



**MURDER AT THE  
ASHMOLEAN**

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# CHAPTER ONE

Oxford, 1895

Daniel Wilson and Abigail Fenton stood in the book-lined office and studied the walnut desk and the empty leather chair behind it.

‘And this is where Mr Everett’s body was discovered?’ Daniel asked Gladstone Marriott.

‘Yes,’ said Marriott. ‘Sitting in that chair, his head thrown back, with a bullet hole in the middle of his forehead. The pistol was on the floor beside the chair. The police believe it fell from his hand after he’d shot himself.’

The three of them were in the office of the recently deceased Gavin Everett, a senior executive at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. Daniel and Abigail had travelled to Oxford to investigate the death of Everett after receiving a telegram from Marriott requesting their help.

‘The Ashmolean is possibly the most famous museum in Oxford,’ Abigail had informed Daniel on their train journey from London. ‘It’s also very old.’

‘Older than the Fitzwilliam in Cambridge?’ asked Daniel, referring to the place where the couple had first met.

‘Much older,’ said Abigail. ‘Although it’s only been at its present location in Beaumont Street since 1845, about the same time the

Fitzwilliam moved to its current site on Trumpington Street. But the Ashmolean was originally established as a museum in 1683. It's actually the oldest university museum in the world.'

'You are a mine of information,' said Daniel.

Abigail looked again at the wording of the telegram they'd received. *Strange death at museum. Your help needed. Please come. Marriott, Ashmolean.*

'He doesn't mention the name of the dead person,' said Abigail.

'He doesn't need to,' said Daniel. He handed her the copy of *The Times* he'd been reading, pointing at a news item.

#### TRAGIC SUICIDE OF PROMISING MUSEUM CURATOR IN OXFORD

*We have received reports of the tragic death by his own hand of one Gavin Everett, a senior executive at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. At this time, details of his death are sketchy, with no apparent reason for him to take his own life, according to the museum's administrator, Gladstone Marriott.*

'That's all there is,' said Daniel.

'When did it happen?'

'The day before yesterday.'

'If it's a suicide, why has he asked us to look into it? It's not as if there's been a crime committed.'

'Legally, suicide is a crime,' Daniel reminded her.

'Yes, but not one where the criminal can be arrested and brought to justice.'

'I'm sure all will be revealed once we get to Oxford,' said Daniel.

When they disembarked at Oxford railway station, Daniel began to head towards the line of waiting hansom cabs, but Abigail stopped him.

'It's only a short distance to the city centre,' she said. 'The walk

will do us good after sitting down all the way from London.'

'Yes, good idea,' agreed Daniel. 'It will give me a chance to see these famous university buildings up close.'

'Later,' advised Abigail. 'This way takes us straight to the Ashmolean before we get to the historic colleges.'

'You should set up as a tour guide,' commented Daniel as they set off. 'I'm sure there's money to be made taking visitors around the university towns and cities.'

'Thank you, but I have enough to keep me busy,' replied Abigail.

'Indeed you have,' agreed Daniel. 'An archaeologist and a detective, while I have just the one job.'

'If you're looking for flattery from me, you're wasting your time,' said Abigail. 'You already know you are the best at what you do. That's why people like Gladstone Marriott at the Ashmolean ask for you.'

Daniel smiled. 'Yes, but I do like to hear you say it.'

'I'm not sure if that's because of your vanity, or a lack of confidence in your own abilities,' commented Abigail.

'Let me guess: you're quoting one of these newfangled psychiatrists?' said Daniel.

'No, my own observation,' retorted Abigail. She grinned at him. 'I'm just using the techniques you've taught me about being a detective: study the subject's demeanour in order to work out their motivation.'

'So I'm a subject for scientific observation?' queried Daniel.

'Of course,' said Abigail. 'Admit it, you do it all the time with me, trying to work out whether I'm happy, or upset with something.' She gestured at a very large white-and-sandstone-coloured building they were nearing on their left. 'Here we are. The Ashmolean.'

Daniel followed her as she mounted the wide stone steps towards the main entrance.

‘I see the architect has gone for the same kind of columns they’ve got at the front of the Fitzwilliam and the British Museum,’ he noted. ‘Is it some kind of legal requirement that all museums have to look like Roman temples from the outside?’

‘I believe it’s to show that inside is a place of classical education.’

A man in a steward’s uniform was standing just inside the entrance, and Daniel and Abigail approached him.

‘Good afternoon,’ said Daniel. ‘Mr Daniel Wilson and Miss Abigail Fenton, here to see Mr Gladstone Marriott.’

The man’s face broke into a smile.

‘Ah yes! Mr Marriott asked me to keep watch for you and to let him know as soon as you arrived.’ He pointed at the bags Daniel and Abigail each were carrying and offered: ‘Would you like me to have those put in the cloakroom? It’ll be less cumbersome for you while you see Mr Marriott.’

‘Yes, thank you,’ said Daniel.

The man gestured for another uniformed steward who was standing at the foot of a flight of sandstone stairs to join them. ‘George, these are the visitors Mr Marriott has been expecting. Will you take their bags to the cloakroom, and then take over here at the main entrance while I show them to Mr Marriott?’

George nodded and took their bags, leaving Daniel and Abigail free to walk unencumbered up the wide stone steps behind their guide.

‘I’m so glad you’ve arrived,’ said the man. ‘I’m Hugh Thomas, the head steward here at the Ashmolean, and I can tell you this dreadful event has upset us all greatly, and none more so than Mr Marriott.’ He shook his head to show his bewilderment. ‘It was so unlike Mr Everett. But I’m sure Mr Marriott will give you all the details.’

They came to an area at the top of the stairs containing many glass cases laden with a variety of exhibits. Thomas led them past the

exhibits and into a short corridor. He stopped at a door, knocked, and at the command from inside of 'Enter!', opened the door and announced, 'Mr Wilson and Miss Fenton have arrived, Mr Marriott.'

Gladstone Marriott, a short, round man in his fifties with a bush of unruly white hair adorning his head, leapt up from behind his desk and came towards them, hand outstretched in greeting.

'Mr Wilson! Miss Fenton!'

He shook them both by the hand heartily. There was no mistaking the expression of obvious relief on his face. He was smartly dressed in a pinstripe suit of dark material that would have suited a banker, although it was offset by a silk waistcoat in a garish collection of motley colours and ornate, almost oriental, patterns.

'I'm so glad you could come!' he said. 'I've heard about the brilliant work you did at both the Fitzwilliam and the British Museum, and I'm hoping you can do the same for us.'

'I'm not sure what there is for us to do,' said Abigail. 'According to the newspaper reports, Mr Everett killed himself.'

'Yes, that's the official story,' said Marriott.

'But you're not sure?' asked Daniel.

Marriott hesitated, then said, 'Perhaps it would be best if you examined the place where it happened, and hopefully you can come to your own conclusion.' As he led them along the corridor towards Everett's office, he informed them, 'Because we – that is, the Board of Trustees – feel that this might take a day or two, we've booked you rooms at the Wilton Hotel. I do hope that's acceptable to you?'

Daniel shot an enquiring glance at Abigail, who nodded to show she knew the Wilton and it was acceptable to her. Although, Daniel reflected, as Abigail had spent time in tents while on digs in Egypt and elsewhere and seemed happy in his small cold-water terraced house in Camden Town, one of the poorest districts of London, he was sure it would prove acceptable whatever the conditions.

They entered the office of the late Gavin Everett and Marriott showed them the scene of the tragedy: the desk, the chair, the spot where the pistol had been found on the carpet.

‘Was the door locked?’ asked Daniel, spotting the damage to the thick oak door close to the door handle.

Marriott nodded. ‘From the inside. The lock had to be forced in order to gain access. The key was on the floor, just inside the door. Again, the police believe the key fell from the lock onto the carpet when force was used.’

‘So, suicide,’ said Abigail.

‘That is what the police say. However, I have serious doubts, which is why I contacted you.’ He gestured for them to sit in two of the chairs in the room and took the third for himself. Daniel noticed that he avoided seating himself in the leather chair where the body of Everett had been found. ‘Everett had been working here for the past two years, and in that time, I have never known him to show any signs of low spirits or worry. On the contrary, he was a cheerful young man, full of life and always looking for new innovations to improve the museum.’

‘Did he have money worries that you might know of?’ asked Daniel.

‘None!’ said Marriott firmly. ‘He was a single man with no dependents. He had lodgings in a house in Oxford which were comfortable but not ostentatious. I believe he must have had a private income as well as his salary from the museum, because he never seemed to have any concerns about money.’

‘His health?’

‘He was fit and well. He was the kind of man who used to run up a flight of stairs rather than walk up them. He’d never taken a day off for sickness in the time he was here.’

‘How old was he?’



‘In his early thirties.’

‘Local to Oxford?’ asked Abigail.

Marriott shook his head.

‘I believe he came from Bedfordshire originally because he once mentioned having family there. But he’d been a traveller, somewhat of an adventurer, from what I could gather. Just before he joined us at the Ashmolean, he’d spent two years in South Africa, prospecting for gold in the Transvaal.’

‘And was he successful?’

‘I do believe that was where his private income came from, as a result of investments he made following some success in the goldfields.’

‘But not a major success, I would guess, otherwise he’d hardly want to take a job, however worthy.’

‘I must admit that did puzzle me,’ agreed Marriott. ‘But Gavin explained that his mind needed stimulation. He could never just loaf around and rest on the money he’d made in the goldfields. He did say it wasn’t a great deal of money, he told me it was sufficient to support him comfortably, but he wanted a new adventure, and the Ashmolean seemed to supply that. As I hinted, he was a very energetic young man, and certainly his contacts in the Transvaal and Cape Colony have been very useful to us. The material he sourced through them has resulted in our African collection becoming noteworthy.’

‘Did you see him on the day he died?’

‘I did, and that’s another reason why I cannot believe he committed suicide. He came to my office full of excitement and told me he’d had a most unusual proposition which he wanted me to consider.’

‘He told me he’d been offered the prologue and first act of an unfinished play by Shakespeare, in Shakespeare’s own hand. The man who offered it to him told him it had come into his

hands through a lady – a titled lady. It had been kept, and in great secrecy, according to her, by her husband’s family. His ancestor, an earl in the sixteenth century, being the one who commissioned the play from Shakespeare before he became well known and paid him a small advance. But when Shakespeare was informed his first play was to be performed, and he was getting paid for it, he abandoned the other play – especially as he was told that the earl had run out of money and couldn’t afford to pay for the rest of it.

‘Gavin told me the man had asked for five hundred pounds for the document. He added that he’d asked the man for provenance to prove the authenticity of the piece of work, and the man said he’d be returning with the proof. He’d arranged to see him the evening he died.’

‘What was the proof?’ asked Abigail.

‘Apparently, a letter from the lady herself verifying that the work had come from her husband’s family’s private collection, and its genesis. Under normal circumstances I’d have taken the matter to the keeper of the Ashmolean for guidance, but in the current circumstances . . .’ And he gave them a look that showed his great concern.

‘I understand,’ said Abigail sympathetically. ‘What was your decision?’

‘I asked him to let me see the documents, and if they seemed genuine, I could see no reason why the museum wouldn’t agree to fund the purchase. As I’m sure you’ll agree, anything by Shakespeare would be a bargain at just five hundred pounds.’

‘Which makes me wonder why the price was so low?’ asked Abigail.

‘The same thought occurred to me,’ said Marriott. ‘According to Gavin, the lady in question was selling the manuscript as . . . well . . . to take some sort of revenge against her husband rather than making a lot of money from it.’

‘But was it hers to sell?’ asked Daniel.

‘According to the intermediary, it was. He said she had a letter from her husband to prove it.’

‘I wonder how she’d managed to get such a letter?’ wondered Daniel. ‘And if it was genuine?’

‘That was one of the aspects that Gavin said he’d look into before completing the deal.’ Marriott gave a heavy sigh as he looked at them. ‘You see why I have grave doubts about the idea that Gavin killed himself, with this new project going on.’

‘Did the pistol belong to him?’ asked Daniel.

‘To my knowledge, Gavin never owned a pistol of any sort,’ said Marriott.

‘Do you know at what time Mr Everett was due to meet this intermediary?’ asked Daniel.

‘At six o’clock. The museum closes at five-thirty.’

‘And no one saw this intermediary go into Mr Everett’s office?’

‘No. In fact, we didn’t discover Everett’s body until the next day. When the cleaning staff arrived, his office was locked. Although that wasn’t usual, the staff just assumed he’d locked it for security of something inside.

‘I went to his office soon after I arrived at the Ashmolean because I was keen to discover the outcome of his meeting the previous evening, but found it locked. That was rare, because Gavin was always at the museum by nine, but I thought that perhaps he’d decided to come in late for some reason.

‘When there was still no sign of him by eleven, I sent a messenger to his lodgings to check that all was well with him, but the messenger returned and said that his landlady had seen no sign of him since he left for work the morning before. It was then that I decided to have the door forced.’

‘You felt that something bad might have happened during his meeting with the intermediary?’

‘I did, but I was puzzled why the door should still be locked. Was his visitor locked in there with him? There had been no sounds from the office. Anyway, I got one of the stewards, who also works as a general handyman, to force the lock so that we could gain access, and that was when we found poor Everett.’

‘Who was the police inspector in charge of the investigation?’ asked Daniel.

‘An Inspector Pitt from Oxford Central,’ said Marriott. He frowned, puzzled. ‘It’s odd. At first Inspector Pitt appeared to view the death as suspicious, but then suddenly he announced the official verdict was suicide and declared the case closed.’

‘I’m sure he had his reasons,’ said Daniel. ‘One last thing, Mr Marriott: it would help us enormously to talk to people who Everett was particularly friendly with to get an idea of his life outside work. Was there anyone here at the Ashmolean he confided in, or had a sort of friendship with?’

Marriott frowned thoughtfully, then shook his head.

‘No one in particular,’ he said at last. ‘Now I come to think of it, in spite of the fact that he was always cheerful and friendly to everyone, full of bonhomie, I can’t think of anyone here that he spent time with outside the museum. It might be worth talking to Hugh Thomas, the man who brought you up to my office. He’s our chief steward and he knows most of what goes on with the staff, certainly better than I do. I leave that sort of thing to him while I concentrate on the administrative side.’