

Arsenic, Old Lace and Sister Amy Archer

by Alan Hynd, 1903-1974

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The eerie sound of the hearse creaking to a stop in front of The Archer Home for old folks and chronic invalids in the ink-black pre-dawn hours of the steaming August night awakened the two old maids who lived in the snug brick house across the street.

“Heavens!” said Mabel Bliss to her sister, Patricia, as she drew the bedroom curtain aside and peered out. “That’s the third time somebody’s died over there in less than a month! And always in the middle of the night.”

A light went on in the vestibule of The Archer Home and the front door opened to admit two burly men who had jumped down from the driver’s seat of the death wagon, opened the rear door and dragged out a box six feet long. They weren’t

inside very long when they reappeared with the box, which now seemed to be more of a burden to carry. They shoved it into the hearse and clattered into the gloom.

Now a light went on in the parlor and the Bliss sisters could see Sister Amy Archer, founder of the home bearing her name, wearing nothing but a very fancy nightgown, settling herself at a little organ. (The “Sister” was a title she had bestowed on herself. It had nothing to do with any religious order.) The windows were open and presently there wafted across the narrow street the sweet sad strains of *Nearer, My God, To Thee*, accompanied by Sister Amy’s pleasant soprano.

Sister Amy Archer, one of the few arch-murderesses in criminal history who could quote passages from the Bible from Genesis to Exodus, was only half way through the hymn when a second figure appeared, a brooding giant of a man with a red puffy face and walrus moustache, in nightshirt and bare feet. This was Big Jim Archer, Sister Amy’s fifth spouse, a coarse type in his forties who seemed to be an odd sort of a mate for our heroine. Sister Amy, though in her late thirties, looked a good decade younger, and, though sharp-featured, was a very attractive little woman with snow-white skin, jet-black hair and a divine form that even the starch in her professional uniform simply couldn’t hide. Not that she was hiding much that August night after the hearse left, nor was Big Jim hiding anything, either, when the music stopped and the lights went out.

It was Sister Amy’s views on sex that puzzled the Bliss sisters. For somebody who was so devout and stern, and who was so unalterably opposed to alcohol and tobacco in any form, Sister Amy was simply mad about sex. Nor did she make any bones about it.

“One man in bed at night when the lights are out,” she had said to the Bliss sisters after coming up from New York six months previously to establish The Archer Home in an abandoned rich man’s mansion in the tree-shaded village of Windsor, just outside of Hartford, Connecticut, “is worth ten on the street in broad daylight.”

After breakfast in the morning, when the twenty residents of The Archer Home, assorted widows and widowers who were, in one way or another, breaking up and coming apart at the joints, were out on a veranda that swept across the front and ran around one side of the big gray frame ramshackle Home, Big Jim clumped across the street and knocked on the front door of the Bliss house. Sister Amy, a simply superb cook, had sent him over with some of her hotcakes and maple syrup. He was both a comic and tragic figure, Big Jim, none too bright, and turned out in brown derby, baggy light-brown suit and heavy black shoes.

“We see you lost another one during the night, Jim,” said Mabel Bliss.

“Yeah,” said Big Jim, “another heart case.”

“That’s what the other two died from, isn’t it, Jim?”

“Yeah. It’s gettin’ to be a regular epidemic.”

“They always seem to die during the night, don’t they?”

“Yeah, don’t they! Well, I gotta to be goin’.”

Six nights later, that hearse was there again, and in the morning, Big Jim was over with something tasty from Sister Amy for the two spinsters.

“Who was it this time, Jim?” asked Mabel Bliss.

“A woman. First woman we’ve lost.”

“What was it this time, Jim?”

Big Jim, who had a flair for the dramatic gesture, didn't reply with words but, raising his eyes toward the ceiling, pointed to his heart.

There was a total of three doctors who had staked out the village of Windsor in the year of 1908, all driving up from their offices in Hartford. None of the three, luckily enough for Sister Amy, was a wizard in the field of diagnostics. And, since all of the deaths in the Home were sudden, and in the dead of the night, none of the physicians was ever able to be at the bedside when the Grim Reaper appeared. It was never until morning, when the corpse was already embalmed, that Sister Amy phoned one of the physicians to get his name on the death certificate.

“What was it, Sister Amy?” the doctor would inquire. The physician, realizing that Sister Amy had been a head nurse in New York's Bellevue Hospital, where Big Jim had been an orderly before coming to Connecticut, had such complete respect for Sister Amy's knowledge in the field of diagnostics, that he would never question her word when she said, “The heart,” or, “A general breaking up due to the infirmities of age.”

There were ten bedrooms for the residents of The Home, each a double, and the residents, who averaged sixty years of age or more, which was old age in that period, were kept equally divided as to sex, so that there could always be two residents in each room. Sister Amy's deal was a unique one for the day: one lump of money or property, anywhere from \$5,000 to \$15,000, depending on the resident's age, physical condition and what the fiscal traffic would bear. For that sum, the resident was to receive a lifetime contract from Sister Amy, including everything from food and lodging and medical care, with a fine plot in Windsor's leading cemetery thrown in as a cheerful after-death bonus.

“I'm going to take such good care of my charges,” Sister Amy told the Bliss sisters shortly after founding The Home, and explaining her plan, “that they'll be eating me into the poor house, praise the Good Lord!”

The Archer Home had been functioning for about a year and a half, and that hearse had been there in the night nineteen times, when Big Jim Archer, who did all the chores around the place, from emptying the bedpans to sweeping up, began to feel himself breaking up. There was a fine Irish saloon, Paddy's, just three blocks from The Home and Big Jim, despite Sister Amy's strict ban on booze, began to sneak around to it when he got the chance. After a few shots, he'd pop some cloves into his mouth.

As time went on, Paddy, a discerning man, saw that Big Jim was beset by troubles of some sort and one night he asked him just what was wrong.

Big Jim, wiping the foam from a beer chaser from his walrus moustache, looked levelly at Paddy for a little while. Then he said, in a voice filled with sorrow:

“It's my wife, Paddy.”

“Sister Amy? Why, is she ill or somethin'?”

“Far from that, my friend.”

“What is it, then?”

Big Jim looked around him to make sure none of the other men at the bar were within earshot, then said,

“It's her demands at night.”

“You mean they're more than you can handle, Jim?”

“More than I can handle now. I used to be able to handle things fine but her demands have increased since we came up here from New York.”

“If I’m not asking too much, Jim, just how great are her demands?”

“Two and three times.”

“A week?”

“No, a night.”

“Good God, Jim, that’s enough to put a man in an early grave!”

As the months wore on, and that hearse continued to stop at The Archer Home on an average of once a month, always at night, Jim continued to confide in Paddy. He was now patronizing a quack doctor down in New York, who was fixing him up with an aphrodisiac. The pills worked for a time. Then one night Jim appeared in Paddy’s with simply woeful tidings.

“The old clock,” he confided to his friend, “has not only run down, it’s stopped altogether.”

“You mean...?”

“The very worst,” said Big Jim, almost breaking into a fit of sobbing, “has happened.”

“And Sister Amy? Is she complainin’?”

“That’s just it,” came the reply. “She don’t say nothin’ when we go to bed and I lay there useless. In the mornin’, when it’s daylight, she has a funny way of lookin’ at me. I’d give a year of my life to know what’s goin’ on in that mind of hers. There’s an awful lot about Sister Amy that I could tell you if I wanted to.”

One day, when Jim was sweeping out the dirt at the back door, there appeared a redheaded, baggy-pants stranger carrying a knapsack on a stick over his shoulder.

“The name’s Gilligan, Michael Gilligan,” he announced to Big Jim in a deep, cheerful voice, “and I’m lookin’ for work.”

“There’s no work here for you,” snapped Big Jim, who was later to tell Paddy that instinct told him that, what with his dried-up condition, Gilligan would be a dangerous man to have around his wife. “Beat it. And beat it quick.”

Big Jim had just ordered Gilligan off the property when he was conscious of Gilligan’s eyes meeting those of somebody who had come up silently behind him. Turning, he saw Sister Amy. She was looking straight at the stranger, tall, handsome, and obviously bursting with what it took when the lights were out. He shuddered, he was to tell Paddy that night, for he hadn’t seen Sister Amy with that light in her eyes since the first time she had laid eyes on him.

Within an hour, Michael Gilligan, having been fed enough for three men by Sister Amy, who overruled her spouse in important matters, was addressing himself to assorted repair chores around The Home.

It was less than a month after Gilligan had first appeared that Sister Amy dropped in on the Bliss sisters one morning far from her usual bubbling self.

“What on earth’s wrong, Sister Amy?” asked Mabel Bliss.

“Jim.”

“Jim? Why, what’s the matter with Jim?”

“He’s not long for this world, may the Lord bless his soul.”

“But just what’s wrong with the man?”

“Complications.”

The Christmas season was coming on, nearing the end of the third year of Sister Amy's functioning in Windsor, when the hearse called in the night and took Big Jim Archer away. Sister Amy appeared to be inconsolable... for a while. Then she appeared to brighten very suddenly. The Bliss sisters couldn't figure out what was up until spring came and the windows were open.

Then, on those occasions when Sister Amy forgot to douse the lights, the two old maids could see history repeating itself, with one exception. When Archer had divested himself of his nightshirt he had been clothed only in his birthday suit. Gilligan, though, no matter whether he was vertical or horizontal, never seemed to divest himself of his socks and garters.

It was in early summer that Sister Amy bounced over to the Bliss place one morning with the news. "My heart has been broken since Jim was called to Heaven but now Michael Gilligan has mended it. It is God's will that Michael and I become one."

Gilligan and Sister Amy got married by a local Justice of the Peace but were too busy with various matters to go off on a honeymoon. Gilligan wasn't the friendly type to the Bliss sisters that Archer had been. And he seemed to drink a bit, always having a pint in his pants pockets as he roamed the property making repairs.

Sister Amy explained to the Bliss sisters why she made an exception to liquor in Gilligan's case. "My Michael," she said, "uses alcohol for medicinal purposes."

One morning, after the second stiff in forty-eight hours had been carried away in the night, Gilligan was out front sweeping the porch when the sisters, who couldn't stand the suspense, decided to call over to him.

"What'd the last two residents die of, Mr. Gilligan?" asked Mabel.

Gilligan stopped to take a swig out of the bottle before answering. Then he bellowed out, loudly enough to be heard in the next block:

"None of yer goddam business!"

That, as it was eventually to turn out, was a mistake. The Bliss sisters were furious. They sat down and got off a letter to *The Hartford Courant*, then, as today, a great New England newspaper. They had been counting the number of people who left in that box during the night for more than four years now and it added up to one a month.

"I think," the letter to *The Courant* concluded, "that that's a lot of people dying and that there is something mighty strange going on over there."

The next day there popped up at the Bliss front door a very appropriately named man named Mike Toughy, the youthful star reporter of *The Courant*, a walking, talking symbol of the front-page scribes of the era: battered hat, dangling cigarette, whiskey breath and side-of-the-mouth talk.

"And now," he began, as he settled himself on a green chair in the Bliss parlor, "suppose you tell me just why you ladies are so suspicious of that place across the street."

The Bliss sisters didn't have anything to impart to Mike but suspicion. But, as they went into details about that hearse that had been calling in the night all those years, there was something so earnest about them that Mike decided to look into things. So he dug into the records of a few of Sister Amy's recent losses, got

the names of the three physicians who had signed the death certificates, and sought out the doctors.

True, all three doctors told Toughy, an average of a death a month at The Archer Home did, at first glance, seem high, considering that such an average would completely decimate the Home and repopulate it every twenty months. But the doctors pointed out to Mike that Sister Amy's patients were all breaking up from the infirmities of age when they came to The Home and had a short time to live at best. Then, too, all three doctors pointed out, Sister Amy, having come out of Bellevue Hospital with practically as much knowledge of the human system as a physician, was more than capable of seeing that everything possible was done for any of her charges.

Toughy wasn't satisfied, though. He had a friend who was an actuary, one of those statistics wizards who figure out how long people are going to live, employed by The Greater New England Life Insurance Company, and he dropped in on the man. After filling him in on the death rate at Sister Amy's establishment, he made some notes, and asked Mike to come back in a few days.

The news that awaited Mike was mixed. The death rate was high, but, considering the condition of Sister Amy's charges when they checked in, a lot was accounted for.

"So," concluded the actuary, a good man with double talk, "the picture doesn't look all black and it isn't all white, either."

Mike Toughy didn't do anything now but hire a couple of grave diggers and an intern from Hartford General Hospital, dig up one of Sister Amy's most recent check-outs, take the man's insides out, put him back and cover the grave. Then Mike took the insides to the state toxicologist right in Hartford. The news from the toxicologist wasn't what Mike was after: not the slightest trace of any kind of poison. Mike, the persistent one, dug up a second stiff but got the same kind of a report. A third stiff got him nowhere, nor did a fourth.

Mike had just gone back to the city room of his newspaper after getting his fourth negative report when who telephoned him but Sister Amy.

"Mr. Toughy," came the sweet voice of the lady who mixed sex and murder, "I'm wondering if you can stop over to see me as soon as you can."

Sitting in Sister Amy's parlor half an hour later, Toughy found himself looking at a very confident lady.

"Well, Mr. Toughy," she began, smiling sweetly, "were you disappointed?"

"Disappointed? Disappointed at what?"

"Disappointed," said Sister Amy, her voice taking on some harshness now, "at not finding any poison in the four bodies."

For once, Mike couldn't come up with an answer.

"No wonder you can't answer me," said Sister Amy, her voice now dripping icicles, "you no good son of a bitch. Dig up one more body and try to blacken my fine reputation and I'll see that you wind up in jail and, besides, I'll sue that paper of yours for the last desk in that room where you write your lies."

Mike had no sooner returned to the city room when the city editor beckoned him.

"Mike," said the city editor, "I can guess what Sister Amy said to you."

"Why?"

“She’s hired the sharpest shyster lawyer this side of the Rockies, a scoundrel from New York, and he’s just been in here threatening the very future of this paper.”

“Anything else?” Toughy asked.

“Yes. This: maybe that woman is one of the greatest criminals since Bluebeard. But if she is, we’ll never prove it. Let the law find out and dig into the facts. Drop this thing.”

Mike Toughy, though, was practically fearless. On his days off, he ran down to New York and began to poke around Bellevue Hospital. There was a coffee house near Bellevue where the doctors, interns and nurses hung out. It was from a young physician who had been an intern when Sister Amy had been a nurse who gave Toughy some idea of Sister Amy’s sexual demands.

“I’ve had quite a few women in my life,” the doctor told the scribe, “but never anybody to come anywhere near Amy Archer. I know for a fact that she had three other fellows besides myself one day when she was here within a twelve-hour period.”

Gilligan seems to have been a very talented man, for as long as he was to last. On most nights, he preferred to perform with the lights on and the shades up in a front room of the second floor. The Bliss sisters, with that wonderful show going on, lost so much sleep that they were seldom awake during the day. Every month or so, in the middle of the night, there would be a change of scene: that hearse.

It hadn’t taken Gilligan long, of course, to become something of a fixture at Paddy’s saloon. Being a boastful man, he regaled Paddy and some of the barflies of stories of why Big Jim Archer had failed as a husband and why he himself was such a success, going into all the details.

Then one night, some three years after his marriage to Sister Amy, Gilligan walked into Paddy’s a man with terror in his face.

“Good God, Mike,” said Paddy, “you look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“It’s worse than that, Paddy. I’ve just seen somebody *makin’* a ghost.”

“Whaddya you mean?”

Gilligan had been hitting it up before he came into Paddy’s and was about two sheets to the ozone. Now, though, as if suddenly realizing that he had let out something that should never have been mentioned, he clammed up. Looking at a shot Paddy had poured for him, he shoved it back, without a word, and hustled out of the joint.

“I wonder what he meant by what he just said?” one of the barflies could hear Paddy muttering to himself. Paddy thought for a while, then shrugged and went back to pouring booze for the customers.

Two nights later, that hearse was at Sister Amy’s again. When Paddy’s opened in the morning, the word was there before the first spigot was turned on: Brother Gilligan had conked out during the night. Heart attack.

Sister Amy, always a lady who looked ahead, had Gilligan’s successor all lined up, a classy-looking gentleman answering to the name of Harold Q. Knight, who had been in residence for several months now.

Knight was a small man of about fifty, with very white skin, very red lips, and jet-black hair that the other residents were certain had been dyed. Nobody knew

where he had come from and, as he passed the other residents at any hour of the day or night, he was always quoting to himself from a book of poetry he carried.

On the night of the day that Sister Amy's seventh husband had been buried, one of the residents, a new arrival named Charles W. Andrews, happened to be passing Sister Amy's bedroom when he heard the voices of Sister Amy and Harold Q. Knight.

"I asked you to come into my room," Andrews could hear Sister Amy saying to Knight, "because I thought maybe we could get together."

"I don't quite understand," Knight replied. There was silence, then Andrews heard Knight saying: "But why are you taking your nightgown off?"

"Can't you guess, Mr. Knight?"

"Why, no."

"I'm a woman," Sister Amy was saying, "and I no longer have a husband. You are a man and you do not have a wife. We can have a lot of fun together."

"Sister Amy," Knight said, "I thought you knew."

"Knew what?"

"That I prefer men to women." There was a stony silence. Then Andrews heard Sister Amy say in the terminology of the day, "You mean you're a fairy?"

"Well," replied Knight, "I guess you can call it that."

It wasn't long afterward when Knight left in the night.

All this time, of course, Mike Toughy had been biting his nails and tearing out his hair because *The Hartford Courant*, not wanting to find itself without a press to print on, had admonished him to lay off Sister Amy. Sister Amy had, of course, cut down on that one-a-month hearse call. But the old boys and girls were still going away in the night.

Sister Amy, who had, up to now, as she began her seventh year operating The Home, always appeared in The Home starched out in a nurse's white uniform and appeared on the street in regular pedestrian attire. Now, though, for street wear, she appeared in the semi-religious garb of the Quaker, flowing gray cape and little gray bonnet. As she minced along the streets of Windsor, out purely for exercise and air, she was never without her Bible, glancing at it as she walked, then quoting it as she looked skyward with a holy light in her eyes.

Our girl sure knew what she was doing. Some citizens regarded her as something of a nut. Others respected her as a devout little character. But nobody, nobody but Mike Toughy, had the slightest idea that she was one of the great killers of criminal history.

It was along about now that Sister Amy, in her middle forties, entered that phase that women call change of life. With the normal woman, sex becomes pretty important. With Sister Amy, the demand was out of this world. To make matters worse, there wasn't a stalwart male on the premises. So Sister began to pay for it. Windsor was filled with stalwart young workmen, plumbers and carpenters and jacks of all trades. So now there was always a leak that developed somewhere in The Home, after dark, and a plumber called to plug it up.

One day, Mike Toughy happened to be lifting a few in Paddy's saloon when who walked in but Charley Andrews, the old boy who had heard that dialogue between Sister Amy and the gay resident. Toughy and Andrews happened to fall into conversation and when Mike heard the story of how Knight had conked out so

quickly after not being able to rise to Sister's demands, he began to throb with suspicion again.

So Mike Toughy, without his paper being any the wiser, decided to play for all or nothing. He scouted around Hartford until he found an old couple, smart folks in their sixties named Flanagan, and he coached them in the part they were to play in a lethal plot.

A few days later, then, Mr. and Mrs. Michael Flanagan appeared at the front door of The Archer Home.

"We're from Massachusetts," Flanagan said to Sister Amy, "and we've heard about your wonderful home."

"Come in," said Sister Amy. The Flanagans looked like prosperous people and Sister Amy sat there for quite a while, sizing them up and feeling them out. The Home, she divulged, was all filled but she'd be glad to put them on the waiting list.

"Oh," said Flanagan, uttering words that Toughy had put in his mouth, "isn't that too bad you can't take us right away. Now we'll have to hunt around for someplace else because we want to get into a Home somewhere right away."

"Yes," piped up Mrs. Flanagan. "And money is no object."

"Oh," said Sister Amy, "I just remembered: there will be two vacancies here in a week or so."

"Oh? You have residents who are very ill?"

"Yes. Two cases of heart trouble, poor souls." Amy dabbed at her eyes. "They're unaware of what's wrong with them, God bless them," she said.

"We'll be back," said Flanagan. "We're staying with relatives down in New York."

When the Flanagans told Toughy about the vacancies, Mike was afraid he'd have two murders on his conscience. So he had the Flanagans go right back and tell Sister Amy they'd changed their minds.

Unbeknown to Mike, though, there was another couple, people named the Chester Watsons, who had popped up at the Bliss home, of all places, asking the two old maids what they knew about the residence.

"We're looking for some place to spend our last years," Mrs. Watson told Mabel Bliss, "and we've heard a lot about the Archer Home."

Mabel Bliss, having been told by Mike Toughy that Sister Amy would have the law on anybody who said a bad word about her, was afraid, unfortunately, as it turned out, to open her mouth. And so she and her sister saw the Chester Watsons walking across the street, rapping on the front door of The Home, and being graciously received by Sister Amy.

Two nights later, not one but two residents of The Archer Home left in boxes. One dead one was an old lady; the other was Brother Andrews.

And that did it, the double departure in the gloom of the night. There was room now for the Watsons. When the Bliss sisters dropped the word to Mike Toughy, he got busy. Toughy had always thought that Sister Amy had learned about those four bodies he had had dug up by spotting him when he had visited the Bliss home originally and somehow having him shadowed when he went to the cemetery at nights. Now, though, he to take his chances.

The body that Toughy had disinterred this time, long enough to get out of the cemetery with the stomach, was that of Charley Andrews. Toughy was in better luck this time. Andrews had been poisoned.

The next day Mike Toughy was sitting in the office of State's Attorney Hugh M. Alcorn. Toughy had, while the state toxicologist had been analyzing Andrews' stomach, been doing some fast poking around the region. He learned that Sister Amy had insured Andrews for \$4,000. He learned that on the occasion that he had had the actuary look into the insurance records for him that the actuary had not looked far enough.

True, Sister Amy had not at that time been carrying insurance on any of the departed ones. Not that she hadn't tried. She had tried to take out policies on most of them but they had all failed to pass their medical tests.

But Toughy had discovered something even more vital to the future of The Archer Home. In digging into the poison books of the drugstores, which he had done previously without results, it occurred to him that Sister Amy might not have used her own name when buying arsenic. And he struck luck there, too. A little woman answering Sister Amy's description had, over a period of years, put in occasional appearances at a drug store in Hartford. And when Mike Toughy sneaked the druggist around to the Bliss house under cover of night and had him get a gander at Sister Amy when she came out the front door next morning, the druggist just nodded.

Now Toughy sat there telling State's Attorney Alcorn the whole lethal story of Sister Amy's seven years of bad luck for Windsor. Alcorn saw the black light. But, to make assurance doubly sure, he had the bodies of four of Sister's most recent victims dug up. Two of them were filled with arsenic. Two of them had been smothered. That answered a lot, that smothering; it explained why most of Sister Amy's victims were walking around after supper and leaving in a box a few hours later. And a smothering job didn't leave any trace in a victim's stomach.

Finally, *The Hartford Courant* ran the big story.

Mrs. Archer-Gilligan
Arrested, Charged
with Murder

The Hartford Courant

Fair Today and
Tomorrow
Illustration Printed by Press Job

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POLICE BELIEVE ARCHER HOME FOR AGED A MURDER FACTORY

MRS. ARCHER - GILLIGAN ACCUSED OF MURDER OF INMATE

AUTOPSY SHOWS TWO WHO DIED WERE KILLED BY POISON

U. S. ACCEPTS GERMAN PROMISE:
NO CONDITION TO BE CONSIDERED

Wilson, in Brief Note Cabled Last Night, Informs Berlin Government That Differences With Other Belligerents Cannot Form Subject of Discussion With Germany.



Mrs. Gilligan, Arrested at Her Home Late Yesterday Afternoon, Withstands Grilling by State Police--Body of Franklin R. Andrews, Whom She is Accused of Killing, Disinterred from its Resting Place in Chelsea Cemetery at Night, Shows Death Was Caused by Arsenic, Not Gastric Ulcers, as Stated in Death Certificate--Another Body Also Shows Death by Poison.

FOUR MORE IRISH LEADERS EXECUTED

Nineteen Other Convicted to Death and Sentences Amy Commuted.

MAY BE 20 WHO HAVE BEEN POISONED

Old Folks Have Come to the Home From All Parts of the State--Woman Has Had Two Husbands--Startling Number of Deaths at Home--Purchases of Arsenic at Windsor Drug Store--Woman Waives Examination--Bodies Taken Away at Night in Violation of Law

Changed with the murder of an inmate of her home for elderly people, and believed by the authorities to have poisoned many other inmates, Mrs. Amy E. Archer-Gilligan of Windsor was arrested late yesterday afternoon.

Sister Amy was charged with the murder-for-profit of Brother Andrews. A bad case of "prison psychosis" made it seem unlikely that she'd come to trial, but on June 18, 1917, the woman suspected of at least a score of murders faced the jury.

After a four-week trial and four hours of deliberation, they found her guilty and sentenced her to die on the gallows in November. But State's Attorney Alcorn, in his enthusiasm, had made a slip in the first trial and had told the jury about twenty-three other arsenic jobs that the State had linked to Sister Amy. That got her a new trial in June 1919.

At the second trial, a curious thing was noticeable. Sister Amy, though only in her forties, had suddenly aged. At the first trial, where she had appeared with a daughter from one of the five marriages she had gone through before darkening the Connecticut landscape, she had retained her remarkable youth.

Now, though, she had suddenly become an old woman, with evil written all over her face. She reminded some court observers of a female Jekyll-Hyde. All through the seven years while she was writing criminal history she had kept her innocent, youthful face. Now, overnight, it seemed, the evil and age had wiped out the innocence and the youth.

Insanity was her defense the second time around, with defense lawyers declaring her crazy. Her 19-year-old daughter, Mary E. Archer, testified that her mother was a morphine addict. The second trial ended on July 1, 1919, with a plea of guilty of murder in the second degree, which carried a life sentence. She was a model prisoner until 1924, when she was declared hopelessly insane and transferred to a mental hospital.

End of story? Not quite.

An aspiring young writer heard of Amy's story in the 1930's and wrote it up as a stage play. His name was Joseph Otto Kesselring, and the original title of his work was *Bodies in Our Cellar*. The title changed, however, and the play found its way to Broadway as *Arsenic and Old Lace*.

Written in 1939, it opened on Broadway at the Fulton Theater, on January 10, 1941, to rave reviews. The original production featured Boris Karloff playing a killer who looked like the Boris Karloff of *Frankenstein* fame and made the idea of wholesale slaughter simply hilarious.

Frank Capra later made it into a film, starring Cary Grant. As one critic proclaimed,

"You wouldn't believe homicidal mania could be such fun!"

Sister Amy was still alive for both the play and the movie. But it is not known if she saw either. Nonetheless, she starred in the original cast and became a celebrity patient, of sorts, in the nut house where she resided. Ironically, she outlived just about everyone she ever met until a day April 1962, when she died quietly at the ripe old age of ninety-two.
