

## BOOK DISCUSSION

November 30, 2012, Pete's Tavern

### *THREE AT WOLFE'S DOOR* (1962): "POISON A LA CARTE" (or TOO MANY HEBES)

Hebe (pronounced: HEE-BEE) = Goddess of Youth and Cupbearer to the gods

Novella was written in June, 1958, according to Rex Stout's writing log

It is one of the few Novellas that was not published in magazine format prior to publication in a 3-story book. First published by Viking in hardcover April 1960. It was published in Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine in 1963.

Carol Annis (the Hebe who dunnit) has a remarkably similar name to that of the murdered mother in THE MOTHER HUNT, Carol Mardus.

#### **Plot Points:**

Would a head waiter or whatever, Zoltan Mahany really, have been able to come up with an act to flummox five women., much less in 30 minutes?

Did anyone have the patience to figure out the logic of why it had to be one of five women? I never have.

Would Carol's attempt to poison Zoltan hold up in court or was it entrapment?

If the doctor didn't know that Vincent Pile was poisoned with arsenic and Wolfe did, why doesn't Wolfe tell the doctor? Pyle was not treated with the methods then available that might have saved him. Certainly Wolfe (or Stout) may not have known of the treatments but assuming there were none was silly:

#### Short Version:

1. Get Fluids into the Victim (urination removes arsenic) and begin a Blood Transfusion; watch out for dehydration.
2. Perform Gastric Lavage (pump out the stomach) within one hour or so of exposure
3. Begin Chelation Treatment: It began in World War I, as a treatment for poison gas attacks (poison gas contained arsenic). Chelating drugs work by forming chemical bonds with the arsenic, reducing its poisonous properties and allowing it to pass out of the body more painlessly.

## Tidbits from the Book:

Brillat-Savarin's Birthday = April 1 (1755) – a founder of the gastronomic essay.

I DIGRESS: Also from Wikipedia: "Brillat-Savarin is often considered as the father of low-carbohydrate diet. He considered sugar and white flour to be the cause of obesity and he suggested instead protein-rich ingredients."

Benjamin Shriver wrote a letter every year on September 1 (why that date?) denouncing the use of horseradish on oysters (why? Because it masks the flavor?)

The word aristology (from Wikipedia):

[Aristology](#), chapter 1. "The word has never become more than a marginal addition to the language, a source of obscure scholarly humour rather than a term of utility," wrote [etymologist Michael Quinion](#). "It's best known from books by Rex Stout, in which his corpulent protagonist, Nero Wolfe, has a couple of encounters with a group of gourmets, the Ten for Aristology."

"The earliest citation in *The Oxford English Dictionary* is from 1835," wrote [ABC NewsRadio](#). "This rare word turns up in one of Rex Stout's delightful mystery novels featuring the fat detective Nero Wolfe — in a book entitled 'Poison a la Carte'."

Cramer says "Scrape his neck" to Wolfe. AG says that is "a new one"

Is the phrase "self-made blonde" obsolete?

Pg 52: "One of the most elaborate charades Wolfe had ever staged..." Is that true?

Typo on pg 52 "It was in my hand. It [f] I had had to..."

Brownstone household question: Did old phone extensions (as in rotary dial systems) have an intercom ability with no dial tone? [Rehearsal device] Wouldn't you need a PBX of something?

The unfamiliar word: Aristology, chapter 1.

1) Regarding Wolfe's premise, is dining a science or an art?

2) From Wikipedia:

"The word has never become more than a marginal addition to the language, a source of obscure scholarly humor rather than a term of utility," wrote etymologist Michael Quinion. "It's best known from books by Rex Stout, in which his corpulent protagonist, Nero Wolfe, has a couple of encounters with a group of gourmets, the Ten for Aristology."

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#### **ARCHIE QUOTES OF NOTE:**

Pg 28: "If you think a problem is tough, try handling a problem elephant"

Pg 4: Archie and telephone # shtick: "It gave me an idea. Fritz likes to pretend that he has reason to believe that no damsel is safe within a mile of me, which doesn't make sense since you can't tell much about them a mile off, and I thought it would do him good to see me operate at close quarters. Also it was a challenge and an interesting sociological experiment."

Plot device that the murderess was one of first 3 approached, and they were the ones who were not clustered in the alcove. So we know she is separated from the throng, plus we get a more in depth look at her and on or 2 others' character

But is the phone # hunt realistic – would young women really give out their phone # to a handsome guy when they knew he was getting everyone's #?

AG says Carol's hair is "the color of corn silk" and later "the color of corn silk just before it starts to turn." Rex & AG were farmers.

Pg. 39: "I was now calling her Helen, not that I felt like it, but in the detective business you have to be sociable, of course preserving your honor and virtue."

Pg 35: "the hostesses were making it sort of festive and intimate by serving Bubble-Pagne, though I preferred milk."

## **A&E TV SERIES:**

- Switched the location of the restaurant from Piotti's on 14th Street between 2nd & 3rd (also used in Gambit) to Rusterman's.
- Changed the location of the scene in which Wolfe expounds to Carol Annis and she repeated says, "You lie," from Wolfe's office to Rusterman's.
- Changed the host from Benjamin Shriver, the Shipping Magnate, to Hewitt; thus changing the scene of the dinner from Greenwich Village to Long Island.
  - The Long Island location required the car trip (Wolfe was portrayed poorly)
  - The Long Island location of the murder should have left Cramer (NYPD) out of the investigation.
- Had the victim, Pyle, wear a green "smoking jacket" instead of a tux like everyone else.
- Wolfe removes the Parmesan from the tray in anticipation of Zoltan leaving the table to get it instead of in the book she says she left her handbag in the car parked outside (in 1960 in Manhattan?).
- Scene at police headquarters with Fritz, Zoltan, and Felix shows them at "the 3 monkeys." I didn't like them taking liberties with Fritz character.
- Stollas do not have sleeves.
- Fritz has his wine glass handy throughout the kitchen scene
- There is a male "wardrobe assistant" shown briefly fixing the hair, wardrobe, makeup, etc. of the Hebes
- The addition of the closing scene is quite good: Wolfe serves wine to Fritz & beer to himself at the kitchen table.

## **MUSIC:**

TITLE: St. Louis Blues | W.C. Handy

Rondo Alla Turca from Sonata No. 11 in A Major | Mozart

Spinning Song | Mendelssohn

WOLFE IN THE KITCHEN WITH FRITZ: Pathos | Dick Walter, APM

FINALE: "Pathos" by Dick Walter (<http://www.apmmusic.com> on CD KPM369)

## EUROPEAN VERSION:

For the European market, the episodes were shot in wide screen and for the longer (fewer commercials) European timeslots. They were then edited with minutes cut and left/right sides of the film chopped, to fit the shorter American episode timeslot.

Inaudible pre-Dinner conversation added

Intro with interviews for Hebe role (funny but superfluous selection process) also has Hewitt spying from the next room – the secret judge

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## Details of Arsenic Treatments (all available in the 1950s)

### Get Fluids Into the Victim and Begin a Blood Transfusion

The cause of death in arsenic poison is often hypovolemic shock, which occurs when the heart can't get enough blood to the body. Dehydration is also a concern because of the fluids lost through vomiting and diarrhea. A blood transfusion and intravenous fluid replacement should begin as soon as possible, and you should monitor the victim's vital signs at all times. Steady urination is a good sign. The more the victim pees, the more the arsenic is being expelled from the body.

### Perform Gastric Lavage ("stomach pump)

This procedure should only be undertaken by professionals. A tube is inserted through the victim's nose and into his stomach, which is then flushed out with water and saline solution. It keeps any more of the arsenic from being absorbed into the victim's system and **it usually works best within one hour or so of being exposed to the arsenic**. It should only be administered in a hospital or formal medical clinic.

### Begin Chelation Treatment

Chelation therapy is used to remove heavy elements such as arsenic and mercury from the body. **It began in World War I, as a treatment for poison gas attacks (poison gas contained arsenic)**. Chelating drugs work by forming chemical bonds with the arsenic, reducing its poisonous properties and allowing it to pass out of the body more painlessly. Chelation treatment should only be undertaken by a trained physician.

<http://www.livestrong.com/article/9098-treat-arsenic-poisoning/#ixzz2By2Pxsbs>