



FRANCES  
MCNAMARA

DEATH  
AT THE  
FAIR

*An Emily Cabot Mystery*



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THE FAIR

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Front cover image (bottom) from *The World's Fair in Water Colors*  
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## DEATH AT THE FAIR

# ONE

The Fair was a great undertaking. Forgotten now, I am amazed to remember how quickly traces of it were dispersed, carted away, burnt to the ground or overgrown by plants in the park that remained. By the end, only the Palace of Fine Arts stood, as if struggling to maintain some vestige of a ruined civilization, providing only an echo of what had been. The lone relic, it finally became the Museum of Science and Industry in one of those many transformations that we have experienced in the twentieth century.

Despite that so rapid disappearance, like some fairy city that had existence only at twilight, I find when I remember it now, the White City of the World's Columbian Exposition exists in my mind whole and complete as it looked in the early summer days of 1893 when you could still look down on the Court of Honor from the roof of the Manufactures and Liberal Arts Building. The graceful white structures with their long colonnades and statues surrounded a basin of water where gondolas floated peacefully. At one end, the great Columbian Fountain with its flowing figures celebrated the deeds of its namesake as they paddled a fantastic ark.

That summer we felt we were at the heart of the universe as people from all over the world traveled to Chicago to visit the Fair. And I think we were all proud and a little overwhelmed by the scope of human accomplishments represented in the huge buildings, which contained exhibits of everything from electricity,

machinery and mines to agriculture and the fine arts. But, in the end, it was the events that overtook me in the final days of the Fair that came to tinge the memory of that display with a kind of wistful melancholy. It was as if the potential greatness was so near to our grasp but at the last minute slipped away, like a match sheltered in cupped hands that goes out in a draft.

I remained in Chicago over the summer to recover from an illness and to complete the research I began in my first year of graduate study at the University of Chicago. That work required the tedious compilation of statistics from thousands of identity cards provided by the Chicago Police Department. The result was something less than it might have been without the loss of some of the cards and of the original draft, which happened during my illness, but my professor, Mr. Reed, was well satisfied. And perhaps more importantly, I was confident that it was a piece of research good enough to bolster Dean Talbot's arguments that the fellowship support for my work should continue, although only six of these honors had been granted to women. While all the world had come to visit the great Exposition at our doorstep, I had been bent over my desk taking time only to tend to the duties that paid for my room and board.

By late August my work was done and I was free to explore the Fair as I had not been able to do earlier. My mother and brother traveled from Boston and I found them rooms in university dormitories that had been appropriated for the use of Fair visitors. Only that made the trip affordable for them. I was myself still employed in managing the women's housing and spent mornings at the desk in one of the alcoves of the Manufactures and Liberal Arts Building where I assisted members of the Women's Collegiate Association in booking rooms.

It was on one such day that I completed my shift and threaded my way, through the crowds viewing the magnificent wrought iron

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gateways of the German exhibit, to the southwestern portico, where I had left my mother sitting on a bench.

The day was hot, but inside the high ceilings and vast spaces retained a coolness. Outside, the portico provided shade and a slight zephyr of breeze that gave some relief. My mother was a tiny figure in her black widow's weeds. It was five years now since my father's tragic and unexpected death, yet she had never felt the need to leave her mourning clothes behind. It was not that she was unable to resign herself to her situation or that she was unduly morose about his absence, but I think she felt the lack of his presence beside her everyday. I had given up trying to encourage her to change her wardrobe. She just felt no need to do that.

"Mother, here I am. But where is Alden? Surely he should have been here by now?"

My younger brother was demonstrating his usual fecklessness. Never an ardent student, at nineteen he had discontinued his studies at Harvard and taken a job at our uncle's bank. He had been given time off to accompany my mother on this trip only by virtue of her wealthy brother's favor. This day, he was supposed to have escorted my mother to meet me but she had arrived alone saying he had stopped somewhere on the Midway and would be along shortly. Her tolerance for his undependable nature always exasperated me.

"I'm sure he will be here soon, Emily. You mustn't worry. Is this perhaps the doctor coming now?" She nodded and I turned around to see Dr. Stephen Chapman coming up the steps. Hatless, he mounted without haste, looking around him as if to take in the expanse of buildings and people. With a clean-shaven square face, warm brown eyes and dark hair always in need of a trim, the doctor seemed old to me at that time, although he was only in his mid-thirties. A physician who had given up his practice to do research at the new university, he had quickly gained a

reputation for brilliance in his laboratory studies. He had been quite helpful in the early days when construction delays had us all scrambling to make do in temporary quarters at the Hotel Beatrice. Unlike most of the impatient male professors he had been grateful for the household tasks we women took on to compensate at the beginning. Once we were all settled into our real housing and studies, my friend Clara and I had put out some efforts to try to pry the doctor from his microscope to join us at social functions. Today I saw he wore the same brown suit that had sufficed for all the classes and university functions during the preceding year. The thought of that wool made me feel itchy on such a sultry day but he was the same as always, quiet, thoughtful and just a little aloof. Reaching the top step, he made a slight bow to my mother as I introduced him and she held out her hand.

“Dear Dr. Chapman, we are greatly in your debt. I cannot tell you how grateful I am to you for saving my daughter. She told me you would not wish to be thanked but you would not blame me if you knew how often I have shuddered to imagine what might have happened if you had not been there.”

I felt the blood rise to the tips of my ears. I had fallen ill of a fever during the spring quarter but I thought my mother exaggerated my danger. At the time, I had been much more concerned that the weakness would prevent me from continuing at the university than that it would be mortal.

“I am grateful to have been able to spare you such pain. Luckily, Miss Cabot has a healthy constitution and her recovery has been complete, so you have nothing to worry about.”

“Yes, Mother, I am completely recovered. Please don’t doubt that. It was only with the help of Dr. Chapman that I was allowed to extend my course work through the summer to complete it. At one point Professor Lukas and some of the others were insisting

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that my illness proved women could not sustain the rigors of advanced work. I very nearly lost my fellowship.”

“Dean Talbot would not have allowed that,” he told my mother. “She and Dean Palmer are themselves the strongest evidence that such carping is unjustified.”

“The dean told me how Dr. Chapman put down the critics, Mother. He embarrassed them by recounting their own past illnesses as evidence that male scholars are every bit as apt to suffer as the women. He was our champion.”

“Foolishness. I merely told them the truth. But, in any case, Mrs. Cabot, your daughter is fully recovered. We all of us have to suffer from sickness at one time or another. In some ways it can be said to strengthen us. There are certainly cases where having once experienced an illness we are afterwards protected from it.”

It was kind of him to reassure her and we spent some minutes discussing my mother’s journey from Boston. My illness had resulted in a sudden intimacy with the doctor and when I was fully recovered and busy with the task of completing my research I soon found I missed his daily visits. I had come to know him only a very little during that time. He never spoke of family and seemed quite alone in the world. Despite the fact that he, too, had remained at the university to pursue his studies over the summer, I was seldom able to lure him from the beakers and microscopes of his laboratory. But I was determined he would not miss a tour of the great sights of the Fair for lack of company.

Yet, it was only by appealing to his kindness and pity for my widowed mother that I had finally persuaded him to join us on our expeditions during her visit. He seemed at once grateful and somewhat reluctant to be included in our party yet I knew him to be an intelligent man who could not help but be stimulated by the great variety of ideas and novelties we would find in the exhibits. The truth was that I hoped my mother’s warmth would draw him out and I was looking forward to days spent touring the Fair



followed by lively discussions of what we had seen over dinners and suppers. I felt I had earned the respite after a tedious summer, and so had the doctor. Now I looked around, exasperated by my brother's failure to arrive on time. It was so like him.

"I'm sorry my brother is late. I told him we would meet here at one o'clock to begin our tour. I can't imagine what is keeping him."

"I'm afraid my son, Alden, is easily distracted by the amusements of the Midway, Dr. Chapman. He stopped there on our way over but I am sure he will join us shortly, and if he does not, we can begin without him."

"With all the wonders of art and industry to be seen, my brother thinks only of amusements. It is a shame," I complained. I was vexed. It had been difficult enough to persuade the doctor to join us and now Alden was making us wait.

"Quite a few people are finding the exhibits on the Midway every bit as attractive as the more formal exhibitions," he said dryly. "They say it is far more profitable than the Fair itself."

"Emily, I believe someone is trying to get your attention," my mother gestured towards the sunlight.

The shaded portico overlooked the promenade along the Basin. As I turned, I saw a group of elegant women with parasols strolling towards us.

"Clara!" I raced down the steps and we embraced.

I had missed Clara Shea ever since she returned home to Kentucky in June, and I had not expected to see her again until the fall quarter began. Like me, she came to the university when it opened the previous fall as one of the first women graduate students and we became good friends and allies. Today Clara made a striking figure with her piles of dark hair pinned up under a straw boater. She looked magnificent in a summer frock of

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frothy white with black dots and black velvet trim. I knew I must appear dowdy beside my tall friend in my shirtwaist and brown skirt but I had become used to her impressive beauty and I was delighted to see her when I had never expected it. I immediately knew that her company would make the excursions to the Fair perfect from my point of view.

“My gram finally decided we should come to view the Fair after all,” she confided in a low voice and her breathy Southern drawl. “I do believe she got tired of having to listen to everyone else tell her stories about their trips.” She turned back to the others who were slowly coming up behind her. “Gram, here is Emily Cabot. I told you all about her.”

She was a small woman with bright eyes who wore an elegant suit of lavender and held a silver walking stick. Clara frequently quoted her grandmother and I was curious to meet this woman who had been so important in her support for her granddaughter’s education. From what my friend had told me, it was her grandmother who had responded to Clara’s broken engagement by handing her a prospectus for the new university and it was she who had insisted on the feasibility of the plan despite the objections of other family members. It seemed a great deal of warm charm sheathed an adamant resolution of will in this small woman. So different physically, I suspected she and Clara were very similar underneath.

Beyond her two more women in the party appeared to waft rather than walk. They wore pastel dresses with matching parasols. One was middle-aged and by her resemblance to Clara, as if she were a slightly more attenuated and delicate version, I guessed she must be my friend’s mother.

The other woman was younger, although not as young as Clara and myself, displaying none of the awkwardness of youth but rather a languid elegance. She had an abstracted, faraway look in her blue eyes and only wisps of pale hair escaped along her

cheekbones under a hat adorned with ostrich feathers. A web of white lace touched her throat and wrists. I sensed an air of sadness that was like a fine mist hanging around her.

Remembering my own companions, I turned back and saw my mother descending the small flight of steps on Dr. Chapman's arm. I caught him looking up from his care of guiding her to glance at the newcomers, and I thought I saw a sign of recognition. But the next moment he was attending to my mother's progress again and I thought it must have been my imagination.

Clara handled the round of introductions. The woman who so resembled her was indeed her mother and the other woman was introduced as Mrs. Larrimer, another Kentuckian come to view the Fair with her husband and father. As I turned to look at her again I saw that the woman's blue eyes were fixed on Dr. Chapman's face. She did not respond to Clara's words and her air of elegance had suddenly deserted her. I was close enough to hear her whisper his name, "Stephen."

Dr. Chapman acknowledged the acquaintance reluctantly, I thought. "I was a student of Mrs. Larrimer's father," he told the rest of us. Then turning back to her, "I trust he is in good health?"

She tore her eyes from his face and bowed her head. "He has traveled with us to attend the medical congress here. He would be happy to see you again." She had a low voice and spoke slowly. He bowed.

"I am sure we will meet in that case, as I also attend the congress."

"Her father and her husband were too busy attending to their own affairs to accompany Marguerite today, Doctor," Clara's grandmother told him. "But we are not ones to wait on the gentlemen, so we carried her off with us to see the sights." She leaned on her cane and looked around at the bustling fair grounds. "Although, I must say, I am quite liable to be overwhelmed by the number and size of these buildings. I think

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we must consult on how best to start on them, ladies, as we will not be allowed to miss any seriously important thing. Not with two such ardent scholars to guide us.”

“Don’t worry, Gram,” Clara told her. “I have the map and I see that Emily brought a guidebook. Together we will guarantee you will not escape a single truly important exhibit. I’d thought to see the Woman’s Building—I know it will interest Gram, don’t you think, Emily?”

As I held out the guidebook to her I could see, from the corner of my eye, that Mrs. Larrimer had once again lifted her eyes and was staring at Dr. Chapman.

“You have come from Baltimore?” she asked him softly.

He grimaced. “I reside here in Chicago. I have been here since last year studying at the university.”

“You gave up your practice then?”

He nodded curtly and shifted as if the wool suit, that looked so scratchy to me, was finally wearing on him. They were on the edge of our group and had spoken softly, almost as if continuing a conversation from some time in the past, while Clara and her mother argued about our proposed route. Somehow I was curious enough to be straining to hear them. Suddenly the doctor interrupted Clara.

“And now, if you ladies will excuse me, I must return to my laboratory.”

“But, Dr. Chapman, I thought you would join us for the tour,” I told him. His eyes shifted to mine and I thought a slight bit of color tinged his cheeks.

“You must excuse me, Miss Cabot. I did not have a chance to explain my change of plans. There is an experiment I must attend to in the laboratory. I came myself, so that I might at least meet your mother and brother, but I cannot stay. Please accept my apologies. I am sure you have found much better companions for your tour.”

He bade us farewell with a slight bow and began to stride away. As the others returned to their discussion I hurried after him, calling, "Doctor!" He could not fail to hear me so he had to respond. He stopped. His neck was red as he turned back to me.

"You will join us for supper later, won't you?" We had planned to go to a hotel in Hyde Park.

He glanced back over my head. "Please, convey my apologies to your mother and brother," he said. "I will be unable to join you."

"But, Dr. Chapman, what is it? Is something wrong? I hope we have not offended you? I wanted so much for you to join us. My mother has wanted to meet you and you will enjoy my brother even if he is unreliable and I thought we would have such an interesting and instructive time, discussing what we had seen. All together."

"Oh, I think you will have plenty of company with Miss Shea and her party." He was looking over my shoulder.

"But so much of the world is on display here, Doctor. Surely you don't want to miss it? You told me you wanted to visit the Fine Arts Building. And you said you had heard much about the German exhibit in the Manufactures Building. You can spare the time for that, can't you? We can be sure to put those first on the tour and you could join us later at the hotel . . ."

"No, I cannot. I am sorry." He pulled his gaze away from the group behind me to look me in the eye. "Your friends are waiting. By all means begin your tour. You do not need me. Now, I must return to my laboratory."

When he turned away that time I had no choice but to let him go. He would not be moved. Trying to persuade him when he had made up his mind was like stubbing your toe on what seemed to be a loose pebble and was really a substantial rock embedded in the ground.

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I couldn't help frowning as I looked back at the elegant Mrs. Larrimer whose eyes were following the figure of Dr. Chapman as he disappeared into the crowd. Who was this woman and what was she to my friend? I was sure that it had been the unexpected meeting that caused him to return to his research, thereby ruining all my plans. Naively I assumed their past association must have ended in some disagreement or unpleasantness. I shook myself. The sun shone brightly as hundreds of figures strolled through the wide boulevards lined by the massive buildings of the White City. Whatever was bothering the two of them it was no business of mine and no reason for me to waste an afternoon that was meant to be spent viewing the many new and important things on display at the exposition. Only it irked me that both the doctor and Alden had managed to foil my plan. At least Clara's arrival was an improvement.