

FRANCES MCNAMARA



DEATH AT
CHINATOWN

An Emily Cabot Mystery

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ONE

Mr. Cormick here suffered injuries from a shotgun blast a month ago.” The surgeon gestured and looked down, but I kept my eyes on the balding patch just visible on the top of his head. “We were unable to locate all of the pellets at the time of original treatment and he has been in continual pain ever since. Today, gentlemen...and ladies,” Dr. Erickson said, with a bow in our direction, “we will, for the first time, use a new technique which the German physician Dr. Roentgen discovered while experimenting with a Crookes tube.” He paused to point at a round glass bulb mounted on a wooden stand.

My husband, Stephen, stepped forward, holding up a photographic negative against a white sheet, which Dr. Erickson pointed towards. “With the help of Mr. Emil Grubbé and Dr. Stephen Chapman, we are able to use the Roentgen rays to find the problematic pieces of lead still in the man’s thigh. Mr. Grubbé will explain the methodology.”

A slightly disheveled young man with stringy black hair shambled over to the negative and mumbled about the plate used, the method of placing the limb between the tube and the plate, the exposure of forty-five minutes, and the procedure for fixing the image. He pointed out a copper wire around the leg, which had been used as a marker, and the pellets visible six centimeters below it. So this was the work that Stephen had been spending so much time on. He had tried to tell me about it, but I was distracted

and, I had to admit, uninterested. In the current circumstances, however, I couldn't help being impressed. In fact, I was fascinated as I realized the machine could show the inside of the body. I had to admit to myself that it really was an amazing discovery.

"And now we will be able to address this man's pain through removal of the missing pieces," Dr. Erickson explained. It was obvious he was impatient with the mumblings of the technician, and it was clear that he saw Stephen as nothing more than an attendant, as he directed him to hold the negative so that it could be examined. "Now we are ready to remove the material." He nodded to the nurse administering the chloroform. "The patient will be unaware of the procedure. Gentlemen..." he said, addressing several younger men standing nearby, "...you will secure the limbs to prevent any unconscious movement."

Dr. Erickson wore a conventional herringbone suit, although he removed his jacket and vest, handing them to a nurse. After he rolled up his shirtsleeves she brought a basin for him to wash his hands in. Once he'd dried them he donned a white apron. All the while, he talked about how the unfortunate Mr. Cormick had been treated for his wounds and the surgical procedure he planned to perform.

I ventured a quick glance at the patient, but he was laid out on a stretcher sheathed in white sheets. His face was indistinguishable, as a nurse held an overturned wire netting over his nose and mouth. It was stuffed with gauze and she carefully drip, drip, dripped a liquid from an amber-colored glass jar onto the gauze. I could smell a cloying, sweet scent that made me want to pinch my nose, but I restrained myself.

It was clear to me that Dr. Erickson wanted to make sure we had an unobstructed view. I would have liked to demur, to leave even, but I sensed that would have reflected poorly on Stephen, so I said nothing and attempted to concentrate my attention on the least shocking sights in the room—thus my interest in Dr. Erickson's head. Staring at it kept me from glancing down at

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the injured man and the knives and the bandages, the thought of which I found somewhat alarming.

The surgeon was a tall man with prominent cheekbones, and had a full white beard and mustache, very neatly trimmed. His cold gray eyes were on a level with mine. As he spoke, I paid attention to each movement of each wrinkle on his well-lined face, intent on *not* looking down at the man on the stretcher below us.

I noticed that Stephen now stood in a corner of the stage, but I knew that he could still see me. Conscious that I was there at his request, I was determined to endure the experience, despite my quite natural revulsion. I could face anything if I had to. I had seen seriously wounded and ill people before, and even encountered dead bodies in my past, but I had never observed a surgery where they purposely cut into human flesh.

Dr. Erickson appeared to be ready, and I let my gaze drift up to the ceiling, hoping to avoid the sight of blood as he wielded the scalpel, but he hesitated.

“Unless we can prevail upon one of our visiting physicians to demonstrate the skills they have learned in Michigan? Dr. Stone, you told me you are trained as a surgeon, is that not the case?”



When I had first met Dr. Mary Stone and Dr. Ida Kahn in the lobby just a short time before, I was disappointed. They seemed so very ordinary. It was only much later that I realized it must have required a great effort to transform themselves chameleon-like for American society. For, despite their very American-sounding names, they were very thoroughly Chinese.

I knew they had come from China four years previously with Miss Grace Howe, a missionary, to study at the University of Michigan. And I knew they had completed medical degrees that spring of 1896. They were visiting Chicago all summer before returning to their homeland to open a clinic. For months, I had

been hearing about them from my husband. I suppose I expected something more exotic than the two slim figures in ordinary walking suits with flat straw hats. They could have been any of the women scholars at the University of Chicago in those days. They had the almond-shaped eyes of an Oriental, but nothing beyond that to mark them out as extraordinary. Held up as paragons by my husband and others, they were said to excel in both social and professional spheres. Yet, when I introduced myself to them in the comparatively cool corridor of the Rush Hospital on that blazing hot August day, I was not overly impressed.

“We have heard so much about you from your husband,” Dr. Mary Stone told me, as she accepted my extended hand in a firm shake. The gloves we both wore did nothing to relieve the oppressive heat. My skirts felt like a heavy drag, my hat a burden, and my jacket too constricting. I struggled to ignore my physical discomfort and to pay attention as she turned to the other women in her group. “This is Dr. Ida Kahn and her adoptive mother, Miss Grace Howe, who has accompanied us during our stay here.”

Ida Kahn seemed a copy of Mary Stone except for the round spectacles she wore. Miss Howe was a large-boned woman whose face was flushed with the heat of the day. I nodded to each, not feeling it necessary to extend my hand, since Mary was gesturing to two other women as well. “And this is Mrs. Laura Appleby—she is the widow of an eminent physician and has been most kind to us during our stay—and Miss Charlotte Erickson. Her father is the distinguished surgeon who will be leading the demonstration today.”

“Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Chapman,” Miss Howe told me. “You are also here for the demonstration? Mary and Ida are anxious to see it. Not my cup of tea, but our time here is for them to learn as much as they can before we return to China. Your husband made special arrangements for them to attend and we are very grateful for that. I must say, he has been extremely helpful

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with introductions to many people in the medical community here. I know the girls are in his debt for that.”

I clenched my teeth in an effort to refrain from commenting on my husband's activities. That summer Stephen had been spending more and more time away from home. His activities had taken him into the city, leaving me in our Hyde Park home with our children. It was not uncommon for him to even spend overnights in the city without notice. When I protested, he parried with enthusiastic descriptions of various new procedures or research he had seen, and then invited me to attend demonstrations. He was deaf to my insistence that I was needed at home and he had become slippery as an eel in slithering out of arguments. It had come to a head the evening before in a big argument, and ended in his insistence that I attend this demonstration and meet the Chinese doctors. That morning he had departed early, leaving me to find my own way to the hospital and to introduce myself to these women. I would not let them see my annoyance, but I was hard pressed to conceal it.

Before I could reply we were interrupted. A tall man in his fifties strode across the corridor towards us. He planted his imposing figure in front of Miss Erickson and accosted her with no consideration for the rest of us. “Charlotte, what are you doing here?”

The young woman was of medium height. She wore the black of deep mourning and she cringed away from the man's towering figure. Mrs. Appleby, who also wore black, stepped between them, as if to protect the young woman. “Isaac, please, I asked Charlotte to join us. After the demonstration there is a luncheon to honor our Chinese guests. I thought it would be a fine thing to have another young woman in the party.”

“Madam, I will not allow it. I will not have you influencing my daughter. Is it not enough that you assisted her in poisoning her own mother? How dare you continue to force your attentions on her when I have forbidden it?” He frowned at his daughter,

who appeared to wilt under his furious gaze. Brushing past the older woman, he took his daughter by the arm and led her away.

“I apologize,” Mrs. Appleby told us. “Please do not mind what he says. He has not recovered from the death of his wife. She was one of my dearest friends. When she suffered pain in her final struggles she asked me for help in finding herbs that could provide some relief. Like many physicians, Dr. Erickson has an unreasonable prejudice against homeopathic treatments. He knows perfectly well that nothing we gave her harmed her. He just needs someone to blame for his loss.”

It was an awkward moment. “I am so sorry Miss Erickson will not be able to join us for the luncheon,” Mary Stone commented.

“I have heard that Dr. Erickson does not believe women are suited for medical research or surgery,” Ida Kahn said.

“He hasn’t always been that way,” Mrs. Appleby hastened to comment. “He has changed since the death of his wife. Before that, he helped to train women physicians at the women’s hospital she supported. And I’m afraid that is not the only change he has undergone.” She shook her head. “He has resigned from most of his appointments at local medical establishments, and much of his practice. It’s unusual for him to even do the kind of surgical demonstration he’s doing today. Please forgive any rudeness. I believe he still suffers from a painful grief.”

I thought this did not bode well for the coming demonstration. If the surgeon disapproved of women physicians, the presence of the Chinese doctors would be awkward, to say the least. Restless with a certain apprehension, I looked around in vain for Stephen. He was the one who’d insisted I attend this session, but where was he?

At that moment, a young man came and asked us to follow him to the demonstration. When I realized that Miss Howe and Mrs. Appleby had no intention of attending, I thought of remaining with them. But I remembered Stephen’s insistence, and reluctantly allowed myself to be herded to a nearby doorway.

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We mounted a few steps and found ourselves in an operating theater. I was shocked. When Stephen had suggested I attend a demonstration, he had not mentioned that it was surgical. The room was a small amphitheater with boxy wooden desks lining the rows. They were mostly occupied by young men in suits, who I assumed were medical students. I hoped we could remain as far as possible from the floor of the room where the operation would happen. But as I moved toward one of the last rows, we were hailed from below.

It was Dr. Erickson. “Come, come, gentlemen. I see our lady visitors have arrived. Make room, make room. You must allow them seats in the front row.” He waved at the young men in the first row and they promptly gave up their seats, much to my dismay. I had no choice but to follow Mary and Ida down the steps and to slip in behind a desk. It would be the only thing between us and the operation about to take place below.



And now, here was Dr. Erickson asking Dr. Stone, one of the Chinese women doctors, to cut into the man lying on the stretcher. The very thought made me cringe with anticipation. I thought it was cruel of the doctor to challenge her in that way. My husband had been a surgeon before he came to Chicago to do research, but that skill was forever lost to him when he was injured by a shotgun blast, several years before our marriage. I had never seen him perform surgery and had no desire to. How alarming it must be for Mary Stone to be dared to perform surgery in this rather antagonistic atmosphere, where the only other women were nurses or observers. I was almost prompted to protest when he badgered her.

“Come, come, madam. Did they not teach you that this is the essence of modern medicine? Or do you plan to merely prescribe herbs when you return to your country? Surely that is not what you

came to here to learn? If you graduated from the great institution of the University of Michigan, surely they taught you to do simple surgery, didn't they?" He had an unpleasant grin on his face, as if he were happy to cause the young woman discomfort. It made me angry with him. I heard Ida speak softly to Mary in Chinese. I was sure it was a warning.

But Mary answered Dr. Erickson in a soft voice. "I would be most honored to participate, if you would allow it."

That surprised him into silence, for a moment at least, while she carefully picked her way through the row of spectators and down the steps to the operating area. My gallant husband stepped forward to help her descend. "You can see how we have used Roentgen's rays to make the image," he told her, leading her to the hanging sheet and placing the negative at her eye level. "There are all sorts of uses for this equipment. You must take one of these devices back to your country with you. People will be amazed by what we can see. I'm sure you will find use for it."

She followed him politely and put her face close to the image, glancing back at the patient from time to time.

"We will have to see if we can put together a setup and ship it to you in Jiujiang," Stephen said enthusiastically.

Satisfied with her inspection of the image, she gave him a charming smile. "That is so generous of you, Dr. Chapman. But I am afraid there will be no electrical power in the cities and towns where we will be working. You must save the equipment for places here where it can be used." She removed her hat and jacket and carefully rolled up her sleeves to the elbow. A nurse appeared at her side with a basin of water and she thoroughly soaped and rinsed her hands and arms, donning an overlarge apron that the nurse tied behind her back. Before turning to the patient, she walked to a small table with a curious-looking container, set atop a spirit lamp, that appeared to be giving off a misty spray. Smiling at it, she gestured to Ida, who nodded. Then she turned back to Stephen. Everyone else was silently paying

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attention to her every move. I thought they were watching for her to make a mistake but I saw that she was unmoved by that attention. “Perhaps the most important things we can bring back with us are the antiseptic procedures of Dr. Lister and the careful sterilizing of materials near open wounds.”

“Ah, yes. Germ theory has been a great advance for all of us,” Stephen agreed. His mentor at the university, Dr. Jamieson, had been researching germs, and that was what had originally drawn Stephen to his laboratory. I guessed, from what I knew of Stephen’s work at the university, that the curious-looking container was spraying carbolic acid in order to destroy germs during the surgery. This was something the women doctors could take back to China without needing electrification to use it.

Dr. Erickson was getting impatient. Mary was clearly very knowledgeable and thorough in her preparations, but he stood with his hands on his hips, as if he was not at all impressed. He loomed over her as she approached the man on the stretcher, but she appeared to be unaffected. She was a petite, slight figure, tiny beside the tall men around her. Her Western-style dress and flat Oriental face contrasted with the suits and beards of the masculine figures. With utter calm, she took up a scalpel and I turned my stare to the ceiling.

By the rapt attention of the audience, I judged that she performed well. Certainly they would have reacted immediately to any error on her part. I was holding my breath without even realizing it. Then I heard a tink, tink, tink, then a general exhalation of breath, followed by, amazingly, applause. Looking down, I saw blood, but also a metal tray holding three shotgun pellets. Mary was still carefully working on the wound, as unaffected by the now positive atmosphere as she had been by the negative atmosphere that preceded it. I looked up again, avoiding the sight of the bloody sheets. After some time had passed, I glanced down and could see that she had sutured the wound. Finally, the still sleeping patient was wheeled away. I could breathe easily again.