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DEATH  
AT  
HULL HOUSE

*An Emily Cabot Mystery*



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Frances McNamara



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Front cover image (bottom) of Hull House  
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# ONE

“As I have warned President Harper on many occasions, the weaker sex simply is not able to cope with the stress of rigorous academic activity. The female brain is not designed for such things. This incident is a disgrace. I only hope this will bring the faculty to their senses and result in a change of policy.”

He had gone on like this for twenty minutes now. I hated the sheen on his high forehead. The white and gray prickly hairs of his moustache and the full beard that outlined his square jaw were despicable. I gritted my teeth as the full pink lips mouthed the words. I loathed the man. Worst of all was the deep authoritative ring of his impressive voice. I do believe Professor Lukas carried more arguments by the tone of his voice than the strength of his logic.

Through the window behind him I could see figures in black academic gowns flocking to what would be convocation for the second year of the University of Chicago. It was a convocation I would not attend.

“Thank you, Professor Lukas. I think that is sufficient. We must all get along to the ceremony this morning.” Professor Albion Small was shorter than the tall, overbearing Lukas who frowned, pursing his lips with displeasure. But the dapper little man with a bald dome and a smudge of dark moustache under his nose was Chairman of the Department of Sociology. As such, he was Lukas’s superior. It was the department to which I had belonged the previous year, and the department from

which I was being expelled as I was being expelled from the university.

The other participants in this sorry meeting to pronounce my final disgrace were Jonathan Reed and Marion Talbot. The young, ungainly Professor Reed had sponsored my work collecting police statistics the previous year and Dean of Women, Marion Talbot, was a petite little bird of a woman whose presence was equal to anyone, even a Professor Lukas.

“It is unfortunate,” she snapped. “Unfortunate for all of us. However, since Miss Cabot must go, I am glad to be able to report she will be joining Miss Jane Addams at Hull House in the city.”

This was a calculated and well timed shot across Lukas’s bows. His large face turned red. “A settlement, that settlement house,” he sputtered. “Oh, yes, that is just the sort of place for someone like this regrettable young woman.”

But Professor Small’s eyebrows rose. He did not share Lukas’s skepticism and disdain when it came to the settlement movement. “Well, well, Miss Cabot, we must all wish you the best in these endeavors.”

Lukas looked outraged. He did it so well. Hull House, the settlement that Jane Addams and some others had begun several years earlier was a phenomenon that attracted international attention in the area of sociology. Professor Lukas deeply resented that so much attention was lavished on efforts by those he considered ignorant amateurs. Lukas himself specialized in labor relations and was a consultant to many businessmen in Chicago. He was well known to have a low opinion of the immigrant masses swarming into the cities and filling the lowest paid jobs. The activities of settlements in such communities were to be scoffed at in his often published opinion. “A gaggle of well meaning women with nothing better

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to do with their time. Ridiculous. Setting up housekeeping in the midst of the tenements. Absurd.”

But there was a gleam in Professor Small’s eye. “I understand the settlement has compiled a survey of households in the ward. There is some anticipation that they will publish the data from that. It could be most useful.” The accumulation of data was an important activity in the opinion of the department chairman. It was already an emphasis of the school of sociologists who had come to Chicago.

I could see the smallest glimmer of a satisfied smile on Marion Talbot’s heart shaped face. She was trying hard to suppress it. “Yes, I have suggested to Miss Addams that Emily may be able to help complete the preparation of that study for publication.”

“Splendid, Miss Cabot. We will look forward to the publication of that work.” Professor Lukas had puffed up his chest as if ready to launch into yet another harangue on the follies of including women in higher education but Professor Small forestalled him. “Now, I’m afraid we must say goodbye and prepare for convocation.”

Dean Talbot marched out the door with a signal for me to follow. I nodded goodbye to Professor Reed. I wanted to thank him for his attempts to defend me but this was not the time. As we walked the corridor of Cobb Hall to Dean Talbot’s office, I felt a weight drop on to me, bending my shoulders. How could this have happened? Here it was the first day of the new university term and I would be leaving. The fact of it hit me then and took my breath away. Stairs to my right led up to the classrooms, like the one where I had studied the Bible in the Hebrew original under the tutelage of the young President William Rainey Harper. I remembered how proud I had been to be one of the first women fellows at the new university. But

I took myself in hand and turned down the corridor stopping to grit my teeth before following the Dean into her office.

The office was a book-lined room with wooden file cabinets, a large desk for the dean and a smaller writing desk to one side. I glanced at it. As the dean's assistant, it had been mine the year before. Now, I took the straight-backed chair opposite the large desk as she indicated I should. But Marion Talbot did not sit down. The pacing she did, swinging her black academic gown as she turned did not bode well for me. She frowned and the tassel on her mortarboard shook when she came to a stop. "Convocation will begin promptly in thirty minutes, so there is not much time. I am sorry to say your expulsion will stand." She grimaced. "For now, at least. Professor Reed and I did all that we could, but you can see the opposition we met." She paced again, stopping this time to look out the high window behind her desk. She was shaking her head. Then she swung around to face me again, like a little bird perched on a twig. "You will go to Jane Addams at Hull House. The arrangements are made?"

I nodded.

"Good. Emily, I must impress upon you how important it is that you use this opportunity to redeem yourself. Your disgrace and expulsion reflect on all of the women here. You owe it to them to make things right."

"I am very sorry to have caused so much trouble. And I am grateful to you and Professor Reed for your efforts on my behalf."

"That's not enough, you know. You must go to Hull House and demonstrate by your work there that you belong back here doing serious research. Emily, I know you were trying to help someone but the fact that you, a woman scholar at this university, could be found in a gambling tent on the

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Midway is just something the university authorities cannot ignore. Your actions make it appear that women enrolled here are so loose and undisciplined as to make this acceptable. Of course it is not. It is against every university regulation. You know that and you should have thought of it before you acted.

“Surely you must understand how important it is that we, the women of the university, remain beyond reproach. You saw all the fuss that was caused last year by the mere suggestion of unchaperoned dances. How could you think you could go to a gambling hall without destroying your reputation as a serious scholar here?” She stamped her foot and I felt a rush of blood turning my face red. I said nothing. We had been over all of this before. Many times.

“Never mind, never mind. What is done is done. What is important now is to repair the damage. You know how unusual it is that this university was organized with the intention to admit women scholars to every level of study.”

It was true. Many women, like me, had been educated in colleges like Wellesley only to find on graduation that the only avenues open to them were marriage or teaching. It was considered unsuitable for a woman to pursue study beyond that degree. But when the businessmen of Chicago had approached William Rainey Harper to establish a world class university in their city, he had planned for an institution devoted to advanced research on the model of the German universities. And he had insisted from the very first that women, as well as men, would be enrolled. When he raided the East Coast educational establishment for the best of their professors, he had also convinced Alice Freeman Palmer and Marion Talbot to come from Wellesley College to shepherd the women. And they had recruited other female students, like me, hungry for the opportunity to be part of this plan. Participation of women had not been without opponents, so there was a



struggle that first year to ward off criticism. And I had damaged our case by my actions. Of course, I regretted that.

“It is the future you must attend to now,” she continued. “Your expulsion will stand. You will go to Hull House. As I have told you, Professor Small has a great admiration for Miss Addams and her co-workers at the settlement. He has often attempted to recruit them to your department but they are too busy with their own activities. The study he mentioned is of particular importance. That survey of the West Side neighborhood is expected to be a landmark document when it is published.” She fastened her small dark eyes on me. “You will bring that study to press, Miss Cabot. And in the process you will redeem yourself and the reputation of the women here. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Miss Talbot.”

She sighed. “Don’t be so downcast, Emily. You will find the inhabitants of Hull House a most interesting and unusual set of companions.” The way she said this I could only assume that she herself did not necessarily consider “interesting” or “unusual” to be good qualities. But she had a certain openness of mind not shared by the likes of Professor Lukas. “And Dr. Chapman will be there as well. He, too, has a reputation to live down.”

“But he was released, the charges were dropped. He is innocent,” I protested. Our friend, the doctor, had been charged with the murder of a man he had known in the past. But when the real murderer was revealed, the doctor was released. During his imprisonment the university had distanced itself from him in a manner I found disappointing.

“Emily, the university abhors any kind of sensationalism. We cannot afford it. Dr. Chapman understands that. This university is dependent on the contributions of the eminent

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people in Chicago. They are the ones who have matched the generosity of Mr. Rockefeller. It is only through their contributions that this institution can continue to exist. Although the charges are dropped, the scandal persists. Dr. Chapman understands the memory of that must die down before he can be readmitted to the university.”

“But he can continue to work in Dr. Jamieson’s laboratory while I am completely exiled,” I pointed out. It was not fair and, much as I liked the doctor, I had to protest the lack of fairness.

“The doctor was unjustly accused, Emily. You, on the other hand, are guilty of a foolish disregard for university regulations. When you accepted the fellowship that Mrs. Palmer and I obtained for you last year, you agreed to abide by the rules of the university. It is your impulsive disregard for those rules that has damaged not only your own career but that of every other woman here. Men like Professor Lukas are only too willing to point to you, Emily, as an example of why women are not fit for rigorous academic work. They have even proposed a separate course of study for female students. It is not for such an arrangement that we have come here and worked so hard.”

She was right, of course, but how many times did I have to say so? Marion Talbot was not one to spare anyone’s feelings, especially not a self confessed miscreant like me. But she was right. I did agree with her totally. “I will go to Hull House tomorrow, Dean Talbot, and I promise you that I will do everything I can to succeed there.”

“It will be a good place for you, Emily. You are impatient of rules and regulations. In Miss Addams and her followers you will find people who manage to defy the constraints of society and still to maintain the respect of all who know them. If you cannot exhibit the self-discipline necessary to succeed at the

university, I hope you will be able to learn from the women of that settlement how to gain the respect of society. Now, I must go. I wish you luck and I expect great achievements from you despite your disgrace.”

With that, she shooed me out the door, closing it behind us with a click, and hurried off to join the academic procession. Convocation would be held in Cobb Hall but I would not participate. As I glumly left the building to return to my rented rooms and prepare for my exile, I wondered when I would ever be back.

“Emily. Are you forgiven?” It was my good friend of the previous year, Clara Shea. She was a tall, strikingly beautiful girl, who left behind the life of a belle in Kentucky when she came to the university. In the course of that first year Clara had come to find her place among the beakers of the laboratories and the numerical calculations of the chemistry department. Over the summer the bond of friendship we formed that first year had been sorely tried, but we had managed to mend it again, so it was stronger than ever. Now she was ready to plunge into the round of lectures and experiments while I was leaving. Seeing Clara really rubbed gall into the soreness I felt.

“No. It’s Hull House for me.”

“Oh, Emily. When do you leave?”

“Tomorrow.”

“It seems so unfair. And now we finally have a real home. You should be with us, Emily.”

She was talking about the new women’s dormitories that had been completed for this fall quarter. We had endured makeshift accommodations and moves that first year, hardships that had only brought us all closer together.

“Dean Talbot thinks I can redeem myself. Perhaps I’ll be back next year.”

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“I hope so. You can come and visit.” I think she saw from my face that would only be a punishment. “Oh, I’m so sorry, Emily.” She reached out to put a hand on my arm. “Is your family still here with you?”

“My mother has gone home to Boston.”

“But your brother remains? Alden, is he still here?”

I stiffened. My younger brother was another problem and I did not wish to discuss him. “He is fine. You’d better go, Clara.”

People in academic gowns were sweeping past us on both sides but she held my hands a moment longer. “I’m so sorry, Emily, I must go.”

“Yes, go. It’s convocation, I know. Goodbye, Clara. Be careful. Don’t go spilling those chemicals over a new frock.” She smiled at the joke but shook her head with regret as she turned away.

Snow was beginning to fall as I trudged back to the rooms I had shared with my mother and brother during their visit from Boston. There was a brisk wind as I walked across the campus of the University of Chicago that November morning in 1893. The scent of burning leaves was left hanging in the air when the breeze dropped. Under a sky of heavy gray clouds things were stirring. There was a sense of anticipation in the air, the sense of starting on new journeys I had always felt with the start of a new academic year. It was painful and exasperating to realize it would all go on here but without me. I had made such a mistake in getting myself expelled. It made me realize the only thing I really cared for was succeeding here in the academic world where I had always been able to shine.

When I entered our lodgings I realized my brother Alden had packed up all of his things and left without a word— or without an additional word. We had had all too many words to

say to each other in an argument at the train station after seeing my mother off.

Alden, four years my junior, was quick witted and lithe. He had a mop of dark brown curls and bright blue eyes, but most importantly he had an engaging manner and an unquenchable curiosity about people. Somehow he always managed to charm his way into any company and he scorned the book study that I had always excelled in. He was fearless in a way I found reckless and he was undependable and irresponsible in the extreme.

After our father's death, Alden accepted a job in a bank managed by my mother's brother. He was given leave from his job to bring my mother to visit me and to see the World's Columbian Exposition this summer. It was only at the end of the trip when my mother was preparing to return that he announced his intention to give up his job and stay in Chicago. Coming on top of my own troubles it had been too much to bear but I waited until my mother's train left to tell him what I thought. I accused him of being irresponsible and he countered that I was worse, as I had deserted them all by coming to Chicago.

As for my own life, I knew my father would have wanted me to continue my studies. In fact, I would have been even more devastated by my expulsion if I had had to face him to explain it. Yet any embarrassment would have been a small price to pay to have him back with us again. Perhaps what was really bothering Alden was that the excursion to the gambling tent that had brought my downfall had been a plan jointly concocted by both of us. It was true that I bitterly regretted it now and, it was true that, although I had never voiced the thought, in my heart I blamed my brother.