

## *Resting Powders*

From the Diary of a Physician

by Sylvanus Cobb, Jr.

In the spring of 1847 I settled in Lancaster. The old physician of that place had been removed by death, and several of my friends were anxious that I should come in. The opportunity was an excellent one, and I embraced it; and when I had been there a year I had a practice far better and more extensive than I had ever before enjoyed. Among those who became my warm personal friends were Frederic Lawson and his wife; and their friendship was worth having. Mr. Lawson was over seventy years of age, a hale, hearty old man; and his wife was the very picture of domestic health and comfort. He was the wealthiest man in the town, being worth over a hundred thousand dollars, and he was one of the most valuable citizens, too. Both he and his wife gave me their friendship very soon after I took up my residence with them, and this circumstance helped me much in other quarters.

One day in the early part of September I received a request to attend at Mr. Lawson's without delay. It was in the afternoon, and when I arrived, I found the old gentleman and his wife both sick. They had been taken just before noon, with cramps and chills; but they were much easier when I arrived than they were when they sent for me. I saw that their stomachs were out of order; and as I knew that they were both pretty high livers, I was not at all surprised. I gave simple emetics, with some other medications, and then left them, promising to call again in the morning. In the morning I found them no better than they had been on the day before. They fancied that they were much better, because they suffered no pain; but I could see that they were really sick. After a careful examination I came to the conclusion that I had got to guard against fever; and I gave the nurse directions with that understanding.

This nurse was named Margaret Allen. She was a peculiar person, though, on the whole, rather pretty. She was of medium height; with light brown hair; grayish blue eyes; and her face, with its finely cut features, was pale and thin. She spoke but little, seeming to shun much society; and when she did speak her voice was low and sad, as though her whole being had been darkened by some calamity that still weighed upon her. She had been in Mrs. Lawson's employ something over a month. She had represented herself as an orphan, without relations or friends, seeking some quiet retreat where, in return for faithful labors, she could have a quiet, peaceful home. Both Mrs. Lawson and her husband had taken a deep interest in her; and her modest, unassuming manners, and her willingness to obey, had so won upon them that they now placed in her the most unbounded confidence.

To Margaret Allen I gave my directions, and she promised to obey me faithfully. For six days I attended upon my aged patients. There was no fever set in, and yet they were growing weaker every day.

Another week passed, and the sick ones were surely failing. There was nothing remarkable about the progress of the disease, for it worked just as I might suppose that such a malady would work. There was only one thing that troubled me, and that was, the peculiar manner in which they had

been taken. However, that was past and gone, and I could only say, *it so happened*, and there leave it.

It was Monday morning again, and Mr. Lawson asked me if I thought he would live. I sat down and told him just what I thought. He might live some time—perhaps for several weeks—it might be for months—but I did not think he would recover. And then I told him that if he wished to make a will, he had better do so without much delay.

“No,” said he, “I have no will to make. I have no children of my own, and my property, if my wife and I both die, will go to my brother’s family. I had one child—a daughter. She was a precious child to me, and yet she struck me a heavy blow. I had a servant, named Stienburg,—a shrewd, unprincipled fellow, with an exterior polished and comely. He won my daughter’s love, and she ran away with him, and married him. I did not discard her—I tried to have her come and live with me; but she would not leave her husband. I could not have him beneath my roof, for he was a villain. At the expiration of a few years Stienburg died, leaving his wife with one child—a son. I then took my daughter and her boy home, and ere many years she died. The boy turned out worse than his father; six years ago I received the news of his death. He died in Calcutta, of fever, and the captain of his ship wrote to me that his body had been decently buried. I breathed more freely after that, for it took away the necessity of making a will just for the purpose of disinheriting my heir, which I should have been forced to do, had William Stienburg lived. It was three days after this—on Friday—that my suspicions of something wrong began to oppress me. On this Friday morning I found the old man more feeble than he had been before, and while I was with him he had a spell of vomiting. The matter ejected from his stomach had a peculiar look, and I asked him what he had been taking. He said he had taken nothing but his resting powders. I took some of the matter away with me, and before noon I had submitted it to a chemical test which betrayed the presence of poison! There was arsenic; but the arsenic was not alone. It was a prepared poison—a compound formed upon some subtle basis—calculated to destroy life without giving token of its presence. In this case it was evident that an overdose had been administered.

If poison had been administered, who had done it? That was the question. Of course my thoughts were first turned upon Margaret Allen, and my suspicions rested there, too. I could not imagine any cause which the nurse could have had for such a deed,— I could only feel that circumstances pointed her out as the only one who had the opportunity to do it.

As soon as I had made a careful analysis of the contents of my phial, I returned to Lawson’s house, and made a change in his medicine. There was a boy in the family—a little fellow some twelve or thirteen years of age—a son of the cook—whom I felt that I could trust. He was as bright as a lark, and I knew that he loved Mr. Lawson. I called him out into the garden and asked him if he would like to help me to serve his master; and, furthermore, if he could keep his own counsel, even from his mother. I was not disappointed. I knew from his manner of reply that I might depend upon him. I asked him what he thought of Margaret Allen.

He said he didn’t like her. And the little fellow shook his head. He felt more than he could explain.

I then told him that I wanted him to watch Margaret Allen in every possible way. I wanted to know everything she did,— only she must not know that he was near her. He promised to do the best he could, and I then dismissed him.

That evening I was with my patients at nine o'clock, and with my own hands gave the medicine. I told them I was going to try a new course, and I wanted them to take nothing till morning. In the morning I was there again, and met the boy in the garden.

He had watched Margaret Allen.

Yes—he had watched her very narrowly.

Had she given the sick people any medicine?

He had not seen anything of the kind.

“Have you seen anything out of the way?” I asked.

“I don't know as there's been anything out of the way,” he replied; “but I saw something this morning that looked funny.”

“Ah—what was it?”

“I went up and watched at her door, and when I peeped through the keyhole, I saw her shaving herself—shaving with a razor—just like a man.”

SHAVING HERSELF!

I had it now. Now I believed I had a clue to the secret of Margaret Allen's strange look.  
*Shaving with a razor—JUST LIKE A MAN!*

Was not that it?

I thanked the boy for his information, and having cautioned him to keep quiet, and promised him he should be rewarded for his services, I dismissed him.

When I went upstairs I found Mr. Lawson very weak, but not in much pain. After some remarks upon general topics I introduced the name of Margaret Allen. I asked him if he had ever noticed anything peculiar about her.

“Yes,” he said; “and that may be one reason why I have been drawn towards her. She looks as my daughter used to look.”

“Your daughter never had a daughter?”

“No—only one child—William.”

“And you are sure William is dead?”

“Certainly.”

“How do you know?”

“Why—the captain of the ship in which he sailed wrote me to that effect.”

“Did it never occur to you that William Stienburg might have written that letter himself?”

“No. Such a thing never entered my mind. But what do you mean?”

“I’ll tell you tomorrow,” said I. “I am in a hurry now.”

I got away from him as easily as possible, and then went back to my own dwelling, where I took one of my pistols and carefully loaded it; and thus armed I returned to the house of my patients. In all probability the reader sees the drift of my suspicion. It is enough for me to say that that suspicion amounted almost to a moral certainty. When I reached the house I called to the coachman and the groom, and asked them to come and help me; and when I had made them understand what was to be done, they were eager enough to lend their assistance.

The nurse was in her chamber. I went up, and the two stout men followed me. They waited upon the outside, while I entered the room. Nurse was sitting by a window, reading.

“Sir!—What means this intrusion?” There was a start; but it was not the start of a virtuous woman. No, no,—far from it.

“Easy,” said I, leaving the door ajar behind me.—“WILLIAM STIENBURG, you have run the length of your rope!”

It was too much for human nerve—too much because it had not been expected. Nurse gasped, and quivered, and turned pale—then leaped to a drawer, and drew out a pistol.

“Hold!” My pistol was cocked, and pointing directly at his head. “You see I am prepared.”

He had exposed himself, and he knew it; and his next movement was calculated to distract my attention. Whether he hoped to escape, or whether he aimed at my life, I could not tell; and it made little difference, for I had but one course to pursue. I called for my companions, and by the time the nurse was secured there was no doubt remaining touching the sex. In short, the groom and the coachman both, as soon as they thus gained the clue, knew William Stienburg well enough. They tore off his disguise—ripped the female garb from his person—and then, when he could no longer hide himself, he sank into sullen silence. I saw him in a place of safety, with a stout guard over him, and then I went to see Mr. Lawson.

I believed that it would do my patient good to tell him the story of my discovery, since I could now give him hopes of recovery; and accordingly I told him all. He was not startled as I expected him to be.

“I have suspected this,” he said, shaking his head.

“Since when?” I asked.

“Since you spoke to me before. Your remarks opened my eyes. I was prepared for this. William has been poisoning me.”

“Yes.”

“Do you think you can cure me?”

“Yes,— I hope so. We will go at it at once, and the result will be apparent in a very few days. And in the meantime what shall be done with our prisoner?”

“Let him be safely guarded tonight, and we will consult about that tomorrow.”

That very evening I was satisfied that I could arrest the work of the poison that had been given, and so I told Mr. Lawson. I did not speak with his wife upon the subject, leaving him to do that himself.

On the following morning Mr. Lawson told me that William Stienburg had gone.

“Don’t be astonished,” he said. “I sent him off myself. He confessed his whole crime, and I let him go.”

And then the old man told me the story—

“I sent for him, and he came to my room; and when I had made him understand that I should not seek revenge upon him, he confessed the whole. He fabricated the story of his own death for the single purpose of putting me off my guard, and also with the thought that it might prevent his being mentioned in my will in the shape of disinheritance. He knew that, as the offspring of my only child, he was heir to my property, and with that idea he has worked. Being small of frame, and of a particular delicate skin, he took the notion of assuming the disguise of a female, and getting into my employ; after which he meant to poison both myself and wife in such a manner that people should think we died from ordinary disease. He told me that he had the recipe for the poison from an old Indian, and that if he had not been careless in giving it, his secret would never have been discovered. He said he would leave the country if I would let him go, and I could not refuse. He was the son of my only daughter, and I would not see him suffer a felon’s doom. I do not believe he will ever trouble me again.

On the whole, I did not blame my friend for what he had done, and so I finally told him. He had learned how the poison had been compounded, and when I knew the secret I knew how to apply the antidote. Within a month both Mr. Lawson and his wife were well again; and, as may be supposed, their feelings towards me had not grown cold.

About a year after that we heard that William Stienburg had gone to California. He was keeping a gambling house in San Francisco. In another year he was dead. It was no deception this time. He was shot in a street row, and a friend of mine, who happened to be there, wrote me the particulars.

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