

THE CHEMIST'S STORY

I am a chemist. Many, doubtless, would find it difficult to define what the duties of a chemist are, if asked. To such, I say a chemist is a collector of facts. It is the business of his life to aid in unmaking for the benefit of mankind, the good and evil hanging even in the air we breathe, burrowing in the earth we tread, mingling with the food we eat, and swimming in the water we drink. Then again, the law waits on the chemist. A human being has passed suddenly away. Somebody thinks there has been foul play. The chemist examines the body of the supposed victim. The law listens, hat in hand, to science. The suspected party trembles in anticipation. The oracular lips of the chemist move, he names one out of the fearful list of poisons. It is either strychnine, prussic acid, or that deadly oil of bitter almonds. The law then puts on his hat, takes the decision into court, and hangs the prisoner.

It was about eleven o'clock on a stormy evening that I bade good night to my student, Tom Richards, at the door of my laboratory, at the south end of the college building. "Good night, Professor," said Tom; "we are going to have a fall of hydrogen oxygen, and a trace of salina."

"I hope," I said, in answer to Tom's playful words, "that it will not rain before I get home."

"Oh, it won't for an hour yet," said Tom. "Then," I said, with a sigh, noticing that the mercury in my barometer was falling, a sign of a violent storm, "I shall certainly get wet."

Tom was very anxious to know what would happen after twelve o'clock, so I told him I was about to commence analyzing the stomach of a Mrs. Johnson, whose husband now lay in P. jail, just across the road from the college, on suspicion that he was the murderer. Tom said that I had worked hard enough that day and deserved the night to myself. He spoke the truth; still I had delayed examining the stomach so long, and the trial so near at hand, that I could not in conscience put off the examination farther; although I had heard several reports at the different public schools in the morning, had delivered a lecture in the college proper that afternoon, another in the laboratory that evening, besides attending to my several duties as police surgeon during the day.

Tom was passing out of the college yard through the gate, his head turned bidding me good night, when he brushed against a man standing with his face to the prison. The street lamp showed me that the man was in the police uniform.

Re-entering my laboratory, I took down a glass jar from the shelf and sat down before my sink to examine it. The jar, which contained Mrs. Johnson's stomach, was covered by a cloth tied with string, and properly sealed with my official seal in red wax. Breaking through the cloth, I lifted the stomach out with a dissecting book and laid it on a white plate before me; then became busily employed in applying those tests to its contents by which we detect the presence of injurious substances.

An hour had passed since the departure of young Richard. I had carefully emptied the contents of the stomach into a number of bowls or basins. I had labored hard to detect traces of poison in all this, but had been unsuccessful. Joe Johnson, the suspected man, had been a student of mine a few years before. I thought him a good-hearted, intelligent fellow, only a little wild, and really began to hope that he might prove innocent; when among the macerated food, I came upon a small, infinitesimal, white grain.

By careful manipulation and the use of my magnifying glass, I managed to get this upon a piece of smoked glass, and examined it.

I was then certain that I had discovered arsenic, but to make assurance doubly sure I determined to apply a well known test for that poison. Accordingly I placed in the stove door a small amount of the acid, and then turned on the blowpipe flame, and presently there appeared the brilliant metallic mark, worthy of Cain's brow, which is the sign and signal of the poison fiend.

"Yes," I exclaimed as I saw the fatal blazon. "Joe Johnson is the murderer of his wife! With the evidence of that mark to back me, no power can save him from the rope."

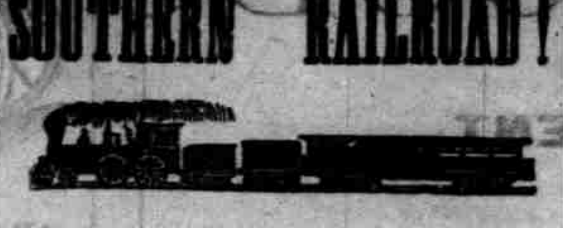
"Do you really think so?" said a calm voice behind me.

I turned quickly, and discovered a tall, lank person, having red, weary eyes, standing at my office door and staring in. His body looked as if it had been rolled out between his hands, like a molasses candy stick. His nose was merely an elongated fleshy lump, and his forehead was decorated with two red streaks instead of eyebrows. He had no expression in his face, and his policeman's hat was so large that it threatened to settle down on his shoulders. His uniform reassured me; I addressed him with some impatience.

To be continued.

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