

# THE STURGIS WAGER

A DETECTIVE STORY.

By EDGAR MORETTE.

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[Continued.]

## SYNOPSIS.

**CHAPTER I**—Scene of story is in New York city. Time, early evening, last day of year. Cable train collides with cab, throwing to ground cabman and passenger also seated outside. Latter disappears; then, inside the cab, body of man shot dead is discovered. Sturgis, reporter, examines cab and surroundings.

**CHAPTER II**—Later that evening, at stag dinner party, Sturgis, in impromptu discussion, maintains reliability of circumstantial evidence. Dr. Murdock, famous chemist, wagers in reply \$5,000 that from any daily paper he can select an unsolvable riddle. Sturgis takes bet.

**CHAPTER III**—Case selected is of two mysterious shots fired that afternoon or near Knickerbocker bank. Man had been running from bank with valise, and arrested. Man said he stole valise from bank steps and was shot at. Valise contained nothing of interest.

**CHAPTER IV**—Sturgis secures appointment with Dunlap, president of bank, to visit scene of shooting early next morning, then induces his friend Dr. Thurston to come to his rooms while he arranges data of the two strange cases.

**CHAPTER V**—From observations made thus far and inductive reasoning thereon reporter has concluded: (1) dead man in cab was bookkeeper about 50 years old, receiving good salary; (2) wound caused by bullet fired at close quarters; (3) might have shot himself; (4) shot had not occurred in cab; (5) right arm broken by heavy instrument; and (6) cabman was drugged, and young man who escaped involved in some way in crime. Cab mystery also noted as possible sequel to bank mystery.

**CHAPTER VI**—Sturgis calls for Sprague, artist friend, to get his company during investigation at bank, but artist has appointment with some fair sitter whose portrait he is making.

**CHAPTER VII**—Agnes Murdock (in charge of her father's household since her mother's death) finds her father in his study. She, in reply to question concerning attentions of a Thomas Chatham, shows her dislike of the persistent suitor. Her father intimates she shall not be further bothered.

**CHAPTER VIII**—Miss Murdock's final sitting for portrait induces artist to ask privilege of calling at her home, where she readily grants. Bellboy brings note for Agnes. This is read with evident annoyance, and she drops it. It remains forgotten when she leaves studio.

**CHAPTER IX**—Promptly at time agreed Dunlap meets Sturgis. Reporter begins and carefully examines in bank. Revolver in bookkeeper's desk shows two empty cartridges.

**CHAPTER X**—Examination completed, Sturgis questions banker regarding reliability of Arbogast, head bookkeeper, then announces Arbogast to be a defaulter with Chatham, accountant who has frequently examined condition of books at office. Message Arbogast sent Chatham deciphered from marks on a blotter.

**CHAPTER XI**—Reporter has now completed diagram showing movements of Arbogast and Chatham and one other, whose identity is as yet completely veiled. Arbogast at last moment had found a note which caused him to suspect his accomplice. He fired wounding him in hand and was about to fire again when unknown conspirator rushed in and struck him on the head. This action resulted in turning weapon and making Arbogast shoot himself. Dunlap is incredulous, but verifies story in part by later identifying body of Arbogast at morgue.

**CHAPTER XII**—Banker calls upon Mrs. Arbogast. While with her she receives letter written by her husband telling of defection and expected flight. He has by mistake altered depositor to overdraw account. Chatham has discovered mistake, and for fear of losing position Arbogast allows himself to be used by Chatham and Mr. Seymour. By false entries Seymour has drawn \$250,000. Change in method of book keeping was about to expose the matter. Arbogast tells his wife of Dunlap confession as soon as he has escaped.

**CHAPTER XIII**—The afternoon of crime Chatham has had occasion to use telephone. Sturgis learns he had been connected with the Manhattan Chemical company, a mysterious concern not known to commercial agencies. At office of chemical concern Sturgis places detectives.

**CHAPTER XIV**—Sprague next morning finds letter Miss Murdock had dropped in his studio, and decides to return it in person.

**CHAPTER XV**—He reaches her home, and is announced just in time to interfere with implied threat of Chatham, who has forced his attentions upon Agnes, and with dangerous looking paper knife in hand has declared: "I don't marry you, no one ever shall." After Chatham leaves, Agnes gives way to hysterical weeping, but is soon comforted by her now accepted lover, Sprague.

**CHAPTER XVI**—Sturgis traces Chatham's movements as far as Dr. Thurston's house. Doctor had just developed Roentgen ray photograph showing position of bullet in accountant's forearm.

**CHAPTER XVII**—Reporter now goes to vicinity of Manhattan Chemical office. Detectives report Chatham to have twice entered the place, but not seen to have come out either time. Murdock's house is on next street directly behind chemical concern. Here Sturgis gains admission, and overhears Chatham's excited voice threatening "to give the whole thing away."

**CHAPTER XVIII**—Sturgis has come to get far view of chemical office, but gives his reason for desire for interview with chemist regarding recent experiments. But Sturgis remembers engagement and excuses himself.

**CHAPTER XIX**—Meeting Sprague outside the two go for warrants and police to search chemical concern. Arriving, Sturgis with skeleton key opens door, then leaving police and detectives he and Sprague descend to cellar, follow an underground passage and come to Murdock's laboratory. Here is found a vat from which reporter carefully fishes out a bit of lead which appears to be a flattened bullet.

**CHAPTER XX**—Sturgis finds vat contains fluid that dissolves bone as well as flesh. The bullet just found is now Chatham had but a little before met his end. Murdock coming from above discovers the men. Sturgis fires, but he retreats in safety.

## CHAPTER XXI

### THE DEATH CHAMBER.

Before the men had gone many steps a grating sound reached their ears from the direction of the skylight. They looked up and saw sliding steel shutters slowly and ponderously close, like grim jaws; and suddenly they felt themselves cut off from the outside world.

Sturgis, taking up his lighted candle, made his way to the door of the subterranean passage and tried in vain to open it; the heavy iron bolt remained immovable in its socket. Inch by inch he scrutinized the door with growing anxiety. At last he abandoned the search and returned in the direction of the square chamber.

"That explains why he wanted to shut me in here when I was in his office," he muttered under his breath. "What is the matter?" asked Sprague.

"We are caught like rats in a trap," replied Sturgis. Then with feeling he added: "I do not know how this will end, old man. I have bungled, and I fear the game is lost. If our lives are

the forfeit, you will owe your death to my stupidity."

Sprague looked at his friend, as if surprised to hear him apparently abandon the fight.

"Don't worry about me," he said, kindly; "I came here of my own free will. But," he added, as a vision of Agnes Murdock flashed upon his mind, "I have no intention to die just yet, if I can help it. Are we not both able-bodied men and armed? What can one man do against two?"

"It is not an open fight," said Sturgis, "but I am glad to see your spirit. I do not give up; but I want you to realize that we are in a critical situation, with the odds enormously against us."

"Why, what can Murdock do?"

"Perhaps what he did to Chatham. It will probably not be long before we discover what that was."

"But there must be some way of opening that door from the inside," said Sprague.

"There evidently is none," replied Sturgis; "he probably controls these doors from the outside by electrical connection."

The men were back in the square chamber. Sturgis' eyes were roving restlessly over the walls, ceiling and floor in search of a loophole of escape.

"There is no chance to reach the skylight without a ladder; and even if we could reach it, we should be no further advanced, as it would be impossible to make any impression on the steel shutters. That leaves the register and the speaking tube. While I examine the register, suppose you try the tube. If it connects with the Manhattan Chemical company's office, there is a bare chance that we may attract the attention of the detectives whom we left there."

"As we were saying, Mr. Sturgis—"

The words came in Murdock's mocking tones.

Sturgis quickly held the lighted candle above his head and peered in the direction whence came the sound. A panel of the door at the head of the stairs had been pushed up, revealing a small opening, covered by a strong and closely-woven wire netting.

"As we were saying, 'murder will out!' Nevertheless, it is sometimes easier to weld a chain, even of circumstantial evidence, than it is to predict who will be bound in it."

Sturgis and Sprague stood in the glimmering light of the candle, silently watching the glowing eyes behind the screen.

"Mr. Sturgis, you are a clever man," continued Murdock, "an uncommonly clever man. I frankly admit that I had underrated your ability. But then we are all fallible, after all. Thaddeus my share of blunders, as you seem to have discovered; but you will doubtless now concede that your own course has not been entirely free from errors. And now that we have reached the conclusion of this interesting game, I have the honor to announce: 'Mate in one move!' Perhaps you are surprised that I should take the trouble to explain the situation to you so clearly. I do so in recognition of your superior intelligence. I see in you a peer. If matters could have been so arranged, I should have been proud to work in harmony with such a man as you; and indeed, when a short time ago I invited you to my laboratory, it was my intention to offer you a compromise which I hoped I might be able to persuade you to accept. I felt that you would prove an ally who could be trusted. But, alas, that is impossible now, on account of your friend's presence. With all due respect to Mr. Sprague, as an amiable man of the world and a prince of good fellows, it may be said that he is not one of us. Much to my sorrow, therefore, I am left no alternative to the course I am about to adopt. The fault, if anybody's, is your own, after all, Mr. Sprague. There is a homely but expressive adage concerning the danger of 'monkeying' with a buzz saw. Why, my dear friend, did you 'monkey' with Mr. Sturgis' buzz saw, instead of sticking to your palette and maulstick?"

"But I fear I am growing garrulous, gentlemen. If I had time, I should like to explain to Mr. Sturgis the details of some of the more important, and, in my humble opinion, more brilliant, schemes of which I have been the—ah—the promoter; for I dislike to be judged by the bungling operations which have so nearly caused me to lose this latest little game. But this cannot be. I shall have to continue to confide to the pages of my journal, as I have done for years, the interesting events of, I may say, a somewhat remarkable career, which I hope will some day, after my death, find their way in print to public favor. My dream has always been that some such man as Mr. Sturgis might ultimately edit these memoirs; but, alas, the fondest of human dreams are seldom destined to be realized."

"Now, then, gentlemen, before finally parting with you, I wish to honorably carry out the terms of my wager with Mr. Sturgis. I concede the fact that, to all intents and purposes, he has won the bet, and I authorize you, Mr. Sprague, as stakeholder, to pay him the amount I deposited with you. As I have already suggested, he has made some perhaps excusable mistakes; but, then, as he himself stated the other night, 'a detective has a lifetime in which to correct a blunder.' A lifetime! It is not in accordance with Mr. Sturgis' usual practice to use so vague a term. A lifetime is not necessarily a very long time, Mr. Sturgis."

During this tirade Sturgis and Sprague had remained standing with their eyes fixed upon the gleaming carbuncles which peered at them from behind the grated peephole at the top of the stairs. The artist seemed to realize that the fight was lost. His attitude was that of a brave man accepting, with calm despair, an unpleasant but inevitable doom. The reporter had drawn his revolver at the first sound

of Murdock's voice, but had immediately returned it to his pocket upon realizing that the chemist was protected by a bullet-proof grating. Now, pale and collected, he remained inscrutable. It was impossible, even for the sharp eyes of Murdock, to determine whether he was at last resigned to his fate, or whether his active mind was still on the alert for a loophole of escape.

The bit of candle which he held in his hand had burned so low that at last he was unable to hold it without risk of burning his fingers. Whereupon he coolly set it down upon the stone floor, where presently the wick fell over into a pool of molten paraffine, and the flame sputtered noisily, sending fitful gleams through the darkness.

"Well," continued Murdock's voice, "it is at any rate a great satisfaction to play a game with an adversary worthy of one's steel. You have played well, Mr. Sturgis. I think you would have won modestly; and you are losing as I would myself have lost, had our positions been reversed. Good-bye."

The gleaming eyes disappeared from the grating and the sliding panel closed with a metallic click.

"Now, then," said Sturgis to his companion, "the last chance lies in the speaking tube. But first help me move this box."

"It is—the last chance—stick to the tube—when he comes—surprise him—your revolver—shoot—before—"

The reporter was clinging unsteadily to his friend's shoulder. Sprague suddenly realized that Sturgis in his turn was recalling to the effects of the gas. He sprang back in time to catch the staggering man in his arms.

"Selfish brute that I am!" he exclaimed. "Here; it is your turn to breathe!" And he pushed the reporter toward the tube.

"No, no," said Sturgis, struggling faintly; "it cannot be both—and you—have—everything—to live for."

But the artist was now the stronger, and he succeeded in forcing his friend to inhale enough fresh air to restore his departing consciousness.

At length Sturgis, with returning strength, was about to renew the generous struggle with Sprague, when suddenly the place was ablaze with the glow of an electric light.

"He wants to see if his work is done," whispered Sturgis, to his companion.

Then, observing that Sturgis was again on the verge of asphyxiation, he continued hurriedly:

"Fill up your lungs with air, quick!—quick, I tell you. Now drop and feign death. Do as I do."

Suiting the action to the word, Sturgis threw himself upon the stone floor, face downward, and lay motionless, his right hand grasping a revolver concealed beneath his body. Sprague, after a short breathing spell at the tube, followed his companion's example.

After a short interval there came a metallic click, which Sturgis recognized as the sound made by the opening of the slide in the panel of the door at the head of the stairs.

A moment—which seemed an eternity of suspense—followed, during which the prisoners felt, without being able to see, the cold gleam of the steely eyes of Murdock at the grating.

Would he enter? Would he suspect the ruse? Would the two men retain their grasp of consciousness and their strength long enough to make a last fight for life?

These thoughts crowded upon the reporter's brain as he lay simulating death and making a desperate effort to control his reeling senses.

If Murdock were coming he would have to shut off the gas and ventilate the room. What was he waiting for?

"Come in!"

The words were Murdock's as he turned away from the grating and closed the sliding panel.

"An interruption which probably means death to us," whispered Sturgis to his companion; "take another breath of fresh air, old fellow; we must hold out a little longer."

Sprague, however, lay motionless and unresponsive. The reporter shook him violently and turned him over upon his back. The artist's body was limp and inert; his eyes half closed; his face livid.

The reporter himself felt sick and faint. But, with a mighty effort, he succeeded in raising his friend in his arms, and dragging him toward the speaking-tube. There, of a sudden, his strength failed him. His head swam; his muscles relaxed; he felt Sprague's limp form slip from his grasp, tottered, reeled, threw his arms wildly about him for support, and fell, as the last elusive ray of consciousness was slipping away from him.



TOTTERED AND REELED.

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As the shadows of death which had been closing in upon him receded, he became conscious of Sturgis' voice beating upon his ears in broken and scarcely audible tones.

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## CHAPTER XXII

### FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

After Sprague had left her, Agnes, shaken by the conflicting emotions of the day, had gone to her room to rest and to prepare for the interview which she meant to have with her father on the subject of her lover and of Chatham.

Having received word that Murdock would remain in his study, during the rest of the afternoon, she had taken time to reflect upon what she meant to say, and how she meant to say it. Her visit was not prompted by the desire of a daughter to confide the great happiness of her life to the loving sympathy of an affectionate parent; but Agnes was punctilious in the performance of what she considered to be her duties, great and small, and she counted it among those duties to obtain, or at any rate to seek, the paternal sanction of her choice of a husband.

Her knock at the door of Murdock's study was answered in the chemist's quiet voice:

"Come in."

As she opened the door, Murdock advanced to meet her. He seemed to come from the direction of the extension.

Miss Murdock sniffed the air.

"Isn't there a leak of gas?" she inquired.

"Yes," replied Murdock; "I have just stopped a leak in the laboratory. Won't you take a chair, Agnes?"

She felt his calm, searching glance upon her; and, in spite of her preparation, she grew embarrassed, as was her wont, in her father's presence.

"Did Mr. Chatham wait to see you this afternoon?" she asked, after a momentary silence.

Murdock observed her narrowly.

"Yes; Chatham has been here today. I did not know that you had seen him."

"I could not help seeing him; for he forced his way into the parlor, in spite of all the servants could do to prevent him."

An almost imperceptible furrow appeared between the chemist's eyes.

"Has he been annoying you with his attentions?"

The words were spoken in Murdock's usual tones; but Agnes saw something in her father's eyes and in the firm lines of his mouth which sent a cold shiver down her spine, and caused her pity to go out to the unfortunate young man who had offended her.

"Perhaps he is more to be pitied than blamed," she suggested, gently. "My interview with him was certainly not pleasant; but I bear him no malice."

"Tell me about it," said Murdock, slowly.

Agnes gave her version of the visit, in which, instinctively, she softened, as much as possible, the passion and brutality displayed by the accountant.

Murdock listened in silence until she had quite finished. Then Agnes noticed that his right hand was clenched upon the arm of his chair with a force which caused the muscles to stand out in hard knots. She looked up into his face in sudden surprise.

His features gave no indication of what his feelings might be; and his voice, as usual, was steady and deliberate.

"I am sorry all this should have happened, Agnes. As I told you yesterday, I hoped to save you from this man's importunities. It cannot be helped now. But I think I made it clear to the gentleman that his attentions are as distasteful to me as they are to you. As he seems to have told you, he has been obliged to leave the country—I understand that he has done something or other which makes it safer for him to undertake a long journey. At any rate, we are well rid of him for some time to come, and I think you need have no fear of further molestation."

"What did he mean by saying that he had had encouragement from you?" asked the young girl.

"I am sure I do not know. That was of course a lie out of whole cloth. He came to me with letters of recommendation from good friends of mine, and I therefore occasionally invited him to the house; but that is all the encouragement he ever got from me. We live in the United States and at the close of the nineteenth century. The selection of a husband is no longer performed by a stern parent, but is left entirely to the young girl herself. That is certainly my way of looking at the matter. When you find the man of your choice, my only function will be to give you advice, if you seek it, and my best assistance in any event."

The turn of the conversation thus suddenly brought to the surface the topic which occupied the young girl's mind, to the exclusion of all others; and which, for that very reason, had been kept severely in the background up to that point.

"That reminds me," said Agnes, consciously, as a charming flush suffused her beautiful face, "that I have not yet broached the principal object of this interview."

Murdock observed her closely and waited for her to proceed. But Agnes was once more laboring under a strange embarrassment and could not find words in which to frame the confidence she was so reluctant to offer.

Perhaps the chemist divined something of the nature of what she was struggling to find expression for. At any rate, he noticed her embarrassment and endeavored to come to her assistance with a few encouraging words, spoken with unusual gentleness. Agnes, engrossed with her own thoughts, did not notice it; but there was in his manner as near an approach to tender wistfulness as his nature was capable of.

At last the young girl seemed to gather courage, and she was about to speak, when there was a knock upon the door.

"Please, sir; there do be two gentlemen in the hall."

"Who are they, Mary?"

"Shure, thin, sir, I dunno, barrin wan uv 'em do be a polacemum."

"Did they ask to see me?"

"They did not, sir; shure they asked if Mr. Chapman was in."

"Mr. Chapman?"

"Yes, sir. And I told 'em he wuz here this afternoon, and I wud see wuz he here now, fur I ain't seen him go yet."

"Well, Mary, you see he has gone, since he is no longer here," said Murdock quietly. "Take the gentlemen into the parlor, and tell them I shall be with them in a minute."

"All right, sir."

After the maid had left the room, the chemist rose from his chair and walked toward the door leading to the library.

"If you will excuse me for a few minutes, Agnes, I shall see what these men want. Wait for me here, if you will. I shall be back directly."

So saying, he noiselessly opened the folding doors and passed into the li-

brary, closing the doors carefully behind him.

Freed from the presence of her father, Agnes almost instantly regained her composure. She had not, however, had much time to collect her thoughts; when she was suddenly startled by a loud, shrill whistle, which brought her to her feet in alarm.

"Well?"

She asked the question in anxious tones, as if realizing that life and death were in the balance. Then she placed her ear to the mouthpiece.

At first she could not make out the words spoken by her invisible interlocutor. Then, gradually, they fell upon her ear with terrible distinctness; and she stood spellbound, as in a horrible nightmare, with sudden terror in her staring eyes, and with the fearful sense of impotence in her trembling limbs.

[To be concluded.]



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