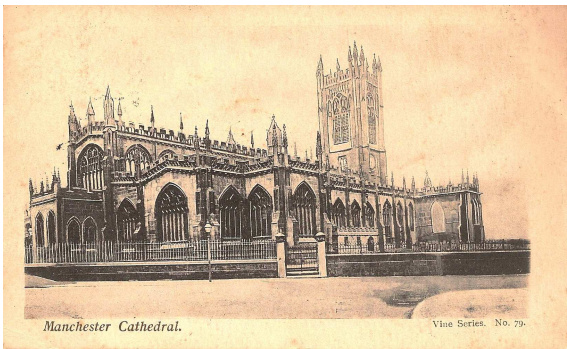


DETECTIVE CAMINADA AND THE MANCHESTER CAB MYSTERY

by

Angela Buckley

At 6.30 pm, on Tuesday 26 February 1889, a well-respected paper merchant hailed a cab on the steps of Manchester Cathedral. Slightly inebriated after an afternoon's drinking, John Fletcher climbed into the carriage with a young man. The pair spent the next hour driving around the city, stopping for a drink in a public house. Later, they were heading towards a private address in Old Trafford, when a passer-by called out to the cabman that one of his passengers had fled. Thinking that he might have been dodging his fare, the driver jumped down and peered into the cab, to find Fletcher slumped in his seat in a semi-conscious state - his young companion had vanished. By the time he had arrived at the Manchester Royal Infirmary, John Fletcher was dead.



The next morning, the citizens of Manchester woke to the shocking news that a respectable businessman had been murdered in a four-wheeled cab, during a night out on the town. Already anxious about their safety, in the wake of the gruesome murders committed by 'Jack the Ripper' in the East End of London, the public followed the twists and turns of the 'Manchester Cab Mystery' with morbid fascination. The pressure was on for a quick resolution, in order to prevent mass hysteria, so the Chief Constable (*Charles*

Malcolm Wood, Chief Constable 1881-1898) placed this puzzling mystery in the capable hands of Detective Chief Inspector Jerome Caminada.

Humble beginnings

At the time of the Manchester Cab Mystery, Jerome Caminada had been in the Manchester City Police for just over twenty years. Born on Friday 15 March 1844, in Deansgate, Manchester, opposite the site of the infamous Peterloo Massacre, he survived a precarious childhood in the city's notorious underworld, and joined the police force as a constable in 1868, at the age of twenty-three. This was a momentous decision for a poor child of immigrant parents; Jerome's father was an Italian cabinetmaker and his mother had Irish roots. Jerome was the fourth of Francis and Mary Caminada's six children - one brother had died in early infancy. When Jerome was three years old, his eldest brother, aged nine, and his father, both died in quick succession, leaving his mother alone to care for her remaining children.

Life became even worse for young Jerome, and the family moved further into Deansgate - known as 'Devil's Gate' - amidst thieves, con artists and prostitutes. Whilst living in these deplorable conditions, Jerome's mother had two more children, neither of

whom survived infancy. Her eldest daughter also died in the workhouse. Despite his desperate situation, Jerome's early experiences in the labyrinthine alleys and closed courts of the rookeries gave him an intimate knowledge of the nefarious criminals and shady characters who inhabited them, which would become one of his most effective weapons in fighting crime.



PC Caminada's first beat was 'A' Division, in the very neighbourhood where he had grown up. He later referred to this disreputable quarter as, 'a very hot-bed of social iniquity and vice'. During his first year on the beat, the young officer developed an aptitude for detective work and was promoted to the rank of sergeant in 1871, joining the Detective Department at the Manchester Town Hall, where he would work for the next three decades.

In his early career, Detective Caminada tackled racecourse pickpockets, forgers and expert swindlers. A master of disguise, he exposed clever confidence tricksters, such as sham heir hunters and the insidious quack doctors.

As his career progressed, Caminada contended with more serious adversaries, such as the Birmingham Forger, a professional conman wanted for a serious theft. He even had his own 'Professor Moriarty' - long-term rival Bob Horridge, a violent burglar who terrorised the city for two decades and would stop at nothing to preserve his freedom. In 1887, Caminada faced Horridge in a deadly confrontation after he shot two police officers. In a dramatic climax, worthy of the pen of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the detective finally succeeded in putting this inveterate felon behind bars for good. Two years later, Detective Caminada would encounter his greatest challenge yet, in the Manchester Cab Mystery, for which he would need all the brilliant powers of deduction of Sherlock Holmes.

*The victim, John Fletcher,
from a contemporary illustration*

Initial investigations

When John Fletcher's body was examined at the Manchester Royal Infirmary, the surgeons found no obvious marks of violence and their initial conclusion was that he had died of alcohol poisoning. A habitual gin drinker, there was a lethal mix of alcohol and chloral hydrate - a chemical often used for insomnia - in his stomach contents. However, the absence of money and valuables on his person led Detective Caminada to believe that there was a far more sinister explanation for his sudden death.



Caminada opened his investigation by interviewing witnesses, in an attempt to piece together the victim's final movements and a description of his elusive acquaintance. John Fletcher, aged fifty, was the senior partner in a firm of paper manufacturers. A wealthy man, he was well known in the city, especially at the Exchange. He had retired from active business, but was still working as a justice of the peace and was a member of Lancashire County Council.

On Tuesday 26 February, Fletcher, a widower, had left his home in Southport for a weekend in Knutsford, stopping in Manchester en route. After visiting the company's offices and a mill auction, he was due to meet a colleague at a shellfish restaurant later that evening, but he never turned up. A police officer spotted him at a market stall in the company of a young man, half an hour before he hailed the cab.

PC William Jakeman described Fletcher's companion as about twenty-two years old, five feet two inches tall, with a fresh, clean-shaven complexion, and wearing a dark-brown suit and a chimney pot hat. The detective interviewed several witnesses who had seen him on the night in question, including the cabman. Their evidence placed the suspect in a number of public houses throughout the city, both before and after the incident. One of the hostelrys was the *Locomotive Inn*, a noted haunt of pugilists.

Despite the fact that the *post mortem* was inconclusive about whether Fletcher had been deliberately poisoned, Caminada followed his instinct and deduced that there was a connection between the presence of chloral hydrate in the victim's stomach contents, and illegal prizefighting, as the drug was used to subdue opponents in the ring. Using his encyclopedic knowledge of the criminal fraternity, he compared the description of his suspect with likely candidates and soon came to the conclusion that the perpetrator might have been Charlie Parton, son of a beerhouse keeper renowned for putting chloral hydrate into the water used by fighters, so that he could rig the betting.

Charlie Parton, a contemporary illustration



A timely resolution

Detective Caminada arrested eighteen-year-old Charlie Parton, at his parents' home, four days after John Fletcher's death. He was remanded in custody while Caminada built up the case against him. The wily detective linked the murder with the recent theft of chloral hydrate from a druggist's in Liverpool - Parton's home city. He also found two previously intended victims. In separate incidents, both men had been on a night out with the suspect and had woken up 'drunk' the following day, with their valuables missing. They had claimed that Parton had drugged and robbed them, but neither case had been proven.

Charlie Parton was committed for trial at Liverpool Assizes, and it was between the court hearings that Caminada played his final card. Through his network of informants which he used to meet in the back pew of his local church, he located a key eye-witness, who had been present in the public house where Fletcher had spent his last evening. In another twist in this astonishing case, the witness revealed in court that he had seen Parton pouring liquid from a small phial into Fletcher's beer.

In the light of this compelling evidence, it took the jury just twenty minutes to return a unanimous verdict of 'Guilty'. The ladies in the gallery sobbed and Parton clutched the rail of the dock as the judge donned his black cap - his death sentence was later commuted to life imprisonment. Detective Chief Inspector Caminada had brought the perpetrator to justice in the record time of just three weeks.

The speedy resolution of the Manchester Cab Mystery was Detective Caminada's finest moment. This sensational case was widely reported in the national press, placing Caminada 'in the foremost rank of the detectives in his day' (*Manchester Courier*). Furthermore, this event took place just as the stories of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle were gaining in popularity, after Sherlock Holmes's debut in *A Study in Scarlet*, published two years earlier - Jerome Caminada was already becoming known as Manchester's Sherlock Holmes.

After the success of the Manchester Cab Mystery, Detective Caminada spent another decade fighting crime on the streets of his city, reaching the position of Detective Superintendent. In his later career, he faced many more dangerous adversaries, including anarchists, child killers and the dreaded 'scuttlers' (street fighters). In 1895, he published the first volume of his memoirs, in which he revealed that he had also been working undercover for the British government. Recruited by the Home Office in the early 1870s, Caminada had undertaken many covert missions tracking Fenian suspects, not only in Manchester but also throughout Europe and even to America. He had been particularly active during the dynamite conspiracy of the 1880s.

A fitting tribute

Jerome Caminada retired in 1899, after an exceptional career lasting thirty-one years. He was rewarded for having single handedly arrested 1,225 offenders, as well as closing more than 400 illegal beer houses in the city. The *Evening Telegraph* dubbed him a 'terror to evil doers' and celebrated his special qualities as a police detective :

'His career has been one of the most remarkable and brilliant in police annals. Probably no man living knows more about crime and criminals, their habits and habitats, their cunning and duplicity'.

Caminada's active life did not end with his police career, as after his retirement, he became a private inquiry agent. In addition, he managed his own estate agency, letting a considerable number of properties that he had acquired over the years. He also served on the Manchester City Council.

On Tuesday 10 March 1914, just five days before his seventieth birthday, Jerome Caminada died at home surrounded by his family - he was married and had five children, three of whom had died in infancy. The funeral of the legendary detective was attended by the city's dignitaries. In his eulogy, Caminada's friend and colleague, Judge Edward Parry, (*County Court Judge, Manchester 1894-1911, and later Sir Edward Abbott Parry*) praised his sterling qualities, his unorthodox methods and above all, his compassion for others, concluding that the detective, 'never lost his faith in human nature, though he knew more about moral diseases than most bishops'.

The judge's sentiments were echoed in the many obituaries in the local and national press. The *Daily Mail* described how Detective Caminada was 'widely known throughout the country for his clever and daring detective work'. Jerome Caminada was a true Victorian super sleuth and a real-life Sherlock Holmes.

Angela Buckley writes about Victorian crime and is a regular contributor to a wide range of publications, and is the Author of :

The Real Sherlock Holmes: The Hidden Story of Jerome Caminada
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