

The Demeanour of Murderers

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The recent trial¹ of the greatest villain that ever stood in the Old Bailey dock, has produced the usual descriptions inseparable from such occasions. The public has read from day to day of the murderer's complete self-possession, of his constant coolness, of his profound composure, of his perfect equanimity. Some describers have gone so far as to represent him, occasionally rather amused than otherwise by the proceedings; and all the accounts that we have seen, concur in more or less suggesting that there is something admirable, and difficult to reconcile with guilt, in the bearing so elaborately set forth.

As whatever tends, however undesignedly, to insinuate this uneasy sense of incongruity into any mind, and to invest so abhorrent a ruffian with the slightest tinge of heroism, must be prejudicial to the general welfare, we revive the detestable subject with the hope of showing that there is nothing at all singular in such a deportment, but that it is always to be looked for and counted on, in the case of a very wicked murderer. The blacker the guilt, the stronger the probability of its being thus carried off.

In passing, we will express an opinion that Nature never writes a bad hand. Her writing, as it may be read in the human countenance, is invariably legible, if we come at all trained to the reading of it. Some little weighing and comparing are necessary. It is not enough in turning our eyes on the demon in the Dock, to say he has a fresh color, or a high head, or a bluff manner, or what not, and therefore he does not look like a murderer, and we are surprised and shaken. The physiognomy and conformation of the Poisoner whose trial occasions these remarks, were exactly in accordance with his deeds; and every guilty consciousness he had gone on storing up in his mind, had set its mark upon him.

We proceed, within as short a compass as possible, to illustrate the position we have placed before our readers in the first paragraph of this paper.

The Poisoner's demeanour was considered exceedingly remarkable, because of his composure under trial, and because of the confident expectation of acquittal which he professed to the last, and under the influence of which

he, at various times during his incarceration, referred to the plans he entertained for the future when he should be free again.

Can any one, reflecting on the matter for five minutes, suppose it possible – we do not say probable, but possible – that in the breast of this Poisoner there were surviving, in the days of his trial, any lingering traces of sensibility, or any wrecked fragment of the quality which we call sentiment? Can the profoundest or the simplest man alive, believe that in such a heart there could have been left, by that time, any touch of Pity? An objection to die, and a special objection to be killed, no doubt he had; and with that objection very strong within him for divers very weighty reasons, he was – *not* quite composed. Distinctly *not* quite composed, but, on the contrary, very restless. At one time, he was incessantly pulling on and pulling off his glove; at another time, his hand was constantly passing over and over his face; and the thing most instanced in proof of his composure, the perpetual writing and scattering about of little notes, which, as the verdict drew nearer and nearer, thickened from a sprinkling to a heavy shower, is in itself a proof of miserable restlessness. Beyond this emotion, which any lower animal would have, with an apprehension on it of a similar fate, what was to be expected from such a creature but insensibility? I poison my friend in his drink, and I poison my friend in his bed, and I poison my wife, and I poison her memory, and do you look to ME, at the end of such a career as mine, for sensibility? I have not the power of it even in my own behalf, I have lost the manner of it, I don't know what it means, I stand contemptuously wondering at you people here when I see you moved by this affair. In the Devil's name, man, have you heard the evidence of that chambermaid, whose tea I should like to have the sweetening of? Did you hear her describe the agonies in which my friend expired? Do you know that it was my trade to be learned in poisons, and that I foresaw all that, and considered all that, and knew, when I stood at his bedside looking down upon his face turned to me for help on its road to the grave through the frightful gate then swinging on its hinges, that in so many hours or minutes all those horrors would infallibly ensue? Have you heard that, after my poisonings, I have had to face the circumstances out, with friends and enemies, doctors, undertakers, all sorts of men, and have uniformly done it; and do you wonder that I face it out with you? Why not? What right or reason can you have to expect anything else of me? Wonder! You might wonder, indeed, if you saw me moved, here now before you. If I had any natural human feeling for my face to express, do you imagine that those medicines of my prescribing and administering would ever have been taken from my hand? Why, man, my demeanour at this bar is the natural

companion of my crimes, and, if it were a tittle different from what it is, you might even begin reasonably to doubt whether I had ever committed them!

The Poisoner had a confident expectation of acquittal. We doubt as little that he really had some considerable hope of it, as we do that he made a pretence of having more than he really had. Let us consider, first, if it be wonderful that he should have been rather sanguine. He had poisoned his victims according to his carefully-laid plans; he had got them buried out of his way; he had murdered, and forged, and yet kept his place as a good fellow and a sporting character; he had made a capital friend of the coroner, and a serviceable traitor of the postmaster; he was a great public character, with a special Act of Parliament for his trial; the choice spirits of the Stock Exchange were offering long odds in his favor, and, to wind up all, here was a tip-top Counsellor bursting into tears for him, saying to the jury, three times over, "You dare not, you dare not, you dare not!" and bolting clean out of the court to declare his belief that he was innocent. With all this to encourage him, with his own Derby-day division of mankind into knaves and fools, and with his own secret knowledge of the difficulties and mysteries with which the proof of Poison had been, in the manner of the Poisoning, surrounded, it would have been strange indeed if he were not borne up by some idea of escape. But, why should he have professed himself to have more hope of escape than he really entertained? The answer is, because it belongs to that extremity, that the villain in it should not only declare a strong expectation of acquittal himself, but should try to infect all the people about him with it. Besides having an artful fancy (not wholly without foundation) that he disseminates by that means an impression that he is innocent; to surround himself in his narrowed world with this fiction is, for the time being, to fill the jail with a faintly rose-coloured atmosphere, and to remove the gallows to a more agreeable distance. Hence, plans are laid for the future, communicated with an engaging candor to turnkeys, and discussed in a reliant spirit. Even sick men and women, over whom natural death is impending, constantly talk with those about them on precisely the same principle.

It may be objected that there is some slight ingenuity in our endeavours to resolve the demeanour of this Poisoner into the same features as the demeanour of every other very wicked and very hardened criminal in the same strait, but that a parallel would be better than argument. We have no difficulty in finding a parallel; we have no difficulty in finding scores, beyond the almost insuperable difficulty of finding, in the criminal records, as deeply-dyed a murderer. To embarrass these remarks, however, with

references to cases that have passed out of the general memory, or have never been widely known, would be to render the discussion very irksome. We will confine ourselves to a famous instance. We will not even ask if it be so long ago since RUSH² was tried, that *his* demeanour is forgotten. We will call THURTELL³ into court, as one of the murderers best remembered in England.

With the difference that the circumstances of Thurtell's guilt are not comparable in atrocity with those of the Poisoner's, there are points of strong resemblance between the two men. Each was born in a fair station, and educated in conformity with it; each murdered a man with whom he had been on terms of intimate association, and for whom he professed a friendship at the time of the murder; both were members of that vermin-race of outer betters and blacklegs, of whom some worthy samples were presented on both trials, and of whom, as a community, mankind would be blessedly rid, if they could all be, once and for ever, knocked on the head at a blow. Thurtell's demeanour was exactly that of the Poisoner's. We have referred to the newspapers of his time, in aid of our previous knowledge of the case; and they present a complete confirmation of the simple fact for which we contend. From day to day, during his imprisonment before his trial, he is described as "collected and resolute in his demeanour," as "rather mild and conciliatory in his address," as being visited by "friends whom he receives with cheerfulness," as "remaining firm and unmoved," as "increasing in confidence as the day which is to decide his fate draws nigh," as "speaking of the favourable result of the trial with his usual confidence." On his trial, he looks "particularly well and healthy." His attention and composure are considered as wonderful as the Poisoner's; he writes notes as the Poisoner did; he watches the case with the same cool eye; he "retains that firmness for which, from the moment of his apprehension, he has been distinguished;" he "carefully assort[s] his papers on a desk near him;" he is (in this being singular) his own orator, and makes a speech in the manner of Edmund Kean,⁴ on the whole not very unlike that of the leading counsel for the Poisoner, concluding, as to his own innocence, with a *So help me God!* Before his trial, the Poisoner says he will be at the coming race for the Derby. Before his trial, Thurtell says, "that after his acquittal he will visit his father, and will propose to him to advance the portion which he intended for him, upon which he will reside abroad." (So Mr. Manning⁵ observed, under similar circumstances, that when all that nonsense was over, and the thing wound up, he had an idea of establishing himself in the West Indies.) When the Poisoner's trial is yet to last another day or so, he enjoys his half-pound of steak and his tea, wishes his best friends may sleep as he

does, and fears the grave "no more than his bed." (See the Evening Hymn for a Young Child.⁶) When Thurtell's trial is yet to last another day or so, he takes his cold meat, tea, and coffee, and "enjoys himself with great comfort;" also, on the morning of his execution, he wakes from as innocent a slumber as the Poisoner's, declaring that he has had an excellent night, and that he hasn't dreamed "about this business." Whether the parallel will hold to the last, as to "feeling very well and very comfortable," as to "the firm step and perfect calmness," as to "the manliness and correctness of his general conduct," as to "the countenance unchanged by the awfulness of the situation" — not to say as to bowing to a friend, from the scaffold "in a friendly but dignified manner" — our readers will know for themselves when we know too.

It is surely time that people who are not in the habit of dissecting such appearances, but who are in the habit of reading about them, should be helped to the knowledge that, in the worst examples they are the most to be expected, and the least to be wondered at. That, there is no inconsistency in them, and no fortitude in them. That, there is nothing in them but cruelty and insensibility. That, they are seen, because the man is of a piece with his misdeeds; and that it is not likely that he ever could have committed the crimes for which he is to suffer, if he had not this demeanour to present, in standing publicly to answer for them.

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1. *The recent trial*: Dr William Palmer (1824-56), the 'Rugeley Poisoner', was convicted on 27 May 1856 at the Old Bailey of the murder by strychnine of his friend, John Parsons; he had also poisoned his wife and brother. He was hanged on 14 June. Dickens described this article as 'a quiet protest against the newspaper description of Mr. Palmer in court: shewing why they are harmful to the public at large, and why they are even in themselves, altogether blind and wrong. I think it rather a curious and serviceable essay' (letter to Miss Burdett Coutts, 1 June 1856).
2. *RUSH*: James Rush, a tenant farmer, was executed in 1849 for the murder of his landlord, Isaac Jermy, and the landlord's son, also named Isaac.
3. *THURTELL*: John Thurtell (1794-1824), famous murderer. Massively in debt, he killed William Weare in 1823, was tried and hanged.
4. *Edmund Kean*: Kean (1789-1833), the most famous tragic actor of his day, who died an alcoholic.
5. *Mr. Manning*: See 'Lying Awake', note 9.
6. *the Evening Hymn for a Young Child*: Dickens probably has in mind the Evening Hymn, 'Glory to Thee, my God, this night,' by Thomas Ken (1637-1711), the third verse of which is:

Teach me to live, that I may dread
The grave as little as my bed;
Teach me to die, that so I may
Rise glorious at the awful day.