

She was accused as a poisoner, even though her "victim's" prescriptions included arsenic, cascara, henbane, iridin, jaborandi, morphine, papain, prussic acid, and strychnine.

sort, perhaps not really demonstrable: but one thinks of him because Mrs. Maybrick participated in that memorable exodus of marriageable young women from America to Europe between the end of the Civil War and turn of the century which so often hovers in the background of James's fiction. It is altogether too fanciful to see her as a small-scale, bourgeois replica of a Jamesian heroine—and yet . . .

Mrs. Maybrick was born Florence Elizabeth Chandler, the daughter of a banker in Mobile, Alabama; her husband, twenty-four years older than she, was a Liverpool cotton merchant temporarily resident in America, where they were married in 1881.*

The story of the Maybrick murder is a simple one, the complications in the trial record being almost exclusively due to the battle of the toxicologists being once more rejoined. On May 11, 1889, James Maybrick died "under mysterious circumstances" in his home, after an illness attended by many distressing symptoms. The principal evidence against his wife was the presumption of motive. In March she had spent a few nights in London with another man, and later the same

month, after their return from the Grand National Steeplechase, where they had happened to meet him, she and her husband had had a violent argument, in the course of which he had given her multiple bruises and a black eye. Only the pleas of a servant and the family doctor dissuaded her from leaving him. Moreover, a month later, a week or so before her husband's final illness began, she had bought flypaper at a chemist's, even though flies were not yet in season and there was some flypaper left in the kitchen from last year. A servant saw her soaking the paper in her bedroom basin to remove the arsenic coating. Her explanation was that she wanted to make a cosmetic solution to clear her complexion, as she was planning to accompany her husband to a ball. At the trial, some evidence was produced that arsenic was occasionally favored as a complexion aid or, alternatively, as a depilatory cream. Another chemist from whom Mrs. Maybrick had bought a dozen flypapers in April said, "I can speak to the fact that ladies came to buy flypapers when no flies were about." But the line of inquiry this statement invited—the possibility that certain other ladies' husbands subsequently died of violent gastric disturbances—was not pursued.

Combined with this indisputable possession of arsenic was the fact that Maybrick's nurses reported some apparent sleight-of-hand on his wife's part with the beef juice that the doctor had ordered given to the patient. A search of the house after his death revealed the presence of arsenic in tiny or more significant amounts on a rag, in one

of Mrs. Maybrick's handkerchiefs, in a bottle of aperient mixture, in a bottle of glycerine, in a packet marked "Poison for Cats" (*sic*—not "rats"), and elsewhere. All told, the analysts estimated that the arsenic found scattered about the house was enough to kill fifty people. But all this was circumstantial evidence, and in its totality it did not constitute a crushing case against the young woman.

A comparison of this trial conducted in 1889 with those of 1856-65 reveals how far the Age of Science had progressed since those remote days when toxicology and forensic medicine were in their hesitant, inexperienced infancy. The medical evidence which occupies by far the greater part of the Maybrick transcript (the scene of virtually the whole reconstructed drama is the victim's sickroom) has a much more scientific air about it, a greater assumption of authority. Home Office analysts were not forced to admit, as one previous analyst had, that the poison revealed by their analysis was derived from their analytic tools. But the trouble was, that along with heightened authority should have come consensus; and no such consensus was reached. The doctors disagreed as violently as ever.

Was Maybrick's death really caused by arsenic? Some expert witnesses testified that it was, while others, equally expert, testified with equal assurance that it was not. The defense labored mightily to show that Maybrick suffered from gastroenteritis. Certain it was that, despite a basically healthy constitution, he was a hypochondriac of

*There is delicious reverse snobbery in the statement of James G. Blaine, the Secretary of State in Benjamin Harrison's cabinet, when he wrote in support of his countrywoman's reprieve: "That she may have been influenced by the foolish ambition of many American girls for a foreign marriage, and have descended from her own rank to that of her husband's family, which seems to have been somewhat vulgar, must be forgiven to her youth, since she was only eighteen at the time of her marriage."