

## William Habron

ENGLAND

THE bar at the Royal Oak in the little town of Whalley Range, near Manchester, was busy on a Saturday night in July, 1876. The usual Saturday night gathering was drinking and arguing in an atmosphere of smoke and the blended odors of strong liquors.

Prominent among the patrons of this inn were the brothers Habron—William, John, and Frank. They were employed on the Deakin farm.

William was a powerful youth of twenty-two—tall, broad, pugnacious, and capable with his fists. William's encounters with other patrons of the place were famous throughout the community, and no one knew William's *penchant* better than Constable Cock, whose beat passed the door of the Royal Oak.

It was the proprietor's custom to call upon the able Cock to pacify Habron and his chance opponent on the frequent occasions when the fray threatened to wreck the furnishings of the inn.

On this particular night Cock was uneasy. It was near ten and nothing had happened. Cock felt it should. There was drinking in the inn. Habron was there. Trouble was in the air.

The previous week he had been called in by the proprietor when William broke loose with his fists, and after he had quieted the principals he said to Habron: "Look here, Habron, I'm tired of this. The next time you raise disorder here I'll have you up before the Magistrate."

Habron did not take the threat kindly. His prestige was being challenged before an audience. If he failed to answer they would think he was afraid of Cock, so he growled: "It'll be a sorry day for you, the day you arrest me."

The tables were turned. It was now up to Cock to make good his threat. This made him uneasy. He did not want to start a feud with the Habrons; still he felt that these repeated outbursts of violence must be stopped. He was in a quandary, but his doubts were soon settled.

About ten o'clock he was passing the inn and heard sounds of fighting. Without waiting to be called he ran into the bar and there saw William and another man pounding each other furiously. He stepped between them, placed Habron under arrest, and took him to the station.

It so happens that this time William was not to blame. He had gone to the inn determined to control himself. He had been moderate in his drinking and conducted himself with exemplary propriety for one of his aggressive character. And it was this very moderation that started the trouble. Another young farm hand, inspired by liquor, interpreted William's unusual attitude as evidence of weakness and decided that it was an appropriate time to pick a fight. And this is what Cock did not know.

So well substantiated was the contention that William was blameless that the magistrate dismissed the case next day. This rather complicated matters in William's mind, for Cock had made good his threat and also done him a serious injustice, so he forced his way through the spectators in the court room and walked up to Cock.

"I promised you a sorry day if you ever ran foul of me," he said. "I'll do you in for this."

"Oh, you're all bluster and wind," Cock replied. "I know you."

Near midnight Cock was murdered.

Cock was walking along his beat with another constable, James Beanland, and John Massey Simpson, a law student. It was ten minutes of twelve. They stopped at a corner to talk a few minutes and then Simpson went on his way. Soon after, Beanland left to follow a man who had passed the three while they were talking. The man disappeared in the shadows and a minute later two shots were fired.

Simpson had gone but a short distance. He ran back and found two carters pulling up their horses; Beanland was in the middle of the road whistling for help, and Cock was lying a few yards from where the two men had left him.

He had shouted, "Murder, I'm shot, I'm shot," when the bullets hit him, but he could not say who fired them; a few minutes later he died.

Police Superintendent Bent joined the group around the dying man. Bent was told that the man Beanland started to follow was dressed in a brown coat, pot hat, and walked with a stoop. "I suspect it's that Will Habron," he said.

Bent and several constables started for the Deakin farm. As they approached the cabin in which Habron and his brothers lived, they saw a candlelight flicker for a moment in the window and then go out.

Bent knocked. "We are armed and will shoot unless you light up and show you mean to give no trouble," he called out.

Again a candle was lighted. The brothers were getting out of bed and dressing hurriedly. William opened the door.

"William Habron, John Habron, Frank Habron, I arrest you in the name of the law for the murder of Constable Cock," Bent announced.

"We were in bed at the time," William replied.

Bent noted this remark in his book and asked, "Where are your boots?"

The soles were covered with fresh mud. Bent wrapped them up to take with him. He searched William's clothes and found two percussion caps of revolver caliber. He ordered the brothers to dress and saw that William put on a brown coat and a pot hat, and on the way to the station he noticed that William walked with a decided stoop.

The brothers were lodged in jail. Bent returned to the scene of the murder carrying one of William's boots. Near the spot where Cock fell were boot tracks. They showed a sole with rows of nails down each side and two rows in the middle. The number and position, he found, corresponded with the number and position of the nails in William's boot.

The community was excited by the murder and news of it spread rapidly. Presently two clerks from a store in a village near by came to Superintendent Bent and said a man had priced revolver cartridges in their store the afternoon before the murder. They believed they were such cartridges as those used to kill Cock. The clerks said their customer had worn a brown coat and a pot hat.

Habron was pointed out to them.

"That's the man," said one clerk.

"It looks rather like him," said the other.

At the preliminary hearing William and John were held for trial. Frank was released. The two brothers were tried in Manchester. The prosecution's case was strong. The incidents related above were skilfully handled by the prosecutor. His examination of the brothers was conducted so adroitly that he soon had them contradicting themselves and making a very bad impression upon the jury.

The defense was hard put to answer, but made a desperate fight. Mr. Deakin testified that William was a hard worker and very peaceful on the farm. He explained the presence of the percussion caps in William's vest by saying he had given the vest to William and often carried such caps in his clothes so that those found by the police were probably his.

The defense also pointed out that whoever priced the cartridges described by the two clerks did not buy them, and this the clerks admitted.

The threat against Cock and his murder the same night were said by the defense to have been merely an unfortunate coincidence and not proof that Habron was the killer. The boot print was hard to refute, but as Bent had made neither photograph nor cast of it, the judge and the jury were unable to determine the resemblance for themselves and had to rely solely upon Bent's testimony.

The prosecution was unable to offer in evidence the weapon used in the murder, though a careful search had been made at the scene and among the possessions of the Habrons. This point was emphasized by the defense as well as the fact that William's style of boots and their nails were common among farm hands as well as the brown coat and the pot hat.

But the jury was not convinced. After deliberating several hours they returned a verdict of not guilty for John and guilty for William, with the recommendation of mercy because of his youth.

The court asked William if he had anything to say before sentence of death should be passed and he answered, "I am innocent."

The court then put on the black cap and sentenced him to be hanged. On leaving the dock the prisoner raised his hands and repeated, "I am innocent."

. . . . .

Cock had been murdered about midnight August 1, 1876. Habron was sentenced November 28, 1876. The Crown accepted the jury's recommendation and William's sentence was commuted to life imprisonment at Portland Prison.

On the day William was sentenced a spectator caused considerable disturbance in the gallery by his aggressive attempt to get a place near the front. He forced his way through the spectators, ignoring their emphatic protests, until he reached the edge, where he announced, "I came all the way from Sheffield to see this trial."

This man was Charles Peace, later revealed as one of the most brutal, clever, and dangerous criminals in English police history.

Charles Peace was hideous physically as well as mentally. He had a skull like a monkey, with an undershot jaw, a thick, flat nose, and eyes set deep in his head. His skull was bare in front but thick with hair at the sides, which formed a deep oval across the crown. At the time of Habron's trial Peace was forty-four.

His principal occupation was crime—crime of all kinds; and though he had been in prison several times it is certain that he escaped punishment for scores of offenses. His hobby was the fiddle and with it he earned a little money playing in saloons, at parties, and on the street. He often wandered over the country paying his way with this violin. He dabbled in picture framing, wood carving, singing, composing, writing poetry, teaching Sunday school, and inventing.

The night after William Habron was sentenced to death, Albert Dyson, a civil engineer, was murdered at Banner Cross and Charles Peace was the killer. Some time before this, Peace became acquainted with the Dysons, who then were his neighbors in Darnall, a suburb of Sheffield. He had become enamored of Mrs. Dyson, an Irishwoman of twenty-five, and had urged her to leave her husband. Despite his

facial handicap and his character, Peace exerted a powerful influence over certain women and Mrs. Dyson was one of them.

As the result of his persistent pursuit of Mrs. Dyson, her husband determined to be rid of him; and after Peace grossly insulted him on the street one day he swore out a warrant for his arrest. Peace learned of this move and went to Hull before the warrant could be served.

He kept close watch on the Dysons' movements, however, and on the night of November 29, 1876, he returned to murder Dyson. This he did in Dyson's home, in the presence of Mrs. Dyson, and then escaped.

Two years later he was living under the name of Thompson at 5 East Terrace, Eveline Road, Peckham, London, S.E., supposedly engaged with Mr. Brion, a neighbor, in the invention of a method for "raising sunken vessels by the displacement of water within the vessels by air and gases."

He was popular among his neighbors and entertained frequently at musical parties, proud of his collection of violins, banjos, and numerous other instruments. He attended church regularly and had at his home an odd assortment of dogs, cats, rabbits, canaries, parrots, and cockatoos and was "curious as to why a Christian nation should support the very un-Christian Turks against the Christian Russians."

He always went to bed early "but not to sleep for he 'worked' by night and most successfully."

His household included Mrs. Peace, known as Mrs. Ward, and her son, Willie. These two lived in the basement. Upstairs Peace lived with "Mrs. Thompson," alias Susan Grey, a woman he had picked up in his wanderings with his fiddle. She was addicted to the frequent and extensive use of strong drink, with the result that Peace was constantly complaining of her liquor bills, which, he said, often ran as high as £3 in two days.

The acquaintances he made in Peckham were valuable to him. He was entertained and was always careful to observe the layout of the rooms in the homes he visited and to scan well the locks on doors and windows.

The community was soon plagued by an epidemic of bur-

glary. It spread to others near by. Presently the whole country was talking about it, but the police could not find the burglar.

The night of October 10, 1878, Constable Robinson was patrolling his beat in Blackheath, a lonely London suburb, when he saw a light moving about a room in the home of J. A. Burness in St. John's Park. Robinson knew that the Burness' retired early so he called the constable on the next beat, Girling, to investigate with him. As they were about to start Sergeant Brown came along. He sent Robinson and Girling to watch the back of the house while he went up to the front door and rang the bell.

The light went out. A window on the first floor opened. Robinson and Girling saw a man climb out with a bundle under his arm. As Robinson started after him the man turned and said calmly, "Stop, or I'll shoot."

Robinson jumped for him and the man fired. The fifth bullet shattered Robinson's elbow but he grappled with the burglar and with his good arm managed to strike the man squarely on the chin as the latter drew a long knife. The man dropped to the ground, and as Brown and Girling came up Robinson collapsed from loss of blood.

The prisoner was taken to the station and revived. He was booked as a mulatto and refused to give his name, but the police soon discovered that his dark skin was a disguise applied with walnut juice.

With the arrest the epidemic of burglaries ceased. The prisoner, who gave the name "John Ward," was convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment for assault with intent to murder Robinson.

For some reason he wrote his friend Brion and asked him to call at the prison. Brion came and immediately identified "Ward" as Thompson and from this his actual identity was discovered. He was taken from prison and tried for the murder of Albert Dyson. On February 4, 1879, he was convicted and sentenced to death.

Peace then began a pious preparation for death. He wished to confess his manifold sins and called for the Reverend Littlewood to hear his story and there was then unfolded the tale of Constable Cock's murder.

Peace was the man in the brown coat and pot hat. His was the hand that pulled the trigger. He told the story in such detail that the authorities, at first skeptical, finally undertook a very thorough investigation and substantiated his assertions one by one until they were completely satisfied that no one but the actual murderer could have had such an intimate knowledge of the crime.

Cock, it seems, had interrupted Peace on one of his nocturnal adventures, and met a fate which Robinson barely escaped.

After three years in prison William Habron was granted a free pardon and was voted by Parliament £500 indemnification. On February 25, 1879, Charles Peace was hanged.

. . . . .

THIS was a case of circumstantial evidence exclusively. Habron's threat directed at Constable Cock and the latter's murder immediately thereafter turned public suspicion naturally upon Habron. Whether Inspector Bent was altogether accurate in his report on the boots was later seriously doubted. The prosecution, convinced of Habron's guilt, discredited all the evidence pointing to his complete innocence. The jury were convinced by the prosecution's clever construction of its theory of guilt and fell into the same trap of blindness to the factors indicating innocence. But for Peace's insatiable appetite for crime, it is quite possible that Habron would have served out his life term. Peace's confession was also a matter of good luck for Habron. Confessions are always looked upon with suspicion, but this one was so authentic in every detail that the Home Office was thoroughly convinced and recommended the appropriation of £500 as indemnity to Habron for his erroneous conviction.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. "Trial of Charles Peace," *Notable British Trials*, ed. W. Teignmouth Shore (London: William Hodge & Co., Ltd., 1926).
2. Gollomb, Joseph. "Puppet to a Lord of Crime," *New York World Magazine* (February 3, 1929).
3. Ellis, J. C. *Black Fame* (London, 1926), pp. 173-182.