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The Sturgis Wager

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THE STURGIS WAGER

A Detective Story

BY

EDGAR MORETTE

NEW YORK
FREDERICK A. STOKES COMPANY
PUBLISHERS

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	THE CABMAN'S FARE,	1
II.	THE WAGER,	13
III.	DOCTOR MURDOCK'S PROBLEM,	24
IV.	THE BANK PRESIDENT,	34
V.	A FOUNDATION OF FACTS,	41
VI.	THE ARTIST,	52
VII.	AGNES MURDOCK,	59
VIII.	THE PORTRAIT,	72
IX.	THE KNICKERBOCKER BANK,	81
X.	PIECING THE EVIDENCE,	92
XI.	A RECONSTRUCTED DRAMA,	107
XII.	THE BOOKKEEPER'S CONFESSION,	121
XIII.	THE LOST TRAIL,	138
XIV.	THE LETTER,	150
XV.	TWO LOVERS,	155
XVI.	THE ROENTGEN RAYS,	166
XVII.	THE QUARRY,	169
XVIII.	THE EXTENSION,	181
XIX.	THE UNDERGROUND PASSAGE,	194
XX.	THE LEAD-LINED VAT,	209
XXI.	THE DEATH CHAMBER,	220
XXII.	FATHER AND DAUGHTER,	234
XXIII.	THE SPEAKING-TUBE,	242
XXIV.	CHECKMATE!	250
XXV.	THE MURDER SYNDICATE,	255

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The Sturgis Wager.

CHAPTER I.

THE CABMAN'S FARE.

IT was bitterly cold. The keen December wind swept down the crowded thoroughfare, nipping the noses and ears of the gay pedestrians, comfortably muffled in their warm wraps.

Broadway was thronged with the usual holiday shoppers and pleasure-seekers. Cabs with their jaded steeds driven by weatherbeaten jehus, and private carriages behind well-groomed horses handled by liveried coachmen, deftly made their way through the crowds and deposited their fares at the entrances of the brightly lighted theaters or fashionable restaurants. A wizened hag, seated on the curbstone at the corner, seemed to shrink into herself with the cold as she turned the crank of her tiny barrel-organ and ground out a dismal and scarcely audible ca-

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cophony; while an anxious-eyed newsboy, not yet in his teens, shivered on the opposite side of the way, as, with tremulous lips, he solicited a purchaser for his unsold stock. One could hardly be expected to open a warm overcoat on such a night, at the risk of taking cold, for the sake of throwing a cent to an old beggar woman, or of buying a newspaper from a ragged urchin. Even the gaily decorated shop windows failed to arrest the idle passersby; for it required perpetual motion to keep the blood in circulation.

The giant policeman on the crossing, representing the majesty of the law, swayed the crowd of vehicles and pedestrians with the authoritative gestures of his ponderous hands, and gallantly escorted bands of timid women through the inextricable moving maze.

And withal, the cable cars, with their discordant clangor, rumbled rapidly to and fro, like noisy shuttles, shooting the woof of the many-hued fabric which is the life of a great city.

Presently from one of the side streets there came a cab, which started leisurely to cross Broadway. The big policeman, with his eyes fixed upon an approaching car, held up a warning hand, to which the driver seemed to pay no at-

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tention, for the reins remained slack and the listless horse continued to move slowly across the avenue.

Several people turned to look with mild curiosity at the bold cabman who dared thus to disregard the authority of blue cloth and brass buttons. Their surprise changed quickly to amazement and dismay when their eyes rested upon him; for his head had fallen forward upon his chest and his limp body swayed upon the box with every motion of the cab. He seemed unconscious of his surroundings, like one drunk or in a stupor.

At his side sat a young man closely muffled in his overcoat, and with a sealskin cap pulled well down over his ears. His face was deathly pale. Those who caught sight of his features saw that his bloodless lips were firmly set, and that his eyes glittered with a feverish light. He carried one hand in the lapel of his coat. With the other he shook the inert form of the unconscious cabman, in a vain effort to arouse him to a sense of the impending danger.

The situation flashed upon the gripman on the car. Instantly he threw his weight upon the brakewheel, at the same time loudly sounding

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his gong. The policeman, too, understood in a twinkling what was about to happen, and rushed for the horse's head. But it was too late. The cab was fairly across the track when the car, with slackened speed, crashed into it.

Just before the collision, the young man in the sealskin cap sprang from the box to the street. He landed upon his feet; but, losing his balance, he fell forward upon his left arm, which still remained in the lapel of his coat. He must have hurt himself; for those standing near him heard him groan. But the center of interest was elsewhere, and no one paid much attention to the young man, who, arising quickly, disappeared in the crowd.

The cab, after tottering for an instant on two wheels, fell over upon its side, with a loud noise of splintering wood and breaking glass. The driver rolled off the box in a heap. At the same time, the panic-stricken passengers on the car rushed madly for the doors, fighting like wild beasts in their haste to reach a place of safety.

After the first frenzied moment, it became evident that, although badly shaken up, the passengers had received no injuries, except such bruises as they had inflicted upon each other in

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their mad struggle to escape. By this time a crowd had collected about the overturned cab, and several more policemen had come to the assistance of the first one, who was now seated serenely upon the head of the cab-horse, a precaution seemingly superfluous, for the poor beast, though uninjured, appeared to be quite satisfied to rest where he lay until he should be forced once more to resume the grind of his unhappy existence.

The cabman had been rudely shaken by his fall. He had lain as though unconscious for the space of a few seconds; then, with assistance, he had managed to struggle to his feet. He stood now as though dazed by the shock, trying to understand what had happened.

"Are you hurt?" inquired one of the policemen.

The man, mumbling an unintelligible reply, raised his hand to a scalp wound from which the blood was flowing rather freely.

At that moment two men forced their way through the crowd which a circle of policemen had some difficulty in keeping at a distance from the wounded cabman. One was a middle-aged individual, who gave his name as Doctor Thurs-

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ton and offered his services as a physician; the other was a young man with keen gray eyes, who said nothing, but exhibited a reporter's badge.

The physician at once turned his attention to the cabman; felt him, thumped him, pinched him; smelt his breath; and then delivered his verdict:

"No bones broken. The slight scalp wound doesn't amount to anything. The man has been drinking heavily. He is simply drunk."

The horse had by this time been unharnessed and the cab had been lifted upon its wheels again.

The reporter stood by a silent and apparently listless spectator of the scene.

Doctor Thurston turned to him:

"Come along, Sturgis; neither you nor I are needed here; and if we do not hurry, Sprague's dinner will have to wait for us. It is a quarter to eight now."

The reporter seemed about to follow his friend, but he stood for an instant irresolute.

"I say, Doctor," he inquired at last, "are you sure the man is drunk?"

"He has certainly been drinking heavily. Why?"

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"Because it seems to me——Hello, we cannot go yet; the passenger is more badly hurt than the driver."

"The passenger?" queried the physician, turning in surprise to the policeman.

"What passenger?" asked the policeman, looking at the cabman. "Have you a passenger inside, young feller?"

"Naw," replied the cabman, who seemed to be partially sobered by the shock and loss of blood. "Naw, I aint got no fare, barrin' the man wot was on the box."

The reporter observed the man closely as he spoke; and then, pointing to the step of the cab, which was plainly visible in the glare of a neighboring electric lamp:

"I mean the passenger whose blood is trickling there," he said quietly.

Every eye was turned in the direction of his outstretched hand.

A few drops of a thick dark liquid had oozed from under the door, and was dripping upon the iron step. The cab door was closed and the curtain was drawn down over the sash, the glass of which had been shattered by the fall.

One of the policemen tried to open the door.

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It stuck in the jamb. Then he exerted upon it the whole of his brute strength; and, of a sudden, it yielded. As it flew open, the body of a man lurched from the inside of the cab, and before any one could catch it, tumbled in a heap upon the pavement.

A low cry of horror escaped from the crowd.

The cabman's passenger was a man past middle age, neatly but plainly dressed.

As Doctor Thurston and a policeman bent over the prostrate form, the reporter shot a keen glance in the direction of the cabman, who stood staring at the body with a look of ghastly terror in his bulging eyes.

Presently the physician started to his feet with a low exclamation of surprise.

"Is he dead, Doctor?" asked the policeman.

"He has been dead for some time," replied the physician, impressively; "the body is almost cold."

"Been dead for some time?" echoed the policeman.

"Yes; this man was shot. See there!"

As he spoke, he pointed to a red streak which, starting from the left side of the dead man's coat, extended downward and marked the course

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of the tiny stream in which the life blood had flowed to a little pool on the floor of the cab.

"Shot!" exclaimed the policeman, who turned immediately to one of his brother officers. "Keep your eye on the cabman, Jim. We'll have to take him in. And look out for the other man, quick!"

Then, addressing the cabman, upon each of whose shoulders a policeman's hand was immediately placed, he asked roughly:

"Who is this man?"

The cabman was completely sober now. He stood, pale and trembling, between his two captors, as he replied solemnly:

"Before God, I don't know, boss. I never saw him before."

The policeman looked at the man in blank amazement for an instant. Then he turned away contemptuously:

"All right, young feller," he said, "you don't have to confess to me. But I guess you'll have a chance to tell that story to a judge and jury."

Then he proceeded to examine the dead man's pockets. They were empty.

"Looks like robbery," he murmured. "What is it, Jim? Haven't you got the other man?"

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Jim had not found the other man; for the pale young fellow in the sealskin cap had disappeared.

The reporter was stooping over the body, while Doctor Thurston cut through the clothing and laid bare a small round wound.

"Here is another bullet wound," said Sturgis, turning over the body slightly, and pointing out a second round hole in the back of the dead man.

He seemed to take great interest in this discovery. He whipped out a steel tape and rapidly but carefully took a number of measurements, as if to locate the positions of the two wounds. Then he stepped into the cab; and, striking match after match, he spent several minutes apparently in eager search for something which he could not find.

"That is strange," he muttered to himself, as he came out at last.

"What is it?" inquired Thurston, who alone had caught the words.

But the reporter either did not hear or did not care to answer. He at once renewed his search on the brilliantly lighted pavement in the immediate vicinity of the cab; examining every

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