

Some Famous Poisoning Cases.

Few criminal cases of late years have attracted such widespread attention as that which involves the apparently mysterious identity of the person or persons responsible for the poisoning of Mrs. Kate J. Adams. Whether the New York police now have evidence in their possession which will lead to the detection of the sender of the poison will probably be known before long. In the meantime discussion of the case in the newspapers has awakened interest in the history of poisoning as a fine art, for as such it was understood only too well in the days when there were no medical experts to run down criminals who did their victims to death by the insidious and certain methods known to the toxicologists of the age.

In the so-called renaissance period of European civilization poison served many a purpose of political intrigue and personal revenge. The demise of a victim was rarely followed by a judicial investigation save in instances where the ecclesiastical authorities found an opportunity to intervene. In the seventeenth century two important poisoning cases appear, that of La Toffana, in Italy, and Mme. Brinvilliers, in France. Private gain and revenge actuated the latter, but the former was a type of the characters so common at that day, who sold philtres to recover lost lovers, or even to rid their customers of bad husbands.

In the early part of this century there was a series of murders committed in Germany which have given to the name of Anna Maria Zwanziger an unpleasant prominence in the annals of crime. Anna Maria Zwanziger, or Anna Schouleben, as she called herself, was living in 1807 in Baireuth, supporting herself by knitting. Her reputation for probity and her exemplary mode of life induced Justice Glaser, who was at that time separated from his wife, to take her as his housekeeper in 1808. In July of that year Glaser was reconciled to his wife, through the efforts, it seems, of Anna Schouleben, but within a month after the wife's return she was suddenly taken sick, though a strong and healthy woman, and died in a few days. Anna now left Glaser's service and went to live as housekeeper with Justice Grohmann. He was a sufferer from gout and was often confined to his bed. In May, 1809, after an illness of eleven days, accompanied by strange symptoms, he died, and his housekeeper appeared inconsolable. Her good name and her skill as a nurse soon procured her another place, this time at Magistrate Gebhard's house, as nurse for his wife. Shortly after her advent, Mme. Gebhard was seized with a violent illness and died in great agony. At different times within the next few months curious and suspicious symptoms—vomiting, spasms, etc.—visited several persons in the house, guests as well as members of the household.

Then a superstitious fear of the woman's unlucky presence, gradually deepened into distrust and suspicion, spread in the neighborhood, and Gebhard was induced to dismiss Anna from his service. He gave her, however, a written character for honesty and fidelity. But it was at her departure the strangest occurrences were noticed. On the morning of that day, it was afterward remembered, she had exceeded the usual limits of her duties; she had filled the kitchen salt box from the barrel and had taken pains to make for the two maids some coffee, which they drank. Leaving the house with every sign of cheerfulness and affection, she took Gebhard's child into her arms, as

she said farewell, and gave it a biscuit soaked in milk. Scarcely half an hour had elapsed since her departure when the child became alarmingly ill; in a few hours the maids were attacked in a similar way, and the kitchen salt box, with the barrel, proved, upon examination, to contain a quantity of arsenic. When she was apprehended shortly afterward, a packet of arsenic was found in her pocket, and upon exhuming the bodies of Glaser, Grohmann, and Gebhard distinct traces of arsenic were discovered in two of the three corpses. She was now taken before a magistrate, and here the peculiar features of Continental criminal procedure were strikingly brought out.

The circumstantial evidence of murder against her was in reality not strong. Her attempts to poison the Gebhard family upon her departure seemed clearly proved by the symptoms, by her possession of arsenic, and by the finding of arsenic in the food. But these were only unsuccessful attempts, and the mere discovery of arsenic in the corpses of Glaser and Gebhard was accompanied by no clear evidence of her connection with those deaths. Now, the favourite German mode of obtaining results in criminal cases is by some means or other to extract a confession, and here, evidently, only a confession could furnish the necessary evidence. According to the most approved methods, therefore, she was subjected to a long series of rigid examinations alone in the presence of the judge and a notary. All the cunning and adroitness of the judge were brought to bear, in order to entrap her into a confession, but for nearly six months, from October 19, 1809, until April 16, 1810, she resolutely denied every form of the charge against her. Under the Bavarian procedure the accused was not allowed to see a copy of his own evidence, or that of the prosecution; and in this case the fact that poison had been found in the two corpses was not announced to Anna Zwanziger until April 16. This produced the desired effect, for after two hours of stubborn composure, she broke down, wept, wrung her hands, and at length confessed to all the charges against her, and for several other murders that had passed for natural deaths. On September 17, 1811, she suffered death at the block, and her name is celebrated throughout Germany as the most infamous poisoner ever known.

There can be no doubt that her mental constitution was peculiar. She had a passion for poisoning, and spoke of her deeds only as "slight errors," and "trifling offences," never expressing any remorse or repentance. It was, indeed, fortunate for mankind, as she said, that she was to die, for she never could have ceased to poison.

In a notable trial forty years ago the desire to obtain life insurance money was the motive for the crime. The case was unusual from the fact that the person accused, the wife of the murdered man, only escaped suffering the penalty through a slight circumstance. Merritt, the murdered man, was employed at the East London Water Works, and until January 24th, 1850, the day of his death, had been to work in his usual health. On that day, however, he was taken sick just before going to work, and told a companion who called to walk to work with him that he had been drinking some broth and a cup of hot tea upon it, which he supposed had turned his stomach. He returned from work about 10 o'clock, and his wife, sending for some oatmeal, made a gruel for him, because, she said, he was so very thirsty. The gruel he

drank, but soon afterward vomited. At one o'clock he went out again, but was obliged to return home, and between 10 and 11 o'clock that night he died.

The wife's actions, both before and after the death, were marked by suspicious circumstances. She had spoken to a friend about a benefit society to which her husband belonged, and had asked whether if he died she would have the full benefit of it. When she learned that the doctor had found arsenic in the body, she appeared distressed, and nervous. To the inspector of police she denied that she bought any arsenic, but when confronted with Brown, the chemist, who had sold arsenic to her five days before, she gave way, and admitted the purchase. Her explanation was that she had placed the arsenic, after taking off the paper marked "poison," in the same cupboard with her husband's effervescent powders, and that he must have taken the arsenic by mistake on rising in the morning. The arsenic and the powders, however, she had carefully thrown away since the death. She had bought the arsenic, she said, because she and her husband had quarrelled, and if he went on as he had done, she intended to take it herself.

All now depended on the probability of her explanation that the arsenic had been taken by mistake, and here the testimony of Dr. Letheby, a chemist, came into a peculiar importance and caused a wide controversy. He asserted repeatedly that from the appearances he had observed the arsenic could not have been taken more than four hours or so before death, and must have been taken in the gruel, which was not made or administered until noon. Of course, if the jury relied on this testimony, it was impossible to believe that he could have died from taking the arsenic by mistake at 8 o'clock in the morning, and the jury accordingly brought in a verdict of guilty, with a recommendation of mercy on account of previous good character. But the medical profession was not satisfied with the assertions of Dr. Letheby, which had been based largely on the idea that substances taken into the stomach are not retained there more than five hours, and Dr. Letheby was accordingly persuaded to write to the Home Secretary that it was even probable that the arsenic was taken early in the morning, and that the woman's story might be true. This statement was duly weighed, and inasmuch as it reduced the case to a question of criminal negligence only, the death sentence was commuted to penal servitude for life. The case was afterward referred to by John Bright, in a speech advocating the abolition of capital punishment.

The first poison case in which strychnine, a poison of this century, was used was that of Wainwright, whose deeds Dickens has related, and who effected the murder of Miss Abercrombie in 1830. The second strychnine case was that of William Palmer, who murdered young Cook in 1856. This trial is regarded as the most famous poisoning case of the century. At the trial the theory was promulgated that strychnine could not be detected in the body of a victim after death by any known test. It afterward turned out that, relying on an alleged statement to that effect, made at Palmer's trial by Dr. Taylor, the eminent authority on poisons, William Dore, who became the defendant in another celebrated trial, was led to poison his wife with strychnine. At the present day, however, it is certainly not true that there is no infallible test for strychnine, for if by the "colour test," so-called, a certain succession of colours is produced, the presence of strychnine is said to be determined beyond a doubt. Yet strychnine in a fatal quantity can be so minutely disturbed in the system that the failure of this test to produce the proper colour is no sign that the poison is not present.

In the Palmer case, however, the prosecution were obliged to rely for proof that Cook had been poisoned almost entirely on the observed symptoms of the illness, for, whether through carelessness or through the imperfection of the appliances used, the body furnished no certain evidence of the presence of strychnine. The story of the case was as follows:—John Parsons Cook, on coming into his fortune of £12,000, abandoned his profession of law, and took to the turf. Here his intimacy with Palmer began. At this time the latter, a surgeon by profession, but now occupied with breeding and training race-horses, was in severe pecuniary straits. His wife's fortune being only for her life, he had insured her life for £13,000, at a premium exceeding his yearly income, and strangely enough, within nine months of this time the wife had died. Three months afterward he tried to effect an insurance on the life of his brother Walter, a confirmed drunkard, for the enormous sum of £80,000, but the insurance officers were suspicious and rejected his application.

The insurance money from his wife did not keep him long afloat. In 1854 he had discounted bills to the amount of nearly £12,000, to every one of which he had forged the acceptance of his mother, and these bills were all due or maturing in November 1855, the month of the murder. On November 13th, Cook's horse Polestar won at the Shrewsbury races, and £1,700 fell to Cook, in cash or bets, payable in seven days.

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On Wednesday, the 21st, Cook lay dead, his pocketbook was empty, and his bettingbook was not to be found. Beginning with November 14th, Cook had showed symptoms of illness, and toward Monday night, the 19th, was seized with convulsions, accompanied by stiffness of muscles, and intense agony, recurring at times until his death on Wednesday. His body at death was so bowed that when placed on the back it rested on the head and feet. This was the characteristic and terrible symptom of strychnine poison. Though other physicians attended, Palmer, intimate as he was with Cook, was constantly on hand, and administered to him among other things, coffee, broth, and pills. After his taking each of these an attack of vomiting ensued. It was proved that on Monday and Tuesday, the days preceding Cook's death, Palmer had made two purchases of strychnine pills; he had given no reason at the time, nor was he able to produce or account for the pills.

There could be but one question: Had Cook died of poison? If he had, then only one person could have been the murderer, and that was Palmer. Accordingly, the defence made super-human efforts to show that the death had been a natural one. The chemical tests failed, as has been said, to detect strychnine in the body, and the contest centred on the significance of the symptoms. The leaders of the chemical and medical professions were marshalled on both sides; tetanus, epilepsy, angina, pectoris, were all suggested as possible, or probable, causes of death, and a strong effort was made to show that if strychnine had been present it must infallibly have revealed itself in the body after death. The trial lasted twelve days, and filled the minds of all England. But the symptoms were too clear and unmistakable to be disregarded, and the justice of the verdict of "guilty" has never been impugned.

Another drug equally difficult of detection is aconite, and the trial ranking next in importance to Palmer's was for a murder committed with that poison. George Henry Lamson, the accused man, was a surgeon, who had married a sister of one Percy John. The latter was at the school of Mr. Bedbrook, at Wimbledon. He suffered from a curvature of the spine, but had fair health otherwise. He had in expectancy, as a share of the family estate, property worth £3,000, and this share, like those of all the children, who were orphans, would, at his death be divided among the survivors, two in number. Lamson was at that time in straitened circumstances. On December 3rd, in the evening, he came to Wimbledon from London. He had always shown a great interest in the health of his brother-in-law, and this time he bought him some candy and some Dundee cakes, of which Percy partook, as well as the master, who was in the room. Lamson then gave Percy a capsule, and soon after left the school. The boy complained of heart-burning, and four hours later died. On the ensuing investigation rests in part the great interest of the case. The symptoms

spoken of by the boy—a severe heartburn—suggested aconite as the cause. Now, in the present state of our knowledge the chemical tests for aconite are unreliable and practically valueless. Moreover, the symptoms usually exhibited during the illness are not entirely conclusive. How, then, can aconite ever be detected? The only trustworthy tests are two—its taste and its effects on small animals. Any substance containing aconite produces tingling and numbness when applied to the tongue or the lips, and when injected into the back of a mouse it produces a characteristic staggering, paralysis, and asphyxia. When the two tests agree the presence of aconite is absolutely certain.

These tests, accordingly, were made with portions of the stomach and other organs of the deceased, and aconite was found in considerable quantities. Previous purchases of aconite by the accused in the month preceding the death were also proved; and in less than three-quarters of an hour the jury returned a verdict of "guilty." A stay of proceedings, however, was twice procured by Minister Lowell, on the strength of affidavits expected from this country, tending to prove hereditary insanity in Lamson; but these were insufficient to satisfy the Home Secretary, and he refused to interfere with the execution.

Space forbids any account of other leading cases in the annals of poisoning in England; of the case of Dr. Donellan, tried for the murder of his brother-in-law, Sir Theodosius Boughton, and, as some think, unjustly convicted upon circumstantial evidence; of the trial of Dr. Pritchard, convicted in 1865 of poisoning his mother, and his mother-in-law, by repeated doses of antimony, and hanged, it is said, in the presence of 100,000 spectators; or of Adelaide Bartlett's trial for the murder of her husband by administering chloroform.

One curious circumstance catches the attention of the long list of noted poisoners. It is that in the majority of cases they are either women or doctors. On a coincidence of this kind it is unsafe to found any absolute opinion, but the peculiar facilities which poison offers to the weak physical equipments of a woman and to the skill which a physician can employ to hide its traces and the peculiar disadvantages which oppose a man who uses tell-tale poison instead of brute force secretly wielded, tend at least to explain the fact, if it is a fact, not only that doctors and women usually choose poison, but that a poisoner is almost always a doctor or a woman.

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