

CAUSES CÉLÈBRES.

XXIII.

NO. 29 RATCLIFFE HIGHWAY.

[1811.]

THE recent Whitechapel tragedies recall to mind a series of crimes which eighty years ago threw not only the city of London, but the greater part of England itself into a paroxysm of consternation and terror. These murders, says De Quincey (in his essay on "Murder considered as one of the Fine Arts"), were "the sublimest and most entire in their excellence that ever were committed." While the perpetrator of the Whitechapel atrocities is still at liberty, the author of the atrocious deeds above referred to was, fortunately, speedily discovered. Less cunning than his more modern rival, he himself furnished the authorities with the means of his detection.

Within a few minutes of midnight on Saturday, Dec. 7, 1811, Mr. Marr, a young newly married man, keeping a small lace and hosier's shop at No. 29 Ratcliffe Highway, sent out his servant-girl to pay a baker's bill and to get some oysters for supper. Mrs. Marr was at the time in the kitchen, rocking her baby in its cradle. The apprentice — a young, ruddy Devonshire lad, named Goven, aged fourteen — was either busy in the shop or at work downstairs. The girl was alarmed, as she left the house on that peculiarly gloomy December night, by seeing a man in a long dark coat standing in the lamplight on the opposite side of the street, as if watching her master's house. The watchman, a friend of Marr's, had also previously noticed this mysterious man continually peeping into the window of Marr's shop, and thinking the act suspicious, had gone in and told the proprietor. A few minutes after Mary the servant left, as the watchman was returning on his ordinary half-hourly beat, Marr called to him

to help him put up the shutters; and the watchman then told Marr that the man who had been skulking about had got scared, and had not been in the street since. In the mean time the girl, looking in vain for an oyster-shop still open, had wandered from street to street and lost her way. It was nearly half an hour before she got home; when she arrived there, to her surprise she found no lights visible, and no sound within the house. She rang, and then gently knocked, but there was no reply. She rang again after a pause, but violently. Presently (but we take this fact, with some slight doubt, from Mr. De Quincey's wonderful narrative of the tragedy) she heard a noise on the stairs, and then footsteps coming down the narrow passage that led to the street door. Next, she heard some one breathing hard at the keyhole. With a sudden impulse of almost maniacal despair, she tore at the bell and hammered at the knocker; partly, perhaps unconscious of what she did, to rouse the neighborhood and paralyze the murderer, feeling now certain that a murder had been committed. Mr. Parker, a pawnbroker next door, threw up his bedroom window, and the servant told him that she felt sure her master and mistress had been murdered, and that the murderer was even then in the house. Mr. Parker half dressed himself, and armed with a kitchen poker, vaulted over the low brick wall of his back yard and entered Mr. Marr's premises. A light was still glimmering through the half-open back door by which the murderer must have just escaped. The shop was floating with blood. Marr lay dead behind the counter near the window, his skull shattered by blows of a mallet, and

his throat cut. The bodies of Mrs. Marr and the apprentice, also killed in the same way, were lying in the centre of the shop floor. The wife had apparently been murdered as she came upstairs, alarmed by the scuffle; the apprentice boy after some resistance, for the whole counter and even ceiling was sprinkled with his blood. Some one in the crowd suggested a search for the child. It was found in the kitchen, crushed and with its throat cut, the cradle beaten to pieces, and the bed-clothes piled over it. At this horrible aggravation of a hideous series of crimes, the spectators uttered a cry of horror. The servant-girl became speechless and delirious, and was carried away by the neighbors.

The murderer must have worked with terrible swiftness and sagacity. The watchman remembered that a little after twelve, finding some of Marr's shutters not quite secure, he called to him, and some one answered, "We know it." That must have been the murderer. Not more than two guineas had been stolen from the house. An iron-headed mallet, such as ship-carpenters use, and with the initials J. P. on the handle, was left behind by the murderer. It was clear that the wretch must have stolen in, the moment the shutters were up and while the door was closing. He had glided in, first stealthily locking the door, and then asked to look at some unbleached cotton stockings. As Marr had turned to take these from a pigeon-hole behind the counter, the first blow must have been struck, for the stockings were found clinched in poor Marr's hands. The murder of the child seemed alone to prove that revenge had been the motive.

During the next week many persons were arrested about Shadwell on suspicion of the murders, but they were all exonerated and discharged. A sailor, half crazed with drink, accused himself of the murders; but his insanity was soon discovered.

On the Sunday week the Marrs were buried; thirty thousand laboring and seafaring people watching the funeral, with faces

of "horror and grief." All London was stricken with fear; fire-arms and thousands of rattles were purchased. There was a horrible fear that the unknown monster, having failed to secure plunder the first time, would attempt further crimes; the bravest man dreaded the approach of night.

That dread was too well founded. On Thursday, the 19th of the same month,—only twelve nights after the Marr murder, and near the same place,—another butchery took place. It occurred at the King's Arms public-house, at the corner of New Gravel Lane, a small street running at right angles to Ratcliffe Highway. Mr. Williamson, a man of seventy, and his wife, kept the house. The other inmates were a middle-aged Irishwoman, who cleaned the pots and waited in the taproom; a little granddaughter, about fourteen years old; and a young journeyman, aged about twenty-six, lodger. Mr. Williamson was a respectable man, always in the habit of turning out his guests at eleven o'clock, and finally shutting up at twelve, when the last neighbor had sent for his ale.

Nothing particular happened in the house while it was open that night, except that some timid persons noticed a pale red-haired man, with ferocious eyes, who kept in dark corners, went in and out several times, and had been met wandering in the passages, much to the landlord's annoyance.

When the guests had left, and the lodger had gone to bed on the second floor (the child being asleep on the first), Mr. Williamson was drawing beer on the ground floor, Mrs. Williamson was moving to and fro between the back kitchen and the parlor, the servant was cleaning the grate and placing wood for the morning.

The lodger, nervous in bed and only able to doze, woke at half-past eleven, thinking of Mr. Williamson's wealth, the murder of the Marrs, and his landlord's carelessness about leaving his door open so late in a dangerous and ruffianly neighborhood. Suddenly he heard the street door below slammed and locked with tremendous violence. He leaped

out of bed, and lowering his head over the balustrade, heard the servant scream from the back parlor, "Lord Jesus Christ, we shall be all murdered!" He felt at once it was the murderer of the Marrs. Half crazed with terror, and unconscious of what he did, Turner crept downstairs and looked through the glass window of the taproom (Mr. De Quincey says through the door that was ajar). He could not see the murderer at first, but heard him behind the door, rapidly trying the lock of a cupboard or escritoire. Presently there appeared in view a tall, well made man, dressed in a rough drab bearskin coat, who knelt over the body of the landlady which lay upon the floor and rifled her pockets. He pulled out various bunches of keys, one of which fell with a clash to the floor. The listening man noticed that the murderer's shoes creaked as he walked, and that his coat was lined with the finest silk. With the keys now stolen, the murderer retired again to the middle section of the parlor. Even in his fear Turner felt that there was now a moment or two left for escape. The sighs of the dying women, the clash of the keys, and the jingling of the money would prevent his footsteps on the creaky stairs from being heard. Softly and with his bare feet he ran upstairs to escape by the roof, but in his terror he could not find the trap-door. He then ran to his room, forced the bed to the door as gently as he could, and tied the sheets together to drop from the window, which was twenty-two feet to the ground. This rope he fastened to an iron spike he luckily found in the tester of the bed. In a few minutes he had let himself down, and was caught by a watchman who was passing at the time. His first thought had been to save the child, but he was afraid she might cry if he awoke her suddenly, and then both the child and he would have been murdered. Almost speechless, all Turner could do, on reaching the ground, was to point to the door of Williamson's house, and stammer, "Marr's murderer is there." It was not twelve o'clock yet, and

several persons soon assembled; two of the most resolute men, named Ludgate and Hawse, armed themselves with iron crows, and broke open the door. They found the bodies of Mrs. Williamson and the servant, Bridget Harrington, with their throats cut, near the fireplace in the parlor. In the cellar they discovered the body of the landlord, which had been thrown downstairs. He had defended himself with an iron bar wrenched from the cellar window; his hands were cut and hacked, his leg was broken, and his throat was cut. The little grandchild was discovered tranquilly asleep. A rush was then made behind, where a noise was heard of somebody forcing windows; and as the door was forced, a man leaped out, crashing down the glass window-frame. There was behind the house a large piece of waste ground with a clay embankment, belonging to the London Dock Company; and across this the man escaped through the rising mist.

The agitation of the neighborhood at the news of these new crimes was irresistible frenzy. People leaped down from windows; every house poured forth its inmates. Sick men rose from their beds. One man — who died, indeed, the next week — snatched up a sword and went into the street. The one desire was to tear and hew the wolfish demon to pieces in the very shambles where he had been found. The drums of the volunteers beat to arms; the fire-bells rang. Every cart and carriage was stopped, every boat on the river and every house in the neighborhood was searched, but in vain. Rewards of fifteen hundred pounds were offered by the government and the parish of St. George.

The very next day an Irish sailor, named John Williams, alias Murphy, was apprehended at the Pear-Tree public-house, kept by Mrs. Vermillot, where he lodged. About half-past one on the night of the first murder, he had come up into the loft where there were five or six beds, two Scotchmen and several Germans. The watchman was cry-

ing the half-hour at the time. The Germans were sitting up in bed with a lighted candle reading; but they put it out because Williams said roughly, "For God's sake, put out that light, or something will happen!" In the morning a fellow lodger, named Harris, told him of the murder before he got up. He replied surlily, "I know it." Since then he had been restless at nights, and had been heard to say in his sleep, "Five shillings in my pocket? — my pockets are full of silver." Alarmed at the Marrs', the murderer had taken nothing there, although there was a sum of one hundred and fifty-two pounds in the house, besides several guineas in Marr's pocket. The mallet left, with another maul and an iron ripping-chisel, at Marr's, was identified as belonging to Peterson, a Norwegian ship-carpenter, who had left it in a tool-chest in Mrs. Vermillot's garret at the Pear-Tree, from which it was now missing. Mrs. Vermillot's children remembered the mallet, from having often played with it. The prisoner's washerwoman also proved that a shirt which he had recently worn came to her bloody and torn, and he had told her he had had a fight. It was proved that he knew Marr and Williamson, and several publicans certified that they had resolved to refuse him their houses because he was always meddling with their tills. It was also proved that he had recently cut off his whiskers, and that muddy stockings he had worn had been found hidden behind a chest.

This was on the Friday; on the Saturday he was committed for trial. On his way to prison, but for a powerful escort, he would have been torn in pieces by a fierce mob. At five o'clock he was left in his cell at Coldbath-fields, and his candle removed. In the morning he was found dead, hanging by his braces to an iron bar.

A few weeks later the guilt of this horrible wretch was finally and completely proved.

In a closet at the Pear-Tree public-house, some men searching behind a heap of dirty clothes found plugged into a mouse-hole a large ivory-handled French clasp-knife, the handle and blade both smeared with blood. Williams had been seen using the knife about three weeks before the Williamsons' murder. They also found a blue jacket of Williams's, the outside pocket of which was stiff with coagulated blood, as if the murderer had thrust the money into this pocket with his hand still wet.

A lady who saw Williams at the police-court examination, described him to De Quincey as a middle-sized man, rather thin and muscular, and with reddish hair; his features mean and ghastly pale. It did not seem real blood that circulated in his veins, but a green sap welling from no human heart. He was known for an almost refined person with a smooth, insinuating manner; he is even said to have once asked a girl he knew, if she would be frightened if she saw him appear about midnight at her bedside armed with a knife. To which the girl replied, —

"Oh, Mr. Williams, if it was anybody else I should be frightened; but as soon as I heard your voice I should be tranquil!"

It is useless to discuss the motives of Williams's crimes. Mr. De Quincey hints that Marr and Williams had sailed to Calcutta in the same Indiaman, and that on their return they had both courted the young woman whom Marr afterwards married. The second murder may have been the result of a wish for money with which to find means for escape: a thirst for money and an unquenchable lust for blood are apparent in both. This good, at least, arose from the horrible tragedies: they showed to the excited and terrified city the utter incompetence of the old watchmen, and prepared men's minds for the necessity of a larger, younger, and more disciplined body of police.