

A Pair of Parricides

By Francis Watt

THERE is a new series of *State Trials* continuing the old and edited with a skill and completeness altogether lacking in its predecessor; yet its formal correctness gives an impression of dulness. You think with regret of Howell's thirty-three huge volumes, that vast magazine of curiosities and horrors, of all that is best and worst in English history. How exciting life was long ago, to be sure, and how persistently it grows duller! What a price we pay for the smug comfort of our time! People shuddered of yore; did they yawn quite so often? Howell and the folk he edits knew how to tell a story. Judges, too, were not wont to exclude interesting detail for that it wasn't evidence, and the compilers did not end with a man's condemnation. They had too keen a sense of what was relished of the general; the last confession and dying speech, the exit on the scaffold or from the cart, are told with infinite gusto. What a terrible test Earth's great unfortunates underwent! Sir Thomas More's delicate fencing with his judges, the exquisite courtesy wherewith he bade them farewell, make but half the record; you must hear the strange gaiety which flashed in the condemned cell and by the block ere you learn the man's true nature. And to know Raleigh you must see him at Winchester under the brutal insults

of Coke. "Thou art a monster, thou hast an English face but a Spanish heart;" again, "I thou thee, thou traitor;" and at Palace Yard, Westminster, on that dreary October morning urging the sheriff to hurry, since he would not be thought fear-shaken when it was but the ague; for these are all-important episodes in the life of that richly dressed, stately and gallant figure your fancy is wont to picture sweeping the Spanish Main in his Elizabethan warship. Time would fail to tell of Strafford and Charles and Laud and a hundred others, for the collection begins with Thomas à Becket in 1163 and comes down to Thistlewood in 1820. Once familiar with those close-packed, badly printed pages, you find therein a deeper, a more subtle charm than cunningest romance can furnish forth. The account of Mary Stuart's ending has a finer hold than Froude's magnificent and highly decorated picture. Study at first hand "Bloody Jeffreys's" slogging of Titus Oates with that unabashed rascal's replies during his trial for perjury, or again my Lord's brilliant though brutal cross-examination of Dunn in the "Lady" Alice Lisle case, during the famous or infamous Western Circuit, and you will find Macaulay's wealth of vituperative rhetoric, tiresome and pointless verbiage. Also you will prefer to construct your own Braxfield from trials like those of Thomas Muir in 1793, and of Alexander Scott and Maurice Margarot in 1794, rather than accept the counterfeit presentment which Stevenson's master-hand has limned in *Weir of Hermiston*.

But the interests are varied. How full of grotesque and curious horrors are the prosecutions for witchcraft! There is that one, for instance, in March 1665 at Bury St. Edmunds before Sir Matthew Hale, with stories of bewitched children, and plague-stricken women, and satanic necromancy. Again, there is the diverting exposure of Richard Hathaway in 1702, and how the
rogue

rogue pretended to vomit pins and abstain from meat or drink for quite miraculous periods. The trial of the obscurer criminal has its own charm. Where else do you find such Dutch pictures of long-vanished interiors or exteriors? You touch the *vie intime* of a past age; you see how kitchen and hall lived and talked; what master and man, mistress and maid thought and felt; how they were dressed, what they ate, of what they gossiped. Again, how oft your page recalls the strange, mad, picturesque ways of old English law. *Benefit of clergy* meets you at every turn, the *Peine Fort et Dure* is explained with horrible minuteness, the lore of *Ship Money* as well as of *Impressement of Seamen* is all there. Also is an occasional touch of farce, but what phase of man's life goes unrecorded in those musty old tomes?

Howell's collection comes down only to 1820. Reform has since then purged our law, and the whole set is packed off to the Lumber Room. In a year's current reports you may find the volumes quoted once or twice, but that is "but a bravery," as Lord Bacon would say, for their law is "a creed outworn." Yet the human interest of a story remains, however antiquated the setting, incapable of hurt from Act of Parliament. So, partly for themselves, partly as samples of the bulk, I here present in altered form two of these tragedies, a pair of parricides; one Scots of the seventeenth, the other English of the eighteenth century.

The first is the trial of Philip Standsfield at Edinburgh, in 1688, for the murder of his father, Sir James Standsfield, of New Mills, in East Lothian. To-day New Mills is called Amisfield; it lies on the south bank of the Tyne, a mile east of Haddington. There is a fine mansion-house, about a century old, in the midst of a well-wooded park, and all round are the superbly tilled Lothian fields, as *dulcia arva* as ever the Mantuan sang. Amisfield got its
present

present name thus : Colonel Charteris, infamed (in the phrase of Arbuthnot's famous epitaph) for the "undevising pravity of his manners" (hence lashed by Pope in many a stinging line), purchased it early in the last century and renamed it from the seat of his family in Nithsdale. Through him it passed by descent to the house of Wemyss, still its present owners. Amongst its trees and its waters the place lies away from the beaten track, and is now as charmingly peaceful a spot as you shall anywhere discover. Name gone and aspect changed, local tradition has but a vague memory of the two-centuries-old tragedy whereof it was the centre.

Sir James Standsfield, an Englishman by birth, had married a Scots lady and spent most of his life in Scotland. After the Restoration he had established a successful cloth factory at the place called New Mills, and there lived, a prosperous gentleman. But he had much domestic trouble, chiefly from the conduct of his eldest son Philip, who, though well brought up, led a wild life. Serving abroad in the Scots regiment, he had been condemned to death at Treves, but had escaped by flight. Certain notorious villainies had also made him familiar with the interior of the Marshalsea, and the prisons of Brussels, Antwerp and Orleans. Sir James at last was moved to disinherit him in favour of his second son John. Partly cause and partly effect of this, Philip was given to cursing his father in most extravagant terms (of itself a capital offence according to old Scots law); he affirmed his parent "girmed upon him like a sheep's head in a tongs;" on several occasions he had even attempted that parent's life: all which is set forth at great length in the "ditty" or indictment upon which he was tried. No doubt Sir James went in considerable fear of his unnatural son. A certain Mr. Roderick Mackenzie, advocate, testifies that eight days before the end he met the old gentlemen in the Parliament Close, Edinburgh, whereupon "the defunct

defunct invited him to take his morning draught." As they partook Sir James bemoaned his domestic troubles. Yes, said Mackenzie, but why had he "disherished his son?" And the defunct answered: "Ye do not know my son, for he is the greatest debauch in the earth. And that which troubles me most is that he twice attempted my own person."

Upon the last Saturday of November 1687 the elder Standsfield travelled from Edinburgh to New Mills in company with Mr. John Bell, minister of the gospel, who was to officiate the next day in Morham Church (Morham is a secluded parish on the lower slope of the Lammermoors, some three miles south-west of New Mills: the church plays an important part in what follows). Arrived at New Mills the pair supped together, thereafter the host accompanied his guest to his chamber, where he sat talking "pertinently and to good purpose" till about ten o'clock. Left alone our divine gat him to bed, but had scarce fallen asleep when he awoke in terror, for a terrible cry rang through the silence of the winter night. A confused murmur of voices and a noise of folk moving about succeeded. Mr. Bell incontinently set all down to "evil wicked spirits," so having seen to the bolts of his chamber door, and having fortified his timid soul with prayers, he huddled in bed again; but the voices and noises continuing outside the house, he crept to the window, where, peering out, he perceived naught in the darkness. The noises died away across the garden towards the river, and Bell lay quaking till the morning. An hour after day Philip came to his chamber to ask if his father had been there, for he had been seeking him upon the banks of the water. "Why on the banks of that water?" queried Bell in natural amazement. Without answer Philip hurriedly left the room. Later that same Sunday morning a certain John Topping coming from Monkrig to New Mills, along the bank of the Tyne,

Tyne, saw a man's body floating on the water. Philip, drawn to the spot by some terrible fascination, was looking on (you picture his face). "Whose body was it?" asked the horror-struck Topping, but Philip replied not. Well *he* knew it was his father's corpse. It was noted that, though a hard frosty morning, the bank was "all beaten to mash with feet and the ground very open and mellow." The dead man being presently dragged forth and carried home was refused entry by Philip into the house so late his own, "for he had not died like a man but like a beast"—the suggestion being that his father had drowned himself, and so the poor remains must rest in the woollen mill, and then in a cellar "where there was very little light." The gossips retailed unseemly fragments of scandal, as "within an hour after his father's body was brought from the water, he got the buckles from his father's shoes and put them in his;" and again, there is note of a hideous and sordid quarrel between Lady Standsfield and Janet Johnstoun, "who was his own concubine," so the prosecution averred, "about some remains of the Holland of the woonding-sheet," with some incriminating words of Philip that accompanied.

I now take up the story as given by Umphrey Spurway, described as an Englishman and clothier at New Mills. His suspicions caused him to write to Edinburgh that the Lord Advocate might be warned. Philip lost no time in trying to prevent an inquiry. At three or four of the clock on Monday morning Spurway, coming out of his house, saw "great lights at St. James' Gate;" grouped round were men and horses. He was told they were taking away the body to be buried at Morham, whereat honest Umphrey, much disturbed at this suspicious haste, sighed for the "crown's quest law" of his fatherland. But on the next Tuesday night, after he had gone to bed, a party of five men, two of them surgeons, came post haste to his house from Edinburgh, and showing him an order

order "from my Lord Advocate, for the taking up again the body of Sir James Standsfield," bid him rise and come. Philip also must go with the party to Morham. Here the grave was opened, the body taken out and carried into the church, where the surgeons made their examination, which clearly pointed to death by strangulation, not by drowning (possibly it struck Spurway as an odd use for a church; it had not seemed so to a Presbyterian Scot of the period). The dead being redressed in his grave clothes must now be set back in his coffin. A terrible thing happened. According to Scots custom, the nearest relative must lift the body, and so Philip took the head, when lo! the corpse gushed forth blood on his hands! He dropped the head—the "considerable noise" it made in falling is noted by one of the surgeons—frantically essayed to wipe off the blood on his clothes, and with frenzied cries of "Lord have mercy upon me, Lord have mercy upon us," fell half swooning across a seat. Strong cordials were administered, and in time he regained his sullen composure.

A strange scene to ponder over, but how terrible to witness! Think of it! The lonely church on the Lammermoors, the dead vast and middle of the dreary night (Nov. 30, 1687), the murdered man, and the parricide's confession (it is so set forth in the ditty) wrung from him (as all believed) by the direct interposition of Providence. What fiction ever equalled this gruesome horror? Even his mother, who had sided with him against the father, scarce professed to believe his innocence. "What if they should put her bairn in prison?" she wailed. "Her bairn" was soon hard and fast in the gloomy old Tolbooth of Edinburgh, to which, as the *Heart of Midlothian*, Scott's novel was in future days to give a world-wide fame. The trial came on next February 6. In Scotland there is no inquest or public magisterial examination to discount the interest of the story, and the crowd that

that listened in the Parliament House to the evidence already detailed had their bellyful of surprises and horrors. The Crown had still in reserve this testimony, sensational and deadly. The prosecution proposed to call James Thomson, a boy of thirteen, and Anna Mark, a girl of ten. Their tender years were objected. My lords, declining to receive them as witnesses, oddly enough consented, at the request of the jury, to take their declaration. The boy told how Philip came to his father's house on the night of the murder. The lad was hurried off to bed, but listened whilst the panel, Janet Johnstoun, already mentioned, and his father and mother softly whispered together for a long time, until Philip's rage got the better of his discretion, and he loudly cursed his father and threatened his life. Next, Philip and Janet left the house, and in the dead of night his father and mother followed. After two hours they crept back again; and the boy, supposed to be sleeping, heard them whisper to each other the story of the murder, how Philip guarded the chamber door "with a drawn sword and a bendit pistol," how it was strange a man should die so soon, how they carried the body to the water and threw it in, and how his mother ever since was afraid to stay alone in the house after nightfall. The evidence of Anna Mark was as to certain criminating words used by her mother, Janet Johnstoun.

Up to this time the panel had been defended by four eminent advocates mercifully appointed thereto by the Privy Council; there had been the usual Allegations, Replies, and Duplies, with frequent citations from Mattheus, Carpzovius, Muscard, and the other fossils, as to the matters contained in the "ditty," and they had strenuously fought for him till now, but after the statement of the children they retired. Then Sir George Mackenzie rose to reply for the Crown. Famous in his own day, his name is not yet forgotten. He was "the bluidy advocate Mackenzie" or
Covenanting

Covenanting legend and tradition, one of the figures in *Wandering Willie's* tale in *Red Gauntlet* ("who for his worldly wit and wisdom had been to the rest as a god"). He had been Lord Advocate already, and was presently to be Lord Advocate again. Nominally but second counsel he seems to have conducted the whole prosecution. He had a strong case, and he made the most of it. Passionate invective and prejudicial matter were mixed with legal argument. Cultured politician and jurist as he was, he dwelt with terrible emphasis on the scene in Morham Church. "God Almighty himself was pleased to bear a share in the testimonies which we produce," nor was the children's testimony forgotten. "I need not fortifie so pregnant a probation." No! yet he omitted not to protest for "an Assize of Error against the inquest in the case they should assoilzie the pannal"—a plain intimation to the jury that if they found Philip Standsfield "not guilty" they were liable to be prosecuted for an unjust verdict. But how to doubt after such evidence? The jury found the panel guilty, and my lords pronounced a sentence of picturesque barbarity. Standsfield was to be hanged at the Mercat Cross of Edinburgh, his tongue cut out and burned upon the scaffold, his right hand fixed above the east port of Haddington, and his dead body hung in chains upon the Gallow Lee betwixt Leith and Edinburgh, his name disgraced for ever, and all his property forfeited to the Crown. According to the old Scots custom the sentence was given "by the mouth of John Leslie, dempster of court"—an office held along with that of hangman. "Which is pronounced for doom" was the formula wherewith he concluded. On February 15 Standsfield went to his death "in manner alone prescribed."

The second case, not so romantic albeit a love-story is woven through its tangled threads, is that of Mary Blandy, spinster,
tried

tried at Oxford in 1752, before two of the Barons of the Exchequer, for the murder of her father, Francis Blandy, attorney, and town-clerk of Henley-on-Thames. Prosecuting counsel described her as "genteel, agreeable, sprightly, sensible." She was an only child. Her sire being well off, she seemed an eligible match. Some years before the murder, the villain of the piece, William Henry Cranstoun, a younger son of the Scots Lord Cranstoun and an officer recruiting at Henley for the army, comes on the scene. Contemporary gossip paints him the blackest colour. "His shape no ways genteel, his legs clumsy, he has nothing in the least elegant in his manner." He was remarkable for his dulness; he was dissipated and poverty-stricken. More fatal than all, he had a wife and child in Scotland though he brazenly professed the marriage invalid spite the judgment of the Scots courts in its favour. Our respectable attorney, upon discovering these facts, gave the Captain, as he was called, the cold shoulder. The prospect of a match with a lord's son was too much for Miss Blandy, now over thirty, and she was ready to believe any ridiculous yarn he spun about his northern entanglements. Fired by an exaggerated idea of old Blandy's riches, he planned his death and found in the daughter an agent, and, as the prosecution averred, an accomplice.

The way was prepared by a cunning use of popular superstitions. Mysterious sounds of music were heard about; at least, Cranstoun said so; indeed, it was afterwards alleged he "hired a band to play under the windows." If any one asked, "What then?" he whispered "that a wise woman, one Mrs. Morgan, in Scotland," had assured him that such was a sign of death to the head of the house within twelve months. The Captain further alleged that he held the gift of second sight and had seen the worthy attorney's ghost; all which, being carefully reported to the servants by Miss Blandy,
raised

raised a pleasing horror in the kitchen. Cranstoun, from necessity or prudence, left Henley before the diabolical work began in earnest, but he supplied Mary with arsenic in powder, which she administered to her father for many months. The doses were so immoderate that the unfortunate man's teeth dropped whole from their sockets, whereat the undutiful daughter "damn'd him for a toothless old rogue and wished him at hell." Cranstoun, under the guise of a present of Scotch pebbles, sent her some more arsenic, nominally to rub them with. In the accompanying letter, July 18, 1751, he glowingly touched on the beauties of Scotland as an inducement to her, it was supposed, to make haste. Rather zealous than discreet, she near poisoned Anne Emmett, the charwoman, by misadventure, but brought her round again with great quantities of sack whey and thin mutton broth, sovereign remedies against arsenic. Her father gradually became desperately ill. Susannah Gunnell, maidservant, perceiving a white powder at the bottom of a dish she was cleaning, had it preserved. It proved to be arsenic, and was produced at the trial. Susannah actually told Mr. Blandy he was being poisoned; but he only remarked, "Poor lovesick girl! what will not a woman do for the man she loves?" Both master and maid fixed the chief, perhaps the whole, guilt on Cranstoun, the father confining himself to dropping some strong hints to his daughter, which made her throw Cranstoun's letters and the remainder of the poison on the fire, wherefrom the poison was in secret rescued and preserved by the servants.

Mr. Blandy was now hopelessly ill, and though experienced doctors were at length called in, he expired on Wednesday, August 14, 1751. The sordid tragedy gets its most pathetic and highest touch from the attempts made by the dying man to shield his daughter, and to hinder her from incriminating admissions
which

which under excitement and (one hopes) remorse she began to make. And in his last hours he spoke to her words of pardon and solace. That night and again on Thursday morning the daughter made some distracted efforts to escape. "I ran out of the house and over the bridge and had nothing on but a half-sack and petticoat without a hoop—my petticoats hanging about me." But now all Henley was crowded round the dwelling to watch the development of events. The mob pressed after the distracted girl, who took refuge at the sign of the Angel, a small inn just across the bridge. "They were going to open her father," she said, and "she could not bear the house." She was taken home and presently committed to Oxford gaol to await her trial. Here she was visited by the High Sheriff, who "told me by order of the higher powers he must put an iron on me. I submitted as I always do to the higher powers" (she had little choice). Spite her terrible position and those indignities, she behaved with calmness and courage. The trial, which lasted twelve hours, took place on February 29, 1752, in the Divinity School of the University. The prisoner was "sedate and composed without levity or dejection." Accused of felony she had properly counsel only for points of law, but at her request they were allowed to examine and cross-examine the witnesses. Herself spoke the defence, possibly prepared by her advisers, for though the style be artless, the reasoning is exceeding ingenious. She admitted she was passionate, and thus accounted for some hasty expressions; the malevolence of servants had exaggerated these. Betty Binfield, one of the maids, was credibly reported to have said of her, "she should be glad to see the black bitch go up the ladder to be hanged." But the powder? Impossible to deny she had administered that. "I gave it to procure his love." Cranstoun, she affirmed, had sent it from Scotland, assuring her that it would

so work, and Scotland, one notes, seemed to everybody "the shores of old romance," the home of magic incantations and mysterious charms. It was powerfully objected that Francis Blandy had never failed in love to his daughter, but she replied that the drug was given to reconcile her father to Cranstoun. She granted he meant to kill the old man in hopes to get his money, and she was the agent, but (she asserted) the innocent agent of his wicked purpose. This theory, though the best available, was beset with difficulties. She had made many incriminating statements, there was the long time over which the doses had been spread, there was her knowledge of its effects on Anne Emmett the charwoman, there was the destruction of Cranstoun's letters, the production of which would have conclusively shown the exact measure in which guilty knowledge was shared. Finally, there was the attempt to destroy the powder. Bathurst, leading counsel for the Crown, delivered two highly rhetorical speeches, "drawing floods of tears from the most learned audience that perhaps ever attended an English Provincial Tribunal." The jury, after some five minutes' consultation in the box, returned a verdict of "guilty," which the prisoner received with perfect composure. All she asked was a little time "till I can settle my affairs and make my peace with God," and this was readily granted. She was left in prison five weeks. The case continued to excite enormous interest, increased by an account which she issued from prison of her father's death and her relations with Cranstoun. She was constant in her professions of innocence, "nor did anything during the whole course of her confinement so extremely shock her as the charge of infidelity which some uncharitable persons a little before her death brought against her."

Some were convinced and denied her guilt, "as if," said Horace Walpole, "a woman who would not stick at parricide would scruple

scruple a lie." Others said she had hopes of pardon "from the Honour she had formerly had of dancing for several nights with the late P——e of W——s, and being personally known to the most sweet-tempered P——ess in the world." The press swarmed with pamphlets. The Cranstoun correspondence, alleged not destroyed, was published—a very palpable Grub Street forgery!—and a tragedy, *The Fair Parricide*, dismal in every sense, was inflicted on the world. The last scene of all was on April 6, 1752. "Miss Blandy suffered in a black bombazine short sack and petticoat with a clean white handkerchief drawn over her face. Her hands were tied together with a strong black ribband, and her feet at her own request almost touched the ground." ("Gentlemen, don't hang me high, for the sake of decency," an illustration of British prudery which has escaped the notice of French critics.) She mounted the ladder with some hesitation. "I am afraid I shall fall." For the last time she declared her innocence, and soon all was over. "The number of people attending her execution was computed at about 5000, many of whom, and particularly several gentlemen of the university, were observed to shed tears" (tender-hearted "gentlemen of the university!"). "In about half an hour the body was cut down and carried through the crowd upon the shoulders of a man with her legs exposed very indecently." Late the same night she was laid beside her father and mother in Henley Church.

Cranstoun fled from justice and was outlawed. In December that same year he died in Flanders.