

WEIRD CRIMES

No. 5. Mary Blandy

TWO dirty, unkempt urchins fought and struggled in the gutterway of Henley. The elder, a ragamuffin lad of thirteen or so, bore his antagonist to the kidney stone pavement, pressed his knee upon the other's chest and leaned forward, intent upon gouging the little fellow's eyes with thumb and forefinger. It was a trick he had learned from the bullies of the waterfront; a trick no decent English lad would stoop to—but this little alley rat was not a decent English lad.

"Help, help!" screamed the smaller boy, fighting desperately to keep the sharp, unclean nails of his enemy from his eyes.

There was a clatter of flying, iron-ringed hoofs against the paving flints, a shout of command to the older boy, and a tall, auburn-haired girl, slim and straight as a youth, flung herself from her pony, laying her riding crop mercilessly across the unfair fighter's shoulders.

Surprised by the sudden rear attack, the boy loosed his grip on his opponent's face and turned furiously to defend himself. He might as well have attempted to beat back the north wind. Right cut, left cut, back and forth, the girl swung her whip with the speed and skill that mark the practiced fencer and the strength that tells of healthy young muscles grown strong and supple through systematic exercise.

"Thou churl, thou mean, base varlet, thou Frenchman!" she cried, still plying her whip. "Dost fight with teeth and nails, like a yowling gib-cat! Thou'rt not fit to breathe the air of England!" She cut him again across his writhing shoulders.

Hopelessly worsted in the combat, the boy drew off a safe distance and made the oldest gestures of insult the world knows—that of the thumbed nose. "Yah, garr, tomboy!" he mocked from his zone of safety beyond the cut of her whip.

"Tomboy, tomboy, live like a man and die like a man.

"*Fighting girls and crowing hens
Always come to some bad ends.*"

"Ye'll die on the gallows, Mary Blandy, and all yer father's money can't save ye from it. Tomboy, tomboy, gal-lows-bird tomboy!"

The girl made a threatening gesture, and he took refuge in flight, but his raucous taunt of "Tomboy, tomboy, gal-lows-bird tomboy!" could be heard long after the patter of his broken-soled brogans no longer sounded in her ears.

She tossed a copper for comfort to the lad she had rescued, remounted her pony and rode slowly toward her father's house.

Mary Blandy was the only child of Francis Blandy, a prominent solicitor of the town of Henley, on the Thames; and because her father had wished a son and been disappointed with a daughter, he had done the next best thing and had Mary educated more like a young esquire than a young noblewoman.

At fourteen she could ride, fence and shoot as well as most boys several years her senior, and better than some, and her proficiency in the classics was a source of wonderment and no little shame among parents with sons in the neighborhood. Many of these, piqued by the girl's extraordinary ability, contented themselves with saying such training and efficiency were unladylike, unfeminine and entirely disgusting. So, at an early age, Mary Blandy suffered unpopularity among the parents of her boy acquaintances.

In a few years unpopularity was increased a hundred per cent., for Mary, the young woman, proved herself as apt at all feminine accomplishments as Mary, the girl, had excelled in boyish pastimes.

Her father's house became a rendezvous for the eligible young men of the vicinity, and many a "womanly woman" sat beside her lonesome fireside

while young professional men and officers from the nearby garrison made the rafters of the Blandy withdrawing room ring with their song and laughter.

Of all the gay young Redcoats who came to court Lawyer Blandy's daughter, the most favored was Captain William Henry Cranstoun, an infantry officer, brother to Lord Mark Ker, of Scotland, and possessor of a yearly income of £1,500—a very respectable fortune in those days.

Other suitors gradually drifted away, and in the course of time the captain's proposal of marriage was duly made, discussed by the Blandy family, and accepted.

Happy in the possession of her gold-laced lover, Mary Blandy went about her preparations for marriage, choosing silks and taffetas for gowns with the nice discrimination that marked all her dealings, embroidering silk stockings for wear at the grand court levees she would attend when her precious sweetheart should at last be promoted and ordered for duty at London town, and between whites dreaming the long, long, open-eyed dreams every girl dreams during her engagement.

Then, one day, came a letter for Lawyer Blandy from "the North"—Scotland. It was signed by a young woman claiming to be Captain Cranstoun's wife, and, what was more, the mother of his son.

Mr. Blandy called his daughter to him, showed her the letter, and told her she must have nothing more to do with the captain.

Shocked as she was, Mary still held faith in her lover, believing the best of him, as all good women do of the men they love, declaring there was either some mistake or that the captain would be able to make a satisfactory explanation.

This he was given an opportunity to do that very night, and when confronted with the documentary evidence of his perfidy, coolly denied any attachment

with the letter's sender. When Lawyer Blandy, worldly wise from forty years' practice of a profession which has its tap-roots in human frailties, declared he needed something more than the young officer's bare denial, the captain asked a few days' grace in which to marshal his defense, declaring he, too, would produce documentary evidence.

Blandy was a just man, and acceded to the captain's request, but put him on his honor not to see or communicate with Mary until he showed the promised papers.

A FEW days later Captain Cranstoun appeared at the Blandy residence with a letter bearing a signature identical with the one Mr. Blandy had received. This letter, addressed to the captain, admitted its sender was neither his wife nor his son's mother, and had no claim whatever upon Captain William Henry Cranstoun of His Majesty's Army.

The canceled engagement was renewed, and preparations for the wedding were almost complete when a second letter came for Mr. Blandy, imploring him not to let his daughter marry a scoundrel. The writer averred she had been led into making a denial of her wifehood by an urgent appeal from Captain Cranstoun, telling her he had no intention of marrying Miss Blandy, having become engaged to her merely as a diversion. He had urged his wife to stultify herself because he had no chance of preferment in the service if it were known he was married, whereas, if he could pass as single a few months longer, he would surely be promoted and would then acknowledge her as his wife and bring her to live with him.

With womanly selfishness she had agreed to write the letter he sought; but far from feeling proper gratitude for her sacrifice, the unprincipled rogue had sent copies of her renunciation to her family, who thereupon turned her out of doors. She was reduced to starvation, and prayed Mr. Blandy to release her husband from his engagement and restore him to her. To prove the truth of her claims, she enclosed the letter Cranstoun had written, asking her to sully her reputation for his sake, and declaring his engagement to Mary a mere frivolous pastime.

Such evidence could not be ignored. In spite of fervent protestations of innocence, Mr. Blandy sent the cockscorn "captain about his business and forbade his daughter, on pain of disinheritance, ever to see him or write to him again.

But the love that laughs at locksmiths pays even less attention to parental commands, and, though Mary dutifully forbore seeing the captain, she carried on a continual clandestine correspondence with him. His earnest disavowals of all wrong-doing, his passionate declarations that he was the victim of a designing woman who sought to stand between him and happiness, overbore Mary's customary keen judgment. In a short time she ceased to think of him as a deceiver and regarded him as a greatly wronged man.

Once or twice she undertook to plead her lover's cause with her father; but her advances called forth such outbursts of temper from the indignant old gentleman that she ceased the attempts. Mary had not inherited her father's auburn hair and gray eyes without a fair share of his choleric disposition, and in the course of their arguments she repaid most of his irascible remarks with compound interest, forgetting that keyholes are as fairly adapted to servants' ears and eyes as to keys.

Her father's adamant attitude and her lack of intimate acquaintances among the neighborhood young women forbade her telling her troubles to a disinterested listener, and with this safety vent denied her, she poured forth her woes to her companion in misery, Captain Cranstoun. That gentleman was absent on leave from his regiment, visiting relatives in Scotland, and it may well be supposed his replies were far from urging her to meek obedience or patient waiting. Yet never did he counsel her to defy her parent openly, nor did he suggest a romantic elopement. Mr. Blandy possessed a considerable fortune and an unrelenting temper. If Mary contracted an unsanctioned marriage, she would certainly come dowerless to her husband, and that eventuality was far from being included in Cranstoun's program.

In these circumstances he had recourse to a stratagem. Pretending great elation, he wrote his forlorn sweetheart that he had met a witch in the highlands of Scotland, a woman able to brew all sorts of potent draughts. She could concoct potions which begot instant and undying love in the breasts of those who took them, she could charm birds from their nests and snakes from their holes; best of all, she could prepare a medicine—quite harmless to the taker—which, could Mr. Blandy but be induced to swallow it, would instantly turn his aversion to Captain Cranstoun's marriage with his daughter into a beaming content.

Mary knew the power of Scottish witches—were they not being cou-

demned for sorcery at every court term?—and this particular witch, Cranstoun wrote, was more powerful in her magic, both black and white, than any yet condemned to hang.

Trusting implicitly in her lover's promises, Mary joyfully awaited the coming of the packet which should bring her a happy issue out of all her afflictions. In due time the drug arrived, marked, as had been agreed, "Powders for polishing Scottish pebbles." It was fine, white, and, when applied to the tongue with a moistened finger, had the faint, tart-sweet taste of apples.

At her first opportunity, Mary mixed a generous portion of the medicine with her father's morning gruel, then waited expectantly for an abatement of his hatred of Captain Cranstoun. But instead of becoming complaisant, Mr. Blandy grew more testy than ever.

Fearing the charm had lost some of its potency in the long trip from Scotland, Mary administered a still stronger dose the following morning.

Shortly afterward her father took to his bed with violent stomach pains.

For a few days Mary gave him no more of the powders, and his health began to mend gradually, but his temper remained as hot as formerly. Letters from the captain urged her to continue the "treatment," and, feeling sure her lack of success was due to insufficient dosage of the magic powder, she prepared a larger portion than ever, pouring it into the broth prescribed by the physician.

Almost immediately Mr. Blandy became desperately ill. The doctor was summoned post-haste, but declared his skill unavailing. The patient was dying.

Then, and not till then, was Mary's consciousness awakened to the enormity of her actions. At last she realized the mysterious powders and her father's illness were cause and effect. Overcome with horror at the part she had unwittingly played, she rushed into her father's bedchamber, and falling to her knees, sobbed, "Oh, father, dear, dear father, do what you will with me, mete out any punishment you see fit, but forgive your foolish, love-blinded child. Oh, my father, my father, forgive me; forgive me."

In spite of the violent pain he suffered, Mr. Blandy lay calmly while she told her story, tears streaming down her cheeks, her words split with sobbing. At last he put forth his hand, laying it gently on his daughter's bowed head.

"My dear," he gasped, "I forgive thee freely. Nay, more, I bless thee, and pray God will bless thee. Now go; and

say no more of this business, lest thou shouldst let drop some word to thine own prejudice. Farewell, my child, and may God pity and watch over thee."

As the weeping girl groped her way blindly from the room, Lawyer Blandy muttered, "Oh, the villain, the graceless villain! To come to my house, eat at my table, and in return take away my life and ruin my daughter!"

Beside herself with grief and remorse, Mary ran from the house, seeking solitude in which to weep away some of the anguish in her heart. At last, feeling she must see her father to implore his forgiveness once more before he died, she re-entered the house and sought the death chamber.

A strange man, roughly dressed and armed with a heavy bludgeon, stood at the door. As she approached he smiled malignantly at her.

"Tomboy," he announced, "thou'lt not enter here. Thy devil's work is already done."

With a start Mary recognized the bailiff. Though age had altered him, he still bore a strong resemblance to the gutter urchin she had thrashed years before for fighting with his nails "like a yowling gib-cat." And, at his repetition of the epithet "tomboy," she remembered his shouted prophecy in the streets of Henley: "Ye'll die on the gallows, Mary Blandy."

Now he was a hanger-on at the jail, a thief-taker, servant to the constable. "Tomboy," his taunt of years ago came back to her, "gallows-bird tomboy." She had been a girl of fourteen when the dirty street Arab had called her that. Now—

She leaned weakly against the wall for support, closing her eyes in hopeless misery. "*Tomboy, tomboy, gallows-bird tomboy!*" the words seemed beating a rhythm in her pulses.

A hand fell on her shoulder. "Mary Blandy, in the name of our lord the King . . . !"

She was under arrest.

HER trial for parricide was held at Oxford on March 3, 1852. Among the witnesses for the crown were her servants, all of whom testified to the heated debates she had with her father over Captain Cranstoun. Not one, however, could be made to say she had shown any evidence of harboring a grudge. On the contrary, all the testimony showed that her anger evaporated almost as soon as it boiled.

While England today enjoys what is, perhaps, the best system of criminal pro-

cedure in the world, a system under which speedy results are achieved, and few, if any, innocent persons suffer injustice, she was just emerging from the dark ages, in which to be accused of crime was almost tantamount to being convicted, when Mary Blandy was called to the bar.

Persons accused of felony were permitted counsel, it is true, but only to a limited extent. Their lawyers might advise them on matters of law, but, though the crown was numerous and ably represented by trial lawyers, counsel for the accused might neither examine witnesses for the defense, cross-examine witnesses of the prosecution nor advise their clients respecting examination of witnesses or any other matter of fact.

This might not seem so great a hardship at first glance, but when it is remembered that a trial consists merely of measuring facts developed in evidence by the yardstick of the law, it will be seen that for one untrained in the law to develop a proper legal defense from the testimony of his witnesses, or to break down the prosecution's case in law by astute cross-examination, was almost an impossibility. Add to this the fact that, while the crown's lawyers might address the court and jury at length, the defendant's counsel might not be heard in argument, and the hopelessness of the accused's plight may be realized.

To offset the inability of the defendant to be heard through counsel, the theory that the judge himself was charged with the protection of the defendant's rights was laid down, but only too often, in those days, this theory was no more than a legal fiction—a grim jest at the prisoner's expense.

The indictment for murder covered several parchment sheets and charged that Mary Blandy, spinster, "not having the fear of God before her eyes, did wickedly, wilfully, maliciously and of her deliberate and premeditated malice feloniously kill and murder her father, the said Francis Blandy, of the town of Henley aforesaid, against the form of the statute in such case made and provided and against the dignity of our lord, the King."

"How will you be tried, Mary Blandy?" asked the court's clerk when he had finished reading the interminable hodge-podge of legal verbiage accusing her of murder.

"By God and by my country," the girl replied, using the prescribed formula which signified she desired trial by jury.

Twelve residents of the vicinity were sworn "well and truly to try and a true

deliverance make between our lord and King and Mary Blandy, spinster," and the trial commenced. It lasted eleven consecutive hours.

When all the crown's witnesses had been examined (no testimony was offered by the defense), and the attorney-general had harangued the jury, charging Mary Blandy with the foulest of crimes, next to treason, known to the law, the judge nodded to the girl. Her time to speak had come.

Bewildered by the unfamiliar surroundings, denounced by the very servants of her father's house, and with not one friendly eye upon her in all that crowded court room, an inexperienced girl rose to plead for her life.

An eyewitness of the trial describes her as being above medium height, erect and proud in bearing and with calm eyes and unruffled brow. She was plainly, but decently, dressed in a gown of dark woolen stuff, with white linen collar and wristbands. Her voice, though low, was distinct, firm and unharried, and her wide gray eyes never left the judge's face as she spoke.

Among all the addresses delivered in court since man first sat in judgment on man, Mary Blandy's surely deserves high rank for strength and simple eloquence. The speech attributed to Robert Emmet has long been held a masterpiece of forensic oratory; but Emmet was a practiced orator and fired with patriotism. Mary Blandy had never addressed a public gathering in her life and was on the point of exhaustion at the end of eleven hours of denunciation—an ordeal sufficient to break the spirit of a strong man.

"My lord," she began, dropping a courtesy to the court, "it is mortally impossible for me to detail to you all the hardships I have endured—but worst of all, I have been aspersed in my character. In the first place, it has been said I spoke ill of my father, that I cursed him. That is entirely false. Sometimes little family affairs have happened, and we did not speak as kindly to each other as I could have wished. I own I am passionate, my lord, and in my passion I may have dropped some hard words; but your lordship must have noticed what great care has been taken to recollect every word I have said which could be applied to my disadvantage. These are hardships, my lord, such as you yourself must allow to be so.

"It has been said, too, that I endeavored to make my escape. Your lordship will judge the difficulties I labored under. I had lost my father; I was accused of being his murderess; I was

not allowed to go near him. I was forsaken by my friends, affronted by the mob, insulted by my servants.

"Although I begged to have the liberty to listen at the door when he died, I was not allowed it.

"My keys were taken from me, my shoebuckles and garters, too—to prevent my making away with myself—as though I were the most abandoned creature. What could I do, my lord? Was this a condition in which to attempt an escape?

"When I was arrested in my home I was locked up for fifteen hours without a maid to attend the decencies of my sex.

"I was sent to jail, and the high sheriff told me he must put an iron on me. A little later he came again and said he must put a still heavier iron on my ankles until my day in court arrived. I was chained like a savage beast, my lord.

"Newspapers and ballad mongers have made free with my reputation; I have been represented as the most abandoned of my sex and prejudiced in the eyes of the world.

"I submit myself to your lordship and to the worthy jury. I do assure you, as I am to answer at the great tribunal where I am some day to appear, I am entirely innocent of my father's death. I really thought the powder an innocent, inoffensive thing, and I gave it to him to procure his love.

"It has been mentioned, I should say, that I have been 'ruined'. My lord, in the sense the witnesses mean, I have not. I am virtuous. But when a young girl loses her character, is not that her ruin? Is it not ruining my character to have this vile charge of murder laid upon me?

"Whatever may be the event of this trial, my lord, I am already ruined most effectually and beyond the hope of redemption."

Carefully and painstakingly, the judge instructed the jury in the legal definitions of murder in the first degree, murder in the second degree, manslaughter, and innocence. He seems to have been a just man who took his duty to conserve the prisoner's legal rights seriously. The instructions done, the court rose, waiting the jury's retirement. But no movement came from the jury box. The clerk frowned in annoyance. A bailiff motioned to the jury's foreman to retire, but was answered by a stubborn shake of the head.

"Gentlemen of the jury," exclaimed the clerk, "have you agreed upon a verdict?" He was prepared to suggest sarcastically that they retire and delib-

erate when the foreman answered in the negative.

He was not given the opportunity.

"We have," replied the foreman.

"Prisoner, look on the jury; jury, behold the prisoner," cried the clerk mechanically. Then, as Mary Blandy rose and regarded the men who held her fate, the clerk continued: "Gentlemen of the jury, how do you find the prisoner at the bar, guilty or not guilty?"

"Guilty!" the foreman spoke the word of doom gruffly.

Mary Blandy's unpopularity in the neighborhood had paid its final dividend.

"YOUR verdict is that you find the prisoner at the bar guilty of murder in the first degree? So say all of you!" the clerk intoned, following the ritual of all criminal trials.

Again the jurors nodded solemnly.

"Bring me my cap," the judge ordered. An attendant fetched a small, black silk cap, which the judge fitted over his full-bottomed judicial wig. No sentence of death could be pronounced in an English court unless the judge wore this symbol of mourning. The symbolism of the black cap in English courts was equivalent to the broken wand in German tribunals when the death sentence was given.*

Briefly the court congratulated Mary Blandy on having had a fair and impartial trial by a jury of her peers, and ordered that she be hanged by the neck until dead on the sixth of the following month. As legal form prescribed, he ended the sentence with the prayer that God would have mercy on her soul.

The girl received her sentence calmly, nor did she waste breath in vain pleas for mercy. She was not a lawyer's daughter for nothing. None knew better than she the inexorable course of British justice.

During the thirty-three days of her imprisonment Mary's conduct was marked by the utmost gentleness. Not once was she heard to protest against her fate or to reproach the servants and former friends on whose testimony she had been condemned. Poor girl, why should she cling to life? Her father was dead, and she condemned in the world's opinion as his murderess; her lover had forsaken her; in all the world she had not a single friend or well-wisher.

April sixth dawned bright and warm. Mary Blandy arrayed herself in a modish gown of black bombazine with a

white kerchief about her throat. When the sheriff's men came to lead her to execution she wished them a cheerful good morning.

Executions in England in those days were publicly conducted, and the gallows on which criminals were hanged was not erected in the jailyard for each execution. It was kept standing in an open field, where its grim shadow was a constant reminder to evildoers, and this field was nearly a mile from the jail where Mary Blandy was confined.

A carriage was offered her, but she declined, saying she would enjoy the April sunshine as long as possible. So, accompanied by the officers and a clergyman, she set out upon her last journey a-foot.

Previous to leaving the jail, her wrists had been crossed and bound before her with black ribbons, a concession to her sex and gentility, and this mode of tying her hands permitted her to hold a prayer book before her. This was another courtesy, for condemned criminals' hands were customarily lashed behind their backs with rope.

The attending clergyman read the office appointed for executions in the Book of Common Prayer, but Mary Blandy opened her book to the Psalter appointed for the sixth day of the month and read from Psalm 32: "Blessed is he whose unrighteousness is forgiven and whose sin is covered. I said 'I will confess my sins unto the Lord,' and so Thou forgavest the wickedness of my sin."

Beneath the gibbet a stepladder, draped in black bunting, had been set up, and on this she mounted two rungs, saying, "Gentlemen, I beseech you, hang me no higher, for decency's sake."

But the knotted noose, swinging from the gallows' crossbar, would not reach her where she stood, so she climbed to the ladder's top. A puff of wind caused the ladder to sway slightly, and the poor girl cried out in terror of falling, raising her helpless, bound hands to steady herself.

"Fear ye not, tomboy," called a hoarse voice from the group about the gallows, "ye'll fall clean to hell in a minute!" The chief constable turned and struck her tormentor such a heavy blow in the mouth that his lips bled. So her old enemy's last meeting with Mary Blandy was like his first, the occasion of a beating.

When the rope had been adjusted, Mary raised her hands, drew her kerchief over her face, and stood a moment in silent prayer. Then she held her prayer book forward.

This was the signal agreed upon be-

*1. See article III of this series, "The Magic Mirror Murders."

tween her and the sheriff. Two husky jail attendants heaved the ladder from beneath her, and Mary Blandy's slender body swung between earth and heaven.

It was half an hour before they cut her down, for her weight was not great enough to break her neck, and she strangled slowly, while the great crowd of mean folk, gathered to watch the execution, stood in hang-jawed amazement to see a woman fight so long for life.

At one o'clock the following morning she was carried by torchlight to the family vault at Henley, and, with the rope that strangled her still about her slim, white throat, buried beside the father for whose murder, rightly or wrongly, she was hanged.

DILIGENT search was made for Captain Cranston, but the scoundrel had heard of Mary's arrest, and, deserting the army, fled to France. For five years he lived a fugitive from justice, but the government took legal proceedings to attach the source of his income. At last, reduced to abject poverty, he died in a home for the indigent kept by the church at Boulogne, and was buried in a nameless grave in foreign soil.

This is the Fifth Article of a Series That Seabury Quinn is Writing for WEIRD TALES. The Sixth Will Appear in Our Next Issue. It is Entitled "The Werewolf of St. Bonnot," and Describes Some Startling Things that Happened in France Under the Reign of Charles IX. Be Sure to Read this Gripping Article in the May WEIRD TALES.

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