

An extract from *THE BODY IN BERKELEY SQUARE*,
BOOK THREE IN THE MAYFAIR 100 WW1 CRIME SERIES BY LYNN BRITTNEY



THE PUZZLE OF THE UNKNOWN CORPSE

The lecture theatre at the Medical School for Women was packed. Caroline and Mabel had arrived especially early so that they could find seats in the front row and get a better view of Bernard Spilsbury's surgical work. Notebooks and pencils poised, they awaited the great man himself, as the hall filled up behind them. Looking around, Caroline noted a few young male medical students, who were huddled together in one corner of the hall, as if for protection. She nudged Mabel and nodded towards the men with a smile.

"Hmm," Mabel whispered, "They'll be off to the Front as soon as they qualify, Soon, the only doctors left in Britain will be women and old men."

"It's the same with nurses," Caroline whispered back, in irritation. "This week, our hospital has lost another three nurses to the field hospitals in France and Belgium. We can't afford to lose them. The medical problems in the civilian population are getting worse – malnutrition, industrial accidents – all sorts of things."

Mabel was about to respond when Spilsbury entered the arena, to a round of applause from the assembled audience. Then everyone settled down to hear the great man speak. With the aid of projected slides, and small grunts of approval from Mabel, who applauded the use of cameras whenever possible, Spilsbury outlined the signs of various poisons in the liver, kidneys, hair shaft, nails and so on. Mabel took frantic notes,

but Caroline was disappointed that he seemed to be aiming his lecture at first year students and, so far, had not covered anything that she did not already know.

But then, two thirds of the way through the lecture, an assistant wheeled on a body, covered by a sheet and Caroline perked up, hopeful that she would now see a live autopsy. However, she was disappointed when, on removal of the sheet, it was obvious that the autopsy had already been performed.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Spilsbury said, “I would like to present you with a mystery and invite you to, perhaps, solve the mystery.”

Caroline and Mabel looked at each other. Their interest was piqued.

Spilsbury continued. “This young woman’s body was found in the bushes in Berkeley Square, on the twelfth of July at one in the morning. She had been stabbed through the heart with a long stiletto-like blade. In fact, it was so long that it went right through her and must have impaled her to a tree.” There was a murmur of distaste went through the audience. Spilsbury continued. “Then the blade was withdrawn, which must have taken some strength. I found traces of tree bark in the exit wound. Death would have been instantaneous. The police made enquiries, but she was not known to any of the residents or their servants in Berkeley Square. She was wearing, so my wife tells me, a dress from a reasonably expensive couture label in London...” A small ripple of laughter emanated from the audience. “She was also wearing a dark wig...” Spilsbury removed the wig to show that the woman had strange-coloured hair. It was light brown but appeared, in the front, to have been

dyed a bright orange colour. “Can anyone comment on the real hair?” He threw the question out to the audience. There was a momentary silence whilst a few hands were raised. Spilsbury pointed to a woman at the back and said “Yes?”

“Is it TNT poisoning?” the woman asked and Spilsbury smiled. “It is indeed,” acknowledging the murmur of surprise that came from the audience. He continued. “She was also wearing a lot of make-up, which when removed, revealed a distinct yellow tinge to her skin...I’m afraid you can’t see it under this harsh spotlight. This is again a feature of TNT poisoning but, on examination of her liver, which showed some minor damage but evidence of healing, it would suggest that the woman had worked, at some time in the recent past, with TNT, but was recovering from its effects. The whites of her eyes were a little jaundiced but, again, showed signs, in one eye, of an improving situation. However, this was not the end of this poor woman’s misfortunes...” he paused and took a swig of water before continuing, then raised his hand to the projectionist to proceed to the next slide. “Examination of the deceased’s throat...” The slide appeared on the screen, showing a dark discolouration at the back of the throat and some sepsis of the tonsils, “...showed that there was some destruction of the tissue of the mucous membranes. Now,” he turned once more to the audience, “I confess that I was at a loss with this, until I called in a specialist doctor who has done some work in the munitions industry. He told me immediately what had caused the condition of the deceased’s throat. Can anyone hazard a guess at what that might be?” Spilsbury threw it open to the students again. This time there were no hands raised.

“Black powder, I was reliably informed.” He continued. “Black powder, used as an explosive in the munitions industry, is a composite of a nitrate, charcoal and sulphur.” There was a murmur of interest from the audience again. “Sulphur dioxide is extremely destructive to tissue of the mucous membranes and upper respiratory tract, eyes and skin. Inhalation may result in spasm, inflammation and edema of the larynx and bronchi, chemical pneumonitis and pulmonary edema. Thus, exposure to sulfur dioxide can lead to a series of health problems and, in the case of extended exposure, death. Now, this woman’s throat condition, again, as with the TNT exposure, appeared to be in the process of healing. Tissues taken from the back of her throat showed, under magnification, new cells were developing, which would suggest that she had once been in a position to inhale black powder but had removed herself from that situation.”

Spilsbury covered over the body and came to the front of the arena. Caroline prepared herself to make detailed notes. “What we are seeing here, ladies and gentlemen,” Spilsbury began, “is a relatively new phenomenon...illnesses, and possibly, in time...deaths...caused by working in the munitions industry. TNT is a relatively new explosive, I am given to understand, not yet in common use throughout the industry. We must familiarize ourselves with these manifestations of toxicity because, as this war progresses, more and more women are going to be working in munitions, if the new Ministry of Munitions has its way. This means that when you are qualified, you will be confronted by these women who need treatment. It is possible that women may be more susceptible to these

chemicals, having, in the main, more delicate tissues.” Caroline tutted at what she suspected was a sweeping generalisation. Spilsbury continued. “Obviously, what is needed is more protection for these workers, who are handling such dangerous substances and I shall be making my recommendations to the new Ministry, which has recently opened its doors. But, I suspect, that the safety of workers will be way down the list of priorities of both the government-run and privately-run munitions establishments, particularly in light of the recent national scandal over the shortage of shells for the Army. But, as frequently happens in the world of pathology, we will be called upon to prove negligence on behalf of the employers when these women start dying and their relatives start claiming compensation. You, as doctors in general practice or in hospitals, will be called upon to give your opinion when these women are disabled by their work environment and can no longer earn a living. So, we must both find out all we can about munitions injuries and diseases...and we must learn very quickly, ladies and gentlemen, because the problem is starting now.” He paused and took another drink of water. “Now, are there any questions?” Many hands shot up, but Caroline was spotted by Spilsbury first and he extended his hand in acknowledgement.

“What will happen to the body of this woman now?” she asked in a clear voice.

“I have requested to keep the corpse in the mortuary at St Mary’s Hospital, so that I may do further investigations and produce a paper for the Ministry of Munitions. This will probably take a couple of months. After that, if the police have

not got any further with their enquiries, the body will be buried in an unmarked grave somewhere suitable.”

As Spilsbury smiled and moved on to the next question, Caroline realized that, more than anything, she wanted to find out the identity of the murdered woman munitions worker, and she needed to speak to Beech as a matter of urgency.

She raised her hand again and, after a short wait, Spilsbury turned his attention to her once more. “Yes?” he asked her again.

“Sir...the expensive dress she was wearing...can you remember the name of the couturier?”

Spilsbury looked amused. “Why yes. It was Renee LaJeune.” He looked quizzically at Caroline, as she wrote the name down with a satisfied look on her face, but then his attention was demanded elsewhere.

“Mabel,” Caroline whispered. “I think we have found ourselves a case to work on. But we must speak to Peter first.”

Mabel nodded and smiled. “A cup of tea before we go to Scotland Yard?” she ventured and was rewarded by an enthusiastic nod.
