



House and Holmes: A Guide to Deductive and Inductive Reasoning

Student Handout #4: **Salon 5-Minute Mystery, “The Fragment of Serpentine Marble”**

By Don Cushman

I will never get used to walking into a place where someone has recently died. Especially when death intrudes on an otherwise tidy existence. A Spode tea cup had spilled its contents on the expensive Persian carpet. A fine layer of dust covered everything, although the house was well sealed against the elements. Astonishing how decay begins immediately. Most of our lives we fight against the inevitable decline which begins the minute we turn our backs, or the minute our backs are turned for us.

There was very little blood. A thin, almost black, trickle ran down his neck and marred the surface of the antique desk. Professor Di Stephano had died quickly. And the death he had invited into his study found him seated at his desk studying a fragment of rare serpentine marble. An opened DHL overnight package lay at one side of the desk, with a return address to Dante Palmieri, Professor of Egyptology at the University of Bologna. The look of astonishment on the dead professor's face reminded me of Sumerian statuary, which always seem to convey an almost supernatural surprise, as though they had just glimpsed something of supreme importance, something that changed everything.

The letter which accompanied the DHL package was in Italian. My eyes scanned the page: "Scavo... K5... Pavimento... Tombo...Valle Egyptus."

I looked at Esther Wong, the young medical examiner, and she raised an eyebrow. I figured the set-up was worth at least a raised eyebrow.

My name is Arthur Stockton and in my capacity as a private detective I was doing one of my occasional favors for the higher-ups at UC-Berkeley. I had taught at this august institution once. I had just enough originality, scruples, and social conscience not to be recommended for tenure. Esther motioned me over.

"Look Arthur," she said under her breath, "What are you doing here? Don't ask me to write natural causes, and suicides don't stick themselves in the spine. I'll know tomorrow exactly what was in the syringe. From the looks of it, it wasn't dope. It wasn't the

substance that killed him, but the precise placement of the needle. Just below the occipital bulge, as you can see." She grimaced slightly as punctuation. "That's about it."

"That's about nothing," I mumbled under my breath. "Let me know when you know, OK?" Esther nodded and moved away.

She called back the next afternoon. "Arthur, it's pretty much what I thought. Someone used the hypodermic like an ice pick. It's not hard to learn. An anatomy class and a nasty imagination. There was a trace of insulin in the syringe. Our perpetrator re-used a spent syringe."

"Thanks, Esther, I owe you one," I said slowly, my mind already turning to the letter and chunk of marble at the murder scene. Both seemed innocent enough. According to Esther, the letter was filled with accounts of excavations and a detailed list of measurements, mostly of doorways, some with asterisks next to them.

I spent the next few days asking questions. Di Stephano's wife, Louisa, had left him six months earlier for a classics postgraduate. But it seems that the Professor and his ex-wife hadn't bothered to start divorce proceedings and even kept their season tickets to the opera. Good seats are harder to come by than faithful spouses. The grad student, Jason Craig, had come to Berkeley with a reputation, none of it acquired in academic pursuits. He was, however, a diabetic.

Like everyone else, I had read The New Yorker article about the discovery of K5, the tomb of Ramses and his sons. It had intrigued me for a week, but there was nothing in it I would kill for.

"But that's where you would be wrong." Donald Crispin, professor emeritus in Comparative Languages, seemed to know everything worth knowing with regard to academic intrigues. "The real race was for something you won't find in any article. It is for a very obscure permit the Egyptian government issues. An excavation permit will be granted to the team which shows the best evidence of knowing where the burial chamber is. It's worth much more than gold. Rumor has it Di Stephano and the Italian were on to something big. Anyway, a team from Stanford was breathing down Di Stephano's neck. A team, I might add, headed by the famous Dr. Jack Rosencreutz."

"Who was close to him in his department?"

He shrugged, "Talk to his assistant. Flowers, I think his name is. The competition will bury him, I assume, but he did work with Paul Di Stephano, and some of the great man's dust might have settled on his unworthy shoulders."

I left Crispin's office in search of the dry martini I'd promised myself.

Jacob Flowers had "new breed" stamped on him like a freshly minted coin, same old mold but less authentic metal. He had a handful of gold earrings, polished combat boots

and a perfectly scuffed leather jacket with a lot of useless chains. "Di Stephano thought he was solving the riddle of the Sphinx, that he alone could save Thebes. Everything from Hermeneutics to the common cold. He wasn't what you might expect. He was a visionary who saw the wellspring of our civilization under all that sand."

"What does that piece of serpentine marble mean to you, and what did it mean to Di Stephano?"

"Those are really two questions. Paul had figured out the real location of the burial chambers so well concealed by the builders. You see, none of the doorways was large enough for a sarcophagus, but that kind of marble was only used for sarcophagi. The piece of marble was a very important, very secret find. An Egyptian excavator found it, a man Palmieri had befriended some years ago."

"Was Palmieri part of Di Stephano's team?"

Jacob Flowers rubbed the side of his hand over his mouth, as though he were trying to erase something. "Listen, this isn't a baseball game. Many of our contacts are *sotto di tavola*. Palmieri is not even working on this dynasty now."

"I hear there's a team from Stanford. . ."

"There is always a team from Stanford," Flowers rolled his eyes. "Jack Rosencreutz has a first-rate publicist, a great team and a gigantic ego. Di Stephano kept most of what he knew in his head. Jack keeps his best moments for grant applications, book tours and cinematic fantasies. "

"Would Rosencreutz know the answer from the piece of marble and the measurements?"

"Jack might, with some expert help."

"And I hear he could afford the best."

Flowers stiffened imperceptibly. "The man *is* from Stanford."

Professor Rosencreutz paced and talked into his cell phone. The phone looked like a large black growth on the left side of his face. He glanced at me as he talked. I wasn't going to give him any money or help him climb another rung on the ladder. I might even be trouble. He turned and paced the other way.

I picked the most comfortable chair in his office and sat down to wait. The man was so smooth and patrician I couldn't imagine him down on his knees in some dusty and hot passageway. Of course he hadn't been down on his knees, at least not for anything Egyptian, since his third book hit the lists.

His office looked like a miniature version of the Cairo museum. He had managed to cart away a fortune in ancient Egyptian artifacts, including a full-sized wooden mummy case. Flowers was right, he talked and gestured as though someone were getting it all on film. Finally, however, he disengaged himself from his phone.

"How well did you know Paul Di Stephano?" I asked.

"We were colleagues interested in the same area. Rivals if you wish. KV5 is the only thing of real interest in the field for years. Paul had a slight edge. He had taught or worked with most of the recognized authorities. I had to spend a great deal of money to keep up." He showed off his boyish smile. "But, Christ, man, academics don't murder each other."

"Do you think Di Stephano could deduce the key to the puzzle of KV5 from that piece of marble?"

Rosencreutz's eyes wandered toward the ceiling. "The puzzle will come together, Mr. Stockton. It's only a matter of time. With Paul gone we will all have to work longer, probably find ourselves at a few dead ends. The secrets have stayed there waiting for us for over two millennia. They will wait a few more years. I am a scientist and a teacher, Mr. Stockton. I try to see the whole. Unlike others, who occupy themselves with civil engineering trivia -- surveying, weather reports. Measurements." Rosencreutz spoke scornfully, making a steeple of his fingers. "Now I am very busy." He picked up his phone and applied it to his ear like a home remedy.

I dug around for a few days in the library, tracking down Rosencreutz's grant history among other things. I called around. Without gossip, rumor and the trade in secrets, no institution can function properly. All I learned was that Rosencreutz spent as much as he made, even a little more; that Flowers had been shown the door by a string of Ivy League colleges and had done a stint at Stanford before coming to Cal; and that the grieving widow's separation had taken her standard of living down a few dozen pegs. Neither Flowers nor Rosencreutz were diabetics.

I went back to Donald Crispin. He put down the book he was reading, "The Tortured Gnostic Past of the Bogomils." I told him what I wanted. "A slacker," he said, referring to Jason Craig, Louisa Di Stephano's classicist lover. "Did his dissertation on Catullus of all people. I am sure it was not only the prurience that interested him, but the brevity of the poems. Started out at Stanford, headed for Antiquities and ended up in Classics at Berkeley. He's harmless, unless you're one of his creditors, care a lot about Catullus. . ."

"And aren't confident in the love of your wife. Did he study with Rosencreutz?"

"His scholarship shows evidence of the same lax attitudes. Come to think of it, he did switch to Classics late in the game. I can't imagine him in khaki and pith helmet, digging in an airless stone gallery. Craig and Flowers, good examples of what is wrong with our institutions. In fact, rumor has it Di Stephano was about to sack Flowers."

"Jesus, Donald, why didn't you tell me before?"

"Arthur, this is the '90s. We of another generation try to keep our moral and ethical judgements to ourselves."

I went to a coffee house, ordered a double espresso, and sat brooding over the clues. Paul Di Stephano had known his assailant. His look of surprise was either a reaction to the letter or to the realization of his visitor's sinister intentions.

I went back to the Di Stephano house. I sat at the desk. Either he had left the door open or the murderer had a key. Perhaps he was so used to this kind of intrusion that he hadn't turned around to face the person. He had kept reading. He was absorbed totally in the letter. I had made a copy of the DHL freight bill. Flowers had signed the bill earlier in the day. Did Flowers open the Professor's mail? I sat and thought about everything Rosencreutz had said, or tried not to say. I was so absorbed in the solution to my puzzle, I, like the professor, was unaware of the blow about to be struck.