

## ARTICLE BY REV. C. H. SPURGEON.

### GREAT CRIMES AND THEIR CAUSES.

TO THE EDITORS OF CHRISTIAN WATCHMAN AND REFLECTOR:

It is a remarkable fact that great crimes usually occur in clusters. Like misfortunes, the gravest offences seldom come alone. Cunning forgeries, fraudulent bankruptcies and enormous embezzlements were at one time so incessant as almost to give a title to their period. The age of villainies, is a marked era in the history of many a young tradesman. Not only crimes, but the same sort of another. This fact has been frequently remarked with regard to murder and suicide, which during certain years have spread with all the energy of an epidemic, and have often manifested in each new instance a singularly striking likeness to the first. In England we have had a succession of tragedies, the mention of which will suffice, since to give particulars would violate a rule I am anxious in this letter to inculcate. The word MURDER has stared us in the face from every boarding, and detailed accounts of the solemn crime have proved as lucrative to our newsmen as an alarming accident, or a decisive battle. How are we to account for this succession of homicides? How was it that at the time of Palmer's murder of Cook, the propensity to destroy life by poison led others to imitate his example? The fact is universally noticed, but how shall we account for it?

We are not prepared to ascribe the prevalence of

for it ?

We are not prepared to ascribe the prevalence of any one crime to atmospheric, electric or mesmeric agencies, and indeed if we did so, the mystery would be no nearer its solution ; it would be dignified with a hard Latin name, but it would remain as much a riddle as before. Perhaps some learned reader may already feel the pains of an incipient lockjaw as he labors to pronounce a word which will precisely and accurately conceal the idea which he entertains upon this subject. Let him not proceed to extremities, for if hard words break no bones they may possibly dislocate them. My own notion upon the matter is as commonplace as it can be, but there is not always the greatest wisdom in the most abstruse theories, and occasionally the opinion of an ordinary thinker may be more practical than the speculation of the profound student. It seems to me that the prevalence of a crime must be accounted for not by a reason from the world of matter but from the realm of spirit, and great crimes may not unfitly be traced to some great devil spirit whose special activity may be their secret origin. We know, upon authority which is infallible, that Satan goeth about like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour. He labors with perseverance and cunning to tempt men into deeds of iniquity, and we may readily imagine that he uses his most arduous efforts to produce the most abominable sins. Understanding right well that man is an imitative creature, he is conscious that the lighting of one fire whose glare may be cast over a whole kingdom will be the signal for the kindling of the firebrands of iniquity in many hearts. Working upon an unusually developed depravity, or an excessive weakness of mental faculty, he induces some desperate wretch to imbrue his hands in the blood of his fellow-man. The story of the dreadful deed is circulated through a thousand mediums, a morbid curiosity constrains most men to read the recital, and upon some minds the effect is most disastrous. Tales of horror engrave themselves in deep lines upon the memory, and have a tendency to return again and again to the recollection. The red colors are sufficiently vivid of themselves, and he who is a murderer from the beginning takes care to add a dash of awful brilliancy to the dreadful picture. Diseased and depraved minds become fascinated, and their meditations imbibe a darker hue and receive a fiercer tint from the narrative which possesses such terrible attractions. They turn over and over again the ghastly morsel until the thought of imitation flits across the mind ; that thought the evil one is careful to renew, until in dreams and musings the man's fancy commits the deed. Now is the hour of the fiend's triumph, for man by nature will ever persevere in the evil path, at every step outleaping himself. To the insane, the step from familiarity with tales of blood to the actual commission of a dreadful deed must be easy in the extreme. Poor creatures, they are so subject to every passing influence, and so much the children of wild fantastic imaginations, that the conspicuous position of a notorious criminal must have fearful charms to them. It is no wonder that they plunge into the fiery cloud, dazed with its blood-red horrors, but it is reason for devout gratitude that so few of them are able to become the destroyers of their kind. With the abandoned and reprobate the pos-

age from murderous contemplations to overt acts will be more or less lengthened according to the ferocity of their passions, and the circumstances with which they are surrounded. In the mass of cases there are a thousand selfish considerations which would restrain the hand of the most vicious, but even here the hearing of the dark story will inevitably harden the heart and render cruelty less revolting. If, however, the vitiated mind indulges the accursed meditation, it seems to me that it will come to load the pistol and sharpen the dagger in imagination, as a mental recreation; it will, in thought, enjoy the excitement of waiting for the victim; and as a perfect luxury of conception, it will imagine the triumph of revenge over the enemy slaughtered in its musings. To act a tragedy so well rehearsed, will be no difficult task. An old enmity, a lurking jealousy, an imaginary slight, or a sudden ebullition of anger, will draw the curtain, and an enlightened public will crowd to the attractive spectacle of a real murder, committed by a performer who is quite at home in his part. The world will wonder at his coolness, and shudder at his self-possession, but they little know that the man before them is no amateur, but one who has killed his brother in heart so many times that he hardly sees the guilt of actually killing him with his hand; still less will they believe that he was educated by themselves, and is in his turn training some of their staring mass to follow in his footsteps. He learned to laugh at human life because he saw how soon it could be spilt upon the ground; he learned to despise the shame of crime because he marked the interest which it excited, and he did not fear to share the gallows, if he might be a partaker in the notoriety of the demoniac who but a little before him, had dyed his villainous hand in the sacred blood of man.

I believe that evil imitation and vicious contemplation are the two main propagators of crime, and I conceive that the publicity which is almost unavoidably given to an extraordinary outrage provokes these depraved powers to a fearful degree of energy. The food given to these wild propensities nurtures them until they must have space for complete development.

What then! Can we suggest any practical course to be pursued. I think we can clearly see our duty, and if we are careful to perform it, if no advantage should accrue, there certainly can be no mischief. In all cases where we have to do with minds partially unhinged and decayed, let us be careful to forbear all allusion to such topics. There is a degree of cunning in the mentally imbecile which will often suggest to them a vacant share of unintelligence, by which they will hope to beguile you onward to give your friend a fuller recital of the story, on the supposition that you are not understood by the afflicted imbecile. Be not deceived, you will be perfectly comprehended on this subject, even where no other can excite attention. Talk of happier themes, and leave these matters until it will be edifying to speak of them.

Will it not be well, in all companies, to abstain

Will it not be well, in all companies, to abstain from any long or exciting conversation upon such enormities? "The *thought* of evil is sin," and in *words* concerning such a monster evil there must be danger. If the public will hear these tales, let us not be the bearers of them. Let us restrain our own curiosity rather than ask information which might injure the giver; let us purge our newspapers of all highly colored details, and let us discourage the literature which panders to the wolfish part of our nature. Let our conversation be seasoned with salt, full of purity, and ministering grace unto the hearers. Crime will still have its paroxysm of power, but it will not be a newspaper lent from our house which suggested it, nor will it be our conversation which annealed the heart of the ruffian. If the bowie-knife or the revolver find out their prey, it will not be our tale of skilful attack which fired the emulation of the assassin, and if some fearful outrage shall be perpetrated in our streets, we shall be free from all question as to the share which our conversation might have had in suggesting the deed. We urge no attempt at mystery, but we only suggest that our civilization should be pushed a little further, and that human life should never be spoken of except with becoming awe and deserved reprobation. Feed not your children's minds with tales of blood. When the newspaper is read at the fireside, let it be one which is purged of all foul matter, and if it must be the ordinary secular intelligencer, select those events for reading to the family which may awaken happier and better thoughts than those of human destruction. Do not subscribe to journals which fatten upon public crime, and as far as your influence extends, silence the evil tongue which only gladdens the corrupt ear. So shall we be clear from the great transgression.

Yours truly, C. H. SPURGEON.