

*Medical College Sketches*  
The Chemist's Story Or Science Versus Murder  
by Euri Byades

I am the Chemist of the Medical College at C—. Man, doubtless would find it difficult to define what the duties of a chemist are, if asked. To such, I may say, a chemist is a collector of facts. It is the business of his life to aid in unmasking, for the world's benefit, the good and evil hovering even in the air we breathe; burrowing in the earth we tread, mingling with the food we eat; swimming in what we drink.

The miner comes to the chemist with his lumps of gold and silver, to be assured his precious treasures are pure and good. The health officers call to him to examine the atmosphere that surrounds and the earth that makes up the plague ground of cholera. The physicians show him the food and drink of their stricken patients, and beg for aid. Sometimes, but, alas, not as often as he would wish, the chemist has a gift or charm to give that is powerful for good.

In short the chemist must know the whys and wherefores in everything in the outward phenomena of life, as far as feeble man can know. The composition of the ocean he must be familiar with; he must be able to name the gasses of the air; and capable of resolving the human body itself into invisible vapors! I am the occupant of this responsible position and important Professorship in the Medical College at C—.

It was about half past ten o'clock on a stormy evening, that I bade good night to my student, John Powell, at the door of my laboratory, at the north end of the college building.

"Good night, Professor," said John. "We are going to have a fall of hydrogen, oxygen, and a trace of saline."

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

"Oh, no; it won't rain for an hour yet," said John.

"Then," I said with a sigh, noticing that the mercury in my barometer was rapidly falling, a sign of a violent storm, "I shall certainly get wet."

John was very anxious to know what would keep me up after half past eleven o'clock; so I told him that I was about to commence analyzing the contents of the stomach of a Mrs. Sillerman, whose husband now lay in the C— jail, just across the road from the college, on the suspicion that he was her murderer. John 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 woman's stomach so long, and the trial was so close at hand, that I could not in conscience put off my examination further. Although I had heard recite, several classes at the different public schools in the morning; had delivered a lecture in the college proper, that afternoon, and one in the laboratory that evening, besides attending to my several duties as police surgeon during the day.

As John was passing out the college yard, through the gate, he brushed against a man standing with his back to the college, and his face toward the prison. The street lamp at the corner showed me that the man was clad in the police uniform.

Re-entering my laboratory, I took a glass jar from a shelf in my little office, and sat down before my sink to examine it. In my laboratory I have everything arranged conveniently; my private office is in the centre, separated from the laboratory proper by windowed sides, through which I can see my students at their experiments, and lend occasionally a helping hand or seasonable advice. In my office is a heater, connected with the furnace in the college cellar so that I can regulate its warmth. There is also a gilt extension pipe, with figured shade, bringing me gas, and allowing me to properly accommodate it to my poor eyes. My writing desk occupies the centre of my office; the marble sink spoken of above, is on the north side; in this I examine those substances which—like the relic of poor Mary Sillerman—are of a disagreeable nature. At the time of which I write, there stood, on the south side, a richly carved drawing-room table, covered with a crimson cloth, and holding a few of my best bound books and one of Mr. Cruikshank's improved Voltaic Electric Batteries. With this addition, the appearance of my office is the same to-day, as it was on the night of my fearful adventure.

The jar containing Mary Sillerman's stomach was covered with a cloth, duly tied with strings, and properly sealed with my official seal in red wax. Breaking through the cloth and seal, I lifted the stomach out with a dissecting hook, and laid it on a white platter before me; then became very busily engaged in applying those tests to its contents by which we detect the presence of injurious substances.

An hour passed away since the departure of young Powell. I had carefully emptied the contents of the stomach into a number of bowls and basins. I had labored hard to discover traces of poison in all this, but had been unsuccessful. George Sillerman had but four short years before been a student of mine. 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 speck upon a piece of smoked glass, and examined it.

I was certain I had discovered arsenic; but to make “assurance doubly sure,” I determined to apply Mr. Marsh's test for that poison. Accordingly, I placed in the diluted contents of the poor woman's stomach the usual acids. I then turned on the blow-pipe flame, and presently, upon a white and beautiful porcelain ground, there appeared that brilliant metallic mark—worthy of Cain's brow—which is the sign and signet of the Poison Fiend!

“Yes,” I exclaimed, as I saw the fatal blazon, “Sillerman 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, squeaking voice behind me.

I turned quickly, and discovered a tall, thin policeman, having red, weak and watery eyes, standing by my office door and staring in. His body looked as if it had been rolled out long between the hands, like a molasses candy stick; his nose was merely an elongated fleshy plug.

His forehead was decorated with two red streaks in the place of eyebrows; he had no expression at all in his face, and his policeman's hat was so large, that it threatened to settle to his shoulders.

His uniform reassure me, and I addressed him thus, with some impatience:

“My friend, I suppose I am wanted to attend an inquest—or what is your business?”

“No, Doctor, the man ain't dead yet.”

“Anything in the surgical way?”

I was police-surgeon as well as coroner.

“No”—

“Well, then, why do you send for me at this time of night?”

“Don't bother, Professor; the man ain't dead yet, but they say he will before mornin'”

“Are doctors attending him?”

“Oh, he's in good hands, Professor!”

“What is the matter with him?”

“Well,” said the official, “some folks says he's got *so much knowledge* into him, that he can't *live* under it.”

“Cerebral disorder, eh?”

That is, a disease caused by excessive study, among other causes.

“What?” asked the man.

“Brain disorder, I mean, something wrong there?”

I touched my forehead, and so did he, as he said:

“Aye; and I thought I'd drop in and tell you; if you was going by the —Station, to-morrow, to drop in and see whether it's *post mortem* or not. Besides, I wanted to see where I could always find you, in case of need.”

I bowed; and attributed his visit to a feeling of curiosity. He sat on the sink, with one rubber foot thrown over the other, and wiped his nose with a dirty handkerchief several times, while his eyes wandered about like Christopher Columbus after discoveries. Finally he spoke, like one who thought himself called on to say something:

“Professor, there’s been an accident, this afternoon—terrible, too.”

“Ah!” said I.

“Awful,” said he.

“What was it?”

“Nitro-glycerine explosion in the Windemere Iron Mills—one hundred fellow mortals busted!”

“Sad!”

“Affectin’ very.” Here he rubbed his mouth with the back of his hand. “Professor, what is that nitro-glycerine?”

“It is a very dangerous article,” I answered, happy to display knowledge. “It has nearly twice the destructiveness of gunpowder; but, unlike it, does not explode on the application of heat. A red-hot coal dropped into it will not explode it; it will freeze; it is yellow and greasy. Its symbols in our nomenclature are C6; H5; (No.4); 3, O6”—

“You don’t mean to say so!” said the officer, interrupting me in disagreeable tones, in the very middle of a choice extract from one of my lectures. “Why, but you ain’t told me how it does go off; if fire won’t bust it, what in—hell—will?”

I told him that if it was pressed, or anything fell upon it, it would explode.

“Place it under the crusher of a cider-mill; strike it with a sledge-hammer; let a weight drop upon it from a height”—

“Yes,” said my man, “and that rouses its volcaner, does it? How does it come, Professor?”

“In little cans—why, like these,” said I, discovering that there was a little can of it on the marble sink, which I had carelessly neglected to place in the cellar. I then took a little of the glycerin and spread it on a thin sheet of paper; and laying the paper on an anvil, struck it with a hammer. A slight explosion, and flame burst from the paper.

“Now, really,” said the policeman, starting back. “I suppose, Professor, that that there can would make a mighty noise, if allowed to explode n here, all at once?”

“It would blow the entire building to atoms,” I said, resuming the analysis of Mary Sillerman’s stomach.

“No!” I heard the policeman remark, in deliberate Yankee tones—“you don’t say so?”

And the next moment I lay on my back, a gag in my mouth, terribly frightened, and sick at heart. Over me stood the policeman; and the first thing that functionary did, was—looking me directly in the eyes—to *take off his nose!* He then rid himself of his red eyebrows, hair, cap, and overcoat, and become a determined looking fellow, with the eyes of a fiend, and the nose of a Roman.

“So you think,” said the metamorphosed, in the tone of a gentleman, “that nothing can save George Sillerman from the rope? Poor fellow, it does look like it! But, my dear Professor, George Sillerman is fortunate enough to have in me a devoted friend, as well as *brother!* I have undertaken to save him—*he shall be saved!* In order to this end, it will be necessary to remove from the face of this earth, not only the stomach of his miserable wife, yonder, but also, My dear Professor—I am sorry to be obligated to say it, for I believe you were my brother’s teacher and friend—*yourself*, as well!”

I saw that he was in deadly earnest.

“Your death must apparently result from accident—at least so it must seem to the authorities. My brother is in jail—they will not suspect him; they certainly will not suspect me.”

What terrible deed was his brain hatching? Was he going to murder me? The hard earned knowledge of a score of years for power to utter one single cry!

He took me in his arms and placed me in a chair, and bound me to it. Then, from a side pocket, he produced a rope.

Was it myself who was going to hang, instead of George Sillerman?

No—Yes—He placed the line pulley-like over an arm of the hanging chandelier. This was too slight a support even for one of my spare frame. Not hanging!

To one end of the rope he attached a weight, and raised it by pulling the other end six feet or more from the floor. The loose end he secured to the sink. Was he mad? Did he mean to draw me under this weight, and send me out of the world in a novel way, by letting it fall and dashing out my brains?

To the sink he attached a long, yellow string. Under the weight on the floor he placed the can of nitro-glycerine! I recognized the yellow string—it was a fuse, and would burn sixty minutes. It would burn across the marble slab—there was no hope of igniting any substance that might warn my friends.

“Do you begin to see through it?” asked George Sillerman’s brother.

I believe I cursed him with my eyes. I could only breathe through my nostrils, and the great veins were swelling and growing hot in my forehead.

Drawing a match from his pocket, he lighted it and applied it to the fuse—that little tyrant that gave a man an hour to live, and killed him at the end of it—that little irresponsible Terror, that, less merciful than Providence, told a man the second that he was to die, if fright and horror spared him to itself!

Slowly the golden flame crept, snake-like, round the twine!

“In one hour,” said the prisoner’s brother, “you will be in heaven or in hell. I will watch here with you for half an hour; the other half you will spend alone.”

He sat down some minutes in a chair, watching the flame. Then he arose, took a piece of porcelain, with the murderer’s mark thereon, from the table and shook his head gloomily.

“I am chemist enough to know it is arsenic,” he said. “Yes, those bright metallic eyes, betrayer of the guilty! Science, thou wouldst kill my brother! Thou shalt save him! Let us see in whose hands thou art more powerful. Here is a man who, by thy aid, bids the Poison Sprite uprise, and write in brilliant characters a foul confession on this piece of porcelain. But behold, oh Science! It is no sooner written than by thy aid the whole confession and thy chosen servant are annihilated. Let the good Professor use his chemicals, the bad brother only asks—a little can of nitro-glycerine.

I heard the speech, indeed; but great Heavens! It was my eyes and not my ears that were busiest then! For, from beneath the table, covered by the crimson cloth of which I have before spoken, and which I faced, appeared the head of a child. The hair was rumped and the blue eyes were just opened from sleep. The intelligent forehead was wrinkled strangely. It was my boy, Eddie!

I was afraid he would cry “papa!” If he did the implacable man would add the murder of the child to the murder of the father.

But my boy did none of this. He had, I supposed, crept under the table unknown to me, and fallen asleep there. I tried to tell the little fellow to hide again and wait for the fatal half hour when my tormentor would be gone. Whether he understood me or not, aided by what he had overheard, I did not know—but he quickly withdrew his curly head, first kissing his hand lightly at me, and then shaking his fist at the schemer watching so intently his dumb fire-agents.

The half hour slowly wore away. Oh, Heavens! What agony I did suffer. Not for myself but for my child. A slight noise might discover his presence—the match might run its tether sooner than was expected. He might be murdered or blown to atoms

The fuse burned on—on. The half hour is up!

The brother of Sillerman rises to go! Joy!

“Commit your soul to God’s keeping! You who hold the evidence of my brother’s guilt—nothing can save you now!”

With that he turned to take his hat from off the table covered with the crimson cloth, beneath which hid my precious boy. Something attracted his attention. He held out his hands and leaned forward. I thought he had discovered my boy. No—he was lifting something in either hand—the wires of the Electric Battery! In another instant my boy had leaped from under the table, and was turning the crank fast and furiously!

George Sillerman's brother was in the power of my boy! He could not drop the wires—he was helpless and motionless! How my boy cried for help! The old college rang again. The prisoner's brother added his voice to my boy's, in his agony. He begged, beseeched—all his nerves were racked—great waves of galvanism leaped and surged and trembled and jarred over every sensitive fiber. Still, my boy was inflexible—shouted and turned faster.

Unperceived upon the marble, in the track of the burning fuse, was a pool of inflammable oil. In an instant a great length burned away on the fuse. It would last five minutes, and no more!

“Father!” shouted the boy. “If no assistance comes, this villain must die with us. I dare not let him free. Help! Help! Help!”

Alas! Alas! Alas! I could not answer him!

But some one else did! Thank God! The fuse is burnt up, the rope is on fire, the weight trembles; in another minute it falls upon the nitro-glycerine!

The door opens. John Powell, on a midnight visit to the sick, has heard the cry. He comprehends all, seizes the can in his hands—the weight descends, indeed, but not on the death-dealing oil. No, down it goes, through the office floor; down, down, like an evil spirit, to give back a dull, metallic echo, from the stones of the cellar beneath.

We are saved!

George Sillerman was hung, but his brother remains unpunished by the law, for he stabbed himself coolly with the paper knife of the judge who sentenced him, and so died.

My tickets for lectures on chemistry are thirty dollars, (full course). Apply at my office, in the college.

*New York Fireside Companion*, April 18, 1868