out of her cot and soothe her with quiet

words and a warm embrace. When the baby fell asleep again, she put her gently down, covered her with a blanket then dressed in the darkness. Groping her way to the bed, she shook her elder son.

‘Wake up, Davy,’ she said.

The boy stirred resentfully. ‘Leave me be . . . I’m tired.’

‘I need you to look after Martha and Leonard.’

‘You can do that.’

‘I have to go out.’

‘Then ask Daddy.’

‘Your father’s not here,’ she told him in a voice that brought him fully awake. ‘I’m going out to find him.’

And leaving a six-year-old boy in charge of the baby and his younger brother, she let herself out of the bedroom and padded downstairs. After putting on her coat and hat, she wrapped a shawl around her shoulders as an extra barrier against the winter weather but she still shuddered when she stepped out into the street. Betty scurried off past the serried ranks of houses built for its employees by the Great Western Railway Company. Though it was too dark to read the name of the street she was after, she found it by instinct. By the time she reached the house she wanted, she was panting heavily. She banged on the door with both fists and looked up hopefully at the bedroom above. When she saw a glimpse of candlelight, she heaved a sigh of relief. Seconds later, the door was opened by a sturdy man in his thirties, wearing a nightshirt.

‘Is that you, Betty?’ he asked, peering through blurred eyes.

‘Where’s Frank?’

‘I’ve no idea.’

‘But he went off to the pub with you.’

‘He was still there when I left.’

‘What time was that?’

‘Look, you shouldn’t be out there in the cold. Step inside.’

‘I just want to know where my husband is.’

‘He should have come home hours ago.’

‘Well, he didn’t. So where can he be?’

‘I wish I knew,’ said Fred Alford, scratching his head. ‘Frank can usually hold his beer but p’raps he had too much this time and passed out somewhere. I’ll put my clothes on and help you to search.’

‘Did anything happen at the pub?’

‘No, no. He just had a drink with us.’

‘You know what I’m asking,’ she said, meaningfully.

‘There was nothing like that, Betty.’

‘Are you sure? He’s come home with blood on his face so many times.’

‘Frank was on his best behaviour. There was no fight.’

Wanting to reassure her, he suppressed the fact that his friend had got into a heated argument with another man from the Works. They’d reached the stage of growling threats at each other. Alford had tried to drag Rodman away but had been shrugged off. The row could easily have descended into violence but Alford didn’t want to alarm Betty by telling her that. She needed hope.

‘Wait until I put some clothes on,’ he said, easing her into the house, ‘and stop worrying about him. He’ll be fine, I’m sure. Frank’s got his faults, as we all know, but he can look after himself.’

The naked body was flat on its back, the ankles bound and the palms tied firmly together as if he was praying for the return of his missing head.

CHAPTER TWO

When the call came, they were in Colbeck's office, reviewing their latest case and wondering why the killer had chosen to commit suicide rather than face arrest.

'It was a dramatic confession of guilt,' said Colbeck, 'and it saved us an appearance in court. The man hanged himself in private to avoid the ordeal of being hanged in public.'

They were interrupted by the messenger who stressed the urgency of the summons. It set off alarm bells for Leeming.

'I knew it,' he said, mournfully. 'With only ten days to go to Christmas, the superintendent is about to send us hundreds of miles away from London.'

'You're being unduly pessimistic, Victor.'

'It's happened before. Three years ago, we spent Christmas Day arresting a man in Cornwall. The same thing could happen again.'

'That's highly unlikely,' said Colbeck with a smile. 'That particular individual paid the ultimate price for the murder of his wife. Of one thing you may be certain – there'll be no need for us to go to Truro again.'

'You know what I mean, sir.'

'I do, Victor, and I share your concern. There have been

occasions when the festive season didn't exist for us. I'm hoping that we can at least salvage part of it this year. Our daughter will be enjoying her first Christmas, remember. I want to be there to celebrate it with her.'

'I don't blame you. It's the one day of the year when a family *should* be together. The superintendent doesn't realise that because he lives on his own.'

'He does so by choice.'

'It's unnatural. Everyone needs company.'

'He's the exception to the rule. In fact, he's the exception to *most* rules.' Leaving the room, he led the way along the corridor. 'Let's hope that he has an assignment for us here in the capital.'

'No chance of that!' murmured Leeming.

After knocking on his door, they went into Edward Tallis's office and stood side by side in front of his desk. By way of a greeting, he growled at them.

'What kept you?'

'We were detained for a few moments, sir,' said Colbeck.

'You were too busy gossiping to obey an order,' said the superintendent. 'A summons is a summons. I'll brook no delay.'

'You have our apologies.'

'I'd rather have you responding instantly to a command.'

'We're here now, sir,' Leeming pointed out.

'Thank you for telling me,' said Tallis, sarcastically. 'I hadn't noticed.'

'Do you have another case for us, Superintendent?' asked Colbeck.

'Why else should I send for you?'

'Can we work in London this time?' pleaded Leeming.

'You'll go where you're needed.'

'It's not Scotland again, is it?'

‘If you’ll shut up,’ said Tallis, quelling him with a stare, ‘I’ll tell you.’ He picked up a telegraph. ‘This was sent by the manager of the GWR Works in Swindon. He asks specifically for the Railway Detective.’

‘That’s very gratifying,’ said Colbeck. ‘What are the details?’

‘Very few, I regret to say. The headless body of an employee has been found on the premises. We have no name of the deceased, no address, no description of him, no suspects.’

‘And no head,’ said Leeming, involuntarily.

Tallis grimaced. ‘That observation is in the worst possible taste, Sergeant.’

‘I’m sorry, sir,’ whispered the other. ‘It slipped out.’

‘We need to be on the next train to Swindon,’ said Colbeck. ‘That means travelling on the broad gauge of the GWR. It’s less than eighty miles away in total and we have a favourable gradient all the way.’ He extended a hand. ‘May I see the telegraph, please?’ Tallis gave it to him. ‘Thank you, sir.’

‘We’ve got only ten days to solve the crime,’ moaned Leeming.

‘Then we mustn’t waste a minute of them.’

‘If there’s been no arrest by Christmas,’ warned Tallis, ‘you must stay on in Wiltshire until you track down the culprit.’

‘We’ll do our best to avoid that situation,’ said Colbeck. ‘Come on, Sergeant.’

Tallis raised a hand. ‘One moment . . .’

‘Was there something else, Superintendent?’

‘Yes, there was. This weekend, I’m vacating my command here in order to attend a reunion of my regiment. As a matter of fact,’ he went on, straightening his shoulders, ‘I am to receive a prestigious award.’

‘Congratulations, sir.’

‘I’ll be here until Friday morning then I’m away until

Monday. In my absence, you'll report to the man I've appointed as Acting Superintendent.'

'The obvious man to replace you,' said Leeming, 'is Inspector Colbeck.'

'The obvious choice is not always the *best* choice.'

'Whoever he might be,' said Colbeck, ignoring the slight, 'we'll report to him in your stead. May we know his name?'

'Inspector Grosvenor.'

Leeming was aghast. 'It's not Mouldy Grosvenor, surely!'

'His name is Martin,' said Tallis, acidly.

'*I'd* be a better choice than him.'

'Do you dare to question my decision?'

'The sergeant respects it as much as I do, sir,' said Colbeck, anxious to get Leeming out of there before he provoked the superintendent into unleashing one of his blistering tirades. 'Time to go,' he continued, taking his colleague by the arm and more or less pulling him to the door. 'We'll be in touch, sir.'

And before Leeming could speak again, he was hauled out of the room.

The Erecting Shop was a large building where the multiple parts of a locomotive were fitted carefully together. As a rule, it was a clamorous place, obliging those who worked there to shout over the pandemonium of pounding hammers, clanking chains, hissing steam and the resounding thud of cranes. Today, however, it was eerily silent. Because the corpse had been discovered there that morning, work had been suspended for a while out of respect for the dead man. Even places like the Foundry and the Boiler Shop – both of them a source of continuous tumult – were muted. It was possible for once to hold something akin to a normal conversation.

At first glance, the two men appeared to be wearing the same uniform but, in fact, they belonged to different police forces and had very different powers. Edgar Fellowes was employed by the GWR and his authority was limited to railway property. He was a grizzled man in his fifties with a pockmarked face. Jared Piercey was ten years younger, a tall, cadaverous, sharp-featured inspector in the local constabulary. He was stationed in what was now known as the Old Town of Swindon to distinguish it from the New Town, the railway community, close to a mile away. When news of the discovery reached him, he'd been buoyed by the thought that he'd be in charge of his first murder investigation, only to learn on arrival that the manager had been in touch with Scotland Yard.

'We could handle this case ourselves,' he asserted.

'Mr Stinson wanted the best man for the job,' said Fellowes.

'I *am* the best man.'

'The Railway Detective has a good reputation.'

'We don't need him blundering around here. I have local knowledge and a feel for what goes on in this community.'

'I live here,' said the other, inflating his chest. 'You don't.'

'Were you a friend of the victim?'

'Frank Rodman didn't have any friends.'

'Who identified him?'

'I did,' said Fellowes.

'Even though someone had cut off his head?'

'I recognised him immediately by the tattoos on his arms. He always worked with his sleeves rolled up because of the heat in the Brass Foundry. They call it Hell's Kitchen.'

'Why did he have no friends?' asked Piercey.

'He was much better at making enemies.'

'Oh?'

‘Rodman was always spoiling for a fight.’

‘Then how did he manage to keep his job?’

‘Oh, he never struck a blow while he was at work and, by all accounts, he was very good at what he did. Off duty, it was a different story. If you crossed him in a pub, you’d find him waiting outside for you.’

‘Was he ever violent with you?’

‘I kept out of his way,’ said Fellowes, ‘just like most of his workmates.’

‘So there won’t be many tears shed over his death.’

‘There’ll be little sympathy for Rodman himself. It’ll be reserved for his wife, Betty, a long-suffering woman if ever there was one. She’ll be left with horrible memories of his murder and with three kiddies to support.’

‘You speak as if you know her.’

Fellowes gave a wan smile. ‘Everyone knows Betty Rodman,’ he said. ‘She’s a lovely woman and was saddled with that angry husband of hers. We’ll be sorry to lose her from the village.’

Hands behind his back, Piercey walked across to the spot where the body had been found and where there was an ominous pool of blood. It was in the shadow of a half-assembled locomotive. Having examined the corpse alongside the Works doctor, Piercey had had it covered by a sheet and removed. He stared meditatively at the blood for some time before turning to Fellowes.

‘Have you any idea who might have killed him?’

‘No, I haven’t.’

Piercey looked around. ‘How did they get in here?’

‘There are ways and means, Inspector.’

‘Someone is on duty all night, surely?’

‘We have regular patrols and, of course, there’ll be a

nightwatchman on duty to keep everything alight.'

'Then why did nobody see anything?' demanded Piercey. 'Someone carrying a dead body is bound to be conspicuous.'

'There's your first clue.'

'What do you mean?'

'Shame on you, Inspector,' mocked the other. 'A man in your position should have spotted it right away. I bet that the Railway Detective will see it immediately.'

'I've no idea what you're talking about.'

'Look at the circumstances,' said Fellowes, enjoying the inspector's patent discomfort. 'A corpse is lugged in here during the night and trussed up. The blood on the floor tells you that Rodman's head was severed on that exact spot. A stranger wouldn't know how to get into this place without being seen. In other words,' he went on, pausing before delivering his conclusion, 'the killer is one of us.'

Before they left, the detectives each dashed off a letter to their respective wives, to be delivered by hand, explaining their departure and likely absence for some time. Both had learnt from experience to keep changes of clothing at Scotland Yard in case they had to leave the city without warning. A cab took them to Paddington and they boarded a train to Plymouth that would stop at Swindon. It was only when they'd settled into an empty compartment that they were able to reflect on what Tallis had told them. Leeming was still simmering.

'It's an insult to you, sir,' he said.

'I didn't see it as such, Victor.'

'Mouldy Grosvenor can't hold a candle you.'

'Evidently, the superintendent believes that he can. Nothing we can say will alter that. It's kind of you to take up the cudgels

on my behalf but perhaps you should see the advantage of having Inspector Grosvenor as the acting superintendent.’

‘There *is* no advantage.’

‘Think again.’

‘Even if it’s only for a weekend, I hate the thought of Mouldy having power over us. Mark my words – he’ll use it to punish us.’

‘What would happen if *I’d* been chosen to replace the superintendent?’

‘Justice would have been done.’

‘That may be so but it would have chained me to a desk. I was in that position once before, if you recall, and I felt like a fish out of water. I don’t want promotion, Victor. I already have what I desire and that’s to be leading a murder investigation with an able sergeant beside me. The truth of it is that Inspector Grosvenor is a better choice because he’ll relish the role.’

‘I still don’t see any advantage for me.’

‘What would happen if *I* were the acting superintendent?’

‘I’d have to work with another inspector.’

‘Precisely,’ said Colbeck, ‘and the most likely person is . . .’

Leeming’s face fell. ‘Mouldy Grosvenor!’

‘You’ve been saved from that grisly fate, so there’s no need to generate any righteous indignation on my behalf. It’s all for the best, Victor. We carry on together. I know full well that the inspector is a nasty, egotistic, ambitious, small-minded man who bears grudges, but his elevation in rank will only last for three days at most.’ He removed his top hat and set it down beside him. ‘I think we’re clever enough to keep out of his way for that long, don’t you?’