Mystery at the Fairground

Solution:

Inspector Halesworth steadily looked at each member of the seated group one at a time.

"Don't keep us in suspense," Hannah begged. "Whodunit?"

"It was so simple, really," Inspector Halesworth said, standing over the crowd. "I was thrown off for a second because Samuel and Josiah lied about knowing each other but I realized then they were guilty only of swindling and hustling – still no small crime," he said sternly and shaking a finger in their direction, "but nothing compared to murder. Josiah, you may even be a real prophet with actual fortune-telling skills. Whether you meant it or not, you did inform Rose she was in danger and tell her to look to the inside, which both proved to be accurate. But I will now get back to the culprit. Madame mentioned being outside and getting fresh air while watching a squirrel. She then said the squirrel backed down the tree. Well, squirrels do not 'back down' from a tree – they either jump, or turn about and run down head first. So that lie made me suspicious of her already, and I knew she was being dishonest about something. Then I looked in the trunk at the life-size doll."

"I saw that doll too," Hannah said. "It was such a realistic rendition."

"Yes, it did look real, too real to be fake, and that is what helped me put it all together," the inspector agreed. "Have any of you ever heard of the condition adipocere?"

They all shook their heads, except for two people, who hung theirs in shame.

"Well, it is a waxy substance that if formed, causes a body to be preserved permanently in its postmortem shape, making a corpse look just like a wax doll!"

"You mean it was a body?" Victoria shrieked. "How awful!"

"It was indeed a body," Inspector Halesworth said. "Madame was planning on launching a collection of life-size dolls but was going to use corpses to make the dolls look especially realistic."

"But how did she kill Rose?" Hannah asked. "Did she have Josiah poison her?"

"She was poisoned," Inspector Halesworth agreed. "I could tell by her red skin and dry mouth. It was not, however, by one of Josiah's supposed health brews. It was by the powder puff doll!"

"A doll," Samuel yelped. "How could a toy do that?"

Inspector Halesworth took a pair of gloves out of his trusty tin box, put them on, and carefully picked up the doll.

"Inside the powder puff is cyanide, one of the most toxic and deadly substances around. If absorbed directly through the skin, it will kill you, no matter how small the amount. Gloves would prevent that contact and exposure, which is why initially Rose was spared, along with anyone else who touched the doll – gloves were being worn. The second time Rose touched the doll, however, Madame had told her to take the gloves off. She said it was because the gloves
had splotches on them and she wanted to keep the doll clean. In reality, she wanted Rose to poison herself and knew touching the doll would prove fatal for her."

"Why would you kill Rose?" Hannah wailed. "She was such a dear person."

Madame grimaced. "You two came in here, waltzing in and touching everything in sight, but buying nothing. Then Rose virtually insulted my dolls and said they were not a necessity. Dolls are so important culturally and they contain so much historical significance. My traveling museum has been the hit of the fair thus far amidst all the other booths and competition. Our idea for a collection of life-size dolls would have slain the competition because they would have been so unique and nobody ever would have known that they were corpses. Rose would have been perfect because she was such a pretty girl, and would have been an even more beautiful doll. We intended to start a whole line."

"We?" Inspector Halesworth questioned. "Ahh, so Simon was also involved. That I had not been sure of but now you have confirmed it."

"But Simon," Hannah said, "you tried to stop Rose from handling the doll and told her it was not for sale. How come? Wouldn't you want her to touch it to further your cause?"

Simon blushed guiltily. "Indeed, Madame and I were working together and were planning on gathering as many dead bodies as possible in order to start our collection. We have a number of dolls that contain poisons or cavities that can contain liquid substances and drugs. They were big during the war and were used to carry secret notes and powders. She could have touched any one of several deadly dolls, and I was going to make sure she did indeed make contact with one. It could have been the powder puff but I did not want her to buy that one because it was such a favorite of mine and was so popular at our museum."

"You're both demented," Victoria exclaimed. "You love your fake dolls so much that you are not aware of how bizarre your behavior is towards real, breathing people. You even kill people and excuse it with your love of dolls!"

"Yes," Madame hissed, her angry eyes flashing, "you may not understand but it makes sense to me, as well as to Simon. You see, Simon and I are brother and sister. My real last name is Oxford, not Hillberry, and we were long ago abandoned by our parents. Dolls can't abandon you or desert you like people can!"

"You are absolutely insane," Hannah informed her. "It doesn't matter though because Inspector Halesworth has put an end to your sick game."

"That's right," the inspector agreed. "I am hauling these two off to prison and I am leaving you ladies to man the traveling museum and make money off these dolls so at least you can make a profit off of Rose's terrible misfortune."

"No way!" Hannah, Anne, and Victoria all shrieked in unison.

Hannah turned to Samuel and Josiah. "Can I join your whist club? I am looking for a new recreation because I think I am done playing with dolls forever!"