



**MURDER AT THE
NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM**

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

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

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

First Edition

ISBN 978-0-7490-2597-7

Typeset in 11.5/16.5 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

London, August 1895

Daniel Wilson and Abigail Fenton gazed at the pile of smashed bones heaped against the wall and exchanged puzzled looks. They were an interesting pair, contrasting in looks but of one mind in almost everything. Daniel, an ex-Scotland Yard detective in his mid-thirties, famed for his work on the Jack the Ripper investigations, was tall and well-built, his rugged features made more so by his slightly broken nose veering to one side. Abigail, an internationally renowned archaeologist, famous for her work on the Egyptian pyramids but who now concentrated on criminal investigations alongside Daniel, her partner in life as well as detection, was also in her thirties. She was tall, slim and elegant, her long reddish hair cascading down around her attractive, almost feline, face. To those who didn't

know her, she could appear haughty, but she was as down-to-earth as the humblest porter on any of the digs she'd been on.

Lying amongst the bones was a piece of cardboard with the words 'BECAUSE OF HE THAT BETRAYETH' scrawled in block capitals.

'It's an iguanodon,' said Evelyn Scott, the curator of the Natural History Museum. 'Or it was before someone attacked it.'

They were in the museum's huge Grand Hall, shielded from the eyes of the general public by a series of temporary screens.

The rest of the Grand Hall beyond the screens was filled with skeletons of dinosaurs of all sizes, along with the fossilised remains of other prehistoric creatures, all part of the museum's recently opened 'The Time of the Dinosaurs' exhibition, which extended to two smaller rooms off the Grand Hall.

Evelyn Scott was tall, thin and pale-faced, her pallor emphasised by having her black hair pulled back into a knotted bun, and smartly attired in a long black dress. Behind the curator, the paunchy figure of the museum's maintenance manager, Herbert Sharp, resplendent in a large-checked purple three-piece suit, glowered angrily at the wreckage of bones, taking this outrage as a personal affront.

'I'm not sure why we've been called in, Miss Scott,' said Daniel. 'Our speciality is solving murders . . .'

'In museums, I know,' said Scott.

'But this isn't a murder,' continued Daniel. 'At best, it's a case of criminal damage, with possibly breaking and entering, or burglary if the people who did it broke in during the night.'

'They did,' said Scott. 'We discovered that a window at the back of the building had been forced. But our concern is not just what happened here with this, but that something worse

might happen in the future. We have had threats, and it is possible this . . . this outrage is the result of those threats.'

'Threats from whom?' asked Abigail. 'And do they mention anything about betrayal, as these words do?'

'It reads like a quotation,' observed Daniel.

'Almost,' said Scott. 'In fact it's a misquotation from The Gospel of St John: "Which is he that betrayeth thee", and we have had a letter which threatens retribution.'

'Retribution for what?' asked Abigail.

'For not buying dinosaur skeletons from them.'

'We'll need to look at that letter,' said Daniel.

'If you come to my office I'll show you.' Scott gestured at the pile of bones. 'We left these as they were for the police and then for you to see. Some of the staff wanted to remove the wreckage immediately, but I do understand investigators prefer things being left as they are after a crime to possibly supply clues as to the perpetrators.'

Daniel nodded. 'That's true, and I'd like to make a close examination of the damage. Can I suggest that while I do that, you and Miss Fenton go to your office to show her the letter, along with anything else you have, and I'll join you once I've finished here? Then Mr Sharp can have things cleared things up and the screens can be removed.'

'Thank you,' said Scott gratefully. 'The screens have aroused all manner of curiosity from visitors, wondering what we might be erecting behind them.' She turned to Abigail. 'If you'll follow me, Miss Fenton.'

Abigail followed the curator towards the main reception area, while Daniel knelt down to examine the wreckage, watched by the angry Herbert Sharp.

‘We’ve never had anything like this happen before,’ said Sharp.

‘The damage looks like it was done with a heavy hammer. Possibly a coal hammer,’ said Daniel. He looked up at the maintenance manager. ‘I’d like to talk to whoever was the first to find the damage.’

‘That’d be the cleaners,’ said Sharp. ‘But they’ve all gone home now.’

‘What time do they arrive in the morning?’

‘Six o’clock,’ said Sharp. ‘The head cleaner, Ada Watson, has a key and lets them in. They work until 8.30 a.m., cleaning and polishing. The senior attendant arrives at 8.30 a.m. to make sure everything is in order, with the staff coming in at 9 a.m. The museum opens to the public at 9.30 a.m. Every day of the week except Sundays. Yesterday, being a Sunday, no one was here. It’s also the only day the cleaners have off.’

‘What time does the museum close?’ asked Daniel.

‘Five-thirty,’ said Sharp.

‘And who locks up?’

‘The senior attendant, Brandon Walpole. He makes a last tour of the museum and then leaves at 6 p.m.’

‘And he did that on Saturday?’

‘Yes.’

‘I’d like to talk to the cleaners who found the wreckage.’

‘The best thing would be for you to call here tomorrow morning at about eight o’clock,’ said Sharp. ‘By then the cleaners will have done most of their work and will be free to talk. I’ll leave a note for Mrs Watson telling her you’ll be coming.’

‘Thank you,’ said Daniel. ‘That would be good. Out of curiosity, how is the exhibition doing?’

‘It’s early days,’ said Sharp. ‘But that’s often the way with a new exhibition. Things will pick up once word spreads about it.’ He gave a proud, almost smug, smile as he added: ‘We had Mr Bram Stoker himself here on Saturday, and I heard him tell Miss Scott how impressed he was and that he’d do his best to get Sir Henry Irving to come along. Once that sort of thing happens, people will come in droves. There’s nothing like celebrity to bring in the crowds.’

Abigail followed Miss Scott up the narrow stone staircase to the first floor and the administrative offices. Scott stopped at a door, knocked and went in. It was a small office. A middle-aged lady sitting at a desk going through some papers looked up as they entered.

‘Mrs Smith,’ said Scott. ‘This is Miss Abigail Fenton. Mr Daniel Wilson is downstairs examining the damage to the iguanodon and he will be joining us when he’s finished.’ Turning to Abigail, Scott added: ‘Mrs Smith is my secretary and knows more about the museum than I do.’

‘I think that’s an exaggeration, Miss Scott.’ The woman smiled, obviously pleased at the compliment.

‘Not at all,’ said Scott. To Abigail, she explained: ‘Mrs Smith was secretary to the previous curator, Mr Danvers Hardwicke.’ Turning back to the secretary, she asked: ‘Do you have the letter from Petter and Wardle, Mrs Smith?’

‘I do,’ said Smith, and she lifted it from her desk and handed it to Scott. ‘I had it ready because I felt you might require it.’

‘Thank you,’ said Scott. ‘Miss Fenton and I will be in my office.’

As Scott and Abigail walked along the corridor to the curator’s own office, Scott said: ‘As you see, Mrs Smith is

absolutely invaluable. So efficient and always prepared.’

They entered Scott’s office. It was a room in which the shelves were laden with books, with more books stacked on the floor in front of the shelves. By contrast, the large desk in the office was cleared of all but a few papers, a decorated inkwell and pens in holders, and a large blotting pad.

‘The books are leftovers from my predecessor,’ said Scott. ‘I haven’t had the heart to go through them yet and decide which ones to get rid of, but I shall.’ She gestured towards a chair by the desk, and when Abigail had seated herself Scott handed her the letter, before taking her own chair.

Abigail read the missive from Petter and Wardle, who were described in the letterhead as ‘Domestic and Commercial Agents’, which Abigail felt was a description covering a multitude of activities. The address was in Paddington and the directors were listed as Erskine Petter and Benjamin Wardle; the letter had been signed by the former.

*To the Curator of the Natural History Museum,
Cromwell Road, London*

Dear Sir,

You are in breach of your exclusive agreement to purchase American fossils of dinosaurs from our client, the Bone Company of America, by the fact that you have purchased similar dinosaur fossils from rival companies in the United States of America. Unless this situation is rectified and these renegade fossils are returned to their supplier, and you accept delivery of those fossils from the Bone Company of America as agreed, retribution will be taken.

‘Retribution,’ murmured Abigail. ‘That certainly sounds like a threat. So, you believe the damage to the iguanodon is related to the rivalry between competing companies selling dinosaur skeletons found in America.’

‘I certainly believe it’s a possibility,’ Scott said. ‘However, the skeleton that was destroyed was found in Sussex here in England, not in America. Unfortunately, when I shared that information with the police constable who arrived to investigate, he said the fact that the destroyed skeleton came from Sussex showed the attack wasn’t connected with this letter. I made the point to him that the attackers may not have been aware of where this particular iguanodon was found, to them it was just a dinosaur fossil, and I pressed him to at least look into it. He said he was unable to do that because the firm is in Paddington, which is outside his beat.’

‘Not very satisfactory,’ said Abigail.

There was a knock at the door to which they both looked. The door opened and Daniel entered, carrying the piece of card and the string by which it had been attached to the skeleton.

‘What’s your opinion, Mr Wilson?’ asked Scott.

‘At this moment I’m afraid I’ve nothing much more to add to your own view, Miss Scott,’ said Daniel. He gestured at the piece of card in his hand. ‘I’ll examine this message that was left and see if that offers anything.’ He looked at the letter in Abigail’s hand and asked: ‘A clue?’

‘Possibly,’ said Abigail, passing it to him.

Daniel read it, then handed it to Miss Scott.

‘The tone is certainly threatening, and the label “Domestic and Commercial Agents” suitably vague,’ commented Daniel. ‘Addressing the letter with the salutation of “Dear Sir” indicates

they are not aware that you as curator are a woman, which suggests their knowledge of the museum is limited. Have you had any correspondence with this Bone Company of America?’

‘No. Mrs Smith and I have looked through the files and can find nothing.’

‘Do you know if they exist?’

‘Yes, they do,’ said Scott. ‘In fact, I’m sure they were one of the companies the museum considered when the exhibition was being planned. At least according to notes I found in the files left by my predecessor, Mr Hardwicke. But there’s no actual correspondence from them, or from Mr Hardwicke to them.’

‘Would it be possible for us to talk to Mr Hardwicke?’ asked Abigail. ‘His information would be first-hand and so very useful.’

‘Sadly, he is no longer with us,’ said Scott. ‘A tragic accident. He died four months ago.’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Abigail. ‘I hadn’t realised.’

‘Our condolences, Miss Scott,’ added Daniel. ‘In view of this letter, I think a visit to Petter and Wardle should be our next move. It will be interesting to see how they respond to our enquiries.’

CHAPTER TWO

The offices of Petter and Wardle were quite near to Paddington Station, a relatively short distance from the Natural History Museum in South Kensington, so Daniel and Abigail elected to walk, especially as their journey took them through the greenery of Kensington Gardens, the scent of blooms and shrubs filling the air, a pleasant change from the sulphurous smell of smoky streets. As they walked, Daniel said: ‘I was talking to the maintenance manager, Mr Sharp, and he mentioned someone called Bram Stoker. Apparently he visited the exhibition yesterday. The way he said his name suggested I ought to be impressed. Who is he?’

‘You’ve heard of the Lyceum Theatre, I assume. And Henry Irving? And Ellen Terry?’

‘There’s no need to be sarcastic,’ said Daniel. ‘Of course I have. You can hardly open a newspaper without being told that Mr Irving is about to give us his enthralling King Lear, or Hamlet.’

‘*Sir Henry*,” said Abigail. ‘He was recently knighted.’

‘An actor knighted?’ Daniel sniffed dismissively. ‘And as for Ellen Terry, she’s still playing Juliet when she’s fifty.’

‘Almost fifty,’ Abigail corrected him. ‘And she looks much younger. Especially on stage. Bram Stoker is the business manager of the Lyceum, and is a crucial figure in everything that goes on there. Actors, set designs, publicity, finances. He also arranges the tours the company carry out, such as when they go to America to do a season of plays there. You name it, Bram Stoker is behind it. And he has the ears of most people in London’s theatreland, so if he spreads some complimentary words about this exhibition among the people he knows, celebrities will come. And where celebrities go, the general public aren’t far behind.’

As they crossed Bayswater Road and began to enter the maze of cramped back streets around Paddington Station, Daniel said: ‘By the way, did you know the curator of the museum was a woman?’

‘Of course,’ replied Abigail. ‘Didn’t you?’

‘Why would I?’ asked Daniel.

‘There may have been a clue in the name at the bottom of the letter she sent us by messenger.’ Abigail smiled. ‘Evelyn.’

‘Men are called Evelyn as well,’ said Daniel. He frowned, puzzled. ‘But you didn’t say anything to warn me.’

‘What was there to warn you about?’ asked Abigail. ‘Yes, it’s rare for a woman to hold a responsible position in such

an august establishment as the museum, but she would only have been given the post because she merited it. She's highly qualified. I believe she graduated with a very good degree.'

'So, she's from your old college in Cambridge, Girton?' asked Daniel.

'No,' said Abigail. 'She was at Somerville, Girton's sister college in Oxford.' She looked at him quizzically. 'Does having a woman in charge disturb you?'

'No, absolutely not,' said Daniel firmly. 'It just took me by surprise, that's all. I heartily approve.'

'Good,' said Abigail. 'I'm sure she approves of you as well.' Then she asked: 'What did you make of the message? About betrayal?'

'It was written in block capitals, either to disguise an educated person's handwriting, or because that's how the assailant writes, which suggests someone not so educated.'

'And your guess?'

'The first. Using an unfamiliar phrase from the Bible suggests literacy.'

'I wouldn't have thought it was an unfamiliar phrase,' commented Abigail. 'I recognised it, or at least the fact that it was a misquote, and so did Miss Scott.'

'Both of you are women with university degrees.'

'The Bible is in common use by many levels of society,' countered Abigail.

'Yes, but while most common people are familiar with Old Testament passages, like the Ten Commandments, for example, I doubt if they are with the rather obscure verses. I didn't recognise it, for example.'

Abigail sniffed. 'Heathen.'

They found the offices of Petter and Wardle located above a butcher's shop within sight, sound and smells of Paddington Station. As with most buildings next to a main railway station, soot from the trains hung in the air, painting the facade of the butcher's and the windows above it. The door to the rooms above the shop was unlocked, and they climbed a flight of grimy, uncarpeted stairs to the first floor and a narrow corridor with four doors, two on either side. The walls of the corridor hadn't seen any fresh paint for some time and the old brown paint was flaking off.

'Not the most prestigious of locations,' grunted Daniel.

A glass-panelled door had the words 'Petter and Wardle' painted on it in gold lettering. Daniel knocked on the glass, then turned the handle, and he and Abigail walked in. It was a small, cramped room, shelves overflowing with bundles of papers tied with ribbons, and four wooden filing cabinets. The desk that took up most of the room was also laden with papers. The dominant smell in the room was a stink of body sweat, combined with decaying paper and cheap gin. The man sitting behind the desk, a red-faced man with a large ginger moustache looked up at them, warily.

'Yes?' he asked.

'Mr Daniel Wilson and Miss Abigail Fenton,' said Daniel. 'We have been engaged by the Natural History Museum to investigate damage done to a dinosaur skeleton, discovered early this morning. It had been smashed.'

'What's that to do with me?' demanded the man.

'Which are you: Mr Petter or Mr Wardle?' asked Daniel.

'I am Mr Erskine Petter,' said the man haughtily. 'Senior partner. And I ask again, what has this smashed dinosaur skeleton to do with me?'

He made no attempt to get up, nor to offer them a seat, although there were two vacant chairs by the window. But the sight of the dust and dirt on the chairs had already made both Abigail and Daniel decide to reject the offer of a seat if it was made.

‘We’ve been shown a letter you sent to the museum as representatives of the Bone Company of America, in which you stated that unless the museum only purchased dinosaur skeletons from your client there would be retribution,’ said Abigail. ‘You will agree that “retribution” has an ominous, not to mention threatening, tone to it.’

‘It was used purely in the context of financial recompense and a loss of reputation of our client. My client has been cheated.’

‘By Miss Evelyn Scott?’ asked Abigail. ‘Who you addressed as “Dear Sir”?’

Petter sniffed. ‘I do not know the lady. Our transactions were conducted with her predecessor, Mr Danvers Hardwicke.’

‘Yet there seems to be no correspondence in the museum’s files from you prior to this recent letter threatening retribution.’

‘That is because all previous correspondence was between the Bone Company and Mr Hardwicke directly.’

‘But no letters to or from the Bone Company of America have been found in the museum’s files,’ said Daniel.

‘Are you calling me a liar?’ demanded Petter angrily.

‘No,’ said Daniel. ‘We’re just saying that the museum has no trace of any letters or any sort of correspondence from the Bone Company of America.’

‘They must have been deliberately destroyed,’ said Petter, flatly.

‘Have you any evidence these letters existed?’ asked Abigail.

‘I have a letter from the Bone Company advising me that the

letters of agreement were sent and signed by Mr Hardwicke.'

'Have you seen these letters?' asked Abigail. 'Do you have copies you could show us?'

'Are you questioning my veracity?' demanded Petter, indignantly.

'Not at all,' said Abigail. 'I'm just asking if we might look at them. Then we can advise Miss Scott that we have seen them and suggest she comply with your requests.'

Petter hesitated before saying awkwardly: 'No, I haven't actually seen them. But I have no reason to doubt my client when they say such letters exist.'

'If that's the case and they were in direct correspondence with the museum previously, why did they engage you to take up the issue on their behalf?'

'Because it takes time for letters to cross the Atlantic,' replied Petter. 'That presented no problem while arrangements were being made for the museum to purchase the skeletons because the exhibition was some months away at that time. But now there is an urgency about the situation and the Bone Company felt it was vital that they had a representative here in London who is authorised to act on their behalf to expedite matters.'

Abigail nodded. 'Yes, that makes sense. Could you furnish us with the address and the names of the owners of the Bone Company?'

'Again, you doubt me?' demanded Petter, stiffly.

'Not at all,' repeated Abigail. 'But if we are to persuade our client, the museum, you have a valid case, the more practical information we can provide the better.'

'All correspondence between us and our client is confidential,' said Petter.

‘Even just the name of the owner and the address of the company?’

‘Especially that information.’

‘Perhaps we should arrange a further meeting between ourselves and you, next time with your partner, Mr Wardle,’ said Daniel.

‘There would be no point.’ said Petter.

‘At least Mr Wardle should be advised that legal action may result because of this incident.’

‘He will be so advised,’ said Petter. ‘At the moment he is out of the country, but I will inform him by letter. Now, I believe our business is done and I will ask you to leave.’

Daniel looked to Abigail, who nodded, and they left the office, heading back down the grimy stairs and out into the street.

‘What a dreadful place,’ said Abigail. ‘Even this sooty air outside seems fresh after that room. What did you make of it?’

‘I’m wondering if there is actually a Mr Wardle.’

‘Why? What are you thinking?’

‘There’s no evidence of any earlier correspondence from them or this alleged Bone Company. The offices are in a shabby back street in Paddington. It suggests to me something dubious.’

‘Extortion?’ asked Abigail.

‘It’s been done before. Some disreputable character sees the chance of making money from the Natural History Museum about this exhibition. They lodge a spurious but legal-sounding claim in the hope of being paid off. When that fails, they up the pressure by sending in a thug with a hammer.’

‘But why do you doubt the existence of a Mr Wardle?’

‘Having two names on the letterhead gives the company greater authenticity, even if one of them is fictitious.’

‘You think Mr Petter carried out the attack on the dinosaur fossil?’

Daniel shook his head.

‘I can’t see him doing the dirty work. It’s more likely that he hired some thugs to do the actual damage. Proving it, however, is another matter.’

‘Then we look into Mr Petter and his associates,’ said Abigail. ‘However, first we need to tell Miss Scott about our meeting with Petter and see how far she wants us to go with our investigation, because it could prove expensive. There’s a good chance that our turning up at Petter’s office may put him off from committing any further damage. Especially if Miss Scott decides to hire a couple of nightwatchmen, which would be the cheaper option.’