

The Poisoner

by Johnson B. Turner

It was a badly frightened and very nervous woman that was ushered into a detective's presence early one morning in June, 1865.

Her name was Mrs. Bertha Schwinke; her occupation that of a boarding house keeper. Her complaint was of a very serious nature, being an accusation of contemplated poisoning on the part of one of her favorite boarders, a gentleman by the name of Frederick Sellers.

The story she told the detective in a tremulous voice may be briefly summed up as follows:

[Sellers] was a dry-goods clerk, and had for a roommate a young man named Abel Luther, a druggist's clerk. Both were American-born, but of German descent, the same as Mr. Schwinke.

Sellers had been an inmate of her household upward a year, and was a general favorite with them all; Mrs. Schwinke especially regarded him as indeed one of the family, but a "change came o'er the spirit of her dream." On the previous night, while doing some repairing to some bed-linen in a room adjoining that of Sellers, she overheard a conversation between him and Luther in which her name was mentioned. This fact excited her curiosity, and applying her ear to the wall which divided the two apartments, she distinctly heard Sellers say that he would give her some poison.

"Are you quite sure that you heard aright?" asked the gentleman.

"Oh, I'm sure he said those words, Mr. Varnoe," responded she, with great earnestness. "I can swear to it."

"Did his companion make any remarks?"

"Yes, sir, he did. He said he would like to do the same thing, only he could not afford it."

"Meaning, I presume, he would not hazard the attempt?" suggested Varnoe.

"I guess he was afraid," was the simple rejoinder.

"Well, what you have me do?" said the detective. "Since you are positive that he means to poison you in the near future, it appears to me that your wisest course would be to lay your complaint before a magistrate and have him arrested."

"Oh, Mr. Varnoe, I would not like that," pleaded she. "I have thought so much of Mr. Sellers that I could not bear to have him arrested. What I would like is for you to come to my house as a boarder and watch him and Mr. Luther, and try and find out how he intends to poison me and for what, for I am sure I have always treated both of them very kindly, especially Mr. Sellers."

Here the young widow put her apron to her face and wept softly for minute or two. She was not over twenty-five, of a good figure, and very pretty in features, and the detective shrewdly guessed that she had a strong liking to her “favorite boarder,” and his contemplated crime against her wounded her vanity as much as it shocked her moral sensibilities.

“But, madam,” remarked Varnoe, smiling, “that would amount to nothing whatever if he really meditates such a thing as you suspect. While I would be seeking to discover the means he intends to employ, he might accomplish the deed. What then?”

“My God! then I know not what I shall do,” said she, in evident distress. “Can’t you find out some better way, Mr. Varnoe?” asked she beseechingly.

“Well, Mrs. Schwinke,” said the detective, taking compassion on her, “I’ll come to your house as a boarder for a few days, and try and find out all about it.”

“Will you now? Oh, I’m so glad!” cried the delighted woman. “You shall have the best of the table while you are a boarder, and I’ll not charge you a cent. And if you can make it out that I am mistaken, and Mr. Sellers does not mean to poison me, after all why I shall give you twenty dollars—there now!”

“That is all right,” responded Varnoe, scarcely able to conceal a smile at her eagerness; then he remarked, “Then you do not wish to think he really meditates taking your life?”

“Oh, no, sir; I don’t.”

“And after all, you do not appear to be certain that you were correct in your interpretation of the words you overheard,” pursued the gentleman quizzingly.

“Well, I thought I overheard him say so,” responded she, in a hesitating tone, “but after all, I may be mistaken.”

“Very likely,” remarked Varnoe, dubiously. “However, I’ll be around in the morning as a gentleman named Mr. James Powers.”

“Thank you, I shall expect you,” rejoined Mrs. Schwinke, and she left the detective with a light heart and a smiling countenance.

Next morning, attired as a fashionable young gent, Varnoe pulled the bell at the German widow’s boarding house, bringing that lady to the door. She looked at him inquiringly, then asked him what he wanted. She did not recognize him.

“I came to take board with you, madam,” said he smilingly.

“Yes, sir,” answered she. “What name?”

“Mr. James Powers.”

“Eh!” cried she, gazing sharply in his face. “Are you Mr. Varnoe?”

“At your service, madam.”

“Well,” said she, gazing at him wonderingly, “I wouldn’t have known you. Walk in.”

She took him to the room where she had overheard the “awful plot” discussed saying:

“This is your room, Mr. Varnoe—Powers, I mean—beg your pardon, and here you can hear them talk quite plain, if you put your ear to the wall.”

“Thank you. I shall avail myself of that method if I find it necessary,” returned he.

However, as neither of the parties mentioned was in the room at that time, there was no opportunity to ascertain whether their conversation could be so easily overheard as the lady had given him to understand. After spending a short time in his room he went into the parlor, where he engaged in light conversation with Mrs. Schwinke, but studiously avoided any reference on his part to their previous conversation, although she endeavored several times to introduce the matter that appeared to be her absorbing thought, but Varnoe always managed to change the subject.

When the dinner bell rang, Mrs. Schwinke said quietly, before they entered the dining room:

“Now you will have an opportunity of seeing the young men. I will make you acquainted with them under your assumed name of Mr. Powers.”

At dinner, Mr. Powers, the new boarder, was introduced to the others and then they sat down to partake of the really good and substantial viands which were provided by the amiable hostess.

Varnoe looked at the two suspected confederates in the “poisoning line,” and at once pronounced the landlady mistaken in her judgment, or rather her suspicions—for the truth manifested itself during the later part of the interview at Varnoe’s office, that she was inclined to doubt her first impression in reference to the murderous intent of Mr. Sellers.

The young gentleman was about twenty-three years of age, of fair complexion, laughing blue eyes, and an honest expression of countenance.

Abel Luther did not impress the detective quite so favorably, yet there was apparently nothing vicious in his organization. He was only a conceited, silly coxcomb, Varnoe thought. He possessed a handsome face and figure, but no brains to correspond.

During the progress of the meal, Varnoe observed something else. A fine buxom girl, who waited on the table, frequently favored Frederick Sellers with a prolonged glance of evident admiration to which the recipient seemed perfectly oblivious. He also saw the girl cast stealthy

glances at Mrs. Schwinke, while that lady and Sellers were engaged in a spirited conversation. He also noticed that while the glances she bestowed upon Sellers were evidently of a tender nature, those that she favored Mrs. Schwinke with were strongly tinged with the angry light of an evil jealousy.

“The landlady admires Sellers, and so does the girl, while at the same time she hates her mistress.” Thus reasoned the observant detective.

After this Varnoe had a private conversation with his hostess, and spoke to her in very plain terms.

“Mrs. Schwinke,” asked he, “who is that dark, handsome girl who waited on the table?”

“Mina Franke,” replied the lady. “Do you admire her?”

“That is not what I am driving at, madam,” responded he gravely. “I see she greatly admires your favorite boarder, Mr. Frederick Sellers.”

An indignant flush sprang to her face at these words, after which she turned pale as death, and in a hoarse whisper observed:

“Do you think she has anything to do with this poisoning?”

“Listen to me, madam; I’ve not finished what I intended to say,” rejoined Varnoe; “I saw her casting admiring glances at Sellers and baleful glances at you.”

“Baleful? What is that—ugly looks?” she asked[.]

“She evidently hates you.”

“I know she does,” was the quick response of the hostess. “Is it because she admires Mr. Sellers,” she asked, anxiously.

“No, it is because you admire him,” returned the detective.

The hostess turned away her head to hide her blushing face, while she sighed, “Oh, Mr. Powers!”

“It is the truth I am telling you,” rejoined Mr. Varnoe. “I do not think that Mr. Sellers has any evil designs on you, and if you fear any such thing, you had better look to Miss Franke. She seems quite capable of such a deed, for she is fearfully jealous; and a woman under its influence loses all control of her better judgment, and often is guilty of acts she would not commit in her cooler moments.”

“I’ll clear her out of the house this very day!” cried Mrs. Schwinke, in great wrath.

“Softly, madam,” said Varnoe, with an amused smile; “that would be incompatible with justice. The girl has committed no graver offence than to admire a man you admire, and surely that is no crime, or you would be equally guilty. It is only an evidence of her good taste, don’t you see?”

“The bold thing! I’ll talk to her,” rejoined the indignant lady; and her hazel eyes flashed ominously.

“Do not provoke her, I beg you?” observed the detective, seriously, “I am a pretty good judge of faces, and I take Mina Franke to be of a very passionate disposition, and dangerous if grievously provoked.”

“Do you think she would be bold enough to strike me?” she asked.

“She may do so, and I’d advise you to speak gently and calmly to her.”

“I don’t care,” cried the lady, “I’ll have her out of the house when her month is up.”

“Ah, that will be better,” rejoined he. “Give her notice without assigning any reason, and thus you will be rid of a dangerous rival without any strife.”

“Humph!” cried the lady, with a toss of her head; “I’ll just tell her what I think of her; that’s what I’ll do.”

The lady evidently kept her word, for the detective saw, while at supper, that Miss Franke wore an angry scowl while waiting on the table, and occasionally darted savage glances at her mistress—glances that boded no good.

Half an hour after the evening meal was over, Mrs. Schwinke was suddenly taken violently ill with all the symptoms of poisoning. Sellers had stepped out ten minutes previously to purchase a weekly periodical and had not yet returned, and Varnoe hastened to summon medical aid.

The lady was in violent pain when the doctor reached her side, and after feeling her pulse and examining her tongue, he pronounced the opinion that she had taken arsenic.

He at once applied the stomach pump, which relieved her considerably and after administering soft liquids, he relieved her of all pain, and under the balmy effects of a general opiate she fell into a calm slumber.

Varnoe went to look after Mina, and found her sitting at the kitchen window, looking out into the semi-twilight, quite unconcerned, barely looking around at the sound of footsteps.

“Miss Franke,” spoke the detective.

She turned her head without responding, and gazed vacantly at the intruder.

“Your mistress was not killed by the dose you gave her[,”] said the detective in a calm voice.

The color forsook her face, and she sat transfixed, as it were, by the keen magnetic gaze of Varnoe, but remained silent still.

“Why did you attempt her life?” asked he, approaching nearer.

She sprang to her feet then, and boldly demanded who accused her of the crime.

“I do.”

“You!” cried she disdainfully; “and who are you?”

“I am a detective officer, come to arrest you for attempted murder.”

A low cry escaped her, and turning her back on her accuser, she seemingly buried her face in her hands and resumed her seat at the window, leaning her head on her folded arms.

Varnoe regarded her with commiseration for a few minutes, then gently laid his hand on her head. She did not move.

“Come, my poor girl,” said he, pityingly, “confess your fault; it will be the better for you in the end.”

Still no reply.

He raised her head and saw her eyes were closed, while at the same time the odor of bitter almonds assailed his nostrils. Gently laying her head on the window sill, he sprang up stairs and apprised the doctor of the probable tragedy that had been quietly enacted in the kitchen.

The doctor was somewhat startled at this information, and also seemed a little bewildered at the new case which was mentioned to him. Leaving Mrs. Schwinke, who was now quietly sleeping to the care of a nurse he quickly followed Varnoe to the kitchen.

The girl was still reclining with her head on the window-sill, quiet and motionless. The doctor quickly reached her side, and taking her hand in his, placed his fingers on her wrist. There was no pulsation.

Then quietly taking her face in his hands he turned it upward and gazed earnestly and searchingly at her rigid features.

When the medical gentleman looked at the girl’s face he shook his head and said:

“She is past all aid. Prussic acid is too deadly a drug for any known antidote.”

The tiny vial in her clenched hand told the sad tale. Rather than endure the disgrace of a trial at court and subsequent conviction and punishment, she chose to end her wretched existence.

Mrs. Schwinke was kept in ignorance of the sad fate of her servant until she herself was quite restored from the effects of the deadly drug administered by a jealous rival. She was filled with remorse when the truth was revealed to her.

“Poor Mina! Poor girl!” moaned she, in heart-rending accents. “I hope the good God will forgive me for being so angry with her.”

Poor Mrs. Schwinke acted generously in regard to the burial of the friendless suicide. She became responsible for all the expenses, and had her decently interred.

Sellers was nearly frantic when told on his return to the house that his landlady had been poisoned, and might possibly die of the effects.

“Oh, no! oh, no!” exclaimed he, as he hastened to the parlor, where she lay on the sofa writhing in pain. He sprang to her side, and falling on his knees beside her, he rapturously kissed her pale cheeks and called her his “dear Bertha.”

“Oh, who has done this wicked deed?” exclaimed he, in anguished tones.

“Say you did not poison me,” whispered she, with a painful effort, while she regarded his face with beaming eyes.

“I poison you!” he cried, in unfeigned horror. “Oh, how can you ask such a question, when I would willingly give my own life to save yours!”

She smiled and closed her eyes, while her frame was wracked with pain. But the smile remained on her lips. She was beloved by the idol of her heart. Now she had no fear of death.

But fate and the doctor decreed otherwise. She was not to die just then, and there were two happy hearts in that house when the physician pronounced her out of danger.

On the following day Varnoe called Sellers aside, and told him of the visit of Mrs. Schwinke to his office, and the purport of her visit.

Sellers laughed outright at her strange conceit, then became grave, and asked the detective what could possibly have put such an absurd idea into her head.

“I have a faint idea how the error happened,” observed Varnoe, with a smile.

“Let me hear it.”

“Were you and Mr. Luther at any time during the last few days discussing in your bedroom the intention of making your worthy hostess a present or gift?”

“Not to my knowledge,” replied Sellers, after a moment’s consideration. We were talking about giving poor Mina a birthday gift, for she was a favorite of ours, and her birthday would have been on the 29th had she lived. But how do you mean to connect that circumstance with the nonsensical notion that lodged in Mrs. Schwinke’s brain?” asked he.

“Listen—I’ll explain it to your entire satisfaction,” rejoined Varnoe. “She overheard you but imperfectly, and understands our language also imperfectly. Hence, when you mentioned the term ‘gift,’ she lost sight of the fact that you were not speaking her language, and ‘gift,’ as you must be aware, means poison in the German language[.]”

“Right; proceed,” said the young man.

“The word ‘birthday’ reaching her ear but indistinctly, she misconstrued, in her excitement, into ‘Bertha,’ and with the two words ‘birthday gift,’ she was positive that you said to Mr. Luther that you were going to give to Bertha gift, meaning poison. Do you see it?”

A merry laugh was the answer[, and] they laughed in concert as they reviewed the ridiculous side of the good lady’s mistake.

When it was explained to her how she came to make so grave a mistake she was greatly confused and vowed to play the part of eavesdropper no more, and possibly to remove from Frederick Sellers’s heart to do so vile a deed as to poison his landlady, she bestowed her hand on him six months later and became a happy bride.

[An] invitation was given to Varnoe to be present at the wedding, as he was now looked upon as a friend by both the lady and the gentleman, and he was therefore present on that occasion.

Varnoe presented his bill for services rendered while the guests were enjoying the wedding supper. It read as follows:

Mrs. Bertha Sellers, nee Schwinke

To Varnoe

Dr.

For producing proof that Fred. Sellers did harbor no deliberate design on Mrs. Schwinke’s life:

\$20.00

The detective mischievously handed it to Mr. Sellers, and whispered to him to hand it to his bride after reading it. He did so, and the guests who witnessed this little by-play greatly wondered what the note contained that it had the power to call such vivid blushes on the cheeks of the blooming bride.

The bride placed the magic bill in her bosom, and, while the blushes still lingered on her cheeks, she playfully shook her plump finger at the laughing detective and said:

“Now, I’ll not pay you.”

And she didn’t.

Columbus [GA] *Enquirer*, February 27, 1881

The Vancouver [WA] *Independent*, March 24, 1881

This story was one of a number of stories, likely written by different authors, all featuring Mr. Varnoe, the detective.