

MY POETRY AND THE POLICE.

By Alfred Stæde.

A clock is an arbitrary thralldom that a man's stupidity imposes on his freedom; besides, it costs money and so smacks of the taint of corrupting wealth. I had improved on it: and on the wall at the foot of my bed, and facing the window, had painted in blacking an approximate sundial, the outcome of much thoughtful contemplation. And waking up blinking at it, I saw that it marked five-and-twenty minutes past eleven, before noon.

This was very early—unusually, unwarrantably early. Groping in my mind for the reason of such matinal wakefulness at the chronic period for my best refreshing rest, I became conscious of an energetic concussion against the door. So I turned over on the other side to go to sleep again, wondering the while to which of my preceding dreams this piece belonged. I was just beginning to get in that blissful state where nothing matters, when the rapping recommenced, and at the same time through the panels percolated a deep bass voice, "Open, in the name of the law!"

I was evidently dreaming out a very good idea: the story of a crime with, I hoped, a superhuman detective in it—fiction that is always marketable and does not wear out one's intelligence or style. I was dimly curious as to where my imagination would take me next; I remembered that my sun now marked ten minutes to twelve; and I realised in grateful anticipation that at twelve he would have disappeared altogether, as far as my window was concerned, and leave the room in darkness that allowed a slumber more tranquil still.

And then I remembered nothing at all more; until a great crash awoke me for the third time, and I found the door had fallen in and a gentleman was advancing through it. He was of middle height, with an iron-gray pointed beard, and a tightly buttoned rotundity of waistcoat that testified worth. I knew him of course—I had dreamt of him for years—he was the influential editor come to buy my manuscripts for their weight in bank-notes.

But as he came nearer I missed that obsequiousness I had expected. I noticed even that his look was fierce, one might almost say uncharitable; so I concluded it was the other editor whom I had seen in nightmare, the one to whom I sent my poetry, and who now came to visit me with an axe. But I was surprised he was looking so well, and had not grown thinner after all my verse he ought to have read.

Pausing melodramatically at the foot of my bed, the apparition halted; with one hand in the air he made a sign towards the entry, with the other he unbuttoned his frock-coat and discovered the tricolour sash. I was not for the moment conscious of having merited any recompense at the hands of the Government; but I was grateful none the less for this delicate if unexpected attention, and I was about to beg the Commissary to place my Cross of the Legion of Honour on the mantelpiece when another interruption prevented me. Two policemen entered impressively,

certainly not gracefully, and the procession was charmingly rounded off by the figure of my doorkeeper, who filled up the space where the door itself had previously been before its destruction.

I pinched myself to see if I was awake, or whether this was only a little spontaneous "copy." I was awake, for I caused myself such pain that I screamed aloud.

"A clear indication of guilt," muttered the Commissary, and the pallid policeman took out a pocket-book and placed the remark on record.

"Your keys," mildly bellowed the Commissary. Strange demand! Did he take me for a banker—or an organist?

"I have none," I only answered.

"He refuses"—in confidence to his two confederates. "Then we will burst open his box and wardrobe." At which word the second policeman, a large beefy athlete, advanced prepared for action.

"You would fatigue yourself," I politely protested, "and I should never forgive myself for it. Especially as it is unnecessary. For I have no locks either."

The magistrate made a sign, his stouter satellite threw himself gaily forward and pulled open the front of the *armoire*.

"Ah," darkly hinted the Commissary, after making a rapid and disdainful examination of the inside. "Linen scant and unworthy of respect." And the uncalled-for condemnation went into the notebook with the rest.

With a disappointment they could not conceal, they turned to my old tin trunk, full to the brim, good measure and flowing over, with my papers, unfortunately mostly manuscript, all my fortune—in futurity. It seemed to interest them; even the two assistants were palpably touched, though I am sure they did not understand one word of English, while the magistrate himself seemed positively enchanted.

"Why," he cried, holding out about a couple of pounds of it, "it is poetry!"

I have not an ungrateful nature; I am sensitive and appreciate intelligence, so springing from the bed I grasped him warmly by the hand.

"It is," I said, "it is; and you are the first who has acknowledged it as such. Bless you, bless you, for this kind encouragement!"

He appeared surprised, and muttered some strange provincial oaths. Fearing that he was about to order me to be hit with a sword, I sank back on the bed disheartened.

"The formula," I mused to myself, but right out loud, "the formula that Frenchmen are polite is only a vulgar error, without any foundation in fact. Also, a French Commissary with his sash on, leads a stranger to ascribe him some connection with the Ancient Order of Foresters at a banquet."

"What does it mean?" he said, thrusting the folio in my face.

"That," I answered, "would be somewhat hard to explain. You see it is a symbolic poem. I wrote it after a heavy supper of lobster and white wine; it refers to destiny and most other things

in life, but hasn't, I am afraid, any particular reason that an ordinary, everyday sort of mortal would properly appreciate."

"Hum!" from the Commissary. "And this?"

"A masterpiece," I explained; "more particularly, a tragedy in five acts and a prologue."

"Does Napoleon come into it?"

"Not very well," I said, "for the scene is laid in Pompeii, before the volcano asserted itself; and at that time the world was rubbing on without him."

"There is more," interrupted the larger policeman, pulling out about half-a-hundredweight" (it is my frequent intercourse with the butter merchant that leads me to reckon my works by weight *avoirdupois*) "there is much more of the stupid stuff."

"Pardon me," I interpolated with dignity, "the word 'stuff' passes as a technical term, but I strongly protest against 'stupid.'"

"What are these then?" asked the magistrate, trying a fresh pile.

"Rather a neat line in lyrics," I said, "especially adapted for English drawing-rooms. Marked down to thirty shillings the dozen sets."

"At last," he went on

regardlessly, "at last we have something of importance—letters, and no doubt highly incriminating."

"Love letters," sniffed the pale policeman. And my *concierge*, who up to now had formed a picturesque background by the door, moved forward to help read them.

"Don't give yourself that trouble," I said to her; "they are none of them from *your* daughters. You see we meet too often to necessitate the foolishness of correspondence."

And I took the packet and hid it under my pillow.

"I must see them," said the Commissary.

"My dear sir," I pleaded, "I am sure you are too gallant a man to insist on violating these ladies' confidence."

"It is my duty," he answered firmly.

"All right then," I said in resignation; "take this one to go on with. It is from Lucille, a charming girl, with a most fascinating disregard for the first elements of orthography. We quarrelled, alas! six months ago."

"Blonde or brune?" anxiously inquired the man of law.

"Blonde, of course," I replied firmly — I am proud of my taste.

"Thank you. I myself like them so."

We shook hands over it, and the mollified magistrate addressed the full company thus—

"I see no ground for the charge made against Monsieur, and so we will withdraw.

"Meanwhile," he went on, pointing to the litter now on the floor, "I will take all these."

"Thank you," I cried in enthusiasm, "thank you. At the usual rates, I suppose, or even with a reduction for the quantity. And I should not

feel insulted by a small trifle in advance."

"I will take all these," he placidly pursued, "to examine at my leisure. As far as I can see as yet, you have done nothing *legally* punishable, but"—impressively—"don't do it again."

And the procession filed out through the *débris* of the door, and so downstairs, with my door-keeper dejectedly in front, while I got up and bathed my burning head in cold water. Then I realised. I had not paid my *concierge* her usual monthly *pourboire*; and she had denounced me to the police as an English spy.



A RIGHTEOUS RETRIBUTION.

By Alfred Stade.

It was soon after I had had the honour of the Commissary's domiciliary visit that I went home and dreamed a dream. I have no recollection of how I got home or who put me to bed; but I fell asleep somehow or other, and that was the main consideration. I know that I had passed a happy evening in company with some literary, irresponsible, and highly injudicious and undesirable acquaintances. There was absinthe as an appetiser and lobster as an *hors d'œuvre*, and truffled turkey to follow. I seem to remember also the popping of corks, and green chartreuse in tumblers; then a clock struck thirteen somewhere, and there were ten of us riding in a cab.

After that an *entr'acte* of vague and weary hilarity; a period of dim repose and grateful darkness, and then, I think, the dream.

I was in a vast and gloomy court of justice, confined of course in the dock—a box much like a coffin, built up of dictionaries and spelling-books. On guard behind were a pair of Roman lictors whittling their fasces with their axe; and in front sat the learned judge, with telescopes for spectacles and a wig composed of quills.

The body of the hall was filled by a very distinguished company; and although I had never met any of the gentlemen before, I had no difficulty in recognising them at a glance. There were Shakspeare and Schiller, and Horace and Heine, and Alfred de Musset borrowing a handkerchief from Voltaire, and Rabelais whispering dubious jokes into the ear of stolid Homer; and Wagner was tapping out "Tannhauser" on a typewriter, and Figaro, the usher, was doing a little dusting with what was either Mascagni or a mop.

I was not at all depressed as I should have been by my disgraceful situation. My body seemed singularly buoyant and I could not ascertain that I had any legs; but by way of recompense my head was of an enormous size and bursting with voluminous ideas.

"There is another point," proceeded the judge, as if I had already been there some time. "In the course of these articles you have twice described Paris as the 'gay city.'"

"It was necessary," I pleaded; "the public absolutely demands the phrase, and sees that it gets no other."

At which Mr. Pater stepped forward and threw an egg—a sugared Easter egg, it is true, and it hurt all the more—right into my eye.

"In your fiction," proceeded the judge, changing the focus of his telescopes, "I find sentences like these, 'I cannot love you as you wish, but I will always be a sister to you.' 'And he held the photograph to his lips and kissed it passionately.' 'I must obey my father, and we must part.'"

"It was to fill up the thousand words," I protested. "The editor was a mathematician and used to knock off the odd coppers for short measure."

"You have also called your heroine Queenie; she had blue eyes like a sweet spring evening, and in many cases also I notice that her golden hair was hanging down her back."

"That tint was all the rage at the time," I said; "and I found that if I made her a brunette the proof-readers bleached her in the printing."

"There are likewise several cases of hypnotism in the charge against you, intimately connected with an unclean Polish Jew with a head like a door-mat—this, mark you, in spite of the axiom that no Irish need apply. Also, several women have married the wrong men, and allowed themselves to admit it in subsequent confidences. Observably, several women have not married at all—an error of omission strongly to be deprecated. And if you interrupt me again," he went on, "I will order you to be gagged and manacled."

"Many of your heroines—mostly named Dorothy or Eunice—have made successes on the stage. A strong percentage of your men have earned fortunes at literature, the others at painting; and I even find one who wrote an opera and produced it triumphantly, all inside of three weeks."

"Then coincidences—of which I have a very black list. You are continually making people meet in trains and at theatres and at parties; and one man went round the world and took refuge from the rain in the middle of the forest, and there he met his long lost love—who ought to have been home at dinner—and seized the opportunity to propose. Strangely, also, there was only one mackintosh between them."

Homer was fast asleep; Shakspeare was making himself ill over a French cigar; Wagner had now got on to "Tristan," still on the same typewriter; and Balzac had strolled in and was having luncheon out of the same bottle as the elder Dumas.

"In your detective tales," went on his honour, making a mark with the stump of a pencil, "you create a clean-shaven amateur who knows it all. This would pass, but you have made him only a mere mortal, not once alluded to him as the seed of Zeus, or half-brother to Mercury."

Edgar Allan Poe shook hands with Gaboriau, then they both shook their fists at me.

"But the end of your indictment is the most serious of all; it relates to your poetry."

Here the entire assembly, with the unfortunate exception of myself, the gaolers and the judge, took their hats and hastened out in wonderful unanimity. Homer, I noticed, was sporting a white beaver with dollies round the brim.

"You have used 'aye' for 'ever'; you talk of 'thee' and 'thou' quite glibly, as if the words existed; 'move' you make to rhyme with 'love' and 'above,' when you know the only rhyme for these words is 'dove' and 'shove'; your metre is all wrong, your rhythm cranky: and the sun keeps setting and your girl forgetting until all is blue."

"That," pursued my judge, after protractedly blowing his nose, "we could condone or ignore; but it is your morals that condemn you."

Here Monsieur Zola rode in on his bicycle and proceeded to photograph me into a Cinematographe. "For among the first of your verses I find one addressed to a married woman."

"She was not married then," I burst in, losing control of my cheerfulness. "She was only engaged; and the poem was a dignified and artistic *finale* to a delicious episode that went in front."

"Eleven of your lyrics, written within the same week, are all addressed to different girls. You vow to each a constancy till death, and declare, in quite unnecessary *crescendo*, 'that no other love your faithful heart shall know.' You should have said, of course, no other love your faithful eleventh portion of a heart, shall know.

"There are a lot of minor crimes to complete the list. You have repeatedly reviewed books you never read; you have reported events you never witnessed; you have written notices of theatres they would not allow you inside. You have padded your 'copy' with classical quotations you did not understand; you have assumed yourself to be in positions of knowledge unwarranted by fact; you have had opinions on music, and even on art; you wear your linen dirty and your hair uncombed; and you have repeatedly permitted declarations of your genius to pass unchallenged and to rest as truth.

"In short," cried his honour, becoming excited, "a revolting record of crime, unequalled in the

annals of villainy. A career that admits of no pity, no extenuation, only just and speedy punishment. And the sentence of the court is that you be taken from the place where you are to the nearest hospital and there have your hair cut and your brains extracted; that your right hand be cut off and your fountain-pen confiscated; that your relations do all your log-rolling; that the *Saturday Review* devote to your pulverisation two pages and a 'par'; and that, wretched man, you have your portrait published in the evening papers!"

"No, no!" I shrieked in agony, "not that last, I implore you! Have pity, pity! Anything but that!"

And I went down on my knees and begged of him for mercy. He only smiled and had a drink from his telescopes, which were now bocks of lager beer; then made a sign to the lictors, who commenced to chip splinters off me with their axe.

I struggled in despair; and so fell out of bed and woke up on the floor.



A MORNING RIDE.