

A Searchlight Can Serve as a Spotlight: An Introduction to the Curated Crime Collection

Whether it be that the multitude, feeling the pangs of poverty, sympathise with the daring and ingenious depredators who take away the rich man's superfluity, or whether it be the interest that mankind in general feel for the records of perilous adventure, it is certain that the populace of all countries look with admiration upon great and successful thieves.

— Charles Mackay

A Worrisome Wave

In an 1841 essay titled “Popular Admiration for Great Thieves,” Charles Mackay reviews a gallery of glorified criminals found in centuries of folklore, fiction, poetry, plays, and opera. He points out that such beloved outlaws exist in France, Germany, and Italy, but the English, he says, have a particular fondness for the likes of Robin Hood, Dick Turpin, and Jonathan Wild. Mackay seems to wince when mentioning “the penny theatres that abound in the poor and populous districts of London,” where such characters “are more admired, and draw more crowded audiences, than any other species of representation.” Such venues turn murder and thievery into “the amusement of those who will one day become its imitators.” Prose fiction and poetry are safe, though: “Here there is no fear of imitation.”¹ Mackay never really explains the difference.

This exemption for rogues portrayed in prose fiction

¹ Charles Mackay, “Popular Admiration for Great Thieves,” *Memoirs of Extraordinary Popular Delusions*, Vol. 1 (London: Richard Bentley, 1841) pp. 203-22.

was *not* shared by some critics in the early 1900s. By then, there had been what one anonymous critic calls a “late revival” of fiction about criminals that was “too notorious not to arrest public attention.” Of lower merit than earlier works in the same vein, “there have appeared many novels—or collections of short stories—with a thief of the most gentlemanly sort for hero, or a pretty lady thief for heroine.” The critic admits such works are entertaining, but asks if they don’t lead “weak minds” to commit crimes and if “books which have attractive thieves for heroes” don’t prompt “not a few readers to look on thieving as desirable above mere everyday and humdrum honesty?” The worried essayist ends by expressing the hope that such fiction will “very soon go out of style, and stay out of style.” A couple of years later, another writer agreed, referring to “the vogue of these tales” and lamenting how “they have made vice attractive to the plastic mind of the ingenuous and adventure-loving youth.” Here, too, is the promise of “a reaction against these ornamental rascals” and indications that “the young people are getting an overdose of suggestions for wrong doing.” In other words, the literary crime wave would crest and crash under its own weight.² While there might be some truth to this, fictional and real rogues were prized through the century, from Simon Templar (a.k.a. The Saint) to Bonnie and Clyde, and from Selina Kyle (a.k.a. Catwoman) to Kempton Bunton.

However, returning to that “revival” or “vogue” of captivating criminal characters in the late 1800s/early 1900s, E.W. Hornung’s Arthur J. Raffles stands out as its wanted-poster boy. Raffles made his debut in the June 1898 issue of *Cassell’s Magazine*, and the series lasted long enough to fill four books. Another prominent character is Maurice Leblanc’s Arsène Lupin, who first appeared in *Je sais tout* in 1905 and returned often enough to fill an entire bookshelf. In both cases, the stories inspired stage plays

² “The Genteel Outlaw Novels,” *The Hesperian* 7.5 (January-March, 1913) pp. 259-61. “Burglar Stories and Plays,” *The Writer* 27.6 (June, 1915) pp. 90-91 (attributed to *The New York Evening Sun*).

based on the same characters. However, Hornung's creation was especially pointed at by critics concerned about the negative effects of this trend in popular narrative.

For instance, in a 1905 essay titled "The Villain as Hero," another anonymous writer sees a decline from the long tradition of fictional criminals. "The moral effect of the newer type of fiction is obviously much worse than the old," says the critic. This is illustrated by contrasting Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes to Raffles: "Both characters, of course, are imitated by impressionable youths, but the amateur detective does less harm to himself and the neighbors than the amateur burglar." The writer next cites a pair of actual criminal cases that were inspired by Raffles. With greater detail, Raffles again stands accused in H.R.D. May's "The Immorality of the Modern Burglar Story and Burglar Play," published six years later. The fear is still with how this character acts as a negative role model for impressionable children, be he enjoyed on the page or the stage. Yet the essay is meant to "throw into disfavour not an individual but a school," since "Raffles is far from being a solitary offender."³ Raffles, it seems, was pegged as a fall guy for a syndicate of felonious figures.

Baker Street's Back Alley

As glimpsed above, Sherlock Holmes was also regularly mentioned by critics addressing not just the trend overall, but also individual works within it. In a review of Grant Allen's *An African Millionaire*—which features Colonel Clay, one of the earliest of the new scoundrels—the writer says: "It will not be long before Colonel Clay is as well-known a type as Sherlock Holmes." Elsewhere, Allen's collection was described as "an inverted series of Sherlock Holmes stories." Melville D. Post's Randolph Mason was similarly described as "an intellectual criminal, a Sherlock

³ "The Villain as Hero," *The Independent* 58.2934 (February 23, 1905) pp. 444-45. H.R.D. May, "The Immorality of the Modern Burglar Story and Burglar Play," *The Nineteenth Century* 77.456 (February, 1915) pp. 432-44.

Holmes with all his good qualities turned evil and his profound mind planning rather than detecting crime.” After naming Holmes, a critic for *The Bookman* described Hornung’s Raffles as “the consummately clever counterpart of the great amateur detective.” The adventures of Frederick Irving Anderson’s Godall are “very much like the Sherlock Holmes stories, though resembling Raffles even more.”⁴ Clearly, Conan Doyle’s wildly popular sleuth served as a touchstone—or, should I say, a mirror—to understand the upsurge in criminal activity in fiction and stage drama.

Indeed, authors such as Allen, Post, Hornung, and Anderson were surfing upon a surge—or, should I say, bobbing in the undertow—of interest in popular detective stories. In *The Literature of Roguery*, an extensive history of fictional criminals primarily in British lore and literature, Frank Wadleigh Chandler explains:

Since the first half of the nineteenth century the literature of roguery has been supplemented and in part replaced by a new genre. This is the literature of crime-detection. Tales, novels, and plays by the hundred have presented crimes venial or revolting, open or obscure, only to focus interest upon the pursuit of the perpetrator. The criminal has yielded as hero to the criminal hunter. . . .⁵

This opens Chandler’s treatment of detective fiction, a chapter of 25 pages. In the previous chapter, “Roguery in Recent Fiction,” he treats the criminal characters discussed here in a seven-page sub-section titled “Raffles and Company.” To be sure, those pages provide a helpful, if

⁴ Richard le Galliene, “Wanderings in Bookland,” *The Idler* 12.1 (August, 1897) p. 128. William Morton Payne, “Recent Fiction,” *The Dial* 23.276 (December 16, 1897) p. 391. “Book Notices,” *The Yale Literary Magazine* 62.547 (October, 1896) p. 61. “Chronicle and Comment,” *The Bookman* 9.6 (August, 1899) p. 495. “Current Literature,” *The Oregon Country* 20.5 (May, 1914) p. 325.

⁵ Frank Wadleigh Chandler *The Literature of Roguery*, Vol. 2 (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1907) p. 524.

spotty, overview, but the contrast in lengths tells us something about the two types of fiction when Conan Doyle was writing his beloved adventures. To belabor my metaphor, it shows that fiction focused on criminals was a ripple in an ocean of detective stories.

A Mirage of Mayhem?

Humans have probably viewed “the good old days” through rose-tinted glasses since long before glasses were invented, but nostalgia can tarnish the present. This helps to explain why what the Reverend R.E. Hoopell preached in 1865 might have a familiar ring to it, as if it had been said yesterday. In a sermon titled “The Crimes, and Tendencies to Crime, of the Present Day,” Hoopell declares that “*all* crime is growing, is extending, fearfully. No crimes, but those of frightful extent, make an impression now upon the public.” Hoopell follows this with examples of horrible murders he found in newspapers each day of the preceding week.⁶ He does not comment on how significant growth in journalism and literacy throughout the 1800s probably had some role in the *perception* of rising crime. (Neither does he point out that the Bible has its fair share of horrible murders, too!) In other words, regardless of whether crime rates actually were growing, they *seemed* to be because reading about them was becoming so pervasive.

In addition to the growth of journalism and literacy, many countries in the late 1800s were experiencing urbanization, the spread of Darwinist and Marxist ideas, and various other social and cultural changes affecting how criminal behavior was understood. Readers interested in expert opinions on crime had a choice of non-fiction books penned by law enforcement officials. Those in the U.S. could read prison warden Charles Sutton’s *The New York Tombs: Its Secrets and Its Mysteries* or Boston police officials Benjamin P. Eldrige and William B. Watts’ *Our Rival, the Rascal*. In the U.K., Her Majesty’s Inspector of Prisons

⁶ R.E. Hoopell, “The Crimes, and Tendencies to Crime, of the Present Day” (London: A.W. Bennett) p. 6.

Arthur Griffith offered his views in *Mysteries of Police and Crime*. Those down under could learn about mayhem caused by outlaws such as Ned Kelly and other “bushrangers” in *Tales of Crime and Criminals in Australia*, written by Henry A. White, another penal expert. At roughly the same time, debates over whether criminals were products of their social environment or of their inherent physiological/neurological attributes—the two positions advanced respectively by Adolphe Quetelet and Cesare Lombroso—evolved into a scientific discipline dubbed “criminology.”⁷ By the end of the 1800s, crime had become a named science.

It’s not surprising, then, that crime was also rejuvenated as a storytelling art. Fiction writers were inspired by new perspectives on criminal behavior while looking for ways to stand out among the multitude of detective characters following the footprints of Sherlock Holmes. These authors sought to return the criminal to the spotlight, grappling with how to make such a character—if not downright likeable—then at least fascinating. To clarify my point, I *wouldn’t* want to go have a beer with either Shakespeare’s Macbeth or Dickens’ Scrooge, but I *am* intrigued by both. What narrative point-of-view should be used? If not third-person, then should the tale be told by the criminal? Or a victim? Or a detective continually thwarted by the central character’s spree? In the final pages, should the outlaw be punished by the law, conscience, fate, or something else? Or should centuries of stories in which

⁷ Charles Sutton, *The New York Tombs: Its Secrets and Its Mysteries* (San Francisco: A. Roman, 1874); Benjamin P. Eldridge and William B. Watts, *Our Rival, the Rascal* (Boston: Pemberton, 1897); Arthur Griffith, *Mysteries of Police and Crime* (London: Cassell, 1899); Henry A. White, *Tales of Crime and Criminals in Australia* (London: Ward and Downy, 1894). Regarding the nature vs. nurture debate leading to criminology, see Adolphe Quetelet, “Développement du penchant au crime” in *Sur l’homme et le développement de ses facultés, ou, Essai de physique sociale*, Vol. 2 (Paris: Bachelier, 1835) pp. 160-249; Cesare Lombroso, *L’uomo delinquente* (Milano: Hoepli, 1876); and Arthur MacDonald, *Criminology* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1893).

justice is ultimately served be rejected, suggesting we live in an uncaring universe, one where morality is a woefully *human* invention? The ramifications of this last decision is nicely illustrated by the *two* endings of Grant Allen's "The Curate of Churnside": the daring and disturbing one that Allen seemed to prefer, since it's found in two of his collections, or the very different, far more conventional one that the editor of *Cornhill Magazine* presumably requested to keep readers happy.⁸ These are just some of the issues facing the authors whose choices make up this series of reprints distinctive.

The Curated Crime Collection

The Curated Crime Collection is designed to bring this fascinating body of work back to the attention of readers. The works have been carefully selected to showcase the best of a wave of lawbreaking focal characters who debuted in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Many volumes present *partners in crime*, meaning a pair of culprits in the same book. Some offer *the complete crimes* of a single character, one whose adventures originally appeared in separate publications.

These novels and short stories have been edited with a very light hand, allowing 21st-century readers to enjoy the charms and quirks of the original texts. This means the language has not been modernized: "any one," "per cent," and other terms that are now treated as a single word remain as two; "to-morrow," "hall-way," etc. keep their hyphens; and words imported into English and *no longer* italicized to signal their foreign feel—among them "*menu*," "*alibi*," and "*espionage*"—are presented as they were a century ago. Other outmoded conventions are preserved, too. For example, once upon a time, words following an exclamation point or question mark were not always

⁸ Compare the story's final paragraphs in Allen's *Strange Stories* (London: Chatto Windus, 1884) pp. 66-99 and his *Twelve Tales* (London: Grant Richards, 1899) pp. 161-94 to the alternate one in *Cornhill* 3.15 (September, 1884) pp. 225-58. Both endings are reprinted in the first volume of the Curated Crime Collection.

capitalized, as if such punctuation were more akin to a comma than a period.

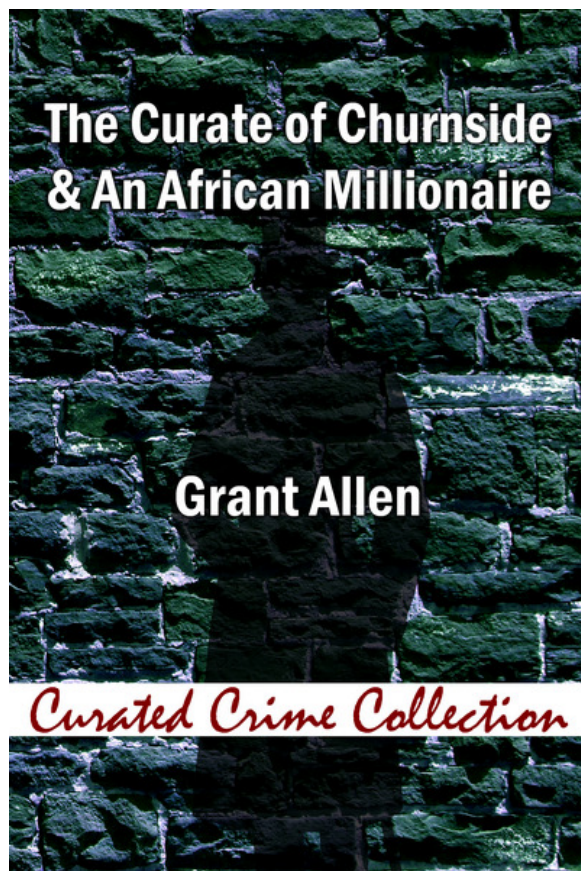
Perhaps disappointingly to some readers, references that have grown obscure stand *without* footnotes to clarify them. In some cases, such footnoting would have overwhelmed the original text. Besides, these days, the solutions to such mysteries as “Mrs. Glasse’s jugged hare” or “the Tichborne swindle” are just a Wi-Fi-enabled device away.

Among the very few changes that *were* made are corrections of obvious errors. Even so, this often involved comparing different publications of the same material. If something in the book version struck me as fishy, I consulted the earlier magazine publication to see if another editor had fixed it or not. If left as is by another editor, I almost always left it as is, too, on the assumption that it was considered correct.

This all said and done, it is your humble editor’s sincere wish that these reprints of neglected works will thrill and amuse a new generation of readers—and that they *do not* beguile these same readers into embarking on lives of crime. If the latter occurs, kindly refrain from snitching on me as an accomplice.

— Tim Prasil

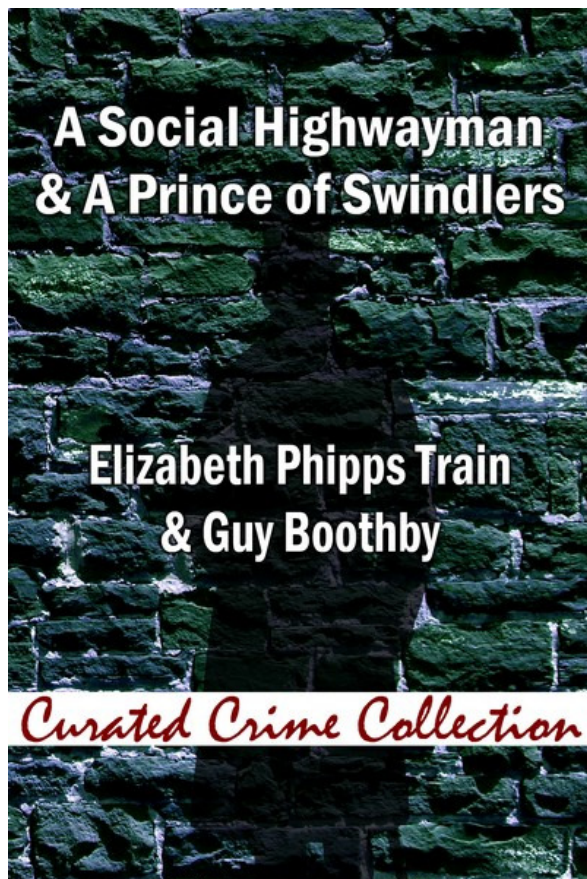
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Shortly after Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and H.G. Wells' *Martians* invaded England, L.T. Meade and Robert Eustace's science-savvy criminal Madame Koluchy infiltrated London in *The Brotherhood of the Seven Kings* (1898). Alongside all ten of her tales, this book adds the six featuring the same authors' Madame Sara, a sinister sister to Koluchy and the title character of *The Sorceress of the Strand* (1902-03). In both cases, a pair of men struggle to halt the outlaw's spree. In both cases, their success is, well, highly qualified.

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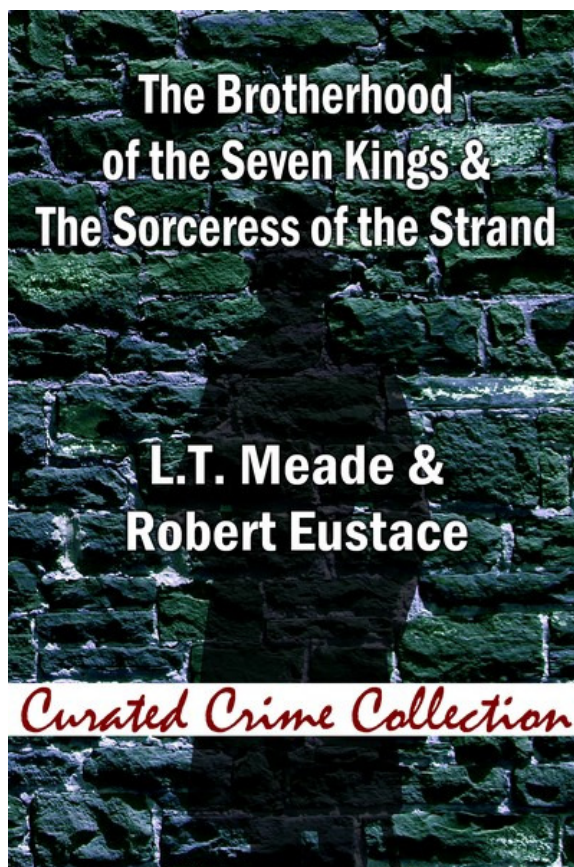
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