

*An account  
of the trial of  
John  
Bodkin Adams*

PENGUIN  
BOOKS

# **The Best We Can Do**

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**Sybille Bedford**

COMPLETE & UNABRIDGED



SYBILLE BEDFORD

THE BEST WE CAN DO

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PENGUIN BOOKS



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**TO**  
**EDA LORD**



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**‘ . . . he has the right to the advantage of the initial incredulity . . . ’**

**MR JUSTICE DEVLIN**

# THE FIRST WEEK

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## THE NURSES



## DAY ONE

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'The trial began at the Central Criminal Court yesterday. . .'

THE TIMES

**T**HE Judge came on swiftly. Out of the side-door, an ermined puppet progressing weightless along the bench, head held at an angle, an arm swinging, the other crooked under cloth and gloves, trailing a wake of subtlety, of secret powers, age: an Elizabethan shadow gliding across the arras.

The high-backed chair has been pulled, helped forward, the figure is seated, has bowed, and the hundred or so people who had gathered themselves at split notice to their feet rustle and subside into apportioned place. And now the prisoner, the accused himself is here – how had he come, how had one missed the instant of that other clockwork entry? – standing in the front of the dock, spherical, adipose, upholstered in blue serge, red-faced, bald, facing the Judge, facing this day. And already the clerk, risen from below the Judge's seat, is addressing him by full name.

There cannot be a man or woman in this court who has not heard it before.

' . . . You are charged with the murder . . . '

And that, too, is expected. It is what all is set for – nobody, today, is here by accident – yet, as they fall, the words in the colourless clerical voice consummate exposure.

'Do you plead Guilty or Not Guilty?'

There is the kind of pause that comes before a clock strikes, a nearly audible gathering of momentum, then, looking at the Judge who has not moved his eyes,

'I am not guilty, my Lord.'

It did not come out loudly but it was heard, and it came out with a certain firmness and a certain dignity, and also possibly with a certain stubbornness, and it was said in a private, faintly non-conformist voice. It was also said in the greatest number of words anyone could manage to put into a plea of Not Guilty. A loquacious man, then, under evident pressure to make himself

heard; and how many among those present who do not simply hope that the burden of his plea may be true.

Now what sounds like, but may not quite be, William Makepeace Leader, John Christian Henderson, James Frederick Wright, floats across the court. Men arise from back benches, scurry or shuffle into sight, get themselves into the jury box: two rows, one above the other, of six seated figures cheek by jowl and not a pin to drop between them. Two women are found to be there, side by side in the upper tier. One is in a red coat and hat, the other has jet black hair and a cast of features suggestive of having been reared perhaps under another law. Everybody in this box is, or appears to be, respectable, middle-aged.

The prisoner is still standing. His right to object to any member of his jury has been recited to him by the clerk and he has turned his large, blank, sagging face – a face designed to be jovial – to the jury-box and stares at them with round, sad, solemn eyes. The jurors, one by one, are reading out the oath. It is an old form of words, and it is not couched in everyday syntax. Some approach the printed text with circumspection, some rush it, most come several mild croppers, inexorably corrected – each time – by the usher.

All of this has taken no time at all. A routine dispatched without irrelevancy or hitch between clerk and usher in the well of the court like a practised sheep-herding, while bench and bar stayed aloof. Now counsel for the Crown is on his feet.

Outside in the street, the Old Bailey is sustaining a siege this morning. Police vans and press vans, cameras and cameramen, detective sergeants and C.I.D.s and hangers-on, comings and goings in closed limousines, young men in bowler hats bent double under the weight of papers nudging their way through the crowd, a line of special constables at every door, and thirty extra quarts of milk left for the cafeteria. Here, inside the court, there is more than silence, there is quiet.

A male voice droning: 'May it please your Lordship –', and the case is opened.

A trial is supposed to start from scratch, *ab ovo*. A tale is unfolded, step by step, link by link. Nothing is left unturned and nothing is taken for granted. The members of the jury listen. They

hear the tale corroborated, and they hear it denied; they hear it pulled to pieces and they hear it put together again; they hear it puffed into thin air and they hear it back as good as new. They hear it from the middle, they hear it sideways and they hear it straight; they all but hear it backward again through a fine tooth-comb. *But they should never have heard it before.* When they first walk into that court, sit down in that box, they are like people before the curtain has gone up. And this, one is conscious from the first, cannot be so in the present case.

The accused, a doctor, in his fifties, is charged with the murder of a patient six years ago. Leading counsel for the Crown is setting out the prosecution's tale in manageable, spare, slow facts. It is the Attorney-General in person. He is standing in his pew, sheaf of foolscap in hand, a somewhat massive figure, addressing the jury in a full voice. The beginning is a warning. They must try to dismiss from their minds all they may have read or heard of this before.

'This is a very unusual case. It is not often that a charge of murder is brought against a doctor. . . .'

Above on the dais the Judge is listening. Full face and immobile, the robed husk has taken on a measure of flesh and youth. The black cloth and the delicate pair of gloves have been deposited. The face is not the profile; gone is that hint of cunning. This is more than a supremely intelligent face, it is a face marked with intellectual fineness. The Judge sits quite still, in easy absorption. Startling Mandarin hands flower from wide sleeves.

'A word about this doctor. You will hear that he is a doctor of medicine and a bachelor of surgery, that he has a diploma in anaesthetics, holds an appointment as anaesthetist to a hospital and has practised anaesthetics for many years. With his qualifications and experience, you may think perhaps it is safe to assume the Doctor was not ignorant of the effects of drugs on human beings. . . .'

It goes on in a sort of casual boom.

'Now Mrs Morell was an old woman. . . . A widow. . . . A wealthy woman. . . . She left £157,000. . . . She was eighty-one years old when she died in November 1950 in her house at Eastbourne. In 1948, she had a stroke and her left side became

paralysed. The Doctor was in charge. She was attended by four nurses; and these nurses will give evidence. They will say they never saw Mrs Morell in any serious pain. The Crown will also call a Harley Street authority. This medical man will tell them that he has formed the opinion that Mrs Morell was suffering from cerebral arterio-sclerosis, in ordinary language, [here the Attorney-General lowers his voice a confidential shade], hardening of the arteries. They will hear that for pain to accompany such a condition is most unusual.

'You will hear of large quantities of drugs prescribed for her by the Doctor in the course of months, and supplied to her. One of the questions to be considered in this case will be: why were they given? It is one thing to give an old lady something to help her to sleep, but quite another to prescribe for her large quantities of morphia and heroin. . . .'

Here come detailed figures. The listening mind is pulled up. Figures can be stumbling blocks. These are intended to sound large. They do sound large. Jotted down (roundly), they come to 1629 grains of barbiturates, 1928 grains of Sedormid, 164 grains of morphia, and 139 grains of heroin, prescribed over a period of ten and a half months. One hundred and thirty-nine grains of heroin into ten months make how many grains, or what fraction of a grain, per day - ? And how much is a grain of heroin in terms of what should or could be given - ? To whom, and when, and for what - ?

' . . . You will hear that these drugs if administered over a period result in a serious degree of addiction to them, a craving for them, a dependence on them. . . . ' [With weight] 'The Doctor was the source of supply. Did not Mrs Morell become dependent upon him? *Why* were these drugs prescribed to an old lady who was suffering from the effects of a stroke but who was not suffering from pain?'

Through all of this the Doctor has been sitting on his chair in the dock, warder on each side, like a contained explosive. He did not fidget and he did not move, but his face reflected that a remarkable degree of impassivity was maintained by will against an equally high degree of pressure from within. At certain assertions his mouth compressed slowly and hard, and he shook his head, to and fro, almost swinging it, as if prompted by an inner vision