



**MURDER AT
THE NATIONAL GALLERY**

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CHAPTER ONE

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Daniel Wilson, formerly a detective sergeant with Scotland Yard and now a private enquiry agent, sat in his favourite wooden armchair in the kitchen of the small terraced house in Camden Town he shared with his partner in life and business, Abigail Fenton, the noted archaeologist and Egyptologist. They made an interesting couple, an apparent attraction of opposites: both were in their mid-thirties, Abigail, a Classics graduate of Girton College in Cambridge, tall, her red hair emphasising her high cheekbones adding to her elegance; and Daniel, the workhouse orphan, tall and muscular, his broken nose giving him the appearance of a bare-knuckle fighter. But sympatico is in the soul, not externals, and both Daniel and Abigail had found a deep empathy with one another when they'd first met three years previously, when Daniel was in

Cambridge, hired to investigate a mysterious murder at the Fitzwilliam Museum.

They'd moved into Daniel's small house in what was generally considered the slum area of Camden Town because it was where Daniel had grown up, but since then they'd talked about moving to a better area, and – more importantly – getting married and formalising their relationship. In the poorer areas, like Camden Town, marriage was often considered an expense that couldn't be afforded; so couples moved in together and the woman adopted the man's surname; and, to all intents and purposes, they were a married couple. As the poor had no property there would be no arguments over sharing the proceeds of the marital house in the event of a split. If questions were ever raised by officials about their marital status, the usual reply was that the wedding certificate had somehow got lost. The fact was that their neighbours recognised them as married, their children and the children's mother bore their father's name, so they were married.

The same standards did not apply to those of the middle and upper classes. To Abigail's sister, Bella, who still lived in Cambridge, Abigail and Daniel were living in sin, and a disgrace to the family. Bella herself was married to a doctor, a very respectable situation.

Daniel and Abigail wanted to marry, not for society's sake but as a pledge of their love for one another, a relationship they both intended to be in for life. They'd come close to it a couple of times but always something seemed to interfere, usually a murder case at one of the nation's great museums that needed investigation. After their first case together at the Fitzwilliam, their reputation had grown and they'd been hired to investigate murders at the

British Museum, the Ashmolean in Oxford, the Manchester Museum, the Natural History Museum and Madame Tussauds.

Now they were in a fallow period as far as detection was concerned, and Abigail could return to her first love: archaeological exploration. She'd agreed to lead an expedition, funded by Arthur Conan Doyle, to the sun temple of Niuserre at Abu Ghurob, part of the area in Egypt known as the Pyramids of Abusir. The plan was for the expedition to begin in June or July. At the moment, Doyle was making financial arrangements, while Abigail studied what was known about the pyramid they would be exploring. Both Daniel and Abigail had agreed that any thought of their wedding, or moving house, should be on hold until the expedition had been completed and Abigail returned to England.

Both of them viewed the expedition with mixed feelings: it would be the climax to an already brilliant career for Abigail; only one woman before, Lady Hester Stanhope, had led such an expedition and lent her name to it. But both of them were aware that Abigail would be in Egypt for a long time, and they would be separated. Daniel had determined to go and visit the dig while it was going on, but it wouldn't make up for the fact that for the past three years they'd spent barely a day apart.

Daniel looked fondly at Abigail as she sat at the kitchen table, studying maps and texts she'd been allowed to borrow from the British Museum, then returned to reading the morning's newspaper. He read the reports of the latest political arguments that were raging around the prime minister, Lord Salisbury, as once more efforts were made by the Home Rule faction to press the government to give independence to Ireland. It was an

argument that had been going on for as long as Daniel could remember, with strong emotions on both sides of the debate. He turned the page and as his eye fell on a story on the second page, his mouth dropped open.

‘My God!’ he said, shocked.

‘What?’ asked Abigail.

‘Walter Sickert’s been arrested.’

‘The artist?’

‘Yes. They say he’s being questioned over the murder of a prostitute whose body was found at the entrance to the National Gallery first thing yesterday morning. According to this, she’d been eviscerated.’

Abigail stared at him, bewildered.

‘Walter Sickert?’ she repeated.

‘It’s like *déjà vu*,’ said Daniel. ‘We had him in for questioning during the Ripper investigation, Fred Abberline and myself.’

Abigail came and took the newspaper from him and scanned the page.

‘This is unbelievable,’ she said.

‘That there’s been another murder in the same manner as the original Jack the Ripper killings, or that Sickert’s been arrested on suspicion?’ he asked.

‘Both,’ she replied. ‘I see that Chief Superintendent Armstrong is in charge of the case.’

‘*Chief* Superintendent? Another promotion? That man knows how to climb a greasy pole,’ commented Daniel.

There was a knock at their front door, and Abigail handed the newspaper back to Daniel and hurried to open it. When she returned she was holding a small brown envelope.

‘It’s addressed to you,’ she said.

Daniel opened the envelope and took out the single sheet of paper.

‘Well, well,’ he said. ‘This is very timely. It’s from Stanford Beckett, the curator at the National Gallery. He wants our help.’

‘No, he wants *your* help,’ Abigail corrected him. ‘It’s addressed to you.’

‘But Beckett’s note asks for both of us,’ said Daniel. He held out Beckett’s letter to her.

‘In that case why wasn’t my name on the envelope?’ she asked, obviously annoyed.

‘I suspect it’s to do with the fact that I’ve met Sickert before, during the Ripper investigations.’ He stood up. ‘Shall we go?’