

# Paralysis Caused by Unknown Poison

Medicine

## Substance Probably Added to Jamaica Ginger

INVESTIGATION into the nature of the poisonous substance in Jamaica ginger which caused paralysis outbreaks in Tennessee, Oklahoma, Kentucky and other states, has been hampered by the absence of any samples of the beverage that was actually drunk by any of the patients, health authorities have explained.

Peripheral polyneuritis is the scientific name for the disease, which has just been diagnosed clinically by local physicians and officers of the Tennessee state health department in cooperation with Dr. Hugh J. Morgan, associate professor of medicine at Vanderbilt University at Nashville. The paralysis is due to a poison which has affected certain sets of nerves. Just what the poisonous agent is has not yet been determined. Professor Morgan believes the disease may have resulted from the effects of two or more poisonous substances in alcohol fortified by a heavy metal dye or volatile substances. The chances for recovery from the condition are good, but it will be a matter of months before the patients are well again.

Study of 119 cases showed that four-fifths of them were from 20 to 45 years old, none being under 15. All but nine admitted the use of alcohol, either Jamaica ginger or some other form. Over four-fifths of the cases were in men or boys.

The drink was sold in small bottles containing from 60 to 80 per cent. alcohol. The rest was Jamaica ginger. Prohibition officials allowed this to be manufactured and sold thinking that the large amount of ginger would make it impossible for anyone to use it as a beverage. However, several hundred hardy drinkers consumed it in large amounts. Some of the patients admitted having drunk as many as fourteen or fifteen bottles of the stuff in a day or two. Because of the small amount in each bottle, each was well drained, and official investigators

have not been able to obtain any of the same beverage that was drunk. Their analyses have been made on samples furnished by the manufacturer, which are supposed to be from the same lot as that causing the paralysis.

In these samples, no metal, no alkaloid, no isopropyl-alcohol, no denaturant of any sort has been detected. The supposition is that either the samples examined were from a different lot than those drunk by the paralytics or the stuff was adulterated by a bootlegger. In Kentucky, near Berea and Richmond, the stuff was sold by a man in a car who collected cash payments for every bottle sold, it is reported. This strengthens the bootlegger theory.

The fact that many of the paralytics are people of some prominence in

their own communities has also hampered the official investigations. There is a natural reluctance to admit the drinking, and officials feel that probably some details are being withheld. While 119 cases have been investigated in Tennessee, official estimates place the number affected in that state at 400 or 500. In Kentucky, only 6 or 8 have been reported. These were mostly painters.

The paralysis set in as long as a week or even three or four weeks after the suspected beverage had been consumed. Some patients also complained of stomach and intestinal upsets. The paralysis affects the legs chiefly so that walking is extremely difficult or even impossible. However, there is sensation and a pin prick or touch of a hand on the paralyzed leg is felt. Some patients have had paralysis of the fingers, enough to give difficulty in buttoning their shirts or handling small objects.

Science News-Letter, March 29, 1930

### The Answer Is In This Issue

Was the *drink* which caused the *paralysis* outbreak manufactured legitimately? p. 194—How is *excavating* made easy for *geologists* in Alaska? p. 195—What are some of the evidences of an *isthmus* between America and Asia? p. 195—How *fast* does the new *planet* travel? p. 197—At what *European* observatories has the new *planet* been observed? p. 197—What was the origin of "motion study" in factory management? p. 198—What *metal* is being used in place of iron for *gas pipes*? p. 200—What was once the strange *penalty* for picking *shrubs*? p. 200—How is it possible to be *comfortable* in a room cooler than 60 *degrees*? p. 200—Why has the parrot fever research been moved? p. 202—What ancient *sport* is now part of the *mental training* at a university? p. 204—Who is the "*hitch-hiker*" of the sea? p. 206—In what *new book* can one learn of the fundamentals of *anthropology*? p. 207.

### Bright Comet Discovered

BRIGHT enough to be easily seen with a small telescope if it were not so close to the sun, a new comet was discovered on March 21, by a Polish astronomer named Wilk at the University of Cracow. The comet is of the seventh magnitude and was found in the constellation of Pisces, the fishes, low in the western evening sky just after sunset.

Astronomically expressed, its position when discovered was 1 hour 27 minutes right ascension and 18 degrees 3 minutes north declination. As comets become brightest when near the sun, Wilk's comet is probably now at nearly maximum brightness, and will probably not become conspicuous to the naked eye. Not until three accurate observations have been made, however, can its exact path be calculated.

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