

### *The Mysterious Death of Jane Stanford*

By Robert W. P. Cutler

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On the last day of February 1905, elderly dowager Jane Stanford cried out in the night, "This is a horrible death to die!" Linking her words to the agonies of strychnine poisoning, Dr. Robert Cutler, once neurologist and pharmacologist at Stanford University (now, most regrettably, deceased) reopened a one-hundred-year-old murder investigation. The book has caused quite a stir, not only because of Cutler's conviction that Stanford was a victim of foul play, but because of his accompanying accusation of a cover-up orchestrated by Stanford University's famous early president, David Starr Jordan. Jordan, of course, had been plucked by Jane and Leland Stanford from the presidency of Indiana University to build and expand the university that the couple created to memorialize their only son.

The story of Jane Stanford's demise has all the makings of a blockbuster popular history, for at each section of each brief chapter there lies the opportunity to expand upon some observation or story. Cutler's endnotes show his own instinct to follow from newspaper to archive each new twist in the drama, and his judicious reservations about the stories that his main suspect, Stanford's longtime handmaid and companion, Miss Bertha Berner, provided. Cutler nonetheless finds proof of murder in the medical descriptions of Stanford's last

moments and her early postmortem appearance, descriptions provided by a group of Honolulu physicians who were involved with the alarm, the inquest, and the autopsy. In particular, medical testimony pointed to her tightly clenched fists, her turned, arched feet, and arms so rigid that the undertaker had to reduce the contraction forcibly in order to disrobe the corpse. Further clues of the distinctive progression of strychnine poisoning lie in Jane Stanford's words of agony to her female companions. An author dedicated to a larger audience might have lingered longer over the frenzy in which medical and legal witnesses were assembled through the early hours of March 1, how the private dining rooms of the hotel were used for the *inquisition post mortem*, or indeed offered the reader more descriptive detail of the way such investigations and declarations of unnatural death were made a century ago. Readers of a longer version would want more of the fascinating toxicological and pharmacological detail pulled from the notes to the text.

Cutler's dedication to proving the crime reflects more a mission of delayed justice than it does exposé or sensationalism. He became convinced that Starr Jordan's efforts to suppress a possibly extensive, expensive murder investigation involved

unwarranted and nearly libelous characterization of the medical and public health personnel in Hawaii who handled Stanford's body. Thus it is Cutler's secondary purpose in this slender book to rehabilitate the reputations of these men. His principal critique of Jordan stems from the way the *Stanford University* president used his power and position: insinuating the incompetence of the Honolulu medical community in private correspondence, denying his agency when necessary, and allowing newspaper reporters to do the dirty work. Cutler's profiles of the elite Honolulu medical community form a composite picture of the range of medical careers attractive to this transitional generation, when the promises of scientific medicine were far greater than its curative or diagnostic successes.

I found most convincing the repair work Cutler offered to these reputations, but I reserve skepticism for the sketchy motivations offered to explain Jordan's private campaigns to suppress the story and impugn the evidence of murder most foul. Moreover, Cutler's conclusion that Stanford could only have been poisoned is still more possible than likely. Med-

ical records to lend any clinical surety to the author's conviction that Stanford was, before the poisonings, in robust good health have long since disappeared, if they ever existed. (The routine modern measures of wellness, illness, and aging were not yet part of health maintenance or monitoring.) The toxicological evidence from chemical analysis of Stanford's body was far more ambivalent than Cutler wished it to be. The insecurity, even near-chaos, of the crime scene presents a further difficulty that Cutler chose not to address systematically. The San Francisco earthquake and fire, the suppression of unhelpful Stanford family memorabilia by Jordan and others: these are the accidents that Cutler points to when the murder trail goes cold. Too much of what would truly convince the reader cannot be wrested from all these silences. But this engaging little book does make us want to know more and to mourn the death of its author. He writes with flair and honesty and above all tells a good story.

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