

An Emily Cabot Mystery

DEATH AT THE
PARIS EXPOSITION



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PROLOGUE

Paris. I haven't yet made peace with Paris. Say "Paris" and I still see the haughty wax figure in court dress. A fake tiara anchors a mass of perfectly waved hair above her smoothly vacant face. The choker of pearls surrounding the unnaturally long neck is anything but fake, though. And the court dress of heavy satin embroidered with pearls and trimmed with lace is the real thing. But it's the extravagant fall of the satin train, spilling down in a pool of fabric, trailing five feet behind, that catches the eye. That train and the kneeling wax figure of a seamstress who is carefully smoothing it out. The standing figure is regarding herself critically in a long mirror, so the eye almost misses the scuffed little black boots lying at an odd angle. At first you don't see it—a figure wearing a simple muslin dress printed with tiny flowers lying at the foot of that wax figure like a discarded handkerchief. No warm wax here, only cold, cold flesh with a face that is puckered in a grimace. A royal blue satin ribbon—that should have been tied around her waist—is knotted around that very young woman's throat.

And, once again, I desperately wish that I could somehow have prevented it. Like a sore tooth, it throbs and aches, that memory. If only I could have penetrated the layers of European artifice and misdirection sooner. So few Americans were capable of that. Certainly Bertha Palmer was not. She was too

easily misled. Perhaps Miss Cassatt, with her artist's eye, saw through it. But not in time to save the girl.

We Americans were ruthless in our naïveté that long ago summer. Still, when someone says "Paris," I long to return to engage in that struggle once more, to see if I might not win and best them in this game of wits. But life with all its responsibilities prevents me. I have a family to look after. If the girl had lived, surely by now, she, too, would have been too busy with the cares of a family to remember it all. She would have moved on, like the rest of us, beyond the transitory excitements and seemingly critical discoveries of the Paris Exposition of 1900. For the rest of us, its wonders were gone in the blink of an eye, but she remains there forever, frozen on the floor of the exhibit, a sacrifice to the gods of modern Parisian fashion.

ONE

I was really in Paris. I sat in an open carriage with deep purple cushions on that fair spring day, being wafted through the town. The air was soft, the brightness of the sun broken by dappled shade from trees, as the horse clip-clopped down the broad avenue. From the Trocadéro to the Champs Elysees, we traveled in perfect comfort. I was a world away from the grimy streetcars of Chicago.

“I don’t know how to repay you, I never can,” I said. It wasn’t the first time I had tried to thank the woman seated beside me for her generosity, nor was it the first time she had impatiently brushed away my thanks.

“My dear Emily, as I have tried to explain, providing you with an ensemble from the House of Worth is part of my plan.”

Mrs. Bertha Palmer was regal but quite at ease in her corner of the carriage. She wore a high-collared jacket, stiff with embroidery in fashionable black and trimmed with narrow bands of red. A sweeping hat of black straw, decorated with satin bows and fluffy black feathers, framed her handsome, square face. Waves of silver hair were piled beneath the millinery confection and her eyes were a brown so dark they had been described as black. It was not strange that Mrs. Palmer had set out to visit the House of Worth on a fine spring morning in Paris. She had been dressed by the famous couturier for years. Even after the patriarch of that fashion house had passed away several years earlier, she continued

to patronize his sons, who had, as long planned, stepped into the business. For an occasion as important as the Paris Exposition of 1900, Bertha Palmer would, of course, require an outstanding set of costumes. As the only woman commissioner in the American delegation to the fair, she was determined to excel in dress, as in all aspects of the job of representing her country. But no one could expect her to also purchase an outfit for a mere secretary. I knew she was doing so because I'd refused to accept a salary. How could I, when she had already been so generous to me and my little family? So, I was adamant in my refusal of any pay for my work. But she was just as adamant in her own right.

Back in Chicago, Mrs. Palmer had bemoaned the fact that she would face her duties at the Paris Exposition without the army of clerical staff she had employed during Chicago's Columbian Exposition in 1893. Miss Jane Addams had promptly recommended me for my organizational skills. I was flattered by her offer of a position, but I couldn't take it seriously. I had a husband, three young children, and a position lecturing at the University of Chicago. In different circumstances, I assured her, I would have loved to accompany her across the world to help organize activities for the United States Commission. But when I explained why it was impossible for me to travel to France, I had no idea what a strong will I was up against. Mrs. Palmer listened calmly to my objections and proceeded, just as calmly, to change all of the circumstances of my life. She had my husband, Stephen, invited to a congress of medical men and saw to it that funds were provided to support travel, not only for him but for his entire family. At the same time, she arranged for the university to grant me a sabbatical and even insisted that we bring our nursemaid, Delia, to care for the children. Finally, she arranged for our family to join the Palmers in the large house which they took for the duration on rue Brignole. It was a magnificent plan, and I soon found Mrs. Palmer was not to be denied. It was this lucky circumstance that had brought me and my family to the

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City of Light on a trip that exceeded all of my dreams. And now she was taking me to the House of Worth for final fittings of her wardrobe, with every intention of improving mine as well.

We had already been busy with a whirl of letter writing, committee meetings, the planning of salons, and endless consultations. Today was a welcome respite from it all. The horse trotted along under dappled shade from trees in the Tuileries gardens. Mrs. Palmer's son Honoré, who sat opposite us, smiled at my protests. "You know Mother will not be thwarted. She truly means it when she says it's all part of her plan."

He was a solid young man only a few years younger than myself. He and his friend, Lord James Lawford, the younger son of an English earl, had decided to join us in our foray to the famous house of fashion. Their excuse was to carry the jewel case containing Bertha's fabulous pearl choker, one of many jewels her loving older husband had purchased for her. They assured me that men were welcome at the House of Worth and that the champagne and pastries offered to its customers were superb. The entertainment was enough to attract young men like themselves, even though it was really calculated to appease the older men likely to be responsible for payments. But the senior Mr. Palmer had scoffed at the idea of accompanying us ladies. Like my husband, he was content to remain at home with his papers.

"It's true," Lawford assured me. "Mrs. Palmer lays her battle plans like a general." He tapped my knee with the top of his ebony cane. He was a fair haired, tall, and stringy young man who had to fold up like a fan in order to fit into a conveyance such as the carriage. It was said that he went to great lengths to avoid socializing with other members of the English aristocracy, ever since he had escaped London for the French capital. He despised his fellow countrymen and loved nothing so much as the society of young Americans like Honoré. "The Queen of Chicago knows how to impress our Parisian hosts," he told me, capturing my attention by the steady gaze of his light blue eyes.

“The fact is, they have been nurtured on pictures of American Bloomerism, which terrifies them. They expect reedy spinsters in red shawls, who serve on committees and battle for women’s rights.” He feigned shock, while Honoré rolled his eyes and Mrs. Palmer gave her attention to the strolling Parisians beyond our carriage. “It’s true! They are amazed by Mrs. Palmer. She is elegant, her French is impeccable, and her gowns are some of Worth’s choicest productions. As such, she confounds them.” The lady in question merely smiled at the hyperbole of the young man. “She has them eating out of her hand as a result,” he concluded.

I saw what he meant. “Ah, and she cannot have someone at her side appear too much like the reedy spinsters, I suppose?”

“Now, now,” Mrs. Palmer objected. “Lord James is correct in that I plan to impress our Parisian hosts with an adequate style. We do not wish to appear provincial in any way. But it is merely a requirement of the position, my dear. I am happy to provide you with an ensemble from the House of Worth since I require you to attend so many social gatherings during the duration of the Exposition.”

I smiled. It was a good excuse. I couldn’t dispute it, not that I would want to. We turned onto rue de la Paix where the great houses of fashion sat, waiting to fulfill the dreams of any woman who had the temerity and pocketbook to enter their doors. As we trotted up the broad avenue I watched the throngs of well-dressed people strolling along, looking into the glass windows. With florid names in gold paint above the glittering merchandise, the milliners, chocolatiers, and jewelers presented their wares on the street level. Halfway up the road, the House of Worth had an elegant stone façade with blue painted window and doorjambs. Directly opposite were the windows of Cartier. It was widely known that the two families would soon be joined, when the daughter of Jean-Philippe Worth became engaged to the jeweler’s son. It would be a royal marriage of the two kingdoms of merchandise.

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They made it so pleasant to arrive at the maison on rue de la Paix. When we halted, our coachman jumped down to place stairs for us to descend, and a doorman from the fashion house came over to assist. I took a last look at the broad street with all the strolling people. It was such an engaging scene on such a lovely day. I could hardly believe I was there.

Before I could gather my skirts and take the hand of one of the men to descend, a young woman rushed to the side of the carriage, grasping it and calling up to the young men in rapid French. I noticed that Mrs. Palmer pointedly ignored the girl, while Lord James's terribly pale complexion flushed and he responded in French. Honoré rolled his eyes and began to climb out over his friend, so as to be able to help me and his mother. The young woman, who was hatless, gestured to the shop she had come from and I saw it had a selection of hats in the window. I suspected this young woman was a milliner, a maker of hats, and that she wanted to catch the attention of our hostess, whose indulgence in millinery confections was as great as her acquisitions of other fashionable items, such as the gowns we were coming to view. I had heard that millinery was an occupation much favored by young women in Paris. It allowed a young girl some flexibility in her lifestyle, as she exercised her talents in decorating the massive hats that were such an important part of any lady's wardrobe at that time. But Mrs. Palmer managed to ignore her, even as the Englishman answered her in rapid-fire French. I had the impression he was embarrassed by the attention, and desirous of getting rid of the girl. I followed Mrs. Palmer, accepting Honoré's hand to help me descend.

"Jee – mee, Jee – mee" were the only words I could make out from the young woman's French. I knew Honoré's friend preferred to be called "Jimmy," disliking the more formal "Lord James," but I couldn't understand their conversation. Then she grabbed Honoré's arm in supplication. I took a look at her as I stepped to the pavement before following Mrs. Palmer through the door

which was held open by the House of Worth man in his livery. She was a small girl, in a gown of figured muslin, a white background with pastel flowers. Around her neck a small locket hung from a black velvet ribbon. She appeared to be earnestly entreating the young men but they gently waved her off. As I turned away to enter the sanctum of the great house of fashion, I wondered about the lives these two young men led when they were out of our company. Of course, while they had many opportunities to go out and mingle with the everyday people of the city, Mrs. Palmer and I were restricted to more formal engagements with other ladies of our class. It made me just a little homesick for Chicago, where I traveled throughout the city to wherever my work took me. But I was aware, as I crossed the threshold into the luxury of the House of Worth, that in Chicago I was seldom called on to enter such lavish surroundings, and never with the object of being treated to the kind of attention I was about to receive. I sighed. If Mrs. Palmer commanded it, who was I to object? A certain excitement bubbled up in me, as I wondered what the famous designer would produce for me based on our visit and the instructions of my hostess. It hardly seemed possible, but I was about to be dressed by Worth.