

POISON

Sylvia Townsend Warner

(Broadcast 27:iv:1934, published in *9 o'clock Series*, 1934)

The market was over, the town had grown so silent that one could hear very plainly the rain falling on the pavement as it had fallen all day. On the steamy windows the tracks of dribbling moisture left rivulets of crystal, and when the apprentice came in from putting up the shutters his spectacles clouded and the change of atmosphere set him yawning; for inside the shop it was extremely cosy, and the neatness, prettiness, and polish of the wares gave an impression of ladylike-ness - as though it were a parlour and not a chemist's shop.

Mr. Hawley looked up from the day-book and remarked that since the beginning of the year there had not been so great a sale of the cough-cure. As he spoke he coughed; he too had had influenza, though he had not taken to his bed for it, doctoring his temperature with quinine and salicylate. His voice was listless, even his cough had little energy. He had taken a great deal of quinine and it had lowered his vitality. The boy, responding, said that Mr. Hawley should go off to bed with something hot. It had been a day to tax anyone, with so many people coming in and leaving the door open for the cold to air follow them. *Dogsnose*, he said; and fearing lest the advice should sound unprofessional he allowed the word to come out with blustering vehemence. For he was quite a young boy, his voice was still unruly to him.

As he spoke, the door was pushed open and a stranger entered. At least it was no one known to Mr. Hawley, though at the first glance it seemed to him that the face was familiar,

that he had seen it, earlier in the day, flattened against the window, staring in past the bottles and the sponges and the display cards.

It was a striking face, striking and unpleasant - round as a platter, further extended by large out-standing ears, and bedizened (for really bedizened was the word) with a pair of pale shallow eyes. Bleached and brilliant, they were like the eyes of a famished cat. The whole aspect of that face conveyed desperate hunger, though not the sort of hunger which can be appeased by a good square meal, for the facial bones were well-covered, there was plenty of flesh there. It was a hunger of the blood, more likely, some variety of chlorosis. Even now, in the midst of an influenza epidemic, to see a face so bloodless made Mr. Hawley's own blood run cold.

Walking up to the counter, leaning his elbow on the curved glass of the show-case, the stranger demanded something for a cold; something strong, a pick-me-up, he said, that he could toss off then and there. And while Mr. Hawley compounded the dose, choosing from this bottle and that, he remained leaning against the counter, his bright eyes flicking over the shelves, as though in search of some aspect of clear glass that could match their brilliancy.

The boy remained also, standing about as though it seemed to him that he might be needed. He was a good boy, a careful boy; Mr. Hawley dismissed him almost affectionately, for he had been touched by that recommendation of dogsnose, though he, an experienced chemist, could do better than that. What he now handed across the counter was stronger than any dogsnose. The man drank it off without comment, and asked for another.

To take at bedtime, Mr. Hawley suggested; but the man said he would take it now. It would not, he averred, be too strong for him. Nothing could be too strong for such a cold as his.

On the empty pavements the raindrops pattered like thin hurrying footsteps. Nodding towards the bottles of Special Influenza Mixture which stood prominently arranged on the counter the man said he supposed there was a brisk demand for that at this time of year. An unhealthy season, he added; and the chemist agreed.

'Not that that does you much harm, I suppose?'

'Well, no, sir. Though this year I've not been much of an advertisement for my own goods, for I've had a touch of the 'flu myself.'

The man laughed, showing his teeth. They were false teeth, and the coral red of his plate was in shocking contrast to his bloodless face and lips. Even in a healthy season, he went on to say, he would suppose this town to be sickly enough, mouldering away in the midst of the fens. In all his life he had never struck such a dead-alive place, a town with no life in it, with no possible future before it.

Mr. Hawley asked him if he travelled much. To hear the town thus abused distressed him: though indeed the words were true enough, for every year trade was dwindling and now the last factory was closing down.

The man did not trouble to answer. Boredom, not interest, it seemed, moved his glance hither and thither about the shop. He shivered, and pulled up his coat-collar, but made no move to go. When he spoke again it was to speak about chemists. He spoke ruminatingly, dispassionately, not at all as though he were addressing one who was a chemist himself. It must be a dreary life, he opined: the same old women with their interminable cancers and asthmas returning for their mixtures, or children wanting a pennyworth of liquorice. One might touch it up with face-powder and fancy soap for the young women, but that was only a top-dressing, and in a year or two the same young women would draggle in for teething powders and ringworm ointment. No, no, he said, coming suddenly out of his reverie, the only romance, the only redeeming excitement in a chemist's business was the traffic in poisons. That was something like it. For one would have a queer, a fascinating sense of power, remembering that in a single bottle one had the wherewithal to send all one's neighbours to the churchyard. And a slip of the hand might do it, a moment's wavering of the memory.

It was not so easy as that, the chemist said. There were regulations, precautions imposed by law.

Yes, said the man, there would be. Nothing in life kept its sparkle of excitement for long. Regulations put on the

damper, or if they did not, habit soon got the upper hand and made one thing as tame as another. And then still glancing over the shop with that bright blank gaze, he began to question Mr. Hawley about the regulations which rendered even possession of poisons a dull business, a mere routine.

There were three methods, the chemist explained. Poisons and dangerous drugs might be kept in a special cupboard, or secured on the shelves by a Tantalus-like device, making it impossible to take them down without a particular manoeuvre, as a minimum precaution they must be kept in bottles of a peculiar colour and surface recognisable to sight and touch.

And how did Mr. Hawley keep his, the stranger asked. 'In a cupboard?'

'In a cupboard.'

'Locked, of course?'

'Locked,' said Mr. Hawley, concealing a yawn of weariness. It was a dull enough conversation, to him at any rate; nor did the stranger seem to find much interest in it either, asking questions only for the sake of asking them.

And yet, the stranger said, turning the emptied glass in his hands, poison was poison, when all was said and done. A chemist, a chemist with some incurable disease, or in trouble over money, or even tired, at last, of his dreary life and despairing of the future, might unlock that cupboard and help himself. He had his own death in his hands, no one could rob him of that.

'I have never heard,' said Mr. Hawley, speaking hurriedly, speaking emphatically, 'of a chemist who poisoned himself.'

'They know better, perhaps,' said the man. 'They've read up the symptoms.'

Putting down the glass he paid for his drinks, stared round once more, nodded casually, and went out. Mr. Hawley sat down with a groan of fatigue. This conversation, coming at the end of a hard day, had made him feel singularly dispirited; and it was a long while before he could rouse himself sufficiently to shut up the shop and retire to his solitary rooms above it.

In the morning the boy enquired how long Monsol had stayed, nodding towards the sneezing muffin-faced misery of

the advertisement. It was to be hoped, he continued, that Monsol would not come in again, for a more unpleasant customer he had never set eyes on. Mr. Hawley said mildly that when the boy had seen as many customers as he had, one would seem much like another. Even as he spoke he remembered that the man overnight had implied as much; and he heard again that whining voice dwelling on the peculiar dreariness of being a chemist. He was glad to be interrupted by the voice of the boy, even though it spoke of the poor sale they had had for the new bath-cubes. In an unhealthy season, Mr. Hawley said, the demand for toilet luxuries always lessened. The medicines, though, said the boy cheerfully, more than made up for that.

Mr. Hawley had a feeling that the man would come again. He did so, arriving at the same hour and asking, as before, for a pick-me-up. He left the door open, and the cold misty air, blowing in, roused up Mr. Hawley's neuralgia. Since it was obvious that the man had again come to linger, Mr. Hawley mentioned the neuralgia as a polite pretext for shutting the door. Strychnine, said the man was what he needed for that; nothing else on those shelves, over which his glance moved so disdainfully, would be strong enough. And as though released into his obsession he began to talk once more of poisons.

Poisons, sickness, death . . . these seemed to be the only things he cared to speak about, and yet he seemed with every word to flout the matter of his discourse, talking always with detachment and petulance, as though he were scornfully humouring the preoccupations of the man on the other side of the counter, as though poisons and sickness and death were Mr. Hawley's concerns only and nothing to him. It occurred to the chemist that a man so horribly pale, so ravaged by some strange fever of the wasting blood, should speak more seriously of sickness and death. But it was jauntily, confidently, that the man took his leave, saying that Mr. Hawley might expect to see him on the morrow.

'For I have taken a fancy to you,' he added. And as though to prove it he looked back through the glass door with an affable nod. Mr. Hawley remembered his impression of a face pressed to the window on market day. He had thought then

that it might be imagination, for one often imagines things after influenza. But it was not.

He wished the stranger's fancy had pitched elsewhere, for he could not but dislike the man extremely; and the thought came to him that he might make his neuralgia a reason for spending the evening in the back shop and leaving the boy in charge of the counter. But that would not do. The boy was young, morbid conversation about poisons would do him no good; though an experienced chemist is well-salted to that aspect of his trade, young minds are easily infected with dangerous imaginings.

This time the stranger came to the point at once, asking the chemist what poisons he had sold that day; and with his customary scornfulness did not wait for an answer, going on to suppose that, in a one-horse town like this, ratsbane would be all that was demanded. A German rat-poison, he said, was the stuff; and he described how, when the lid was taken off, the paste smoked with a choking visible fume, so savagely ample was the amount of phosphorus. You spread it, he said, on bread and butter; and the rats who tasted it were instantly tormented with so burning a thirst that they would gnaw through leaden pipes to get at the water. Water - even a drop of water - would intensify their agony, hasten their death-throes. That was the cunning of it, he said; and his shallow colourless eyes grew rounder and rounder, and his breath, playing on Mr. Hawley's cheek, as he leaned so excitedly across the counter, seemed like the fumes, choking and visible, that wreathed up from the opened tin of rat-poison.

On leaving he repeated that he had taken a fancy to Mr. Hawley; and all that night and all the next day the chemist waited in heavy apprehension for him to come again.

He did not come.

Four days went by, and there was no sign of the stranger. Yet Mr. Hawley was little the better for it. It was as though the stranger's ghost walked in instead, for now, every evening at closing time, Mr. Hawley felt the oncoming of a fit of the horrors. Like a thick fog, gloom and weariness would overtake him, so that he could scarcely keep his eyes open while he made up the day-book and shut the shop. Too tired

for supper, he would go to bed and fall into a leaden sleep. Out of this sleep he would awaken with the conviction of having made some fatal mistake in dispensing. At some time or other during the day, it seemed to him, he had put poison into a medicine. Sometimes he had done it by mistake, at other times, deliberately, not from any malice but with a malign indifference, as though a devil had possessed him and made him its conscious besotted tool. These were delusions, he knew, nothing but delusions. The attack of influenza had left him low, his persistent neuralgia was proof enough of that; horrors and bad dreams were only further signs of debility. So he would reason with himself in the midst of the dark night. But reasonings were of no avail; like the bursting of some subterranean flood the horror would rush over him again, wave after wave, and overwhelm him.

One night, during a moment when reason was uppermost, he got up and went down to the shop and opened the prescription book. There were the prescriptions he had made up during the day, and into no one of them did a poison enter. Even while he stood at the page the horror came back on looking him, a contemptuous voice saying that the prescription-book was no register of his doings, for he would not be such a fool as to enter the details of the death poured into the bottle.

Out of these nights he would emerge broken and trembling, painfully sleepy and clumsy and forgetful. He would make mistakes in the change or hand customers the wrong article. His shaking hands knocked over the bottles on the counter or demolished the neat pyramids of soap and pill-boxes. He could no longer do up a parcel properly, the sealing-wax straggled over the white paper like smears of blood. He stopped the dispensing, though the drugs stood in their ordered positions on the shelves he could not find them. And all the while his neuralgia went nagging on. Strychnine, said a remembered voice, was what he needed for that; and on Sunday, in the closed and dusky shop, he set about compounding himself a strong tonic. But no sooner had he unlocked the poison cupboard and put forth his hand among the blue-ribbed bottles, recognisable to sight and touch, than

such a horror overtook him that he slammed-to the door and fled. That night, awakening, he remembered that he had not stayed to lock the cupboard; but he dared not stir out of his bed, he must lie there, sick and trembling and in a cold sweat, till the harsh morning light brought some sort of astringent to his miserable mind.

Market day came round again, just such a day as the last, wet, cold, and foggy. He will come to-day, thought Mr. Hawley. As the clock jolted to the hour, and the shop emptied, and he could hear again the shutters being put up and the rain-drops tapping on the pavement he was ready to pray that the stranger might indeed come. Anxiously, snappishly, he bade the boy go home, and the boy went gladly enough, for he had no wish to prolong working-hours that had lately become so unpleasant.

Mr. Hawley waited. It was the hour when his horrors were due to begin. They came, but the stranger did not. To-night the horrors took a definite form. Mr. Hawley began to think of diseases of the brain. The ills of the flesh which his profession had made him so well acquainted with were bad enough, but madness was worse. There were no remedies, no palliatives, in his shop for that. Neurasthenia, he cried, it's only neurasthenia! There were dozens of patent medicines for neurasthenia; and he took up one of them and read the word, *phosphorus*.

When at last the stranger came quietly into the shop Mr. Hawley was standing before the opened poison cupboard.

'So you are having a look at it,' said the stranger.

The chemist shut the cupboard at his words, and locked it. Now, at the request for the usual pick-me-up, he laid the key on the counter, and turned in a flurry to find the various bottles he needed. The sal volatile . . . he could not find the sal volatile . . . the boy must have replaced it on the wrong shelf. While he was staring at the drug-jars the stranger picked up the poison cupboard key and dropped it into his pocket.

'Make it strong,' he said.

He certainly needed it strong. To-night he seemed more bloodless, more famishing, than ever before, his eyes, so

round and pale and brilliant, were like pieces of glass set in a mask of white rubber.

He tossed off the pick-me-up, paid for it, and went away.

Mr. Hawley scarcely noticed his departure. Dragging his feet, only half conscious of the routine he performed, he shut and barred the door, put out the lights, and took himself to bed. With his hand on the switch he stood staring at the smooth mound of his pillow as if he had never seen a pillow before, or would never see one again. Bed had been a kind place, once, and he a dutiful contented man.

When he awoke, the light was still on, and this made the room look like a sickroom. But he had no mind for speculation now. Out of that pillow, so smoothly mounded, had sprung a new nightmare. He had dreamed that he had poisoned himself, that the poison was at this minute working in him, and that that was why he felt, as the rats did, such intolerable thirst. 'But now I am mad,' he said to himself, smoothly and reasonably. He had been already mad when he opened the cupboard to look in. Like the rats, frantic for the water which must complete their undoing, he, already poisoned in mind, must seek out the poison which should finish off his body. Then the stranger had come in, thwarting him. But now he was alone, there was nothing to stay him; and he got out of bed, put on slippers and a dressing-gown, and went downstairs.

Seeing the familiar shop, so cosy, so tidy and lady-like and parlour-like, he was seized with a piercing regret that he must leave it, end himself horribly, all for no reason. Fear leaped up in him, then common sense, awakening, overmastered fear. What he must do, what as a reasonable chemist suffering from neurasthenia consequent upon influenza, he must do, was to look this obsession in the face until it swayed him no longer. Yes, calmly and deliberately, he would open the poison cupboard, confront those bottled terrors, read their labels, handle them maybe; and then, having seen them for what they were, a dangerous but essential part of his stock-in-trade, familiar but disciplined perils, he would shut them away and go back to bed, his own man once more. The key was on the counter. He remembered leaving it there, and that

showed the state he had allowed himself to get into; for such neglect was criminally careless.

The key was not on the counter.

He would not be foiled like that, death should not escape him so easily! Not for an accident of a key would he put off his desire, spend such another day of torment, go mad and be carried to an asylum. There were his dear poisons, his comforters, his dreadful and dear ones, waiting quiet as pigeons in a pigeon-cote. With his fist he smashed the cupboard door, chose, swiftly and unerringly, the bottle he wanted, poured out, deft with long habit, the strong, the sure dose into the measuring glass, and drank it off.

At the inquest the stranger was the chief witness. He told how he had gone to the chemist with a bad cold, how he had fallen into conversation with him, how the chemist had spoken of the poisons in his charge. On subsequent visits Mr. Hawley had spoken after the same fashion, so markedly, so boastingly, that the stranger had surmised the existence of something like an obsession. He told, too, how, on his last visit, he had found the chemist standing before the opened cupboard, and how, on a sudden impulse, he had picked up the key and gone with it and his suspicions to the police station. A stranger to the town, he had been some little while finding his way thither; and in that interval the chemist was a dead man.

He was highly commended by the coroner for his humane and prudent behaviour.

The apprentice, who was also called as a witness, could not take his eyes from the stranger. All his pallor, all his famished looks were gone. His complexion was clear and ruddy, his voice was ringing, he seemed the picture of a well-nourished man. It was as though poor Mr. Hawley's death, thought the boy, had been the very pick-me-up his customer had needed, as though he had replenished himself with the dead man's blood; and his thoughts trudged between the dead man and the survivor, but could find no clue, no explanation.

On the following day the stranger left the town.