

Publishing the Details of Crime.

BY REV. L. E. JOHNSON, D. D.

One of the most urgent reforms that needs to be undertaken in the interest of public morals, is one against the publishing of the details of crime. The wonderful prominence of the newspaper in modern civilization, its enterprise in seizing everything of public interest, and the competition which stimulates it to do its utmost to enlarge the number of its readers have made crime and everything connected with it a favorite topic for its columns. So, unconsciously and without any corrupt design, one of the brightest and most active agencies of our civilization has become one of the powerful corruptors of public morals. It cannot escape the observation of any thoughtful man, that there is a remarkable coincidence between the scattering broadcast, all over the land, of the minute description of social horrors by the newspapers in our day, and the multiplication of those horrors. If those descriptions were actual seeds of crime filling the air and falling on congenial soil, and then springing up in fresh and larger harvests of crime, the appearance would not be different from what it is. There may be other causes in part, but they are not so apparent, while this lies on the surface and is adequate to account for the coincidence, in good degree.

1. In the first place, publishing the details of crime puts the criminal suggestion in many minds that otherwise might never have it. It puts into innocent minds an atmosphere of criminal thought which they cannot get rid of. Many a man has carried through life fearful spectres of wickedness in connection with things which he read about when a boy, which have risen in hours of temptation, to annoy him or even to lead him on to guilt. Such details are not things that can be forgotten. They make alliance with the wayward element in human nature, and become a part of the permanent furniture of the soul. Men who afterwards become thoroughly good are so occupied and haunted by the apparitions of these recitals, thoughtlessly entertained in early life, that they are plagued by their unsavory re-appearance in untimely hours and places, till the grave closes over them. What is an unwelcome visitor to them may be a syren to others.

2. Again, publicity arouses and fires the slumbering criminal passion. It has long been noticed that particular social horrors are likely to be repeated. Suicides, murders, railroad robberies, crimes against the State, of a peculiar type, are found in clusters—not necessarily in the same neighborhood, but near the same time—in historical clusters. It is not the influence of the air or the soil, or the water, or of the law or social organization, or any power of physical contagion in crime that causes this, but the spread of the knowledge of the crime, sweeping with all its fiery, maddening details over weak hearts in which the latent possibility is slumbering, which leads them to imitation. The press is the unwitting medium of passing this disastrous information; and through its ubiquity one poison flower of the historical cluster of wickedness may be in Russia, another in America, one in Germany, another in Ireland, one in America, one in Italy, another in Mexico, or they all may be close together in place as well as time. The instantaneous omnipresence of the information of the press causes a crime committed in Missouri or Kansas today to be festering in wild brains and stimulating to its repetition in California to-morrow; and tends to produce the vast sympathetic brotherhood in the types of guilt among the nations which we would witness in our day. And where the effect is not an imitation, it may lead to horrors of other forms. All crime is related; and crimes of one sort, corrupting the mind by familiarity with their recitals

debauching the conscience, arousing the slumbering depravity and making it daring and reckless, stimulate to crimes of other kinds as well. Highwaymen start out afresh after having their blood set on fire by reading accounts of murders. Assassins are stimulated by the recitals of lynching by a mob. Theft and arson play into each other's hands. To arouse the criminal impulse in society anywhere is to call out a deadly fang and make it active, and no one can tell where it will strike next, whether in an imitation or independently.

3. Publishing the details also suggests a programme which, in the opinion of the candidates for crime, only needs slight modification, here and there, to be made successful in their case. Such persons see where others failed; what a small mistake was made; and out of the full disclosure they imagine they see away in which they can do wrong and escape punishment. All these minute recitals are thus made the basis of a keener education of criminals. They use them as text books—the means by the aid of which they drill their faculties, form their plans, and prepare themselves to outrage society more adroitly and successfully. The newspaper, the bloom of our civilization, the enlightener of the people, the popular mirror of society, in its eagerness to furnish the news, is thus telling assassins and robbers and burglars and thieves and counterfeiters just how to do it, giving them the advantage of the knowledge of all the skill and mistakes and crooked ways of their fraternity, and putting them on the way to greater cunning and more successful malignity. To scatter such information is to lay the trains of crime far and wide, in many places, for time and opportunity to fire. If the press were to pay a great price for the privilege of distributing these examples and models and programmes of lawlessness, all wrought out to the minutest particulars, it could not compensate for the pecuniary disadvantage to society for the quickened criminal education and skill thereby produced, to say nothing of the moral effects.

4. Publishing crime in its incidents and details, and overlooking the orderly flow of social life, encourages crime also, by giving a false view of its proportion. Persons criminally inclined are led to think they are in a great company; that nearly all are wrongdoers; and thus lose the sense of the relative horror of crime. What such multitudes are engaged in doing does not seem repulsive to them. Company in evil breaks down the moral barrier restraining from evil. A thousand men joined together will each plunge into sin when they see one another doing it, and no one acting differently, when they would not think of doing it if they felt their case was exceptional. The press joins the hands of the rogues all over the country, and they see one another, and feel the influence of one another, and invite one another to fresh forms of mischief, which they never would think of committing if it were not for the stimulus caused by their misapprehension about the relative amount of crime in the community, given them by the papers. Many half-virtuous men, not anchored in principle, simple and easily influenced, look out upon the country which they think is steaming and boiling with lawlessness and they think they may well practice it as the rest. If the honest people were brought as prominently into their notice as the rogues, they might be deterred from the first step. "Evil company doth corrupt good manners," and this maxim of the Apostle Paul has no truer application than when applied to the influence of the press in spreading out the details of crime before those of weak virtue. Rogues keep altogether too much company with those of weak virtue through the press.

5. Another point of criticism re-

lates to the tone of the press towards crime, as well as the fact of spreading it out with full descriptions. It is common for the editorial staff to speak of it smartly, derisively, jestingly, not as if it were a moral enormity. They appeal to other parts of our nature than conscience to make a sprightly paper, and amuse the reader, rather than educate him to virtue and a horror of wickedness. They may trust the occurrence with the indifference of a horse race or a dog fight, or a show without moral earnestness. They may speak of the men who have attempted crime and failed, as stupid, or cowardly, giving the impression that they would have been more admirable villains if they had succeeded. It is a dangerous undertaking to set forth human malignity and depravity in æsthetic colors. It can never be depicted safely to society unless the description is made to arouse the conscience of the reader in good, strong, unflinching condemnation of the whole wicked procedure. To produce any other effect, or arouse any other interest contrary to this, is to encourage disorder and lose reportorial opportunity to help the public. Crime cannot be dealt with æsthetically or rhetorically or sensationally, or in any other way than morally, without making it seem something else than that awful guilty thing it is. Popular writers should be in the mood of true moral earnestness, determined to set the heart and conscience of their readers against it, or they should enter on no account of it. It is one of the things that should be approached from high ground, in the interest of public morals, or it should not be approached at all. To joke and polish the shafts of wit, and extort a smile from the reader, over the man who has butchered his fellow-man, or tried to do it; who has wrecked a railroad train, or tried to do it; who has shaken his pistol over a man in bed in the dead hours of the night, while he robbed him of his valuables; who has destroyed the peace of his neighbor's home; who has stolen the money put in his trust—is to confuse the moral convictions of the people and promote moral corruption. Nor is it enough to treat social wrong with denunciation and vituperation. Stings are not medicinal; nor is the pain they inflict likely to lodge in the guilty parties. The public needs to be helped by the references made to the wrongs from which it suffers, to be itself more thoroughly grounded in virtue and all good living. It wants to be helped up to righteousness and purity and love; and denunciation is not the most successful way of doing this.

The better way, undoubtedly, is, in all ordinary cases, to suppress the details—the things which seize the imagination, fasten on the memory and incite the criminal impulse. Keep those definite fire-brands out of print; as much as possible out of the speech and thoughts of the public. Bury them in silence and oblivion, that they may go out, and not be borne over the land to kindle other hearts to mischief.

The next reform, therefore, that is needed, is a reform of the Press in this particular. This evil has sprung up inadvertently; in fact, unconsciously. Neither the Press nor the public has realized its bearing on the increase of crime. Attention should be called to this subject. Thoughtful persons are beginning to see the evil. They should speak out. Let a movement be made gathering up the enlightened and advanced public sentiment on this subject, and disclosing the number who turn with a sickening feeling away from the paragraphs devoted to the details of individual and social misdemeanors and vices in our prints, and the Press will readily respond when it sees that the public taste requires something cleaner and more helpful. It thinks now that there is a popular demand for what it gives. When the public studies the subject and understands it, there will not be a demand for it; but the public will demand the suppression of the seeds of crime flying on these winged sheets; of the disclosures that propagate corruption; of the publicity that sends the fire and the pistol and the sword, alarms and horrors, desolation and sorrow, on the swift currents of the wind over the land.—Pacific.

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