

Doctor Crippen and the Black Museum

To the semantic genius who thus christened it, the Black Museum at Scotland Yard owes the continuing story of its allure, every bit as much as Jack the Ripper himself is, in large measure, indebted for his folklore-ish survival to the folk lure of his brilliantly bestowed *nom de meurtre*. For 'black' is the *adjectif juste* for the collection of criminous nick-a-brac at the Yard, as assuredly as red must always be the signal colour for 'Saucy Jacky'. Actually, the name Black Museum was coined in 1877, by a journalist on the *Observer*, disgruntled because he had been refused admission to it.

Although the Metropolitan Police Crime Museum, to give it its staid official designation, has, since its ascent from its dark cellar home in the old Scotland Yard building on the Embankment to an L-shaped room on the first floor of New Scotland Yard, the palatial high-rise on The Broadway, St. James, ostensibly continued to justify itself as the storehouse of sober teaching material, it is still the Chamber of Horrors aspect rather than the police academical that fascinates. So, inevitably, does the forbidden fruit element, for, since 1922, the police in their wisdom have exercised a rigid exclusion zone policy, thus investing their blacked treasure-house with a beckoning mystique.

Gordon Honeycombe's book, unlike the Black Museum, whose exhibits extend themselves to such illicit jollifications as gaming, forgery, drugs, and pornography, concerns itself solely with homicide. He uses the museum as a kind of magic touchstone, its relics hailing him off on a retrospective pilgrimage covering 93 years and 53 cases of murder most black – and red.

It is a pity that he does not identify in the text the particular museum objects connected with specific cases. We are told most engagingly all about that living lesson in the Smilesian virtue of self-help, George Joseph 'Brides-in-the-Bath' Smith, but, although there is a photograph of it, Mr. Honeycombe omits to mention that the vehicle of the eighth Madam Smith's translation to a happier sphere, to wit, the bath from Bismarck Road, Highgate, in which her loving new spouse drowned her, stands now high and dry in the Black Museum.

Other, what may be termed in booksellers' argot 'association items', include such sanguineous exhibits as:

From the Mahon case of 1924 – the cook's knife and butcher's saw plied to the lethal severing of Patrick Mahon's relationship with Emily Kaye.

From the Christie case of 1953 – a tobacco tin of assorted pubic hairs from little 'Reggie-No-Dick's' esoteric collection.

From the Merrett-Chesney case of 1954 – one of the most gruesome exhibits: the pickled arms of the murderer.

And all around the room, which, with its iron-grated fireplace, old-fashioned wooden table and chair in the centre, is an exact replica of the original museum at Great Scotland Yard, are wall displays of weapons that have been used in crimes, and a high shelf on which stands a row of death-masks of the executed of the nineteenth century.

Nearby, there is a collection of the hangman's nooses, labelled with the names of those whom they expeditiously, or otherwise, despatched.

There has been extraordinarily little descriptive literature about the Museum. It formed the subject of one short chapter in *The Bye-Ways of Crime* by R.J. Power-Berry (1899). It has since been given brief treatment in various books dealing with Scotland Yard. In 1973, Guy R. Williams published *The Black Treasures of Scotland Yard*, which devoted a mere 29 of its 202 tedious pages to the Museum's homicidal section.

We still await a really good book on the Black Museum and its contents. And one thing that such a book will need to take into the reckoning is the very special atmosphere of the place; and that atmosphere is best described as Victorian-Dickensian-Holmesian.

Of course the Museum keeps up to date – Item: the latest lethal gimmick from the firm of Messrs. Kray Bros, attaché-case makers *par excellence* – but it is quintessentially a terrain of legends and ghosts. Example: the legend of a death-mask that grew a beard.

It was a nineteenth-century custom to cast, at the request of the Phrenological Society, plaster likenesses of hanged men and women criminals. It is creepily told how a tuft of hair caught in the hot plaster continued to grow, sprouting into an inch-long beard.

And ghosts? Here hover the shades of terrible black bombazine Victorian boggy-women – the dreadful Mrs. Dyer, baby farmer; Mary Eleanor Pearcey, the perambulator murderess, sitting at the piano in her bloodstained room singing ‘Killing mice! Killing mice!’ – of monkey-agile Charlie Peace, whore-hating Dr. Thomas Neill Cream, and whore-slicing Jack the Ripper.

Howsoever determinedly it is dragged through into the technocratic age, rehoused in chrome and plastic, perspexed and fluoresced, the Black Museum will always remain, like the Tussaud Chamber of Horrors, a thing of the Sherlock Holmes period, the exhibits winking wickedly under the gas-light, the fog rolling in from the nearby Thames and swirling in thick spiral and thin arabesque about the high shelves where the Newgate death-masks of the hanged stare through the dull plaster of closed eyelids, and the noosed ropes creak their frightful memories in the river wind.



Prominent among the treasures of the Black Museum is an exhibit which hails from the still-echoing Crippen case of 1910 – a lock of the victim’s hair and a fragment of Dr. Hawley Harvey Crippen’s pyjamas, bearing the identifiable, hanging-clue label, ‘Jones Brothers, Holloway, Limited’, in which the filleted remains of his wife were found.

The murder and dismemberment by Dr. Crippen of his wife, Belle Elmore, *née* Kunigunde Mackamotzki, is one of the classic murder cases of the twentieth century. The story of the discovery of her headless, limbless remains, buried beneath the flag-stones of the cellar of 39 Hilldrop Crescent, North London; of the flight of the doctor and his paramour, Ethel Le Neve, disguised as a boy, to Canada; and of their arrest on the high seas after a wireless message had revealed their presence aboard the S.S. *Montrose*, has remained curiously alive all these decades.

A full report of the subsequent Old Bailey trial constitutes one of the volumes in the *Notable British Trials* series. More or less sensational accounts of the case appear in innumerable popular anthologies of crime, and the episode is perennially rehearsed in magazine and newspaper articles. But, strangely, with the exception of a

book by M. Constantine Quinn, published in 1935 and long out of print, there has been no complete study of the Crippen affair.

Mr. Cullen's new book is, therefore, of great interest. Having traced the lives and interweaving relationships of the ill-destined members of the infernal triangle, he propounds a novel motive for the murder.

Observing the undisputed fact that both Crippen and his wife had been indulging in mutually condoned extra-marital activities, and that Mrs. Crippen had known of and tolerated the Le Neve connection over a period of three years, he inclines to the view that the affair itself was not the trigger of the murder. He suggests that Crippen killed his wife in order to put an end to her recently mounted 'campaign of calumny' and continual public besmirching of his much-loved Ethel. The doctor could bear, and had borne, any amount of ridicule at his shrewish and unfaithful wife's hands, but when her attacks were directed against Ethel, a hatred which had lain dormant for years was disastrously activated.

Cullen is also of opinion that Crippen's defence was mismanaged. Albeit the doctor was a most difficult client, adamantly proscribing the introduction of anything which, however beneficial to himself, was not consonant with the notion of Ethel Le Neve's entire innocence of involvement, but vital evidence which might have told in his favour was not put, rebuttal witnesses were not called, damaging statements by Crown witnesses were not challenged as they should have been.

He does not go so far as Marshall Hall, who firmly believed that Crippen was innocent. It was Hall's view that the doctor administered hyoscin to his wife as a sexual depressant, and that although he caused her death by an overdose, the *mens rea* necessary to uphold a charge of murder was lacking.

The Crippen presented by Mr. Cullen is a figure of pathos. Ethel Le Neve, on the other hand, emerges as a character notably less innocent, less naïve, than she has hitherto been considered. She is described as a compulsive liar, and it is hinted that she may well have known rather more of the fate of Mrs. Crippen than she pretended. Cullen also reveals the fact that Ethel had been pregnant by Crippen, who was deeply distressed when she lost the baby.

Reading the letters, printed here, which Crippen wrote to Ethel from the death cell at Pentonville, it is easy to lose sight of the callousness of his behaviour to his wife, and to see a sort of Paolo and Francesca situation which lends a spurious gloss of romance to a relationship which must, however, be seen against its true background of a rag, no bone, and a hank of hair, buried beneath the floor of a North London cellar.

The Murders of the Black Museum 1870-1970; Gordon Honeycombe, Hutchinson, 1982.

The Mild Murderer: The True Story of the Dr. Crippen Case; Tom Cullen, The Bodley Head, 1977.



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The Bravo Poison Mystery

The old house stood – still stands – on the green rim of Tooting Bec Common, South London, hugging its deadly secret. One April night, a shadowy poisoner, moving stealthily within its crenellated Gothic walls, laced the bottle of drinking water in handsome young up-and-coming barrister Charles Bravo's bedroom with antimony.

It was dead on 9.45 p.m. when Charles suddenly flung open his door, and loud shouts of 'Florence! Florence! Hot water! Hot water!' rang out through the clock-ticking stillness of the house.

Florence, his beautiful, chestnut-haired wife of a bare five months, lay already asleep in her room, just down the landing. Seated, watchful, on a small stool beside her, was her faithful, middle-aged companion-housekeeper, Mrs. Jane Cox.

The scene is set for the tragedy that was to become one of the greatest poisoning mysteries of Victorian England.

Like so many things of Queen Victoria's golden days, on the surface, life at The Priory, the miniature palace set amid ten acres of paddocks and gardens – sumptuously laid out with asparagus beds, strawberry cloches, melon pits, pineries, and vineries – seemed idyllic. Two smart cobs, Victor and Cremorne, clattering and whickering in the stable, rooms crammed with the choicest bric-a-brac that abundance of money and poverty of taste could assemble. Young love twittering happily about it all.

Thus lapped in luxury, Charles and Florence, both aged thirty, lived in enviable style. She it was who had brought the money. Cracks in the fabric of their brief marriage were scrupulously papered over with the finest quality wall-paper. But cracks there were. In fact, Charles was Florence's second husband. Her previous marriage to Grenadier Guards officer, Captain Alexander Ricardo, had ended in disaster – a legal separation, followed by his early death from drink. At the end of her emotional tether, Florence had fled to Malvern to take the then fashionable water-cure at the hands of its equally fashionable specialist, the celebrated Dr. James Manby Gully. Although married, and old enough to be her grandfather, Dr. Gully became her lover.

After the death of Ricardo, the young widow had settled down in Streatham. It was there, at the house of her solicitor, Henry Brooks, that Florence first met a little, threadbare widow, 45-year-old Mrs. Jane Cannon Cox, who, in her effort to bring up her three small sons, was acting as governess to the Brooks' daughter. The two women took an instant liking to each other, and Florence invited her to become her resident companion at the, then, unusually handsome salary of £80 a year.

Florence had chosen well. Mrs. Cox displayed a most convenient defect of vision – not so much short sight as oversight – in the matter of the amorous visitations of that aged Lothario, Dr. Gully. He, by the way, had quit Malvern, and taken a house nearby in Leigham Court Road.

In 1873, Florence and Gully travelled together to Kissingen, a sort of German Malvern. Florence became pregnant. Dr. Gully performed an abortion on her. She was very ill after it. Mrs. Cox proved a solicitous and discreet nurse. The friendship with Dr. Gully remained thereafter strictly platonic. But whatever its basis, the survival of that relationship was essential to Mrs. Cox's economy. Her position as confidante, chaperone, and dispeller of Florence's fundamental loneliness, depended upon it. If Florence were to marry, it would make Mrs. Cox redundant. Yet such is the irony of things that it was Jane Cox herself who precipitated her own crisis. It was she who introduced Florence to the man who was to become the chief threat to the Cox family's security – Charles Bravo.

In December 1874, nine months after Florence and her household had moved into The Priory, at the top of Bedford Hill, Balham, Mrs. Cox took her to meet her friends, Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Bravo at their new home in Palace Green, Kensington. The Bravos' son, Charles, was there. It was not love at first sight. Ten more months went by.

One October day in 1875, on the sea-front at Brighton, Florence and Charles, purely by chance, met for the second time. And two months after that, Florence having confessed her affair with Dr. Gully, and Charles that he had a mistress in Maidenhead, they were married.

After two marriages, and umpteen quarrels with her second husband over money, Florence may well have found leisure in which to repent the haste with which she had abandoned the tranquil safety of life on her ancient lover's arm.

Came the night of Tuesday, April 18th, 1876.

At 7.30 p.m. Charles, Florence, and Mrs. Cox sat down to dinner at The Priory. Charles drank three or four glasses of burgundy. The women polished off two bottles of sherry. Florence, still suffering the after-effects of her latest miscarriage, retired to bed at 9 p.m.

Then . . . the cries in the night . . . "Florence! Hot water!"

Mrs. Cox rushed in to Charles. She found him being violently sick out of the window. The next minute he was slumped unconscious on the floor.

During the next couple of days a procession of puzzled medical men came and went. Finally, the royal physician, Sir William Gull, arrived. For a fat fee, and with more scientific truth than human kindness, he pronounced: "There's very little life left in you. In fact you're half dead now." And, indeed, at 5.30 a.m. on April 21st, Charles expired – of tartar emetic poisoning.

There was an inquest. Two actually. The first, held in the dining-room at The Priory – refreshments by kindness of the widow – proved too private and polite an affair to prove anything. Following widespread public dissatisfaction at coroner William Carter's kid-glove handling of the evidence – Florence had not even been required to appear – and the jury's consequently inconclusive verdict of 'poisoning but with insufficient evidence to say how the poison came to be in the body' – a second inquest was held in the billiards room of the Bedford Hotel, Balham. It brought a verdict of wilful murder; although there was still no naming of any guilty party. It had, however, developed into a quasi-trial, with Florence and Mrs. Cox figuratively in the dock.

The popular verdict was summed up in a broadsheet verse:

When lovely woman stoops to folly
And finds her husband in the way,
What charm can soothe her melancholy
What art can turn him into clay?

The only means her aims to cover,
And save herself from prison locks,
And repossess her ancient lover
Are Burgundy and Mrs. Cox!

So, who killed Charles Bravo? Was it suicide? Was it Florence, Mrs. Cox, Dr. Gully – or a joint effort? Over the decades opinions have varied. The great Scottish chronicler of crime, William Roughead, suspected Mrs. Cox. He thought that she had put Bravo out of the way, hoping to keep her job. He had wanted her dismissed. Yseult Bridges, who wrote *How Charles Bravo Died*, in 1956, believed that he was poisoning Florence, and took some himself by a mistake. John Williams, author of another study of the case, *Suddenly at The Priory*, 1957, thought Florence guilty. So did Elizabeth Jenkins, writer of *Dr. Gully: A Novel*, 1972. Agatha Christie plumped for a guilty Gully.

What the authors of this book have done is to unearth the illuminating truth about Mrs. Cox's background. She turns out to have been, not the exotic Jamaican creole of Yseult Bridges' always over-active imagination, not the interesting Anglo-French hybrid as which she presented herself, but Jane Edwards, of Liverpool.

Have they succeeded in solving the 112-year-old riddle? They are persuasive, but what about the 'pension' which, according to a confidential letter to William Roughead (copy in my possession) was paid to Mrs. Cox by one of Florence's brothers? How is one to account for that?

Murder at The Priory; Bernard Taylor and Kate Clarke, Grafton Books, 1988.

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