ERLE STANLEY GARDNER

—A PERRY MASON MYSTERY—

—THE CASE OF—

HE SPURIOUS SPINSTER

THE CASE OF
The Spurious Spinster

It took Susan Fisher ten full minutes of rapid conversation to describe the events of the day.

When she had finished, Mason's eyes narrowed. He glanced at his wristwatch. 'Well,' he said, 'there isn't time to head things off ... I think you should have had a witness as soon as you discovered what was in the box ... *You* assume that the box is intact but suppose someone should claim there's two thousand or five thousand dollars missing?'

'Yes,' she said. 'I see your point.'

'Particularly in case that someone should want to discredit you,' Mason said.

'And why would anyone want to do that?'

'Because,' Mason told her, 'apparently you have information about irregularities in the company. Under those circumstances some guilty party might very well try to involve you first.'

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FOREWORD

Few people realize how important the skilled forensic pathologist is to the individual and to society, how necessary it is that citizens understand the importance of legal medicine.

Even you who are reading this might find yourself accused of a murder you hadn't committed and in a case where the 'victim' actually had died a natural death. You might even be convicted if the 'crime' occurred in a jurisdiction where the Coroner's Office has no skilled pathologist available.

My friend, Richard O. Myers, MD, to whom I am dedicating this book, is a specialist in forensic pathology. He is highly skilled, thoroughly competent, and he can and does, from time to time, tell his intimates about actual cases that illustrate the point I am making.

The average medical doctor is no more competent to perform an autopsy in a puzzling case than an ice skater is qualified to execute a ski jump.

The physician and surgeon specializes in saving the lives of the living. He has to know the physiology and the psychology of his patients. He has to keep abreast of all the new developments in medicine. He knows all about the so-called wonder drugs and, if he is on his toes, he is properly sceptical, so that he keeps a keen eye open for unexpected side effects and individual allergies when he uses some of the new drugs which are being perfected. He has to understand literally thousands of symptoms so that he can evaluate them and make a differential diagnosis. In short, he has his hands so full caring for the living he has little time to study the dead.

The forensic pathologist has to know crime. He has to know all there is to know about dead bodies. He has to know what happens when a body starts to decompose. He has to understand the vagaries of high-speed bullets travelling through human tissue. He has to be able to differentiate between the contact wound of entrance and the somewhat similar-looking blasting wound of exit where a bullet has mushroomed.

The forensic pathologist has to know hundreds of things completely foreign to the general practitioner.

There aren't too many skilled forensic pathologists in the country today. The reason there are so few is that the public hasn't been educated to their importance. These men aren't paid enough, they aren't given enough authority, and the public doesn't know enough to insist that a forensic pathologist be available whenever a death occurs under 'suspicious circumstances'.

My friend, Dr Myers, can open his files almost at random and pick out cases where he has been able to keep the guilty from escaping on the one hand, or to keep the innocent from being convicted on the other.

There is, for instance, a case where a very reputable general practitioner in the medical field testified with solemn assurance that certain changes in the internal organs of a body, which hadn't been discovered until some time after the death, had been due to direct violence. This testimony also resulted in an innocent person being convicted of murder.

But Dr Myers was able to demonstrate that the death was from natural causes, and that the changes which had taken place were the result of decomposition.

It is a horrible tragedy when an innocent man living an upright life finds himself falsely accused of crime, then finds himself convicted, branded as a felon, sent to prison, and forced to spend the remainder of his life within prison walls.

Throughout the nation today there is a relatively small handful of highly trained men who are dedicating their

lives to improving the administration of justice so that murders are not mistakenly classified as natural deaths and so that deaths from natural causes are not mistakenly classified as homicides.

My friend, Dr Myers, is one of these men.

These men dedicate their lives to discovering the truth. They are far different from the partisan so-called 'expert' who gets on the witness stand and glibly rattles off a lot of technical medical terms in order to 'win the case' for 'our side'.

When Dr Myers gets on the stand, he wants it definitely understood that there isn't any *our side*. He is there to tell the truth as he sees it and let the chips fall where they will.

From time to time I've dedicated Perry Mason books to outstanding members of this small select group of forensic pathologists.

The great tragedy, as far as society is concerned, is that this group is so small. It is small, as I said above, because its members are relatively underpaid. Once they have established the proper qualifications, they find more lucrative fields beckoning persuasively. It is far more gainful to become a hospital pathologist than to enter the field of forensic pathology. The only men who remain in this field are those who are actuated by an unselfish, unswerving loyalty to the cause.

We should recognize these men, we should understand the job they are doing, and we should honour them.

It would serve no purpose at this time to set forth the technical qualifications of Dr Myers, or the vast background of experience which has developed his present skill. His record includes a fellowship in the American Academy of Forensic Sciences, Autopsy Surgeon in the office of the Los Angeles Coroner, Assistant Professor of Legal Medicine at the College of Medical Evangelists, and Associate Clinical Professor of Pathology at the University of Southern California's School of Medicine, and dozens of other honours that would fill a full page of this book if I had the space to set them forth.

I'm hoping that some day the public will awaken to the importance of having highly competent, specially trained forensic pathologists available in sufficient numbers to do a good job.

Dr Myers doesn't care what title is given him or whether the person in charge of investigating deaths is called a coroner, a medical examiner, or a sheriff, just so that person has available a highly trained, duly certified forensic pathologist, and understands enough of the problems of homicide so that the evidence remains undisturbed until the forensic pathologist has a chance to evaluate it.

This is good philosophy. It means a lot more to you and to me and to our loved ones than we seem to realize.

And so I dedicate this book to my friend:

RICHARD O. MYERS, MD

ERLE STANLEY GARDNER

CHAPTER ONE

Sue Fisher had to sign the register in the office-building elevator because it was Saturday morning and all of the offices were closed.

Sue had been looking forward to a restful weekend, but a wire announcing that Amelia Corning was due to arrive from South America on Monday morning necessitated a lot of last-minute statements and reports which she had been unable to get together by quitting time Friday night. So she had promised Endicott Campbell, manager of the Corning Mining, Smelting & Investment Company, that she would come in Saturday morning, finish typing the reports, and have everything on his desk so that the statements would be available the first thing Monday morning.

The situation was further complicated by the fact that in addition to an arthritic condition which confined her to a wheel chair, Amelia Corning was rapidly losing her eyesight. In fact, there were rumours from South America that she had already lost her vision to such an extent that she could only tell the difference between light and dark, and people were hazy, blurred figures whose features were indistinguishable.

Susan Fisher had been with the firm for more than a year and knew Amelia Corning only by her stiff, cramped signature which from time to time appeared at the bottom of irascible letters of brief instructions.

By ten-thirty, when Sue Fisher was well immersed in her work, she heard the patter of running feet, then the sound of knuckles on the door and a childish treble saying, 'Oh, Miss Sue, Miss Sue.'

For a moment, Sue Fisher's face softened. Then she

frowned with annoyance. Carleton Campbell, the boss's seven-year-old son, worshipped the ground she walked on and Sue, in turn, was strangely drawn to the youngster. But Elizabeth Dow, the governess, was, Sue felt, more and more inclined to wish off some of her responsibilities and disciplinary problems on Sue's shoulders.

Sue shut off the motor on the electric typewriter, crossed her secretarial office, entered the reception room, and opened the door.

Carleton Campbell, his eyes shining with eagerness, held up a shoe box for her inspection.

'Hello, Miss Sue. Hello, Miss Sue,' he said.

Elizabeth Dow, moving steadily and deliberately on her low-heeled heavy walking shoes, came marching down the corridor.

Sue put her arm around the boy, lifted him up, kissed him, then stood waiting for Elizabeth Dow, who very typically refrained from quickening her pace in the slightest, nor would she deign to exchange a greeting until she was close enough so there was no necessity of raising her voice in the slightest.

'Good morning, Susan,' she said, formally.

'Good morning, Elizabeth.'

'I dropped in because they told me you were going to be here this morning.'

'Yes,' Sue said. 'I have work to do.' And then, after a properly impressive pause, added, 'A very important job. We're working against a deadline.'

'I see,' Elizabeth Dow said, her voice showing her utter indifference to the urgency of the matter. Elizabeth Dow was affected only by problems which were important to Elizabeth Dow. Other persons' problems made not the slightest difference to her.

'Sue,' she said, 'would you be a dear and watch Carleton for thirty minutes? I have a very important personal appointment and I just can't take him with me . . . and you know you're the only one he'll stay with.'

Sue glanced at her wristwatch. She knew the thirty min-

utes could be at least forty-five and might well be an hour.

'Well . . .' She hesitated and again looked at the watch.

'I wouldn't ask it of you for myself,' Elizabeth Dow said, 'but Carleton has some things he wants to talk over with you and he's been rather upset this morning. I know if I left him with the housekeeper in his present state he'd be a nervous wreck by the time I got back, and she would, too.'

'Oh, please, Miss Sue,' Carleton pleaded. 'Let me stay here with you. I want to talk.'

'All right,' Susan said, 'but you're going to have to be a good boy, Carleton. You're going to have to sit in a chair and watch Sue work. I have some very important statements to get out.'

'I'll be good,' Carleton promised, climbing into a chair and seating himself with his hands folded on the shoe box.

Elizabeth Dow, apparently fearful that something would happen to change Sue's mind, headed for the door. 'It will be only a few minutes,' she promised, and was gone.

Sue smiled at Carleton. 'What's in the box?' she asked.

'Treasure,' he said.

Sue regarded the box with sudden apprehension. 'Now look here, Carleton,' she said, 'you haven't any toads or anything alive in that box?'

He smiled and shook his head. 'This isn't my treasure box,' he said, 'it's Daddy's.'

'What do you mean?'

'Daddy keeps his treasure box upstairs. Last night he let me put my treasure in his closet. He said he'd trade treasures with me any time I wanted. So this morning I took *his* treasure.'

The words poured out with Carleton's childish accent and were spoken so rapidly that one word seemed literally to tread on the heels of another as they left the child's lips.

Susan regarded the box thoughtfully. 'Did I understand you right, Carleton?' she asked. 'This is Daddy's treasure?'

'It's my treasure now,' Carleton said. 'Daddy said we could trade treasures, but he'd want his back and he'd give me mine back.'

'What about *your* treasure box? What kind of a box was it?'

'Just like this,' Carleton said. 'Daddy doesn't buy shoes in stores. Daddy buys shoes by mail. When they come, my daddy takes the shoes out of the boxes and puts the shoes in the closet.'

'Yes, I know,' Susan said, smiling. 'I make out the orders for his shoes. He has a particular brand of shoes that he likes and he has rather an odd size. Does your daddy know that you have his treasure box?'

'He said we could trade,' Carleton said.

'When?'

'Oh, a while back.'

'I thought your daddy was going to go out on the golf course this morning.'

'He said we could trade,' Carleton repeated.

Susan said, 'I'd better look in your daddy's treasure box, Carleton, just to see.'

He made a convulsive grasping gesture, pressing the box into his stomach and bending over. 'No!' he screamed. 'That was the trouble with Miss Dow.'

'How did that make trouble, Carleton?'

'She wanted to take it away.'

'Why?'

'I don't know.'

'I'm not talking about taking it away,' Susan said. 'I just thought we ought to look in it. Don't you think we should?'

He said nothing, but clung to the box.

'You don't know what's in it, do you?'

'Treasure,' he said.

'What was in *your* treasure box, Carleton?'

'Lots of things.'

'I wonder if your daddy has as many treasures as you do. Do you think he does?'

'I don't know.'

'Wouldn't it be fun to find out?' she said, her voice containing an invitation to adventure.

'It's tied up,' Carleton said.

Susan smiled at him. 'I'm awfully good at knots,' she said, and then frowned thoughtfully. 'Perhaps, though, those knots would be too much for us. Let's take a look at them, just to see.'

Carleton let her inspect the twine around the box.

As soon as she saw the neat square knot she knew that this had not been tied by childish fingers. Whether or not his explanation of the exchange of treasure boxes was correct, there seemed to be no doubt that this was an adult treasure box.

'Let's see how heavy,' she said.

He hesitated for a moment, then let her take the box. She moved it up and down in her two hands, estimating the weight, then handed it back to him. 'My,' she said, 'that's heavy.'

He nodded.

The fact that she had returned the box to him without trying to open it did much to reassure him.

'I wonder what makes it so heavy,' Susan said. And then added, 'If your daddy has business papers in there, Carleton, we'd have to keep them from getting lost.'

He nodded gravely, hanging on to the box. 'I won't lose it.'

'Do you know the difference between a square knot and a granny knot?' Susan asked.

'My granny is dead,' he said.

'No, no, not your grandmother, but the knot they call the granny. Look, this is tied with a square knot. See? Here, let me show you.'

Having engaged his attention with the box still on the child's lap, Susan worked away at the knot until it was untied. 'See how easy it is to untie that kind of a knot?' she said. 'Now, a granny is the name of another knot. It's the kind of a knot you would be very apt to tie if you didn't know knots.'

Pretending to show Carleton the different methods of tying the string, Susan managed to get the knotted fish twine off the box. She left the box in Carleton's lap but

surreptitiously raised a corner of the cover as she got to her knees in order to readjust the string.

What Susan saw stopped her cold. The box was well filled with green currency and the bills Susan saw in that first peek into the box were in amounts of one hundred dollars.

Carleton seemed concerned that someone was going to try to take the box from him.

'Does Miss Dow know this is your daddy's treasure box?' Sue asked.

'Of course. She tried to take that box. She wants my treasure. I don't like her. She's bad.'

'She was just trying to help,' Sue said. 'She probably thought that your daddy didn't want you to take his treasure.'

'Daddy said we could trade.'

'I wonder,' Sue said thoughtfully, 'if *your* treasure is safe with your daddy. Do you suppose he might lose it?'

The boy's face clouded with the idea.

'I think,' Sue said, 'that we should find your daddy and tell him that if he takes your treasure he has to be very careful. Perhaps we could give him his back and take yours, and then yours wouldn't get lost. A golf course is a very big place.'

'I don't know where my daddy is. He went out in a car.'

'I think he was going to play golf this morning,' Sue said. 'You don't want to lose your treasure, do you?'

'I'm going to keep Daddy's treasure,' the child said, his hands gripping the box tightly.

Sue let her face light up with the inspiration of a sudden idea. 'Wouldn't it be fine,' she said, 'to open the safe, the *big* safe, and put the treasure box in there?'

Carleton seemed dubious.

'Then we'd close the safe,' Sue said, lowering her voice to a conspiratorial tone, 'and Miss Dow couldn't get in there. Nobody could get in. We'd lock it up and the treasure would be safe, and then we could get it again whenever we wanted it.'

Carleton's eyes lit up. 'Okay,' he said in almost an eager whisper, 'let's open the safe.'

Sue crossed over to the big safe, twisted the dials on the two combinations and finally flung the doors open. She unlocked the inner steel door and then rearranged some papers so as to make room for the box.

'All right,' she whispered, 'let's hurry. We'll put it in there before Miss Dow gets back.'

Carleton was dancing with excitement. 'We'll close it and we won't tell her where it is.'

'Oh, we can tell her *where* it is,' Sue said, 'but it won't do her any good. She can't get the safe open. Nobody except your daddy and I can get this safe open.'

'Gee, that's swell,' Carleton said.

Sue reached for the box. For a moment Carleton hesitated at parting company with it. But then he shoved it into her hands.

'Now we'll get it fitted right in this compartment here,' Sue said.

She turned for a moment so that her body hid the box from Carleton, and during that moment lifted the cover.

There were literally thousands of dollars in that box – hundred-dollar bills which had been stacked neatly and snapped with rubber bands. Evidently, Sue thought in her hurried survey, in lots of five thousand dollars each.

Sue fumbled around getting the cover back on the box, said, 'We'll have to tie this string again,' and carefully tied the fish cord around the box, knotting it in a square knot as she had found it and then pushing the box into the safe.

She hurriedly closed the inner door, twisted the key, then closed the heavy outer doors, pulled the nickelled levers which shot the bolts into place, and spun the combinations.

'Now,' she said triumphantly, 'we've got it where nobody can get it away from you.'

Carleton was enthusiastic with childish excitement. 'We won't even tell her where it is.'

'Oh, if she asks I think we'd better tell her,' Sue said. 'But ... you know, we have to keep an attitude of proper respect

for Miss Dow, Carleton. She's trying to help you.'

'She's mean,' Carleton said, pushing out his lips in a pout. 'She doesn't like me.'

'Oh, yes, she likes you. She likes you a lot,' Sue said. 'But, you know, she has work to do and she has to make you do things that you don't like to do sometimes. But they're the things that are good for you.'

Sue let her face become suddenly thoughtful. 'You know,' she said, 'I think we ought to try and find your daddy and see if he took your treasure box.'

'I don't know where Daddy went,' Cartleton said.

'I'll tell you what we'll do,' Susan said. 'We'll ring up the country club. I think we can find him there. I know he was intending to play golf this morning and he's out on the links someplace.'

'Can we put my treasure in the safe too?' Carleton asked.

'I think so. I think your daddy will let us. Let's see if we can find him.'

'He's coming home tonight.'

'I know,' Sue said, 'but he's playing golf and you know he can't carry a box with him while he's playing golf. If he traded treasures, he's probably left your box in the car or somewhere and you wouldn't want anything to happen to your treasure, would you?'

'No.'

'Well, let's try and find him.'

Sue connected up the switchboard and put through a call to the country club.

'Is Mr Endicott Campbell on the links?' she asked.

'I'll have to connect you with the office of the pro,' the operator said. 'Just a moment.'

After a few moments a masculine voice said gruffly, 'Golf shop.'

'Is Mr Endicott Campbell on the links this morning?' Sue asked. 'I'd like to speak with him, and it's quite important. This is his office calling and if you—'

'But he isn't here,' the voice interrupted.