Two Victorian Sensations

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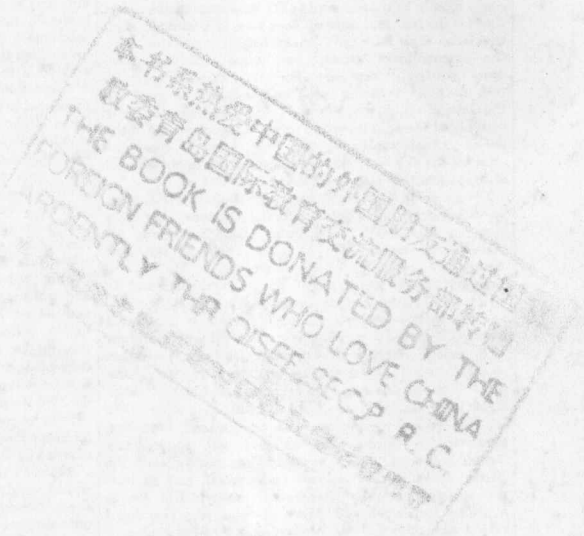

THE TIMES, SATURDAY, JULY 13, 1861.

THE CHARGE AGAINST THE BARON DE VIDIL.

For some days past the clubs have echoed with nothing else than rumours, more or less exaggerated and incorrect, respecting the extraordinary crime with which the Baron de Vidil is now charged at Paris with having attempted to perpetrate last week. The most contradictory accounts have, in fact, been in circulation regarding this strange attempt, and they yesterday went the length of asserting that young Mr. de Vidil had died of his wounds at Twickenham. We are glad at once to be able to say that there is no ground for this latter statement. Young Mr. de Vidil, though very seriously and almost dangerously cut about the head, is making rapid progress, and is likely soon to be convalescent. We may state at the outset that for the last four days we have been in possession of all the facts that have yet transpired in connexion with the extraordinary attempt at crime. It was, however, positively necessary for the ends of justice that as little publicity as possible should be given to the details, which, though widely discussed, were generally discredited from the mere fact of nothing appearing in the public journals concerning it. Now, however, that the arrest of the Baron de Vidil is known at Paris, we have, of course, no further motive for concealment.

The Baron de Vidil is a French gentleman by birth, who, having married an English lady of fortune, has long been in the habit of visiting London, where his position and friends gave him the *entrée* to the most distinguished society in the metropolis. He was an honorary member of several of the principal clubs, and, in fact, a gentleman whose position in what is termed "society" was admitted everywhere. Baron Vidil is now accused of having attempted to murder his son last Friday week, June 28th, under circumstances of peculiar atrocity. The endless *on dits* which are current as to the cause which impelled him to this crime are often inconsistent with themselves, and nearly all irreconcilable with each other. We can only rely, therefore, on what has generally been communicated to us on what we may call emphatically "good authority." It is stated, then, that lately the Baron de Vidil has become embarrassed, and, in fact, was pressed urgently for ready money. His son is a young gentleman, 23 years of age, who has been reared almost entirely in England, and who has graduated at Cambridge. By the death of this young man the Baron de Vidil would become entitled at once to 30,000*l*. Whether the conduct of the Baron has ever been such as to raise suspicion in his son's mind that he ever meditated or even desired the death of his young heir it is impossible to say. This can only be known to the son himself, and, of course, can never be elicited till criminal proceedings are instituted. The facts connected with the actual attempt may be very soon told. The Baron proposed to his son that they should ride out and pay their respects to the Duc d'Aumale and the members of the ex-Royal family at Claremont. Both gentlemen, accordingly, started by the train from Waterloo for Twickenham, where they hired horses and rode on to Claremont. Young Mr. Alfred De Vidil had a light riding whip, but the Baron had none. At Claremont

FRIGHTFUL ENCOUNTER IN NORTHUMBERLAND-STREET.

Between 11 and 12 o'clock yesterday a fearful scene took place at Northumberland-chambers, 16, Northumberland-street, Strand, in the apartments of Mr. J. Roberts, a solicitor and bill discounter, who occupies the first floor of that house. A deadly struggle had taken place between Mr. Roberts and Mr. Murray, late a Major in the 10th Hussars. At about half-past 11 o'clock several pistol shots were heard in Mr. Roberts's chambers, after which the back window was thrown open, and Major Murray leaped out into the back yard. He then scaled the wall, and entered the garden of the next house, occupied by Mr. Ransom, who, finding that Major Murray, a stranger to him, was bleeding from the neck and forehead, assisted him to the Charing-cross Hospital, and sent a messenger to the police-office in Scotland-yard, whence constables were sent to examine the premises. In the meantime information was sent from the hospital to the police-station, Bow-street, whereupon Superintendent Durkin and Inspector Mackenzie proceeded to the spot, and undertook the investigation. The doors of the apartments being locked, a ladder was procured, and an entry effected by the windows. In the back room they found traces of a recent struggle. The furniture was disordered, pictures and frames smashed, and great pools of blood were on the floor. Several pistols were found about the room; one pair of which had been discharged. In the front room they found Mr. Roberts, much hurt about the head and face, huddled up against the wall near the door almost insensible. He was removed to the hospital. He has not yet been able to give any account of the transaction. Major Murray states that he knows nothing of Mr. Roberts, and had never seen him till that day, but had been invited by him to his chambers to speak of some pecuniary matters relating to a company with which Major Murray is connected; that Roberts fired upon him twice, and that he defended himself with the firetongs until he had disabled Roberts. Major Murray is not so much injured but that hopes may be entertained of his recovery. Both now lie in the hospital under the care of Dr. Canton, and are guarded by the police.

About 1 o'clock in the afternoon Superintendent Durkin waited on Mr. Corrie, the sitting magistrate at the Bow-street Police-court, and made a communication, in consequence of which Mr. Corrie, accompanied by Mr. Burnaby, the chief clerk, proceeded to the Charing-cross Hospital to take the deposition of Major Murray. Dr. Canton, however, informed his worship that the patient was not in a position to make any deposition, being at that time unable to articulate. He had administered a stimulant, and expected that the patient would shortly be well enough to speak again. In consequence of this representation Mr. Corrie abandoned for the present the idea of taking the depositions. Mr. Canton, however, undertook that if Major Murray should appear to be sinking he would communicate with the magistrate, in order that the deposition might be taken.

It appeared that, though the inmates of the house (Northumberland-chambers, 16, Northumberland-street) heard the sound of pistols, they paid no attention to it, as it was no

PREFACE

In this double-feature account of the mysterious and bloody indoor battle in Northumberland Street and Baron de Vidil's unexplained assault on his son in a Twickenham lane, I have invented no detail, however insignificant. Any deviation from the strict truth may be laid to the momentary inaccuracy or imaginative indulgence found in the day-by-day newspaper reportage on which my narrative is wholly based, thanks to the resources of that splendid institution for the preservation of the historic moment, the British Library's Newspaper Library at Colindale.

As for the issues left unresolved—exactly what *was* Mrs. Murray's relationship with William Roberts? just what, if anything, did young Vidil know about his father that he was so anxious not to divulge to the court, and conversely, what damaging statements might his father have made about him if he had been allowed to testify?—the reader has before him all the evidence that, so far as I know, was on the public record in 1861, and his guesses are as good as mine.

R. D. A.

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DEADLY ENCOUNTERS

CHAPTER ONE

The Dawning Age of Sensation

Sensation (noun): 3 (a) An exciting experience; a strong emotion (e.g. of terror, hope, curiosity, etc.) aroused by some particular occurrence or situation. Also, in generalized use, the production of violent emotion as an aim in works of literature or art. (b) A condition of excited feeling produced in a community by some occurrence; a strong impression (e.g. of horror, admiration, surprise, etc.) produced in an audience or body of spectators, and manifested by their demeanour.
—*Oxford English Dictionary*

Some applications of the word, at least in England, were new in 1861; the social phenomenon they referred to was not. Sixty years earlier, William Wordsworth, in, of all places, the preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, deplored the "craving for extraordinary incident," the "degrading outrageous stimulation" that affected his countrymen. The human desire to be shocked or thrilled, so long as whatever danger there was did not imminently affect the beholder, had always been a normal accompaniment to life in society, perhaps intensified in modern times, as Wordsworth hazarded, by "the accumulation of men in cities" and "the rapid communication of intelligence." Sometimes this fascination with the extraordinary, the perilous, the violent erupted, briefly, into a fever, stirred by a single well-publicized or particularly novel event. But what distinguished the outburst in 1861 was that sensation itself, so to speak, was the sensation. It was a craze that lasted an entire decade, evoking a spate of worried commentaries in the intellectual periodicals and leaving a lasting mark on English fiction and popular drama. Although one

cannot say with absolute certainty that a single event ignited the sensation mania of the 1860s, a pair of mysterious, murderous attacks in and near London in the summer of 1861, covered by the energetic press with almost unprecedented thoroughness and excitement, occurred in a gathering atmosphere for which they were providentially suited.

On Saturday, 20 July, just one week after the Murray and Vidil cases first broke in the London press, *Punch* ran a set of lighthearted verses that had obviously been written before those crimes immediately lent a more sinister connotation to the new vogue word:

> Some would have it an age of Sensation,
> If the age one of Sense may not be—
> The word's not *Old* England's creation,
> But New England's, over the sea—
> Where all's in the high-pressure way,
> In life just as in locomotion,
> And where, though you're here for to-day,
> Where to-morrow you'll be, you've no notion.
>
> In that land of fast life and fast laws—
> Laws not faster made than they're broken—
> Sensation's the spirit that draws
> To a head, whate'er's written or spoken.
> If a steamer blow up on the lakes,
> Or a statesman prove false to the nation,
> Its impression the circumstance makes
> In a paragraph headed "Sensation."
>
> If a senator gouges a friend
> In the course of a lively debate;
> Or a pleasure-train comes to an end
> By trying to leap a lock-gate;
> If the great Hiram Dodge takes the stump,
> Or the President makes an oration,
> The event able Editors lump
> Under one standing head of "Sensation."
>
> The last horrid murder down South,
> The last monster mile-panorama;

Last new sermon, or wash for the mouth,
New acrobat, planet or drama;
All—all is Sensation—so fast
Piled up by this go-a-head nation,
That by dint of Sensation at last,
There's nothing excites a "Sensation."
There's nothing excites a "sensation."
And now that across the Atlantic
Worn threadbare "Sensation" we've seen,
And the people that lately were frantic,
Blush to think that such madmen they've been;
Mr. Punch sees with pain and surprise,
On the part of this common sense nation,
Every here and there, on the rise,
This pois'nous exotic "Sensation."
This pois'nous exotic "sensation."
When an acrobat ventures his neck,
In the feats of the flying trapeze,
Or some nigger minstrel would deck in the feats of the flying trapeze.
His wool-wig with extra green bays;
If a drama can boast of a run, His wool-wig with extra green bays
By dint of a strong situation,
The posters e'en now have begun by dint of a strong situation
To puff the thing up as "Sensation."

Mr. Punch 'gainst the word and the things
It applies to, his protest would enter:
For the vulgar excitement it brings
May England ne'er prove fitting centre.
If you've got something good, never doubt it
By deeds will avouch its vocation;
And be sure that not talking about it
Is the true way to *make* a "Sensation."

The United States had no monopoly on railroad wrecks, steamship explosions, political melodrama, or daredevils: the stuff of sensation was as abundant in Britain as in America. To be sure, some of the most exciting events and persons in the English newspapers in the past two decades had been American importations. P. T. Barnum's winsome midget, General Tom Thumb, had been the adored star of the

nation's entertainment world in the 1840s, closely followed by George Catlin's troupe of Red Indians. The visit of Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a book that broke all best-seller records in Britain in 1851, took the form of a royal progress, marked by almost hysterical outpourings of adulation. "Monster mile-panoramas"—visual travelogues, the first being of a trip down the Mississippi, embodied in painted lengths of canvas that unrolled before a rapt audience—had been a popular and profitable novelty in English theaters.

What had, up to this point, distinguished the British sensations from their American counterparts was that the former had not yet been given that name, which had originated in an American press that, as Dickens and other travelers had noted, was uninhibited by any considerations of decorum or discretion. Their eyes steadily fixed on a readership that craved constant shocks and thrills, American newspapers were in the habit of "sensationalizing" any events that even faintly lent themselves to such treatment. The same was true of publicity, not only for theatrical and other forms of entertainment but for some kinds of consumer goods, largely nonessential items. Today's word to cover all of this would be simply "hype."

Although *Punch* deplored journalistic and commercial sensationalism as a Yankee abomination to be firmly barred from sedate, low-key Britain, there was a strong native strain of the same malady. Until recently, the daily press had been relatively sober, though thorough, in its coverage of domestic news; the Sunday papers, however, like the mass circulation ones in today's London, specialized in vividly written stories of violence and scandal, particularly such as occurred, or were said to occur, in the higher reaches of society. The generally radical politics of such sheets as *Reynolds' Weekly Newspaper* and *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper* harmonized well with news columns calculated to stir the cruder feelings of their working-class and lower-middle-class readers. The London daily press took on a more "popular" tone, with no scanting of quantity, when the abolition of the old newspaper tax in 1855 enabled the *Daily Telegraph* to become the first penny daily in British history. And as far as commercial publicity was concerned, London had its own brand of hype in the specially built wagons, some bearing hugely enlarged imitations of the products advertised (a seven-foot hat, for example) that clogged traffic in central London, and the corps of sandwich board men who likewise clogged the sidewalks in behalf of current entertainments and products.

Although it occupied only an incidental place in *Punch*'s list of American sensations, murder was a staple of the English entertain-

ment diet. It had long been so, as the survival of countless broadsides, ballads, "last dying speeches," and catchpenny pamphlets for the delectation of the populace, attests, as does the popularity, on a higher social level, of the several nineteenth-century editions of the *Newgate Calendar*, a compendium of accounts of famous murder trials. Now, however, a formidably expanding daily press had acquired the capacity to spread news of the latest homicides to the remotest part of the British Isles within hours. The previous half-dozen years had witnessed a series of well-publicized murders that were distinguished from the ordinary run of contemporaneous homicides by their occurrence in middle-class families, a realm of Victorian society that had always been assumed to be exempt from such catastrophes by virtue of its much-vaunted "respectability." In 1856, after a trial to which the press gave the heaviest coverage to date, a Staffordshire physician named William Palmer was convicted of poisoning six people, including one of his illegitimate children, his mother-in-law, his alcoholic brother, and his wife. The next year, Madeleine Smith, the pretty and spirited daughter of a prosperous Edinburgh architect, stood trial for poisoning her French lover with hot chocolate laced with arsenic; she was neither convicted nor acquitted, the jury rendering the ambiguous Scottish verdict of "not proven." In 1859, another physician, Thomas Smethurst, was tried for allegedly murdering a woman to whom he was bigamously married. He was convicted, but, largely because the circumstantial and scientific case against him was palpably inadequate, he was granted a pardon. Scarcely had the furor over Smethurst subsided than Constance Kent, the sixteen-year-old daughter of a government factory inspector, was accused of killing her four-year-old step-brother at their home at Road, Wiltshire. Despite the strong case against her made by a Scotland Yard detective who had been called in after the local constabulary found themselves hopelessly out of their depth, the magistrates before whom she was arraigned set her free; upon which Inspector Whicher resigned from the force. The question of Constance's guilt or innocence continued to be debated as 1861 began. (She confessed to the deed five years later, but this did little to resolve the question even then. In 1868, Wilkie Collins would take advantage of the still lively memories of the Road mystery, as it was called, by using several of its features in *The Moonstone*.)

Three major news stories in the first half of 1861 qualified as sensations, although the word was not used as yet outside the theater. The first (21 February–8 March) was the trial, in Dublin, of *Thelwall* v. *Yelverton*. At first glance it was the most prosaic of actions, merely that

of a tradesman suing a man for £259 he owed for goods supplied to his wife; but the crucial question of law was whether they were in fact married. Theresa Longworth, daughter of a Manchester silk merchant and descendant of an ancient family, had become the object of the attentions of Major Yelverton, second son of Lord Avonmore, who pursued her all the way across Europe to the Crimea, where he was serving with the army and she was doing nursing service as a vowless Sister of Charity. Upon their return to England in 1857, with her consent they went through a form of do-it-yourself ("Scotch") marriage, whereby the private reading of the Anglican marriage service was sufficient to unite bride and groom. The lady, however, held out in addition for a Roman Catholic service, which was performed secretly some days later by a complaisant priest. But the following year, having left his Theresa, the major married another woman, the widow of an Edinburgh professor. Was this a bigamous marriage, or had either or both of the preceding ceremonies been without legal standing?

The dry point of law was eclipsed by the dramatic testimony, the star witness being the vivacious, intelligent, "ladylike" young woman who insisted on calling herself "Mrs. Yelverton." Day after day, newspaper readers were regaled with "the strange revelations of life incident to the Crimean campaign—the beauty, talent, and ill-regulated passions of the victim—the conventional moral maxims of the seducer and the phantasmagoric manner in which foreign convents, Sisters of Charity, Greek priests, priestless Scotch marriages, and Roman Catholic priests, came and went." Newspapers even sacrificed their leading articles (editorials) and advertising space to provide maximum coverage, which was strongly biased in favor of the imprudent but victimized woman. When the jury decided that both the Scotch and the Roman Catholic marriages were valid in law, "the whole audience rose and cheered tumultuously, the ladies waving their handkerchiefs, the gentlemen their hats, and the barristers their wigs."

The Yelverton case was rich in titillation. The major, for example, described spending one memorable afternoon with the temporary-duty Sister of Charity in a room at the Crimean hospital, where he "formed—not the 'design,' that was too strong a word, not the 'desire,' that was too strong a word, but the 'idea' of making her his mistress." But persons who preferred other kinds of vicarious excitement had to look elsewhere, and on the first of June they were obliged. On that day, the French acrobat Blondin made his first appearance at the Crystal Palace, the spacious entertainment center in the south Lon-

don suburb of Sydenham, which had been built with the materials salvaged from the iron-and-glass structure that housed the Great Exhibition in Hyde Park in 1851. Blondin, a former infant prodigy who had taken to the air at the age of four, was, in a sense, another American importation, for he had most recently been in the news as the man who the previous year had walked a tightrope across the 1,200-foot chasm of Niagara Falls. During his summer engagement at the Crystal Palace he worked on an inch-and-a-half-thick rope suspended 180 feet above the central transept. One highlight of his performance before sellout crowds was walking blindfolded with a sack over his head, then standing on his head and doing a backward somersault. In another act, he took a fifty-pound stove with him onto the rope, lighted a fire, cooked an omelette, and served himself with dishes on a tray, topping the aerial repast with a bottle of wine. Only a newly enlisted word like "sensation" was adequate to describe such a series of feats.

Three weeks after Blondin's Crystal Palace debut, on Saturday, 22 June, a sprawling complex of wharves and warehouses between the Thames and Tooley Street, opposite the City, caught fire. The crowds that watched from London Bridge were as large as those that had witnessed from Westminster Bridge the destruction of the old Houses of Parliament in 1834. By the time the fire was finally brought under control—Dickens saw it still "blazing furiously" a week later—it had devastated a quarter-mile of Bermondsey waterfront and caused the then stupendous loss of £2 million in buildings and their contents. The chief of the London Fire Brigade, James Braidwood, was killed in action. It is curious to reflect that just three weeks later, on Friday, 12 July, Major Murray would have seen the still smoldering ruins as he changed from his train at London Bridge to the riverboat that would carry him to his fateful encounter with "Mr. Gray" in Hungerford Market.

Meanwhile, from mid-April onward, the outbreak of the American Civil War commanded much space in the press; but though the dispatches from Washington and Charleston were interesting enough, they could be read with placid detachment. President Lincoln's call to preserve the Union and the blockade of Confederate ports, events occurring thousands of miles away, had no immediate pertinence either to the affairs of empire or to everyday life in Britain.

For readers whose appetites ran to murder above all, it was a lean six months. Late in August, a newspaper reviewing the furor over the Murray and Vidil cases commented that until they had commenced

their run in the press "public attention . . . had seemed palled into incurable lethargy by the Barmecide feast of less romantic atrocities that had been preceding them." On 13 July the weekly *Spectator* reported that apart from a number of commonplace murders, "the week has been a dull one, distinguished socially only by the celebration of the Queen's birthday, which occurs whenever Her Majesty pleases, and was this year fixed for 10th July, and by the meeting of the National Rifle Association at Wimbledon." Had the *Spectator* but known it, the doldrums were suddenly at an end. Elsewhere in its pages was a brief mention of the Vidil case, picked up from the preceding day's *Morning Post*. But nowhere did it mention the other stop-press affair that the morning papers piled alongside it at London newsagents' were featuring in adjacent columns. Between them, in the weeks to come, the unfolding stories of the blood bath in a Northumberland Street office and the brutal assault of father upon son that had occurred earlier in a secluded Surrey lane would usher in what soon came to be called the Age of Sensation.