

A Book of Remarkable Criminals

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Introduction

"The silent workings, and still more the explosions, of human passion which bring to light the darker elements of man's nature present to the philosophical observer considerations of intrinsic interest; while to the jurist, the study of human nature and human character with its infinite varieties, especially as affecting the connection between motive and action, between irregular desire or evil disposition and crime itself, is equally indispensable and difficult."
--*Wills on Circumstantial Evidence.*

I REMEMBER my father telling me that sitting up late one night talking with Tennyson, the latter remarked that he had not kept such late hours since a recent visit of Jowett. On that occasion the poet and the philosopher had talked together well into the small hours of the morning. My father asked Tennyson what was the subject of conversation that had so engrossed them. "Murders," replied Tennyson. It would have been interesting to have heard Tennyson and Jowett discussing such a theme. The fact is a tribute to the interest that crime has for many men of intellect and imagination. Indeed, how could it be otherwise? Rob history and fiction of crime, how tame and colourless would be the residue! We who are living and enduring in the presence of one of the greatest crimes on record, must realise that trying as this period of the world's history is to those who are passing through it, in the hands of some great historian it may make very good reading for posterity. Perhaps we may find some little consolation in this fact, like the unhappy victims of famous freebooters such as Jack Sheppard or Charley Peace.

But do not let us flatter ourselves. Do not let us, in all the pomp and circumstance of stately history, blind ourselves to the fact that the crimes of Frederick, or Napoleon, or their successors, are in essence no different from those of Sheppard or Peace. We must not imagine that the bad man who happens to offend against those particular laws which constitute the criminal code belongs to a peculiar or atavistic type, that he is a man set apart from the rest of his fellow-men by mental or physical peculiarities. That comforting theory of the Lombroso school has been exploded, and the ordinary inmates of our prisons shown to be only in a very slight degree below the average in mental and physical fitness of the normal man, a difference easily explained by the environment and conditions in which the ordinary criminal is bred.

A certain English judge, asked as to the general characteristics of the prisoners tried before him, said: "They are just like other people; in fact, I often think that, but for different opportunities and other accidents, the prisoner and I might very well be in one another's places." "Greed, love of pleasure," writes a French judge, "lust, idleness, anger, hatred, revenge, these are the chief causes of crime. These passions and desires are shared by rich and poor alike, by the educated and uneducated. They are inherent in human nature; the germ is in every man."

Convicts represent those wrong-doers who have taken to a particular form of wrong-doing punishable by law. Of the larger army of bad men they represent a minority, who have been found out in a peculiarly unsatisfactory kind of misconduct. There are many men, some lying, unscrupulous, dishonest, others cruel, selfish, vicious, who go through life without ever doing anything that brings them within the scope of the criminal code, for whose offences the laws of society provide no punishment. And so it is with some of those heroes of history who have been made the theme of fine writing by gifted historians.

Mr. Basil Thomson, the present head of the Criminal Investigation Department, has said recently that a great deal of crime is due to a spirit of "perverse adventure" on the part of the criminal. The same might be said with equal justice of the exploits of Alexander the Great and half the monarchs and conquerors of the world, whom we are taught in our childhood's days to look up to as shining examples of all that a great man should be. Because crimes are played on a great stage instead of a small, that is no reason why our moral judgment should be suspended or silenced. Class Machiavelli and Frederick the Great as a couple of rascals fit to rank with Jonathan Wild, and we are getting nearer a perception of what constitutes the real criminal. "If," said Frederick the Great to his minister, Radziwill, "there is anything to be gained by it, we will be honest; if deception is necessary, let us be cheats." These are the very sentiments of Jonathan Wild.

Crime, broadly speaking, is the attempt by fraud or violence to possess oneself of something belonging to another, and as such the cases of it in history are as clear as those dealt with in criminal courts. Germany to-day has been guilty of a perverse and criminal adventure, the outcome of that false morality applied to historical transactions, of which Carlyle's life of Frederick is a monumental example. In that book we have a man whose instincts in more ways than one were those of a criminal, held up for our admiration, in the same way that the same writer fell into dithyrambic praise over a villain called Francia, a former President of Paraguay. A most interesting work might be written on the great criminals of history, and might do something towards restoring that balance of moral judgment in historical transactions, for the perversion of which we are suffering to-day.

In the meantime we must be content to study in the microcosm of ordinary crime those instincts, selfish, greedy, brutal which, exploited often by bad men in the so-called cause of nations, have wrought such havoc to the happiness of mankind. It is not too much to say that in every man there dwell the seeds of crime; whether they grow or are stifled in their growth by the good that is in us is a chance mysteriously determined. As children of nature we must not be surprised if our instincts are not all that they should be. "In sober truth," writes John Stuart Mill, "nearly all the things for which men are hanged or imprisoned for doing to one another are nature's everyday performances," and in another passage: "The course of natural phenomena being replete with everything which when committed by human beings is most worthy of abhorrence, anyone who

endeavoured in his actions to imitate the natural course of things would be universally seen and acknowledged to be the wickedest of men."

Here is explanation enough for the presence of evil in our natures, that instinct to destroy which finds comparatively harmless expression in certain forms of taking life, which is at its worst when we fall to taking each other's. It is to check an inconvenient form of the expression of this instinct that we punish murderers with death. We must carry the definition of murder a step farther before we can count on peace or happiness in this world. We must concentrate all our strength on fighting criminal nature, both in ourselves and in the world around us. With the destructive forces of nature we are waging a perpetual struggle for our very existence. Why dissipate our strength by fighting among ourselves? By enlarging our conception of crime we move towards that end. What is anti-social, whether it be written in the pages of the historian or those of the Newgate Calendar, must in the future be regarded with equal abhorrence and subjected to equally sure punishment. Every professor of history should now and then climb down from the giddy heights of Thucydides and Gibbon and restore his moral balance by comparing the acts of some of his puppets with those of their less fortunate brethren who have dangled at the end of a rope. If this war is to mean anything to posterity, the crime against humanity must be judged in the future by the same rigid standard as the crime against the person.

The individual criminals whose careers are given in this book have been chosen from among their fellows for their pre-eminence in character or achievement. Some of the cases, such as Butler, Castaing and Holmes, are new to most English readers.

Charles Peace is the outstanding popular figure in nineteenth-century crime. He is the type of the professional criminal who makes crime a business and sets about it methodically and persistently to the end. Here is a man, possessing many of those qualities which go to make the successful man of action in all walks of life, driven by circumstances to squander them on a criminal career. Yet it is a curious circumstance that this determined and ruthless burglar should have suffered for what would be classed in France as a "crime passionel." There is more than a possibility that a French jury would have extenuating circumstances in the murder of Dyson. The fate of Peace is only another instance of the wrecking of a strong man's career by his passion for a woman.

In Robert Butler we have the criminal by conviction, a conviction which finds the ground ready prepared for its growth in the natural laziness and idleness of the man's disposition. The desire to acquire things by a short cut, without taking the trouble to work for them honestly, is perhaps the most fruitful of all sources of crime. Butler, a bit of a pedant, is pleased to justify his conduct by reason and philosophy--he finds in the acts of unscrupulous monarchs an analogy to his own attitude towards life. What is good enough for Caesar Borgia is good enough for Robert Butler. Like Borgia he comes to grief; criminals succeed and criminals fail.

In the case of historical criminals their crimes are open; we can estimate the successes and failures. With ordinary criminals, we know only those who fail. The successful, the real geniuses in crime, those whose guilt remains undiscovered, are for the most part unknown to us. Occasionally in society a man or woman is pointed out as having once murdered somebody or other, and at times, no doubt, with truth. But the matter can only be referred to clandestinely; they are gazed at with awe or curiosity, mute witnesses to their own achievement. Some years ago James Payn, the novelist, hazarded the reckoning that one person in every five hundred was an undiscovered murderer. This gives us all a hope, almost a certainty, that we may reckon one such person at least among our acquaintances.[1]

[1] The author was one of three men discussing this subject in a London club. They were able to name six persons of their various acquaintance who were, or had been, suspected of being successful murderers.

Derues is remarkable for the extent of his social ambition, the daring and impudent character of his attempts to gratify it, the skill, the consummate hypocrisy with which he played on the credulity of honest folk, and his flagrant employment of that weapon known and recognised to-day in the most exalted spheres by the expressive name of "bluff." He is remarkable, too, for his mirth and high spirits, his genial buffoonery; the merry murderer is a rare bird.

Professor Webster belongs to that order of criminal of which Eugene Aram and the Rev. John Selby Watson are our English examples, men of culture and studious habits who suddenly burst on the astonished gaze of their fellowmen as murderers. The exact process of mind by which these hitherto harmless citizens are converted into assassins is to a great extent hidden from us.

Perhaps Webster's case is the clearest of the three. Here we have a selfish, self-indulgent and spendthrift gentleman who has landed himself in serious financial embarrassment, seeking by murder to escape from an importunate and relentless creditor. He has not, apparently, the moral courage to face the consequences of his own weakness. He forgets the happiness of his home, the love of those dear to him, in the desire to free himself from a disgrace insignificant{sic} in comparison with that entailed by committing the highest of all crimes. One would wish to believe that Webster's deed was unpremeditated, the result of a sudden gust of passion caused by his victim's acrimonious pursuit of his debtor. But there are circumstances in the case which tell powerfully against such a view. The character of the murderer seems curiously contradictory; both cunning and simplicity mark his proceedings; he makes a determined attempt to escape from the horrors of his situation and shows at the same time a curious insensibility to its real gravity. Webster was a man of refined tastes and seemingly gentle character, loved by those near to him, well liked by his friends.

The mystery that surrounds the real character of Eugene Aram is greater, and we possess little or no means of solving it. From what motive this silent, arrogant man, despising his ineffectual wife, this reserved and moody scholar stooped to fraud and murder the facts of the case help us little to determine. Was it the hope of leaving the narrow surroundings of Knaresborough, his tiresome belongings, his own poor way of life, and seeking a wider field for the exercise of those gifts of scholarship which he undoubtedly possessed that drove him to commit fraud in company with Clark and Houseman, and then, with the help of the latter, murder the unsuspecting Clark? The fact of his humble origin makes his association with so low a ruffian as Houseman the less remarkable. Vanity in all probability played a considerable part in Aram's disposition. He would seem to have thought himself a superior person, above the laws that bind ordinary men. He showed at the end no consciousness of his guilt. Being something of a philosopher, he had no doubt constructed for himself a philosophy of life which served to justify his own actions. He was a deist, believing in "one almighty Being the God of Nature," to whom he recommended himself at the last in the event of his "having done amiss." He emphasised the fact that his life had been unpolluted and his morals irreproachable. But his views as to the murder of Clark he left unexpressed. He suggested as justification of it that Clark had carried on an intrigue with his neglected wife, but he never urged this circumstance in his defence, and beyond his own statement there is no evidence of such a connection.

The Revd. John Selby Watson, headmaster of the Stockwell Grammar School, at the age of sixty-five killed his wife in his library one Sunday afternoon. Things had been going badly with the unfortunate man. After more than twenty-five years' service as headmaster of the school at a meagre salary of L400 a year, he was about to be dismissed; the number of scholars had been declining steadily and a change in the headmastership thought necessary; there was no suggestion of his receiving any kind of pension. The future for a man of his years was dark enough. The author of several learned books, painstaking, scholarly, dull, he could hope to make but little money from literary work. Under a cold, reserved and silent exterior, Selby Watson concealed a violence of temper which he sought diligently to repress. His wife's temper was none of the best. Worried, depressed, hopeless of his future, he in all probability killed his wife in a sudden access of rage, provoked by some taunt or reproach on her part, and then, instead of calling in a policeman and telling him what he had done, made clumsy and ineffectual efforts to conceal his crime.

Medical opinion was divided as to his mental condition. Those doctors called for the prosecution could find no trace of insanity about him, those called for the defence said that he was suffering from melancholia. The unhappy man would appear hardly to have realised the gravity of his situation. To a friend who visited him in prison he said: "Here's a man who can write Latin, which the Bishop of Winchester would commend, shut up in a place like this." Coming from a man who had spent all his life buried in books and knowing little of the world the

remark is not so greatly to be wondered at. Profound scholars are apt to be impatient of mundane things. Professor Webster showed a similar want of appreciation of the circumstances of a person charged with wilful murder. Selby Watson was convicted of murder and sentenced to death. The sentence was afterwards commuted to one of penal servitude for life, the Home Secretary of the day showing by his decision that, though not satisfied of the prisoner's insanity, he recognised certain extenuating circumstances in his guilt.[2]

[2] Selby Watson was tried at the Central Criminal Court January, 1872.

In Castaing much ingenuity is shown in the conception of the crime, but the man is weak and timid; he is not the stuff of which the great criminal is made; Holmes is cast in the true mould of the instinctive murderer. Castaing is a man of sensibility, capable of domestic affection; Holmes completely insensible to all feelings of humanity. Taking life is a mere incident in the accomplishment of his schemes; men, women and children are sacrificed with equal mercilessness to the necessary end. A consummate liar and hypocrite, he has that strange power of fascination over others, women in particular, which is often independent altogether of moral or even physical attractiveness. We are accustomed to look for a certain vastness, grandeur of scale in the achievements of America. A study of American crime will show that it does not disappoint us in this expectation. The extent and audacity of the crimes of Holmes are proof of it.

To find a counterpart in imaginative literature to the complete criminal of the Holmes type we must turn to the pages of Shakespeare. In the number of his victims, the cruelty and insensibility with which he attains his ends, his unblushing hypocrisy, the fascination he can exercise at will over others, the Richard III. of Shakespeare shows how clearly the poet understood the instinctive criminal of real life. The Richard of history was no doubt less instinctively and deliberately an assassin than the Richard of Shakespeare. In the former we can trace the gradual temptation to crime to which circumstances provoke him. The murder of the Princes, if, as one writer contends, it was not the work of Henry VII.--in which case that monarch deserves to be hailed as one of the most consummate criminals that ever breathed and the worthy father of a criminal son--was no doubt forced to a certain extent on Richard by the exigencies of his situation, one of those crimes to which bad men are driven in order to secure the fruits of other crimes. But the Richard of Shakespeare is no child of circumstance. He espouses deliberately a career of crime, as deliberately as Peace or Holmes or Butler; he sets out "determined to prove a villain," to be "subtle, false and treacherous," to employ to gain his ends "stern murder in the dir'st degree." The character is sometimes criticised as being overdrawn and unreal. It may not be true to the Richard of history, but it is very true to crime, and to the historical criminal of the Borgian or Prussian type, in which fraud and violence are made part of a deliberate system of so-called statecraft.

Shakespeare got nearer to what we may term the domestic as opposed to the political criminal when he created Iago. In their envy and dislike of their fellowmen, their contempt for humanity in general, their callousness to the ordinary sympathies of human nature, Robert Butler, Lacenaire, Ruloff are witnesses to the poet's fidelity to criminal character in his drawing of the Ancient. But there is a weakness in the character of Iago regarded as a purely instinctive and malignant criminal; indeed it is a weakness in the consistency of the play. On two occasions Iago states explicitly that Othello is more than suspected of having committed adultery with his wife, Emilia, and that therefore he has a strong and justifiable motive for being revenged on the Moor. The thought of it he describes as "gnawing his inwards." Emilia's conversation with Desdemona in the last act lends some colour to the correctness of Iago's belief. If this belief be well-founded it must greatly modify his character as a purely wanton and mischievous criminal, a supreme villain, and lower correspondingly the character of Othello as an honourable and high-minded man. If it be a morbid suspicion, having no ground in fact, a mental obsession, then Iago becomes abnormal and consequently more or less irre-

sponsible. But this suggestion of Emilia's faithlessness made in the early part of the play is never followed up by the dramatist, and the spectator is left in complete uncertainty as to whether there be any truth or not in Iago's suspicion. If Othello has played his Ancient false, that is an extenuating circumstance in the otherwise extraordinary guilt of Iago, and would no doubt be accorded to him as such, were he on trial before a French jury.

The most successful, and therefore perhaps the greatest, criminal in Shakespeare is King Claudius of Denmark. His murder of his brother by pouring a deadly poison into his ear while sleeping, is so skilfully perpetrated as to leave no suspicion of foul play. But for a supernatural intervention, a contingency against which no murderer could be expected to have provided, the crime of Claudius would never have been discovered. Smiling, jovial, genial as M. Derues or Dr. Palmer, King Claudius might have gone down to his grave in peace as the bluff hearty man of action, while his introspective nephew would in all probability have ended his days in the cloister, regarded with amiable contempt by his bustling fellowmen. How Claudius got over the great difficulty of all poisoners, that of procuring the necessary poison without detection, we are not told; by what means he distilled the "juice of cursed hebenon"; how the strange appearance of the late King's body, which "an instant tetter" had barked about with "vile and loathsome crust," was explained to the multitude we are left to imagine. There is no real evidence to show that Queen Gertrude was her lover's accomplice in her husband's murder. If that had been so, she would no doubt have been of considerable assistance to Claudius in the preparation of the crime. But in the absence of more definite proof we must assume Claudius' murder of his brother to have been a solitary achievement, skilfully carried out by one whose genial good-fellowship and convivial habits gave the lie to any suggestion of criminality. Whatever may have been his inward feelings of remorse or self-reproach,

Claudius masked them successfully from the eyes of all. Hamlet's instinctive dislike of his uncle was not shared by the members of the Danish court. The "witchcraft of his wit," his "traitorous gifts," were powerful aids to Claudius, not only in the seduction of his sister-in-law, but the perpetration of secret murder.

The case of the murder of King Duncan of Scotland by Macbeth and his wife belongs to a different class of crime. It is a striking example of dual crime, four instances of which are given towards the end of this book. An Italian advocate, Scipio Sighele, has devoted a monograph to the subject of dual crime, in which he examines a number of cases in which two persons have jointly committed heinous crimes.[3] He finds that in couples of this kind there is usually an incubus and a succubus, the one who suggests the crime, the other on whom the suggestion works until he or she becomes the accomplice or instrument of the stronger will; "the one playing the Mephistophelian part of tempter, preaching evil, urging to crime, the other allowing himself to be overcome by his evil genius." In some cases these two roles are clearly differentiated; it is easy, as in the case of Iago and Othello, Cassius and Brutus, to say who prompted the crime. In others the guilt seems equally divided and the original suggestion of crime to spring from a mutual tendency towards the adoption of such an expedient.

In Macbeth and his wife we have a perfect instance of the latter class. No sooner have the witches prophesied that Macbeth shall be a king than the "horrid image" of the suggestion to murder Duncan presents itself to his mind, and, on returning to his wife, he answers her question as to when Duncan is to leave their house by the significant remark, "To-morrow--as he proposes." To Lady Macbeth from the moment she has received her husband's letter telling of the prophecy of the weird sisters, murder occurs as a means of accomplishing their prediction. In the minds of Macbeth and his wife the suggestion of murder is originally an auto-suggestion, coming to them independently of each other as soon as they learn from the witches that Macbeth is one day to be a king. To Banquo a somewhat similar intimation is given, but no foul thought of crime suggests itself for an instant to his loyal nature. What Macbeth and his wife lack at first as thorough-going murderers is that complete insensibility to taking human life that marks the really ruthless assassin.

Lady Macbeth has the stronger will of the two for the commission of the deed. It is doubtful whether without her help Macbeth would ever have undertaken it. But even she, when her husband hesitates to strike, cannot bring herself to murder the aged Duncan with her own hands because of his resemblance as he sleeps to her father. It is only after a deal of boggling and at serious risk of untimely interruption that the two contrive to do the murder, and plaster with blood the "surfeited grooms." In thus putting suspicion on the servants of Duncan the assassins cunningly avert suspicion from themselves, and Macbeth's killing of the unfortunate men in seeming indignation at the discovery of their crime is a master-stroke of ingenuity. "Who," he asks in a splendid burst of feigned horror,

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