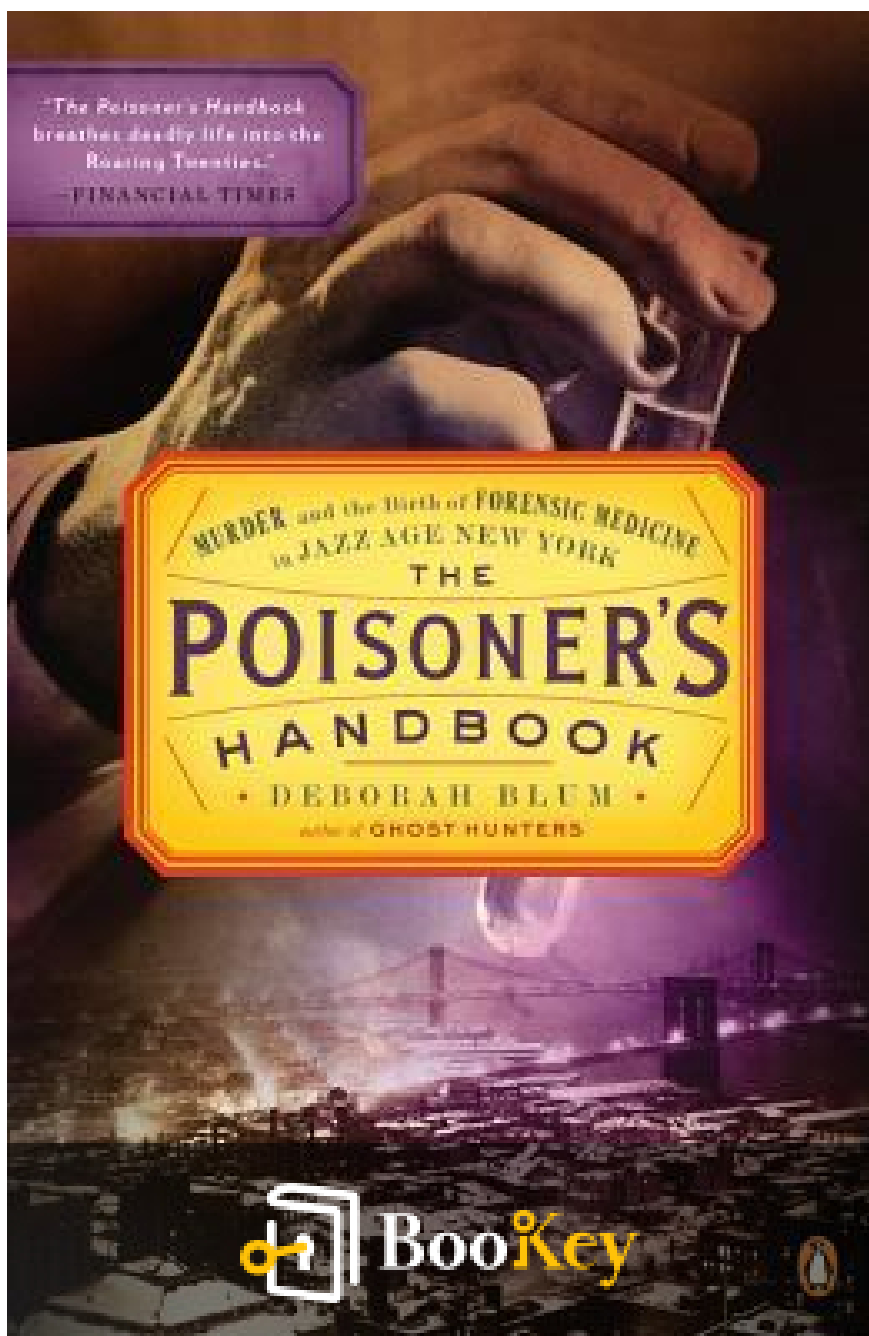


The Poisoner's Handbook PDF (Limited Copy)

Deborah Blum



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The Poisoner's Handbook Summary

Murder and forensic science in early 20th century America.

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About the book

In "The Poisoner's Handbook," Deborah Blum masterfully weaves a captivating narrative that explores the chilling world of toxicology in early 20th-century America, where poison was both a tool for murder and an uncharted frontier of scientific discovery. Centered around the groundbreaking efforts of Charles Norris, New York City's first chief medical examiner, and his talented assistant, Alexander Gettler, the book unfolds like a thrilling detective story, blending blood-curdling cases of fatal poisoning with the evolution of forensic science. As the two men confront the sinister figures behind notorious poisonings, they also illuminate the societal issues of the time—from the glamorization of toxic substances to the complexities of justice in an era of rapid industrialization. Blum's engaging prose invites readers to delve into a world where every sip and breath could be lethal, prompting a haunting reflection on the intersection of science, morality, and the darker aspects of human nature.

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About the author

Deborah Blum is an acclaimed American author and journalist known for her richly detailed narratives and explorations of science and the human experience. A winner of the Pulitzer Prize for her work at the San Francisco Chronicle, Blum has a passion for uncovering the often-hidden connections between science, history, and society. Her books, including *The Poisoner's Handbook*, blend meticulous research with engaging storytelling, making complex scientific topics accessible and intriguing to a broad audience. With a keen interest in the darker aspects of human behavior and the impact of science on culture, Blum's writings not only educate readers but also invite them to ponder the ethical questions surrounding scientific advancements.

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chapter 1 Summary: CHLOROFORM (CHCl₃) 1915

In the winter of 1915, New York City was beset by harsh weather, an outbreak of typhoid fever linked to infamous carrier Typhoid Mary Mallon, and the incompetence of its coroner, Patrick Riordan, who was often drunk while investigating deaths. Amid this turmoil, a distraught porter named Frederic Mors walked into the district attorney's office and confessed to killing eight residents at a local elderly care facility using poison.

Mors, originally from Vienna and recently immigrated to America, worked as an orderly at the German Odd Fellows home in Yonkers, where he initially attempted to alleviate suffering among the elderly with arsenic, which resulted in messy deaths. He then shifted to chloroform, a compound known for its use in anesthesia but also notorious for its lethality when misapplied. Mors described chloroform as a kinder method, likening it to putting a child to sleep, a perspective that horrified the detectives who had dealt with the substance primarily in criminal contexts.

Mors's story gained traction among investigators, who discovered disturbing corroborative evidence, such as a German poison manual in his possession and eyewitness accounts from embalmers and orderlies about suspicious deaths and the use of chloroform on patients. Despite these leads, a major hurdle persisted: the coroner's office, marred by alcoholism and incompetence, had historically failed to accurately document causes of



death, particularly for poisonings. Autopsy procedures were unreliable and often yielded inconclusive results, making it difficult to prove foul play.

Investigators tried to rely on Mors's confession, but a lack of physical evidence made it nearly impossible to build a solid case against him. With many in power questioning the efficacy of the coroner's system—highlighted by a damning report from reformer Leonard Wallstein—there was a push to reform the process and eliminate the elective coroner system, which had allowed unqualified individuals to hold power over death investigations.

As Mors awaited trial, he was sent to Bellevue Hospital for psychiatric assessment, where doctors deemed him mentally capable and a potential planner of the crimes, but this did not provide the district attorney the solid evidence needed for prosecution. The confounding realities of Mors's killings, combined with systemic failures in the coroner's office, led to a tense stalemate between law enforcement and public officials.

In the spring of 1915, before permanent charges could be filed, Mors escaped from the asylum, leaving no trail behind, signaling the city's ongoing struggles with crime and justice in a corrupt system. The municipal government finally responded to the outcry for reform with plans to establish a qualified medical examiner system that would remedy the previous shortcomings. However, the implementation would be delayed for three



years, allowing the status quo to persist in New York City, where both criminals and the victims of a flawed justice system could continue to slip through the cracks.

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Critical Thinking

Key Point: The need for systemic reform in justice and health investigations

Critical Interpretation: This chapter presents a crucial lesson about the importance of a competent and accountable system in our lives. Just as the failures of the coroner's office led to chaos and injustice, we too can be inspired to advocate for transparency and reform in our own communities. Whether it's pushing for better healthcare practices, holding authorities accountable, or ensuring that the voices of the marginalized are heard, every effort counts. By demanding integrity and diligence from systems that impact our lives, we can help prevent the mishandling of critical issues, ensuring that justice and care are not just ideals, but realities.

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chapter 2 Summary: WOOD ALCOHOL (CH₃OH) 1918—1919

Summary of "Wood Alcohol (CH₃OH): 1918—1919"

This chapter introduces John F. “Red Mike” Hylan, a self-made politician who navigated the murky waters of New York City’s political landscape to become its mayor. Known for his bluster and populist appeal, Hylan campaigned on anti-reform sentiments, proclaiming that reform-minded leaders were elitists distanced from the realities of the streets. In a surprising electoral victory against the reformist Mayor Mitchel, Hylan declared, "We have had all the reform that we want," signaling a shift in governance focused on political patronage rather than merit.

As Hylan began appointing allies to key positions, controversy erupted over his controversial choice for chief medical examiner, Patrick Riordan, whose qualifications fell far short of legal standards. The ensuing public outcry, led by groups like the Citizens’ Union and supported by media scrutiny, highlighted Riordan’s past misconduct. Hylan, dismissive of his critics, retaliated by attempting to discredit the applicants who had qualified for the role legitimately, sparking legal challenges and governmental intervention.

Ultimately, amidst mounting pressure, Hylan appointed Dr. Charles Norris

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as the new medical examiner. While initially begrudgingly accepted by Hylan, Norris soon became a tireless reformer, committed to transforming the medical examiner's office into a respected institution. His dedication and energy reshaped the department, propelling it into a position of national prominence in forensic science.

Norris's extensive background, including his education in pathology and contributions to medical research, positioned him as an ideal leader. Despite his wealthy background, which could have afforded him a comfortable life, Norris was motivated by a deep commitment to public service and the critical role of forensic pathologists in delivering justice. His proactive approach included improving department protocols, insisting on detailed autopsies, and enhancing communication with law enforcement.

Meanwhile, the chapter introduces Alexander Gettler, a passionate toxicologist who shared Norris's vision for advancing the field of forensic medicine. As the nation prepared for the impending enactment of Prohibition in 1920, both Norris and Gettler anticipated a significant rise in wood alcohol poisoning, driven by illicit alcohol production. Letting readers understand the chemistry behind wood alcohol's extreme toxicity, the text stresses the potential public health crisis stemming from increased access to dangerous substitutes for legal alcohol.

As Prohibition loomed closer, the chapter recounts the growing incidence of



wood alcohol deaths and blindness in New York City, urging medical professionals to remain vigilant. Gettler's laboratory becomes an epicenter of new toxicological methodologies, including innovative tests for identifying wood alcohol in human tissue. His findings not only emphasize a public health urgency but also foreshadow the catastrophic consequences of Prohibition on the urban landscape.

Amidst a backdrop of war, disease, and societal change, Norris and Gettler take on the dual battle of improving public health and combating the emerging crises created by governmental policies. Their concerted efforts serve as a response to the widespread dangers posed by unchecked substance use, laying the groundwork for a new era in forensic medicine during a tumultuous time in American history.

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chapter 3 Summary: CYANIDES (HCN, KCN, NaCN) 1920–1922

Chapter Summary: Cyanides (HCN, KCN, NaCN) 1920–1922

The chapter opens with the atmosphere of a roaring party on New Year's Eve, December 31, 1919, as revelers brace for the onset of Prohibition at the dawn of January 20, 1920. With the legal sale of alcohol coming to an end, New Yorkers filled speakeasies and bars, eagerly dancing and drinking, despite the growing threat of deadly illicit liquors. The arrival of Prohibition sparked not only a wave of illicit alcohol but also a tragic increase in poison-related deaths as bootleggers resorted to using toxic substitutes for spirits. Reports of deaths due to methanol poisoning surged, with investigators discovering that some victims had ingested cocktails containing dangerous compounds like potassium cyanide.

As speakeasies flourished amid secrecy, their charm drew patrons into a world of hidden excitement, complete with inventive cocktails that masked the harshness of homemade liquor. However, the thrill of these underground venues came with a dark side, including the risk of consuming absolutely poisonous concoctions. Emerging tales of toxic liquor tragedies revealed the perils that accompanied the vibrant nightlife.

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The narrative shifts to the medical examiner's office, where Dr. Alexander Gettler faced challenges amid funding cuts from the city administration. He struggled to maintain his team and resources while highlighting the importance of toxicological analysis, particularly in a city riddled with dubious alcohol.

A pivotal case arises when a retired couple, Fremont and Annie Jackson, is found dead in their apartment at the Hotel Margaret in Brooklyn. Autopsy results showed signs of significant distress, supporting initial suspicions of poisoning. Investigators fail to find evidence of poison in their residence and link their deaths to a possible cyanide poisoning, which prompts a search for the source of the toxin. Meanwhile, the historical context of cyanides is provided, tracing their lethal potential back through centuries, highlighting uses in industry and their popularity as a means of suicide.

As the investigation unfolds, it becomes apparent that the couple had been exposed to fumigation gas from their building's basement. Testing corroborated this theory, confirming that hydrogen cyanide gas could have infiltrated their living space. Despite the clarity of the evidence presenting that the Jacksons died from gas exposure, the trial against those accountable for the fumigation leads to frustration. The hotel manager and fumigator are acquitted amid the challenging landscape of early forensic science and the difficulties of proving poison-related deaths.



In the aftermath of this unresolved case, Norris and Gettler resolve to improve the standards of forensic toxicology in New York. They seek collaboration among a network of pathologists and chemists across the U.S. to ensure that such oversights do not recur, driven by the fear of similar tragedies. Gettler’s extensive research over the years reinforces his commitment to accurately understanding cyanide toxicity, its effects, and the critical need for scientifically sound evidence in legal settings. Ultimately, they aim to enhance public safety regarding chemical exposures and strengthen the credibility of forensic teams dealing with toxicology in criminal cases.

The narrative ties together the historical relevance of cyanide, the rise of speakeasies during Prohibition, and the scientific advancements that arose from tragic incidents, illustrating the complex interplay between law, science, and public safety in the face of a tumultuous period in American history. By the chapter's conclusion, the Hotel Margaret is no longer a symbol of elegance but a reminder of failures in regulatory oversight and the pressing need for reform in medical and legal practices surrounding toxicity and poisoning.

Key Points	Details
Context	New Year's Eve, 1919; Prohibition about to begin on January 20, 1920.

Key Points	Details
Prohibition Effects	Increase in illicit alcohol and poison-related deaths due to toxic substitutes.
Methanol Poisoning	Surge in deaths from methanol, with potassium cyanide reported in cocktails.
Speakeasies	Thrilling yet dangerous venues offering homemade liquor with risks of poison.
Dr. Alexander Gettler	Challenges in toxicological analysis due to funding cuts in the medical examiner's office.
Key Case: Fremont and Annie Jackson	Found dead; autopsy indicates poisoning; linked to cyanide exposure from fumigation.
Cyanide Investigation	Confirmed exposure to hydrogen cyanide gas from the building's basement.
Trial Outcome	Hotel manager and fumigator acquitted; highlights early forensic science challenges.
Gettler and Norris' Resolution	Aim to improve forensic toxicology standards; seek collaboration across U.S.
Historical Relevance	Cyanide's lethal potential; link between speakeasies, poisonings, and forensic advancements.
Conclusion	Hotel Margaret represents failures in regulatory oversight; calls for reform in toxicology practices.



Critical Thinking

Key Point: The importance of forensic toxicology in public safety

Critical Interpretation: Imagine standing amidst a vibrantly chaotic celebration, the thrill of the night surrounding you, and yet beneath the surface lurks a potential danger that could alter lives irrevocably. This chapter highlights the critical role that forensic toxicology played, especially during an era when safety was often overlooked in the pursuit of enjoyment. It inspires you to recognize that vigilance in understanding and addressing risks is not just a responsibility of those in power but also of every individual. By advocating for heightened awareness and reform in safety standards, we can prevent tragedies and protect ourselves and our communities from unforeseen dangers lurking in the shadows of our revelries.

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chapter 4: ARSENIC (As) 1922—1923

In the summer of 1922, an unusually warm backdrop provided the setting for a series of tragic events that began with seventeen-year-old Lillian Goetz, who worked as a stenographer in a dress goods firm located in the Townsend Building in New York City. On July 31, after refusing her mother's offer for a box lunch, Lillian chose to eat at the nearby Shelbourne Restaurant, where she ordered a tongue sandwich, coffee, and a piece of huckleberry pie. This seemingly ordinary lunch turned deadly, as tragically, it was the pie that contained arsenic, leading to her death and that of five others who dined there that day.

Panic rippled through the Townsend Building as doctors raced to tend to office workers succumbing to symptoms of poisoning. Investigations revealed that every victim shared the commonality of eating pie from the restaurant, raising alarms about the malicious intent behind the poison. Health commissioners confirmed that arsenic had been deliberately added to the food, marking the incident as a planned attack rather than an unfortunate accident. The intense media coverage rekindled memories of a similar poisoning in October 1921, intensifying fears that a serial poisoner might be on the loose.

Eerie historical touchstones illuminated the danger of arsenic, revealing it as a favored tool of notorious historic poisoners, including the Borgias.



Medical scientists, such as Columbia University's Rudolph Witthaus, underscored its deadly history with estimates suggesting that arsenic accounted for a significant portion of poisoning cases, often linked to homicides. Given law enforcement's focus on identifying the poisoner amidst prevalent societal issues such as Prohibition, the search for the murderer proved challenging, as arsenic was easily obtainable and often used in household products.

The subsequent investigation relied heavily on the expertise of city toxicologist Alexander Gettler, who meticulously scrutinized the autopsy results from the victims. In the sterile environment of the Bellevue autopsy room, he dissected the bodies, discovering arsenic's deadly trace, including its characteristic effects on the stomach and other organs. Across the city, social unrest continued to mount as fear of violence fueled by gang activity grew rampant with the backdrop of Prohibition.

As the poison pie incident unfolded, another shocking case emerged with the arrest of Mary Frances "Fanny" Creighton, a young mother accused of killing her brother and suspected of contributing to the deaths of her in-laws with arsenic. Her seemingly innocent exterior, emphasized by media portrayal, contrasted starkly with the grisly details of the charges against her. The unfolding trial revealed a web of family tension and financial motives, as Fanny stood accused of murder in relation to a life insurance policy taken out for her brother.

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Despite the overwhelming suspicions against her, her lawyers championed the idea that Charles Avery, her brother, might have self-administered arsenic, while another trial ensued to explore the circumstances surrounding the deaths of John Creighton's parents. The outcome relied on the chemical

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chapter 5 Summary: MERCURY (Hg) 1923—1925

Summary of "Mercury (Hg) 1923-1925"

This chapter chronicles the complex relationship between Charles Webb and Gertrude "Gertie" Gorman, highlighting the tragic events surrounding Gertie's untimely death and the ensuing investigations that questioned Webb's integrity.

Charles Webb, a gentle yet determined New York City broker, was devoted to Gertie, his love from a well-to-do family. Despite being looked down upon by Gertie's relatives and friends—who saw him as merely after her family's wealth—Webb maintained a steadfast courtship that culminated in their marriage after eight long years. Tragically, just ten months into their marriage, Gertie died suddenly at the Westchester Biltmore Country Club, leading to suspicion surrounding her death.

In September 1923, Gertie's uncle publicly suggested that her demise was not natural. He claimed that she had been poisoned with bichloride of mercury, a highly toxic compound known for causing slow, agonizing deaths. The chapter provides a detailed background on the dangers of mercury compounds, explaining how they can permeate and damage living tissues, thus garnering considerable suspicion around Webb's role in her



death.

The narrative then transitions into a captivating account of Olive Thomas, a Hollywood actress who inadvertently swallowed bichloride of mercury, prompting public intrigue and highlighting the substance's lethal nature. This incident set a precedent, as Gertie's family hinted at similar circumstances surrounding her death, raising doubts about Webb's motive—a thirst for the substantial inheritance Gertie would leave behind.

The Westchester County coroner's hesitance to certify Gertie's death as a natural occurrence resulted in an autopsy, which found traces of mercury. However, it soon became clear that the levels detected were insufficient to be lethal. Instead, they pointed to a milder mercury compound called calomel, often used in medical treatments. This revelation shifted focus away from Webb, as evidence began to point towards the possibility of Gertie's pre-existing health conditions.

Webb attempted to clear his name amid mounting public scrutiny, emphasizing his innocence and the love he had for Gertie. As the investigation deepened, it caused turmoil not only in Webb's life but also within Gertie's family. Gertie's relatives, seeking to challenge her last will, came under fire for the possible motivations behind their accusations.

As the Westchester grand jury concluded that Gertie died of natural causes,

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the district attorney's findings exonerated Webb. However, the fallout from Gertie's death left a bitter taste, with her family continuing to pursue claims on her estate, leading to protracted legal battles and heightened tensions.

In the latter part of the chapter, the narrative broadens to showcase Charles Norris and Alexander Gettler's efforts in toxicology and forensic science, framed against a backdrop of rising public health concerns related to poisons, especially in industrial settings. The introduction of tetraethyl lead as a new poison reveals the complexities of regulatory oversight amidst industrial innovation, paralleling the earlier story of Gertie's mercury poisoning and the challenge of understanding the dangers of emerging chemicals.

By the end of the chapter, Webb is depicted as not only a man wrangling with loss and accusation but also someone determined to fulfill his late wife's memory through philanthropy. Ultimately, he donates land for a public park in memory of Gertie, illustrating a bittersweet closure to a tumultuous chapter marked by love, tragedy, and the relentless pursuit of truth amidst scandal. The park stands as a tribute to Gertie Gorman and a reminder of the struggles faced in the name of love and integrity.

Key Points	Details
Main Characters	Charles Webb, Gertrude "Gertie" Gorman



Key Points	Details
Relationship Background	Eight-year courtship resulting in marriage, rejected by Gertie's family.
Tragic Event	Gertie died ten months after marriage at Westchester Biltmore Country Club.
Death Investigation	Suspicion arose from Gertie's uncle claiming poisoning by bichloride of mercury.
Toxicology Background	Detailed explanation of mercury's dangers and presence in tissues.
Public Incident	Olive Thomas's accidental mercury poisoning draws public attention to dangers.
Coroner Findings	Initial findings of mercury later attributed to calomel—non-lethal compound.
Webb's Defense	Webb asserts his love for Gertie and innocence throughout scrutiny.
Legal Aftermath	Grand jury finds natural causes; Gertie's family continues estate claims.
Bigger Context	Charles Norris and Alexander Gettler's impact on toxicology and public health concerns.
Legacy	Webb donates land for a park in Gertie's memory, achieving a bittersweet closure.



Critical Thinking

Key Point: The importance of integrity in relationships and public life

Critical Interpretation: In the wake of Gertie Gorman's tragic death and the subsequent suspicions surrounding Charles Webb, we are reminded of the profound significance of integrity in both personal relationships and within the community. Despite the intense pressure and public scrutiny, Webb's unwavering commitment to his love for Gertie shines through as he valiantly defends his honor. This story encourages us to prioritize honesty and authenticity in our own lives, teaching us that even when faced with adversity, our integrity can guide us toward clarity and purpose. Just like Webb, we must rise above the judgments of others and cultivate a legacy grounded in love and truth, inspiring those around us to navigate their own challenges with integrity.



chapter 6 Summary: CARBON MONOXIDE (CO), PART I 1926

Chapter Summary: Carbon Monoxide (CO), Part I – 1926

In late January 1926, amidst the cacophony of traffic at Sixth Avenue and 34th Street in bustling Manhattan, a New York Times reporter set out to investigate a complaint about noise from the streets, which he found almost inaudible over the chaos of honking horns and rumbling vehicles. The intersection was emblematic of the automobile boom of the 1920s, with millions of cars on the road, reflecting a burgeoning American obsession with car ownership for status and convenience. A lack of reliable public transportation had led to increasingly dangerous roads, and even those responsible for ensuring traffic safety, like emergency medical examiners, suffered from a shortage of vehicles.

As the number of motor vehicles surged—4 million sold nationwide in just a year—so did traffic fatalities. In New York alone, car-related deaths rose dramatically, prompting officials like medical examiner Charles Norris to advocate for stricter licensing and regulation. However, those efforts often collided with political interests and the power of the transportation industry.

Amidst this backdrop, discussions about public health risks arose,

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particularly the dangers posed by tetraethyl lead in gasoline, which the federal government deemed safe, much to the relief of the automotive industry. Ironically, the realities of the public's health, especially in urban settings, were overlooked. Toxicologists like Alexander Gettler began to worry about other toxic substances resulting from gasoline combustion, namely carbon monoxide (CO), a silent killer from incomplete fuel combustion that poses grave dangers in enclosed spaces, especially as the popularity of automobiles grew.

Carbon monoxide is colorless and odorless, created in significant quantities by internal combustion engines and gas appliances. It binds to hemoglobin in the blood more effectively than oxygen, leading to chemical suffocation and myriad symptoms, often mistaken for drunkenness. Each year, New York City reported hundreds of carbon monoxide-related deaths. Notably, many murders disguised as accidents relied on this lethal gas, illustrating a grim reality where perpetrators could exploit the gas for nefarious purposes.

One such case involved Harry Freindlich, who attempted to cover up the murder of his wife Leah by simulating an accident with illuminating gas, but the forensic examination contradicted his story, leading to his capture. The narrative reinforced the notion that carbon monoxide's properties could both signal criminality and obscure the truth if mishandled.

As the chapter progresses, we follow Gettler's groundbreaking work with



carbon monoxide in deceased animals, which confirmed that the gas did not permeate bodies post-mortem. His experiments, combined with rigorous chemical testing, underscored the growing significance of forensic science in legal contexts, particularly as it pertained to detecting carbon monoxide's deadly grip on victims.

The chapter culminates in the tragic but revealing case of Anna Fredericksen, whose dismembered body was linked back to suspected murderer Francesco Travia. Norris and Gettler's investigations highlighted the scientific precision of forensic analysis, contrasting with the chaotic and often inaccurate assumptions made about accidental deaths in the city.

Ultimately, Travia was acquitted of murder due to the evidence proving Fredericksen had been dead before he attempted to dismember her, showcasing the profound impact that forensic toxicology could have in judicial proceedings. This development marked a pivotal moment for the field, indicating a shift from anecdotal and dramatic evidence to a solid foundation based on scientific inquiry and analysis, establishing forensic toxicology as an essential element in the pursuit of justice.



chapter 7 Summary: METHYL ALCOHOL (CH₃OH) 1927

In the summer of 1926, rumors circulated that government chemists were secretly experimenting on ways to increase the toxicity of denatured alcohol to curb rampant alcohol consumption during Prohibition. Frustrated by the illegal alcohol trade, which had flourished since the Eighteenth Amendment took effect, government chemists sought to retaliate against bootleggers who were neutralizing government poisons in industrial alcohol. At the heart of this conflict were the dangerous compounds employed by the government, such as methyl alcohol and other toxic additives designed to deter consumption. These illicit spirits, ironically, became even more common as the black market evolved, with bootleggers employing chemists to refine industrial alcohols and mask their harmful qualities.

As drinking on the streets thrived, the deadly consequences of consuming these tainted spirits became apparent. Cases of poisoning surged, especially around the holidays in late December 1926. Bellevue Hospital reported a spike in patients suffering from the effects of methanol poisoning, leading to hospitalizations and deaths across New York City. Dr. Charles Norris, the chief medical examiner, publicly declared the government's poisoning policies as morally culpable for the fatalities, arguing they had failed to deter consumption and instead put lives at risk. The Anti-Saloon League's Wayne Wheeler countered Norris's claims with accusations of sympathy for



lawbreakers, illustrating the contentious views surrounding alcohol consumption.

In early 1927, the federal government decided to double the quantity of methyl alcohol in denatured spirits, intending to make consumption even riskier. Meanwhile, Nicholas Murray Butler, president of Columbia University and a critic of Prohibition, launched a presidential campaign advocating for its repeal. However, Butler's anti-Prohibition stance was met with fierce resistance, particularly from Wheeler, who suggested that such ideas were deleterious to public morality.

As the tide of public sentiment against the government's alcohol policies grew, Norris continued to gather evidence linking Prohibition to a public health crisis. His statistics revealed a shocking death toll from poisoning, indicating that the poor were the primary victims of the government's misguided policies. Despite Norris's efforts to galvanize attention to public health issues, the Prohibitionist narrative remained strong among many legislators.

The narrative then shifted with the revelation of the infamous Snyder-Gray case. Ruth Snyder and her lover, Judd Gray, conspired to murder Ruth's abusive husband, Albert, for the benefit of a lucrative life insurance policy. Their plotting led to a bungled crime, ultimately resulting in both being charged with first-degree murder. The sensational trial captured public



attention, with testimony from forensic experts, including Alexander Gettler, confronting the couple's elaborate lies and detailing the evidence against them.

In a twist of fate reflecting the intertwining narratives of Prohibition and crime, the Snyder-Gray case showcased the intersection of despair and depravity in a society grappling with the consequences of alcohol prohibition. As the couple was sentenced to death and their electrocution recorded for posterity, the media sensationalized the event, solidifying their notoriety. The photograph of Ruth Snyder's execution in particular became emblematic of the era's struggles between law, morality, and the human condition, marking a moment in which the consequences of government policies and personal choices converged with tragic clarity.

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chapter 8: RADIUM (Ra) 1928—1929

Summary of the Chapter on Radium (1928-1929)

In early 1928, Dr. Charles Norris, the chief medical examiner of New York City, received a request from his friend and former classmate Harrison Stanford Martland. Martland, a pathologist and the chief medical examiner for Essex County, New Jersey, had encountered an alarming health crisis linked to the usage of radium in industrial applications, specifically concerning the U.S. Radium Corporation. This company, established during World War I, produced luminous paint for watch dials, which relied on radium, a newly discovered radioactive element that had sparked considerable excitement in the medical community for its therapeutic potential.

Radium had originally been hailed as a miracle substance following its discovery in the late 19th century by pioneers Henri Becquerel and the Curies, who showed its unique properties and potential for healing. The early 20th century saw an explosion in the use of radium in consumer products, including beauty creams and tonics, which promised rejuvenation and vitality. However, Martland's investigations into the hazards posed by radium exposure had led him to link the deaths of several young female dial painters in New Jersey to radium poisoning, as they used the toxic substance



in their work without knowledge of the dangers.

These women, dubbed the "Radium Girls," faced a spectrum of horrifying health issues, including severe dental problems and anemia, leading to their premature deaths. Martland exhumed the body of Amelia Maggia, one of the earliest victims, and sought Norris's expertise to confirm whether her bones exhibited radioactivity.

Norris's team employed advanced methods to analyze the remains, and their results starkly revealed significant levels of radioactivity in the bones, vindicating Martland's suspicions about radium's lethal consequences. These findings contributed to a growing public awareness of the dangers of radiation exposure and marked the beginning of a shifting perception of radium from a "wonder element" to a recognized health threat.

The escalating scandal culminated in a landmark lawsuit filed by the Radium Girls against the U.S. Radium Corporation. Although initially faced with legal challenges, such as claims of expired statutes of limitations on their injuries, the women asserted that they continued to suffer effects from radium exposure. The courts eventually recognized the ongoing nature of their injuries, and a trial was scheduled, forcing the company into a settlement.

While this legal battle unfolded, the political landscape in the U.S. rapidly

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changed. The 1928 presidential campaign featured Al Smith, the Democratic candidate, who faced scrutiny and challenges linked to his beliefs about alcohol prohibition. Ultimately, the election solidified Herbert Hoover's place as president, bringing about a tumultuous period that included a significant economic downturn.

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Chapter 9 Summary: ETHYL ALCOHOL (C₂H₅OH) 1930-1932

Chapter Summary: Ethyl Alcohol and Its Consequences (1930-1932)

In the period from 1930 to 1932, Alexander O. Gettler, a forensic chemist, documented a series of tragic fatalities linked to ethyl alcohol, commonly found in whiskey. His investigations revealed a harrowing pattern of deaths stemming from excessive alcohol consumption, illustrating the lethal nature of what was thought to be harmless liquor.

Three cases were particularly illustrative:

1. A 25-year-old man, confident in his drinking ability, consumed one and a half pints of cheap whiskey and lapsed into unconsciousness, ultimately dying six hours later.
2. A 41-year-old woman who had a history of alcoholism also succumbed after drinking a similar quantity of strong whiskey, with her autopsy revealing severe damage to her stomach.
3. A laborer, age 33, became deeply intoxicated after drinking 10 to 15 ounces, dying 19 hours later with significant blood congestion in his brain observed at autopsy.



These cases exemplified the dangers of ethyl alcohol, especially in a society that had been reeling from the impacts of Prohibition. Contrary to public perception that Prohibition might safeguard public health, Gettler found alarming statistics from insurance companies revealing a surge in deaths due to alcoholism—reporting a 600% increase in mortality rates during Prohibition compared to 1920 figures.

The rise in alcohol-related deaths was stark: Prudential Life Insurance noted that deaths from acute alcoholism climbed to 5,000 annually from a mere 1,000 at the onset of Prohibition. Gettler emphasized that ethyl alcohol stood as the leading poison related to numerous deaths and afflictions, warranting serious investigation into its effects on the human body. Despite the prevailing sentiment against alcohol during Prohibition, Gettler and his colleagues recognized the urgent need for research into its impact, particularly focusing on how it affected the brain.

As Prohibition ramped up the illicit production of alcoholic beverages, cases of poisoning emerged, primarily through concocted spirits like Ginger Jake. This particularly toxic beverage, derived from Jamaican Ginger, rapidly became infamous for causing paralysis and other neurological problems. In 1930, the rise of the "Jake Leg" syndrome caught the attention of medical professionals as it stricken victims with a distinctive, uncontrollable gait. The diagnosis was rendered more dramatic due to the fact that these cases darted across multiple states in the Southern and Southwestern U.S.

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Walter Anderson, a Brooklyn-based manufacturer, was charged with producing this poisonous version of Jamaican Ginger, fundamentally altering its composition to make it dangerously intoxicating. Utilizing a plasticizer from industrial compounds led to grim and untold suffering among consumers. The public health response exposed the severe dangers of unregulated alcohol during Prohibition.

Gettler's research thrived in the setting of New York City's morgues, where he examined a plethora of bodies corresponding to the alcohol-related deaths surging throughout the decade. The examinations underscored the variance in alcohol metabolism among individuals and established pioneering methodologies for understanding intoxication. Challenging assumptions of intoxication based solely on blood alcohol levels, Gettler introduced a scale correlating alcohol levels in the brain to behaviors observed in alcohol consumption, marking a scientific breakthrough in forensic toxicology.

As America grappled with economic strife during the Great Depression, Gettler documented the intertwined public health crises presented by alcohol abuse and economic despair. Despite setbacks in funding and support for forensic work, his efforts contributed significantly to a deeper understanding of how alcohol impacted individuals and society at large.

Amid increasing awareness and understanding of radium poisoning from

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cases similar to the Radium Girls, another significant event unfolded. The death of Eben Byers, a wealthy industrialist linked to the consumption of a radioactive tonic, ignited a national conversation about public health and the need for rigorous regulation of potentially harmful substances.

As 1932 drew to a close, the social climate surrounding alcohol began to shift with Franklin D. Roosevelt's election and a push to end Prohibition. The ongoing fatalities associated with ethyl alcohol remained a stark reminder of its pervasive impact, positioning the substance as the most crucial poison in public health discussions and forensic analysis, as Norris poignantly remarked in his holiday report on poisoned liquor deaths.

Ultimately, the tale of ethyl alcohol during these years served as both a cautionary reflection on human behaviors surrounding substance use and the political ramifications of Prohibition—a historical juncture that would ultimately shape federal policies in favor of alcohol regulation.

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Chapter 10 Summary: CARBON MONOXIDE (CO), PART II 1933—1934

In the Bronx during the harsh winter of 1933, a rundown speakeasy operated by Tony Marino became the backdrop for a chilling plot. Nestled between shops, the speakeasy attracted a mix of regulars struggling through the Great Depression, including the notorious alcoholic Michael Malloy. Malloy, known for his resilience, became the target of a murder scheme devised by Marino and his associates—bartender Red Murphy, funeral director Francis Pasqua, and fruit vendor Daniel Kriesberg. As they faced mounting financial instability, the conspirators joked about needing a wealthy relative to profit from. It then escalated into a serious plan to kill Malloy for insurance money, dubbing it a darkly comedic proposition that no one would miss him.

The conspirators managed to secure three life insurance policies on Malloy, adding up to nearly \$1,500 upon his death. Believing that a bout of heavy drinking would finish him off, they provided Malloy with unlimited access to alcohol. Surprisingly, he thrived instead, leading Marino to concoct increasingly desperate methods to kill him. Attempts including serving poisoned food and leaving him out in the cold all failed, further solidifying Malloy's reputation as "Mike the Durable."

Frustrated, the conspirators shifted their method of murder to carbon

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monoxide poisoning. They rented a room in a boarding house and, after getting Malloy heavily intoxicated, executed their plan using a gas hose. To their shock, Malloy, who had survived every other attempt, finally succumbed to the lethal gas. His body was hastily buried, and initial attempts to collect on the insurance policies seemed successful.

However, the plot unraveled as news spread of Malloy's uncanny ability to survive. The Bronx district attorney launched an investigation, spurred by the legend of the unkillable Mike. Uncovering a trail of evidence and witness testimonies, the district attorney's office was able to bring murder charges against Marino, Pasqua, Murphy, Kriesberg, and the cab driver, Hershy Green, who had helped dispose of Malloy's body. The doctor who falsified the death certificate was also implicated.

During their trial, the newly formed forensic department at NYU employed pioneering techniques to analyze Malloy's exhumed remains, affirming he had died from carbon monoxide poisoning. Conclusive evidence was presented that proved crucial for the prosecution, leading to the conviction of Marino and his co-conspirators on first-degree murder charges. They were sentenced to death in the electric chair.

As the nation began to lift the burdens of Prohibition and celebrate the return of legal alcohol in April 1933, the conspirators faced their fate. In a grim twist, they had not only failed to secure their financial rescue through



murder, but they also found themselves emblematic of a darker societal undercurrent: the desperate lengths individuals would go to during times of hardship. On June 3, 1934, the men were executed, marking the bizarre finale to a grim story intertwined with the decay of prohibition-era morality, leaving behind the infamous legacy of “Mike the Durable.” Their end heralded both a shift toward more robust forensic science in America and the gleeful return to a life of legal drinking.

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Chapter 11 Summary: THALLIUM (Tl) 1935—1936

The chapters present a harrowing exploration of the dangers posed by toxic substances in 1930s America, particularly focusing on the industrial and cosmetic misuse of thallium. The narrative opens with a commentary on society's troubling reliance on poisons embedded in everyday products: from cosmetics laden with toxic dyes to household pesticides. Arthur Kallet and F. J. Schlink, authors of the impactful consumer advocacy book **100,000,000 Guinea Pigs**, raise alarm about the lack of regulation surrounding such hazardous materials, illustrating the grave risks consumers face from untested products marketed by indifferent corporations and a powerless FDA.

The story shifts to the tragic Gross family in Brooklyn, whose members succumb to mysterious illnesses in rapid succession. Frederick Gross, a bookkeeper, faces an unimaginable nightmare when his children and wife fall ill, displaying symptoms of poisoning that defy immediate diagnosis. As he grapples with devastating loss, the narrative highlights the peculiar symptom of rampant hair loss affecting the deceased—a telltale indicator of thallium poisoning.

Thallium's toxic history is intertwined with its scientific origins in the 19th century, where its brilliant green flame revealed its presence during elemental analysis. Initially discovered by chemists William Crookes and



Claude-August Lamy, the element was deemed safe in small doses, a claim that would later be widely challenged as poisonings revealed its lethal nature.

The investigation into the Gross family deaths reveals alarming evidence of thallium's presence in their tissues. Despite Frederick Gross's insistence on his innocence, the emergence of the poison from cocoa he had purchased raises suspicions. His financial struggles during the Great Depression may suggest a motive, but he is defended by those who knew him, emphasizing his good character and love for his family.

As the story unfolds, forensic chemist Alexander Gettler meticulously analyzes the evidence and ultimately concludes that, while the children were poisoned, there is no conclusive evidence linking Frederick to the crime. This unexpected turn leads to his exoneration and highlights the complexities of thallium poisoning—often mistaken for infectious diseases due to nonspecific symptoms. The case captures public interest and underscores systemic weaknesses in consumer protection.

Amidst this narrative, the text transitions to discussions surrounding the advancements in forensic toxicology, propelled by the tireless work of figures like Charles Norris and Gettler. Their commitment to scientific rigor and advocacy ultimately lays the groundwork for significant reforms in food and drug safety regulations, culminating in the groundbreaking 1938 Food,



Drug, and Cosmetic Act.

As spring 1935 unfolds, the narrative also reflects on the exhaustion and emotional toll endured by Norris, who, despite the successes of his office, faces continuous threats from budget cuts and political investigations. His passing marks the loss of a pivotal figure in the establishment of forensic science, leaving behind a legacy that the narrative frames as both triumph and tragedy.

The following subplot, concerning the Arsenic cases related to the Creightons, adds another layer of depth to the exploration of poison in society, showing how past experiences with poison lead to a chilling cycle of deceit and tragic outcomes. The trials for murder echo the same questions of morality and culpability raised in the Gross case, ultimately showcasing the enduring struggle against ignorance and malevolence in a world awash in danger.

In summary, these chapters weave a complex tale of medical malfeasance and societal neglect, detailing the fatal consequences of unchecked toxins and the relentless effort of advocates and scientists who strive for accountability and change. Through personal tragedies and compelling legal battles, the narrative highlights a critical period in American history when the clash between industry welfare and public health reached a critical turning point.

Chapter Highlights	Description
Toxic Substance Exploration	Examines the dangers of toxic substances in 1930s America, focusing on thallium's misuse in industrial and cosmetic products.
Consumer Advocacy	References *100,000,000 Guinea Pigs* by Kallet and Schlink, highlighting the risks from untested products and lack of regulatory oversight.
The Gross Family Case	Details the tragic story of the Gross family in Brooklyn, who suffered mysterious illnesses linked to thallium poisoning.
Thallium's Discovery	Discusses thallium's scientific origins in the 19th century and its initial perception as safe, later revealed as deadly.
Investigation Findings	Forensic tests show thallium in the Gross family's tissues, raising questions about Frederick Gross's innocence amidst financial struggles.
Forensic Science Development	Highlighting advances in forensic toxicology by Norris and Gettler, leading to reforms in food and drug safety regulations.
Norris's Legacy	Reflects on the challenges faced by Norris and his eventual passing, marking a significant loss for forensic science.
Arsenic Cases Subplot	The narrative also touches upon the Creighton arsenic cases, exploring themes of deceit and morality in poisoning cases.
Overall Theme	Weaves a narrative about the consequences of unchecked toxins and efforts toward consumer protection and accountability.

