

The CURVED BLADES

By CAROLYN WELLS

Author of "A Chain of Evidence," "The Gold Bag," "The Clue," "The White Alley," Etc.

CHAPTER XIV.—(Continued.)

"Surely, Mr. Stone. The autopsy showed a fatal dose of aconitine. Aconitine, as you of course know, is the herb—wolfbane—of the Hellebore tribe, all the species of which are poisonous. Aconitine is an intensely poisonous alkaloid obtained from aconite. Taken in a moderate quantity, it acts as a powerful sedative, but the dose absorbed by Miss Carrington was undoubtedly fatal within half or three-quarters of an hour."

"And she died at what time?"

"About 2 o'clock."

"Proving she took the poison at about 1:15 or 1:30."

"Yes; thereabouts. It is not possible to fix these hours precisely, but the poison was administered positively between 1 and 2 o'clock."

"Administered? You do not think, then, that she took it herself?"

"Most certainly not! Miss Carrington has been in my care, professionally, for many years. I knew her very well, and I know nobody more opposed to medicine in any form or drugs of any sort. It was a most difficult task to persuade her to take even the simplest remedy, and then she had to be assured over and over again that it was harmless. No, Mr. Stone, nothing could have made her take that dose of her own accord, nor could any one have persuaded her to take it, consciously. It was, without doubt, given to her secretly, by the clever ruse of the murderer. Of course it could not have been an accident. The marvelous part is, to my mind, how any one secured the poison. It is not an easy matter to buy aconitine."

"Then that ought to make it easier to trace. If the public could easily procure it at will, there would be greater difficulty in running down the purchaser."

"That is so; and yet, I think your search will be a hard one. How shall you go about it?"

"By canvassing the drug shops of the city and of the small towns as well."

"It may be you can trace the sale. But if it was bought under promise of secrecy, and if that secrecy were well paid for—?"

"True, there is the difficulty. But what's a detective for if not to find out secrets?"

"Quite right. May your quest succeed."

"And now, a little more about the action of this poison. What are the immediate effects of a fatal dose?"

"In a few moments there occurs a tingling numbness of lip and tongue and pharynx. The numbness increases and affects all the muscles, and death ensues inside of an hour. This paralyzing effect renders it impossible for the victim to cry out, and there are no convulsions. The body remains calm and undisturbed, and the eyes open. A dilatation of the pupil takes place, but the expression on the face remains as in life. This is why Miss Carrington continued to look happy and smiling."

"And proves that when she took the poison she was happy and smiling, and therefore in no way terrorized or frightened into it."

"Exactly so. And that indicates that she didn't know she was taking it—"

"Or, that it was administered by some one she knew and loved and had all confidence in."

"It would seem so," and Dr. Stanton's fine old face showed a sad apprehension.

"How was it taken—in what medium?"

"That we can't tell to a certainty. There were traces of the sandwiches discovered at the autopsy, but, though the poison could have been given her, concealed in a sandwich filling, it is improbable."

"Why?"

"Because the white granules or powder, which are soluble in water, would be more easily discerned in solid food."

"But, on the other hand, it

could be unostentatiously placed in a sandwich, with little fear of detection; but to prevail on her to swallow a solution—it is bitter, is it not?"

"Yes, slightly so. I admit, I cannot imagine any one inducing Miss Carrington to swallow such a draught. Therefore, it may well be it was placed in a sandwich. The filling, they tell me, was caviare, which would disguise the bitterness."

"And does not all this, if true, point to some one exceedingly familiar with all the details of Miss Carrington's affairs? Some one who knew of her nightly sandwich? And, also, does it not imply the presence of some one who could and did insure her consumption of that sandwich?"

"It would indeed seem so, Mr. Stone; but, when it comes to discussing such a question as that, I must ask to be allowed to retire from the field. It is my duty to tell all I know, from my medical experience, but further than that I am not obliged to express any opinions or voice any suspicions."

"You know, however, that Count Charlier is held pending investigation?"

"Yes, I know it. I have no opinion to express."

Fleming Stone rather admired this gentleman of the old school, whose courtesy was evident, but equally so his determination to say only what justice demanded of his profession.

And then, like a flash, the reason came to him. Dr. Stanton suspected, or at least feared to suspect, some member of the Carrington household.

Of course, this was not a new idea to Fleming Stone. He had mentally gone over the possibility of every one in the family and all of the servants at Garden Steps, but so far he had held his mind open for impressions rather than to formulate theories himself.

"Then, to sum up, doctor," he said, as he rose to go, "you assure me that you consider it out of the question that Miss Carrington took the aconitine herself, say, as a headache cure, or something, intending only a small curative dose?"

"Absolutely impossible, sir!" exclaimed the old gentleman, almost angrily. "To begin with, Miss Carrington never had headaches, and if she had she would have borne any amount of suffering from them before she would have touched a drug or a medicinal remedy of any sort. And, aside from that, how could she get aconitine? It is not to be bought for the asking at any druggist's! No, sir, my conscience makes me insist on that point; Miss Carrington never took that poison knowingly—either by accident or design. It was given to her, without her knowledge, by a very, very clever villain."

"Again, then, could it have been given her innocently, by mistake? I mean, if some one, her maid, or any friend, had wanted to give her a sedative, and meant only a light dose, but by error in quantity—"

"No, sir! Not a chance! The amount given was too great to be an error. And every one in that house knows better than ever to have attempted to give medicine in any form or degree or for any purpose to Miss Lucy Carrington."

"It was crime, then," said Fleming Stone, "black crime. And as such it must be discovered and punished."

"Yes," agreed Dr. Stanton, but he spoke with deep sadness and as one who feared where or toward whom such discoveries might lead.

From the doctor's house Stone went to see the Count.

That elegant gentleman was highly irate at being detained against his will in such plain quarters as the Tombs furnished, but he was not as belligerent or vindictive as Stone expected to find him.

Hasty work on the part of the detectives from the district attorney's office had resulted in his imprisonment, but the later devel-

opment of Bates' share in the matter made it extremely probable that the Count might soon be released from custody.

Pleasantly enough the two men conversed, and Count Charlier gave the impression of one glad of help from an outside source.

"It is such absurdity," he declared, "to think I would in any way wish harm to the lady. Why, I admired her above all, and it was my hope that she would do me the honor to accept my hand."

"Honestly, Count Charlier?" and Stone looked at him with a man to man glance that caused the Count to hesitate in his protestations.

"Well, I was considering the matter in my own mind. You know, Mr. Stone, it is a great responsibility, this seeking a wife. And Miss Carrington was not— not in her first youth. Of a fact, her years outnumbered my own. So, I asked myself was it wise, was it altogether just to the lady to—"

"Never mind all that, Count," said Stone, a little impatiently, "just give me a few details of that evening, so far as your actions were concerned. You were at the house till midnight?"

"Yes, Mr. Illsley and I left together. We had spent the evening there at cards and music."

"You had had any private conversation with Miss Carrington during the evening?"

"Yes, we walked alone in the conservatory for a time—"

"You proposed marriage?"

"Not exactly that—but I have hinted at such an event."

"And the lady seemed agreeable?"

"Entirely so. If I may say it, she met my advances half way, and I could not misunderstand her feelings toward my unworthy self."

"She spoke to you of money matters? Of her will?"

"Yes, to my surprise, she told me she had bequeathed to me \$10,000."

"Was not this a strange bequest to a casual acquaintance?"

"Oh, we were more than casual acquaintances. I have known Miss Carrington for two or three months."

"Which? Two or three?"

"Perhaps nearer two," and the Count showed a slight embarrassment.

"Do your friends often leave you large sums of money on such short acquaintance?"

"It has never happened before," and now the Count's dignity was touched and he spoke shortly and coolly.

"Then, of course, it struck you as peculiar," and Stone's smile assumed an acquiescence.

But the Count returned: "Not at all. Miss Carrington was an unusual woman, and I never expected her behavior to be entirely conventional. When she told me of this I was simply and honestly grateful, as I should have been to any one who showed me such a kindness."

"You were glad to get the money then?"

"Yes, indeed!" the Count exclaimed, with sparkling eyes, then realizing his slip, he hastily added: "That is, I was glad of the knowledge that it would come to me some day. Surely I did not want the lady to die, that I might receive it, but I was pleased to know she thought enough of me to make the direction."

"What did she mean by saying: 'Tomorrow all will be different'?"

"That I do not know. Could she have meant—"

"She did say it, then? You admit she said it to you?"

Breathlessly, Fleming Stone waited the answer. Miss Carrington had said this to the person who was with her behind her closed door at 1 o'clock! Could the Count be going to incriminate himself?

"Not to me only. She said it to all who were present. It was while we were playing bridge."

"She said it again to the man who killed her?"

"Of that I know nothing," said Count Charlier, politely.

"Bother!" said Fleming Stone, inaudibly.

in the house might be deemed possible, as well as some who were not in the house. But each one must be taken into consideration.

To begin with the most important, Miss Stuart. It was possible that she poisoned her aunt, but so improbable as to make it exceedingly unlikely. True, she was heir to half the fortune, but well bred, well nurtured young women do not commit crime to inherit their money sooner. Except for that conversation reported by Anita Frayne, there was not a shred of evidence against Miss Stuart. And Stone did not place implicit confidence in that story of the talk behind closed doors. He had discovered that the two girls were not friendly and he knew Anita capable of making up or coloring a tale to suit herself. Pauline had told him that she was in the hall window seat at 1 o'clock that morning and had seen Anita coming from Miss Carrington's room. Or, to put it more carefully: She had seen her with her hand on the door knob, in the act of closing the door after her. This Pauline had told to Stone with an air of such verity and truthfulness that he was fain to believe her. However, in all honesty, he had to admit to himself that Miss Stuart could have given the poison in some secret way, had she so desired. The same was true, though, of Miss Frayne, of Haviland and of the various house servants. But where could any of them get it?

Again there were the Count and Mrs. Frothingham to be considered. In fact, there were too many suspects to decide among without further evidence.

"Any luck?" Stone asked of Hardy, who came in to report.

"No, Mr. Stone. I've raked the drug shops thoroughly, and there is no trace of a sale of aconitine. It's practically impossible to buy such a substance, I mean, for the ordinary customer."

"Yet somebody did."

"I suppose so. But doesn't it limit the field of search to realize that it couldn't have been a servant or either of the young ladies?"

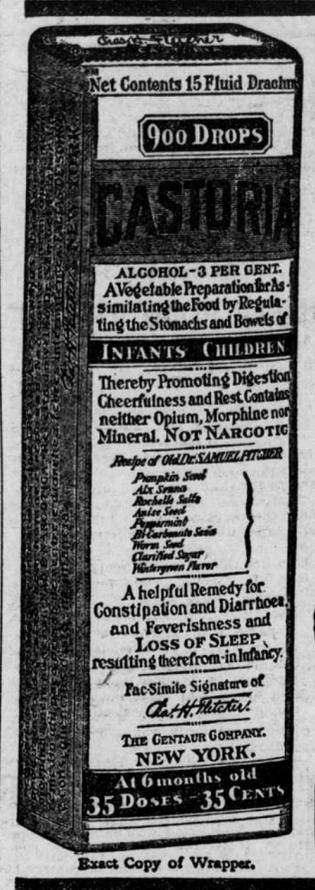
"Why neither of the young ladies?"

"But how could they get it?"

"Why not as well as any one else? And somebody did."

"Then somebody stole it. Nobody bought it. I'm positive of that, now I've learned how impossible it is to make such a purchase. And how could those girls steal it?"

"I don't know, Hardy, but my point is: Why couldn't they steal it if anybody could? You're denying their ability to steal the poison because you don't want to suspect them. And neither do I, but we must look this thing squarely in the face. Somebody managed to get that aconitine and administer it to Miss Carrington secretly, and it is for us to find out who did it—who could do it in the face of almost insuperable obstacles. But it is futile to say this one or that one could or couldn't do it. Now, since you've found no trace of the poison sale, let's start from some other point. Surely, this case, with its unique circumstances, offers many ways to look for evidence. What strikes me most forcibly is the costume of the lady. Not so much the gown—I believe she was fond of elaborate boudoir robes—but the array of jewelry, the glittering scarf and the snake. Most of all, the snake. That, of itself, ought to point directly to the true solution, and I believe it does, only we're too blind to see it. I'm going to work on that snake clue, and, to help, I wish you'd go at once to all the possible shops where it might have been bought. It may not be traceable and then, again, it may. And, the strange fact of her sitting idly before the mirror when she died! Whoever gave her the poison was there on the spot, must have been, for it's sure enough that she didn't take it herself, according to the doctor's statements. Well, if the murderer was right there with her, and she not only made no outcry, but continued to look smiling and happy, it was surely some one she knew and in whom she had all confidence. Perhaps this person urged her to eat the sandwich—oh, pshaw, that's all plausible enough—but, the snake! That's the bizarre clue that must lead somewhere. And it shall! I'll ferret out the mystery of that paper snake or my name's not Stone! Go to it, Hardy! Rake the Japanese shops and department stores, but find out who bought it. It isn't old. I observed it was fresh and new. Those flimsy paper things show handling mighty quickly. Find out who bought the thing, and we've a start in the right direction."



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NOVEMBER DEAL RE-INSTATED

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We advise the retail druggists to place their orders immediately, so that the jobbers will be able to get prompt shipments to them.

THANKS OF THE PUBLIC DUE THE DRUG TRADE DURING THE INFLUENZA EPIDEMIC.

The thanks of the American public are certainly due the entire drug trade—retail, wholesale and manufacturing—for what they accomplished during the recent influenza epidemic. The war caused a shortage of physicians—nurses were almost impossible to obtain—the demand on the drug trade was unexpected and overwhelming, and to this demand they responded nobly. Retail druggists kept open day and night and slept where they dropped behind the prescription counter. Wholesale druggists called their salesmen off the road to help fill orders—hundreds wired us to ship Vick's Vaporub by the quickest route, regardless of expense.

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But it was a slow process. Some of our raw materials are produced only in Japan—supplies in this country were low and shipments required three months to come from the Far East. Then we had to recruit and train skilled labor. We brought our salesmen into the factory and trained them as foremen. We invented new machinery, and managed to install it on Christmas Day, so as not to interfere with our daily production.

143 JARS OF VAPORUB EVERY MINUTE DAY AND NIGHT

By January 1st we had everything ready to put on our night shift, and since then our laboratory has been running day and night. To feed our automatic machines, which drop out one hundred and forty-three jars of Vaporub a minute or one million and eighty thousand weekly, has required a force of 500 people. Our Car Department, created for the benefit of these workers, served 7,000 meals during the month of January alone.

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An idea of the work we have accomplished this fall may be given by our production figures—13,028,978 jars of Vaporub manufactured and distributed since last October—one jar for every two families in the entire United States.

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(Continued Next Week.)