A FRANCES DOUGHTY MYSTERY

THE POISONOUS SEED

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An interview with Linda Stratman

Although **The Poisonous Seed** is my first published novel, following ten non-fiction books, it is not so much a departure for me as a return to my origins. In common with most writers I can trace my earliest efforts at the written word to poems and short stories, only later expanding my tales of the imagination to novel length. At that time non-fiction writing meant school essays, not the most satisfying work! I was, however, following an early interest in crime by reading and later collecting works about true crime. My first non-fiction book, (unpublished) about the Bartlett murder case of 1886, was written following a momentary whim, and took three years to complete during which I learned the art and craft of research and found that making discoveries was an almost incomparable thrill. I also came to love the nineteenth century, exploring the interlocking complexity of its attitudes and beliefs with the practical demands of daily life. It was on the basis of this work that I was commissioned to write my first published book, **Chloroform: the Quest for Oblivion**.

It was several years before I thought of writing fiction again, and the idea was directly inspired by membership of my local writers' group, Forest Writers of Walthamstow. A good writers' group; and this is a very good one; is something to treasure. At our regular meetings we are equals, whether published or not, and we read and comment fearlessly kindly and constructively on each other's work - poems, stories, novels or nonfiction - sharing our experiences and information.

It was a risk, but I took several months away from nonfiction and wrote a novel. I read it out in parts to the members of the writers' group, and took on board their criticisms, on one occasion going home and completely re-writing a chapter. The support and advice of Forest Writers has been invaluable. Writing is usually seen as a solitary occupation, and inevitably the committing of words to screen does tend to happen when the writer is behind a firmly closed door, but much of the inspiration and the energy to write come from the larger environment, and the company of creative people is a powerful stimulus. I hope readers will enjoy reading about Frances Doughty as much as I have enjoyed writing about her.

My writing experience by Linda Stratmann

Aspiring writers are often advised to start by writing about what they know, and this is sound advice. At first glance, it may seem limiting, but all of us have unique experiences, of a location, a social circle, a family environment, education, an occupation, or a special interest which can form the inspiration for a book. This even holds true for works of speculative fiction. The writer may have created a fantasy world, or be writing about the future, or a civilization on another planet, but to be convincing it still has to work as a whole, and be believable, so the reader can imagine themselves to be there. It is the writer's own experience of people and places and the structure of society will help him or her to create a new world that the reader will want to know more about. Writing about the past presents some of the same challenges. It must feel real to the reader, and to achieve this, the writer needs intimate knowledge of both time and place, and how people spoke and thought. Like a painter whose tiny highlights bring an otherwise flat picture to life, it is the little details of everyday existence that should make us feel we have stepped out of a time machine and are really there.

I chose to set my novel **The Poisonous Seed** in Victorian Bayswater because I had researched it for Whiteley's Folly, and realised that as a microcosm of London with its own small town character it was the perfect enclosed environment in which all sections of society lived, worked and interacted. It offered enormous possibilities to explore the many layers of Victorian life, and the more I study it the more it opens up and reveals the concerns and problems of the inhabitants, and how they weave into each other. The setting of a chemist's shop was a natural choice. At the age of 16 I trained as a chemist's dispenser in an old shop with its original wooden fittings, lined with bottles labelled in Latin, following a study course which had clearly been devised in earlier times, requiring me to make pills and powders, and mix ointments on a slab with a spatula. Both the shop and the course were modernised soon afterwards, but it was an experience for which I am now very grateful!

Chapter One

Police Constable Wilfred Brown strode briskly along Westbourne Grove, his boots thudding heavily on the wooden paving. A few days before, dirty yellow fog had swirled thickly across London, turning daytime into twilight, burning eyes and lungs, and dissuading all but the most determined or the most desperate to venture out of doors. The return of daylight had brought the Grove back to life again, but it was still bitterly cold, and he carefully warmed his fingers on the top of the bullseye lantern that hung from his belt. Last month's Christmas bazaars had become this month's winter sales, and the Grove was choked with carriages, a lone mounted policeman doing his best to make the more persistent loiterers move on. The constable wove a determined way through armies of large women in heavy winter coats fiercely clutching brown paper parcels, vendors of hot potatoes and mechanical mice, and deferential shop walkers braving the cold to assist cherished customers to their broughams. The chill air was seasoned with the scent of damp horses and impatient people. Despite the appearance of bustle and prosperity, there were, however, signs that all was not well in the Grove. The bright red 'Sale' posters had a sense of desperation about them, and here and there were the darkened premises of businesses recently closed. On the north side of the Grove, the unfashionable side, opposite the sumptuous glitter of Whiteleys, he found his destination, the murky yellow glow of the morning gas lamps softening the gilded lettering of William Doughty & Son, Chemists and Druggists. He pushed open the door and the sharp tone of an overhead bell announced his entry into the sweet and bitter air of the shop, where the glimmer of gaslight polished the mahogany display cases, and within their gloomy interiors touched the curves of porcelain ointment pots, and highlighted the steely shine of medical instruments.

It was a small, narrow shop, in which every inch of space was carefully utilised. There were cabinets along its length, filled with neat rows of bottles and jars, and above them, shelves reaching almost to the ceiling arrayed with more bottles lined up like troops on parade. In front of the counter there was a single chair for the comfort of lady customers, and an iron stove filled with glowing coals, gamely supplying a comforting thread of warmth. Behind the counter were deep shelves of brown earthenware jars, and fat round bottles with glass stoppers, some transparent, some opaque blue or fluted green, each labelled with its contents in Latin.

Below were dark rows of wooden drawers with their own equally mysterious inscriptions. Nowhere, he observed, was there any speck of dust.

Wilfred paused as a tall young woman in a plain black dress and a white apron finished serving a customer; a delicate looking lady who shied away at the sight of his uniform and left the shop as quickly as she could.

He stepped forward. ‘Good morning, Miss. May I see the proprietor?’

The young woman looked at him composedly, lacing her long fingers in front of her, a subtle glance noting the striped band on his left cuff that showed he was on duty.

‘My father is unwell and resting in bed,’ she said, her tone implying, in the nicest possible way, that that was the end of any conversation on that subject.

Wilfred, who stood five feet nine in his socks, was unused to meeting women tall enough to look him directly in the eye and found this rather disconcerting. Recalling that the business was that of Doughty & Son, he went on: ‘Then may I see your brother?’ He could have kicked himself as soon as the words were out.

Miss Doughty could not have been more than nineteen. She was not pretty and she knew she was not. The face was too angular, the form too thin, the shoulders too sharp. She was neat and capable, and her hair was drawn into a careful knot, threaded with a narrow piece of black ribbon. Her one article of adornment was a mourning brooch.

Her eyes betrayed for a brief moment a pain renewed. ‘My brother is recently deceased.’ She paused. ‘If you require to see a gentleman, there is a male assistant who is on an errand but will, I am sure, return shortly. If not, then I should mention that I have worked for my father for several years.’

Wilfred, who could already see in her the makings of the kind of formidable matron who at forty years of age would be enough to terrify any man, took a deep breath and launched into his prepared speech.

‘You may have heard that Mr Percival Garton of Porchester Terrace died last night?’

‘I have,’ she calmly replied. Bayswater was a hive of talk on all subjects, and several customers had arrived that morning eager to tell the tale, each version more dramatically embellished than the last.

7

Frances Doughty had never met the Gartons but they had been pointed out to her as persons of eminence. They were often, in good weather, to be seen taking the air, an anxious nursemaid following on with the children, of whom there were now five. Percival was something over medium height, with handsome features impressively bewhiskered, his figure inclining to stoutness, while Henrietta, with a prettily plump face, was ample both of bosom and waist. Frances had observed the way that Henrietta placed her hand on her husband's arm, the little glances of confidence that passed between them, the small acts of consideration that showed that in each other's eyes at least they were still the same graceful and slender creatures they had been on the day of their wedding. There was a delightful informality about Henrietta's pleasure in her husband's company, while Percival, at a period in life when so many men were pressed down by the cares of business and family, showed the world a smooth and untroubled brow. Bayswater society had judged them a most fortunate couple.

'Is it known how he died?' asked Frances.

'Not yet, I'm afraid. We are making enquiries about everything he ate and drank yesterday, and it is believed that he had a prescription made up at this shop.'

'I'll see.' She moved behind the wooden screen that separated the dispensing desk from the eyes of customers, and emerged with a leather-bound book which she placed on the counter. As she turned to the most recent pages, Wilfred saw that it was a record of prescriptions.

'Yes, here it is.' She pointed to some faint and wavering script that he felt sure was not hers. 'Yesterday evening, a digestive mixture.'

'I'm not sure I can read that, Miss,' said Wilfred, awkwardly. 'Is it in Latin?'

'It is. I'll show you what it means.' She fetched two round bottles from the shelf behind her, one clear and one pale blue, and placed them on the counter, then added a flat glass medicine bottle and a conical measure. 'First of all, two drachms – that is teaspoonfuls – from this bottle, tincture of nux vomica.' She pointed to the clear bottle which was half full of a brown liquid. 'The tincture is a dilute preparation from liquid extract of nux vomica which in turn is manufactured from the powdered seed. Two drachms' – her long finger pointed out the level on the measure – 'are poured into a medicine bottle this size. We then add elixir of oranges' – she indicated the pale blue bottle, which was only a quarter full – 'to make up the total to six ounces.

The elixir is our own blend, syrup of oranges with cardamom and cassia. Many people take it alone as a pleasant stomachic. The whole is then shaken till mixed. The dose is one or two teaspoonfuls as required. ‘

‘This nux vomica . . .’, he left the question unsaid but she guessed his meaning.

‘The active principle is *strychnia*, commonly known as strychnine.’ She saw his eyebrows climb suddenly and smiled. ‘In very small amounts.’

Wilfred frowned. ‘What if he took more than the proper dose?’

‘I can assure you,’ said Frances firmly, ‘the amount of *strychnia* in this preparation is so small that Mr Garton could have swallowed the whole six ounces of his mixture and come to no harm. Also,’ she turned through the pages of the book, ‘It is known that Mr Garton does not have an idiosyncrasy for any of the ingredients, as he has had the mixture several times before without ill-effect.’ She pointed out the entry for a previous prescription, this one in a neat legible script. ‘And this is not freshly made-up stock. As you can see from the levels in the bottles, we have dispensed from this batch many times in the last few weeks.’

Wilfred nodded thoughtfully. ‘Are you – er – learning to be a chemist, Miss? I’ve heard there are lady chemists now.’

She paused, and Wilfred, to his regret, saw once again a sadness clouding her eyes. ‘One day, perhaps.’ It was not the time to explain. Frances recalled the long evenings she had spent in diligent study to prepare for the examination that would have admitted her to the lecture courses of the Pharmaceutical Society, and the incident that had put a stop to her ambitions; her brother Frederick’s fall from an omnibus and the injury which had sent poisons coursing through his blood. There had been two years during which she had nursed him, two years of fevers and chills and growing debility, three operations to drain the pus – procedures which would have killed an older man – the inevitable wasting of strength, and decline into death at the age of twenty-four. It was a time during which her grieving father had dwindled from a hale man of fifty to a shattered ancient, becoming a second invalid requiring Frances’ constant care.

‘Can you advise me how much of the mixture remains in the bottle?’ asked Frances. ‘I really do doubt that he drank it all.’

‘We do have a slight difficulty there,’ admitted Wilfred. ‘The maidservant was so upset she dropped the bottle and most of the medicine spilled out. We are hoping that what is left is enough for the public analyst but we have no way of knowing how much he took.’

‘I see,’ said Frances. ‘All the same, I believe you may safely rule out Mr Garton’s prescription as being of any significance in his death. When is the inquest?’

‘It opens at ten tomorrow morning, at Providence Hall, but I doubt they’ll do more than take evidence of identification and then adjourn for the medical reports. If you’ll take my advice though, Miss, I suggest you ask your solicitor to watch the case. You never know what might be said.’

There was a sudden loud jangling of the bell and a dapper young man with over large moustaches burst into the shop, his eyes wide with alarm. ‘Miss Doughty, I met a fellow in the street and he told me —’. He halted abruptly on seeing Wilfred and gasped, ‘Oh my Lord!’

‘Constable, this is Mr Herbert Munson, my father’s apprentice,’ said Frances evenly. ‘Mr Munson, I would beg you to be calm. The constable is merely enquiring about the prescription made for Mr Garton yesterday.’

Breathlessly, Herbert dashed to the counter and glanced at the book. ‘Yes, of course. I remember it very well, I was here at the time, and I can assure you that everything was in order.’ He threw off his greatcoat. ‘I’ll make up some samples of the stock items for you to take away. The sooner this is settled and we are cleared of suspicion the better.’ He busied himself behind the counter. Despite the chill weather he was sweating slightly, and had to make an effort to steady his hands as he poured the liquids. Frances remained calmly impassive as she helped to seal and package the bottles.

‘We would appreciate it, Constable,’ said Frances handing Wilfred the parcels and looking him firmly in the eye, ‘if you could let us know the outcome of your enquiries.’

‘Of course, Miss.’

‘And should I wish to speak to you again, where can I find you?’ Frances had already observed his collar number and now produced a notebook and pencil from her apron pocket and solemnly wrote it down.

‘You’ll find me at Paddington Green station at either six in the morning or six at night. Just ask for Constable Brown.’ He smiled. ‘Good day to you, and to you Sir.’ As Wilfred trudged away his thoughts turned, as they so often did during his long hours of duty, to his wife Lily, the sweetness of her face and temper, her diminutive rounded form innocent of any sharpness and angles, more rounded recently since she had borne him their second child (not that he minded that at all), and how she had first melted his heart by the way she had gazed up trustingly into his face.

10

In the shop, Frances was deftly tidying everything away while Herbert sank weakly into the customers' chair and dabbed his brow with a handkerchief. At twenty-two he was three years older than she, and had been apprenticed to William Doughty for a year. With the death of William's son Frederick, Herbert had, without saying a word, assumed that he would in time be the heir to the business, a position which would probably require marriage to Frances. That she held no appeal for him either in form or character hardly mattered, and the fact that she would rather have been doomed to eternal spinsterhood than marry him was something he was unaware of. Slightly built and four inches shorter than
Frances, he had deluded himself that his large moustaches made him an object of female admiration, and enhanced them with a pomade of his own mixing. Frances had never liked to tell him that in her opinion he used too much oil of cloves. When he was agitated, as he was now, the pointed tips quivered.

'They're saying that Mr Garton was poisoned by your father!' he gulped. 'It's all over Bayswater! They know Mr Doughty has been ill and they're saying he made a mistake and put poison in the medicine! But I can *swear* it was all right!'

'Then that is what the analysis will show,' said Frances, patiently. 'You know what Bayswater is like; by tomorrow there will be a new sensation and all this will be forgotten.'

'We'd best not mention it to Mr Doughty.' He suddenly sat up straight. 'In fact, I *insist* we do not!'

Frances, who was sure she knew better than he what was best for her father, bit back her annoyance. 'I agree. I hope the matter may be disposed of without him being distressed by questioning.' She removed her apron. 'If you don't mind, Mr Munson, I shall see how he does.'

There was no direct connection between the shop premises and the family apartments above, so it was necessary for Frances to leave the shop by the customer's entrance and use the doorway immediately adjacent. Ascending by the steep staircase, Frances found the maid, Sarah, in the parlour, wielding a broom with intense application, strewing yesterday's spent tealeaves to collect the dust. Sarah had been with the Doughtys for ten years, arriving as a dumpy and sullen-looking fifteen year old. With unflagging energy and a fearless attitude to hard work, she had become indispensable.

Now grown into a brawny young woman, solid, plain and unusually stern, she showed a quiet loyalty to the Doughtys that nothing could shake, and a tendency to eject by the back door any young man with the near suicidal temerity to court her.

'Mr Doughty's still asleep, Miss,' said Sarah. 'I'll bring him his tea and a bit of toast as soon as he calls.'

Frances eased open the door of her father's room. He was resting peacefully, the deep lines that grief had carved into his face softened by sleep, his grey hair, which despite all Frances' attentions never looked tidy, straggling on the pillow. For two months after Frederick's death he had been an invalid, rarely from his bed, and the Pharmaceutical Society had sent along a Mr Ford to supervise the business. Frances had given her father all the care she could, but when he eventually rose from his bed, he was frail and stooped, while his mind was afflicted with a melancholy from which she feared he might never recover. Since the death of her mother, an event Frances did not recall as it had occurred when she was only three, all William Doughty's hopes for the future had rested on his son, and nothing a daughter could do was of any consolation. Frederick's clothes were still in the wardrobe, and despite Frances' pleas, William would not consent to their being given to charity. Often, she found him gazing helplessly at the stored garments and once she had found him clutching the sleeve of a suit to his face, tears falling copiously down his cheeks. Only once before her brother's death had she seen her father weep. She had been ten years old, and had asked many times to be taken to her mother's grave to lay some flowers. After many weary refusals he had relented, and on a bleak winter day took her to the cemetery where she saw a small grave marker, hardly big enough to be a headstone, bearing simply the words 'Rosetta Jane Doughty 1864'. To her horror, her father had fallen to his knees beside the stone and wept. When he had dried his eyes they went home, and she had never mentioned the matter to him again.

It was Frederick who had talked to her about their mother. 'We had such jokes and merriment!' he would say, eyes shining. 'Sometimes we played at being lords and ladies at a grand ball, and danced until we almost fell down, we were laughing so much.' Then he took his little sister by the hand, and whirled her about the room until William came in to see what all the noise was, and suggested that they would be better employed at their lessons.

12

In the December that followed Frederick's death, William had once again assumed his duties in the shop. In truth, he was there only as the nominal qualified pharmacist. His professional knowledge was intact, but his hands were weaker than they had been, with a slight tremor. The work of preparing material for the stock of tinctures and extracts fell largely to Herbert and Frances. In the stockroom at the back of the main shop there was a workbench where the careful grinding, sifting and drying of raw materials was carried out, the mixing and filtering of syrups and assembling the layers of the conical percolator pot. Although William observed the work, he seemed unaware that by unspoken agreement, Herbert and Frances were also watching him. He had confined himself to making simple mixtures from stock and filling chip boxes with already prepared pills. The sprawling writing in the book recording Garton's prescription had been his. Behind the counter it was usually Frances' nimble fingers which would wrap and seal the packages so William could hand them to customers with a smile. It was the only moment when he looked like his old self.

Gazing at her sleeping father, Frances noticed, with a tinge of concern, the small ribbed poison bottle by his bedside, which contained an ounce of chloroform. He had taken to easing himself to sleep by sprinkling a few drops on a handkerchief and draping it over his face, declaring, when Frances expressed her anxiety, that if it had benefited the Queen it could scarcely do *him* any harm.

She closed the door softly and returned to the parlour. 'Sarah, I don't know if you have heard about Mr Garton.'

'I have, Miss,' she said grimly. 'I had it off Dr Collin's maid. I don't want to upset you, but they're saying terrible lies about Mr Doughty.'

'I know,' said Frances with a sigh.

'I've heard that it's Mrs Garton herself, who's accused him. Well I've said that the poor lady is so beside herself she doesn't know what to think.'

Frances sometimes wondered if the servants of Bayswater had their own invisible telegraphy system, since it seemed that once any one of them knew something, so the rest of them also instantly knew it too. 'My father mustn't be troubled with this,' she said. 'He's too unwell.'

'I know, Miss, I'll never say a word.'

13

Despite what Frances had said to soothe Herbert's panic, she remained deeply concerned, but there was nothing she could do except write to the family solicitor Mr Rawsthorne asking him to attend the inquest, and hope that the post-mortem examination on Percival Garton would show that he had died from some identifiable disease.

The winter season with its coughs and chills was normally a busy time in a chemist's shop, but as the day went on it became apparent that the residents of Bayswater were taking their prescriptions elsewhere, while medicines made up the previous day and awaiting collection remained on the shelf. There were some sales of proprietary pills and mixtures, but Frances had the impression that the customers had only come in out of curiosity. Some asked pointedly after the health of William Doughty, and those ladies who were in the shop when he made a brief appearance later in the day, shrank back, made feeble excuses and left. William frowned and commented on the lack of custom, implying by his look that it was somehow the fault of Frances and Herbert. He seemed to be the only person in Bayswater who did not know of his assumed involvement in the death of Mr Garton. Herbert went out in the afternoon for a chemistry lecture, and returned in a state of some distress. A Mrs Bennett, a valued customer of many years had stopped him in the street and explained at great length and with many blushes that she wanted to take a prescription to the shop and she did so like the way Herbert prepared her medicine and could he promise her that if she brought it in he would do it with his very own hands?

'I didn't know what to say!' whispered Herbert, frantically as he and Frances made up some stock syrups in the back storeroom. 'She's one of our best customers and she's afraid to come into the shop!' For the sake of the ailing man, Frances and Herbert did their best to behave as if nothing was the matter, and at four o' clock William muttered that they could see to the shop for the rest of the day, and went back upstairs to read his newspaper.

Early the following morning, Constable Brown returned, and this time he was accompanied by a large man with a bulbous nose and coarse face who he introduced as Inspector Sharrock.

'Is Mr Doughty about?' said Sharrock, glancing quickly about the shop. 'We need to speak to him.'

'He is unwell,' said Frances. 'He is in his bedroom, resting.' Out of the corner of her eye she saw Herbert starting to panic again.

‘Can’t help that,’ said Sharrock, brusquely. He strode up to the counter and thumped it loudly with his fist directly in front of Frances. Herbert jumped and gave a little yelp. Sharrock jutted his chin forward, with an intense stare. It was meant to intimidate, but Frances, standing her ground and clenching her fingers, could feel only disgust. ‘Either he comes down here or we go up to him. You choose.’

The last thing Frances wanted was her father waking up suddenly to find strangers in the house. ‘I’ll fetch him,’ she said, coldly. As she passed Wilfred he gave her a sympathetic look, which she ignored.

It took several minutes to prepare her father for the interview she had hoped to avoid. He was tired and seemed confused, but she explained as best she could about Garton’s death and amidst protests that he hardly knew how he could help, he agreed to speak to the police. She saw that his clothing was tidy and smoothed his hair, then brought him downstairs. When they entered the shop Sharrock put the ‘Closed’ sign on the door, and ushered William to the seat. ‘Is this your writing, Mr Doughty?’ said Sharrock, thrusting the open prescription book under William’s nose, and tapping the page with a large blunt finger.

‘I expect so,’ said William, fumbling in his pocket for his spectacles, getting them onto his nose at the third attempt and peering at the book. Sharrock pursed his lips and gave a meaningful glance at Wilfred. ‘Yes – that is my writing.’

‘And did you prepare the prescription for Mr Garton?’

‘Well – I – imagine I must have done. Yes – let me see – *tinctura nucis vomicae*, *elixir aurantii* – I believe he has been prescribed this before.’

‘The thing is,’ said Sharrock, ‘our enquiries show that the medicine you made for Mr Garton was the only thing he had on the night of his death that was not also consumed by another person. And the doctor who examined the body is prepared to say that the cause of death was poisoning by strychnine. What do you say to *that*?’

William frowned, and his lips quivered but he said nothing.

‘Come now, Mr Doughty, an answer if you please!’ Frances, trembling with anger, was about to reprimand the policeman for bullying a sick man, but realised that to plead her father’s condition would only increase the suspicion against him. She came forward and stood beside her father, laying a comforting hand on his arm. Really, Inspector,’ said William at last, ‘I can’t say anything other than that the mixture would not contain enough *strychnia* to kill anyone.’

Sharrock, towering over the seated man, leaned forward and pushed his face menacingly close. ‘Is it possible, Mr Doughty, that you made a mistake? Could you have put in more of the tincture than you thought? Or could you have put in something else instead? Something a lot stronger?’

‘Inspector, I must protest!’ exclaimed Herbert. ‘I myself was here when the mixture was made up, and it was exactly as prescribed.’ He drew himself to his full height – not a long journey – and as Sharrock stood upright and gazed down at him he quailed for a moment, the tips of his moustaches vibrating, then recovered. ‘I will say so under oath if required!’

Sharrock smiled unpleasantly. ‘And that is what you will have to do, sir. I must tell you that we are working on the theory that Mr Garton was poisoned due to an error in the making up of his prescription.’

‘I am sure you will find that is untrue,’ said Frances quietly.

Sharrock glanced briefly at her but didn’t trouble himself to reply. Instead he tucked the prescription book firmly under one arm, strode over to the shop door and turned the sign back to ‘Open’.

‘Inspector,’ said Frances, following him before he could depart with the book. She held out her hand for it. ‘If you please.’

He smiled his humourless smile. ‘I’ll hold onto this for the time being. Evidence. We’ll take our leave now. You’ll be hearing from the coroner’s court very shortly. And if you’d like to take my advice, I’d say Mr Doughty looks unwell. He ought to rest.’

As Sharrock departed with Wilfred trailing unhappily after him, Herbert turned to Frances and mouthed ‘What shall we do?’ She shook her head in despair and returned to her father’s side, taking the cool dry hand and feeling it tremble.

‘He was right,’ said William, in a sudden miserable understanding of his condition ‘I am unwell. I may never be well again. Perhaps I *did* poison Mr Garton.’

‘No, Sir, I will swear you did not!’ exclaimed Herbert.

‘Come with me, father,’ urged Frances. ‘You need rest and a little breakfast.’

He sighed, nodded, and went with her. Once he was comfortably settled, with Sarah keeping a careful eye on him, Frances returned to the shop.

‘What did Inspector Sharrock have to say while I was fetching my father?’ she asked.

Herbert shuddered. ‘He wanted to see everything we have which contains *strychnia*. When I showed him the pot of extract of nux vomica in the storeroom he was very interested indeed. I told him that was where we always kept it, but he didn’t believe me. He tried to imply that we usually kept it on the shelf amongst the shop rounds, and only moved it into the stockroom after Mr Garton’s death to make it look less likely it could have been used in error.’

‘What an unpleasant man,’ said Frances.

‘Miss Doughty, I want you to know that I have the most perfect belief in your father!’ exclaimed Herbert. ‘He is the kindest and cleverest of men!’

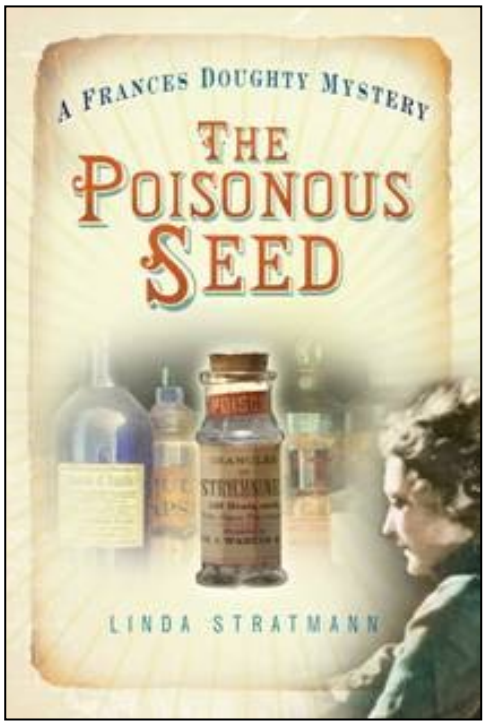
‘Thank you Mr Munson. I value your support, and if as you say, you observed the mixture being made, then that settles any question I might have of an error occurring here. We must wait to hear the public analyst’s report, and hope that it reaches some firm conclusions. The Constable informed me that most of the medicine was spilled, which is very troubling. If the inquest was to leave the matter open, it might never be resolved in the public mind.’

‘What if Mrs Garton poisoned him?’ suggested Herbert. ‘Have the police thought of that? Perhaps she put poison in his medicine and then blamed it on your father! Wives do murder their husbands, you know.’

‘Yes,’ said Frances dryly, casting Herbert a pointed look, ‘I am sure they do.’ She paused, thoughtfully. ‘But if the Inspector is determined to find my father at fault then he will not be looking for other explanations of Mr Garton’s death. It is easy for us to form theories, of course, but we know almost nothing of the Gartons, their household and their circle, and only a very little of what happened on the night he died.’

‘That is true,’ admitted Herbert, ‘But there is nothing to be done about that. It’s not as if you can turn detective.’

‘I think,’ said Frances, with a sudden resolve, ‘that is exactly what I may have to do.



A Frances Doughty Mystery

The Poisonous Seed

Linda Stratmann

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A gripping tale of murder, mystery, jealousy and emancipation in Victorian London

When a customer of William Doughty's Bayswater chemist shop dies of strychnine poisoning after drinking medicine he dispensed, William is blamed, and the family faces ruin. William's daughter, nineteen-year-old Frances, determines to redeem her ailing father's reputation and save the business. She soon becomes convinced that the death was murder, but unable to persuade the police, she turns detective.

Armed only with her wits, courage and determination, and aided by some unconventional new friends, Frances uncovers a startling deception and solves a ten-year-old murder. There is to be more deaths, and a secret in her own family revealed before the killer is unmasked, and Frances will find that her life has changed forever.

- A Victorian murder mystery set in Bayswater London.
- The heroine is a clever and determined female sleuth.
- While most of the characters are fictional, many of the people, locations and streets in Bayswater are real.
- Paints a realistic picture of Victorian daily life.
- The first book in the new Frances Doughty Mystery series.
- Published by The Mystery Press a new imprint dedicated to local crime fiction and cosy crime.

Linda Stratmann is a freelance writer and editor. She has a degree in psychology and a lifelong interest in true crime. She is the author of numerous titles for The History Press including *Greater London Murders* & *Chloroform*. She lives in Walthamstow, London. Author website at **www.lindastratmann.com**

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