

Wirgman's Theory

Rafael Sabatini

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Whatever might be said against Roger Wirgman—and his intimates, had they been willing to speak, might have said a good deal—it was not to be denied that he was a man of marked individuality. And in this twentieth century world a man of individuality is like a rosebush in a bed of weeds. I don't know that my metaphor is exactly applicable to Roger Wirgman, for there was little about him, morally or physically, that suggested roses. He was lank of figure with the brow of a philosopher and the mouth of a satyr.

He was widely read, rather than well read; he had a passion for criminology, and murder was his study predilect. He contended—and facts offer no lack of justification for his contention—that the dictum murder will out was found, when tested, to be as fallacious as most proverbial tenets.

Given, he would say in his cold-blooded manner, a man of sufficient education, with an imagination wide enough to foresee all possible issues, and intelligence strong enough to provide capably for each and every one of those issues so as completely to cover up his tracks, and he may kill with impunity.

Think of the hundreds—indeed, I might almost say thousands—of yearly undiscovered murderers. Why are their crimes not brought home to them? Because, possessed of the qualities I have mentioned, they have successfully effaced all traces of any implicating evidence.

Now, what is the first question that is asked when an investigation is opened? It is: Who could have had a motive for doing this? To baffle research at the outset, therefore, we must arrange that no motives shall be apparent. So that when a man is noxious, and his removal becomes a desideratum or a thing that at some future time may be necessary, we must look to it that we do not betray those feelings by over inveighing against him and exposing our inimical sentiments. On the contrary, let us feign and protest friendship and affection for him; let us court him, and make it appear that we are his dearest friend. Thus, when some day he is found dead, with a suggestion of foul play attaching to his end, and it comes to be asked who were his enemies, none shall think of naming us.

In this fashion would he pursue his pet theme, dilating upon the contriving of accidents by land and water in a horrible, cold-blooded, logical manner that made his audience shudder.

To listen to you, said Pegram one night after Wirgman had delivered himself in this usual strain, one might almost believe you had actual experience.

On the contrary, rejoined Wirgman with a touch of whimsical regret, I'm afraid that I am never likely to have an opportunity of applying my theories. Nevertheless, I am convinced that should the occasion arise I could prove them sound; though, for obvious reasons, I should unfortunately be unable to lay my results before you.

Wirgman, you'd make a nasty enemy, laughed Pegram; and I for one am glad to rank among your friends.

Touch wood, muttered a humourist, to avert the omen.

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Come to think of it, though, rejoined another, it is really his friendship that is dangerous, for the first step according to his methods entails making a close friend of his proposed victims.

At that there was a fairly general and good-humouredly bantering laugh at Wirgman and his theory, and the topic was abandoned for others in better concert with a club smokeroom.

Little did Harry Pegram dream how soon that theory was to be put into practice against himself; and still less did Wirgman think how he was to discover the gulf that lies between theories based upon human actions and their application.

The thing came about six months later. It arose from a sufficiently common cause—a woman, whom by an ill chance they had both elected to woo. She was a poor thing herself in every sense unworthy of the struggle that followed between the rivals; but then is it not in the tortuous way of things that such women as these shall have power to inspire great passions and stir up great strife?

A coolness, slight at first, but later more remarkable, fell between the two friends. They grew distant in their manner, and avoided each other in so marked a degree that their estrangement grew into matter for conversation. Then Pegram did a mean and foolish thing. He uttered a slander calculated to harm Wirgman. When it came to Wirgman's ears and he discovered the source of it, he flew into a violent rage—self-possessed though he ordinarily was—and swore to kill the fellow. The threat was voiced in that same club smokeroom, and loudly enough to be heard by its every occupant. That he would kill Pegram they looked upon as mere hyperbolic expression of his passion—a mere figure of speech. But that his anger was deep they realised, and they implored him to calm himself. Outwardly he succeeded in doing so; but inwardly his rage boiled on, and the desire to do for that man's existence what that man had done for his character was unabated.

Had anything been needed to swell his rancour he had it a week later in the announcement of Pegram's betrothal to the lady. Wirgman had over-estimated his own attractions, her show of favour had lured him on, and perhaps justified him in building an elaborate castle in the air. He relied upon his marriage to mend his crippled resources—for the lady was well endowed. This castle of his now came toppling about his ears, and the financial crisis which he was compelled to face deepened his ill will towards Pegram, and carried him a step farther in the contemplation of that gentleman's removal.

One night in the solitude of his elegant chambers he pondered the injury that had been done him. He cursed the moment of folly in which he had threatened Pegram's life. He recalled the theory he had been so fond of expounding, and he reflected bitterly upon how grievously he had neglected to be guided by it now that its application had become desirable. Gloomily he sat and thought. He was a man of stern, determined mind, without conscience and without any principles to speak of; and he found himself dwelling upon the contemplation of murder as calmly and coldly as he had been wont to dwell upon its theoretical aspect.

A dozen means suggested themselves to his fertile brain, any one of which he might have adopted with safety had he but refrained from alienating Pegram, and, above all from foolishly proclaiming his resentment and threatening his rival's life.

With brows knit he sat on through the night, and thought with all the intensity of his subtle intellect, until at length the frown lifted, and a smile gradually stole over his strong face, and relaxed the lines of his cruel mouth. He had found a way.

He realised that it was beyond his power—and the act he contemplated must render it doubly so—to win the woman, or, in fact, to reap any advantage beyond the satisfaction his enemy's destruction might afford him. But that satisfaction he deemed more than sufficient. Introspection showed him that he hated the woman now almost as bitterly as he hated the man; and he gathered pleasure from thought that the blow he intended to strike would

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be sufficiently far-reaching to wound her also. For this it was worth while abandoning England and his friends, even had not his creditors rendered such a step imperative in any event, now that he was not to have the assistance of her wealth to set him straight; and friends, after all, were of very slight consideration to a man of such self-centred interests.

Pegram was at the time staying down at Port Wimbush with the lady—whose name, by the way, was Miss Drummond—and her mother. No locality could have been better suited to Wirgman's projects than this little seaside resort.

His first step was to contrive a disagreement with his bankers, which afforded him the motive he sought for withdrawing his deposit, a matter of some three thousand pounds, representing all that he possessed.

On the morrow he left town. But before he went he took care to look in at the club, and announce to everybody likely to be interested that he was going down to Port Wimbush to administer to Harry Pegram the completest thrashing ever one gentleman visited upon another.

What he was about to do he knew. For the manner of it he must profit by such circumstances as should offer themselves. He put up at the Swan Hotel—having previously ascertained that Pegram and the ladies were staying at the Crown—and during the whole of the next day he kept his room.

After dinner, as dusk was setting in, he stepped across to the Crown Hotel, and, strolling into the bar, he called for a whisky—and-soda. Through the glass doors he peered into the smokeroom, and his eyes gleamed with satisfaction as they lighted upon Pegram, sitting there with his paper and his post-prandial cigar. Wirgman was building heavily upon a slender foundation of probabilities. This, the first of the circumstances he had relied upon, proved as he had reckoned. He emptied his glass, and, moving over to the office, he inquired was Miss Drummond in the house. He received an affirmative reply. She was in her sitting room. Truly the gods of chance were fighting on his side, for here was the second circumstance making good the combination he had hoped to find.

He gave his card to a waiter; then, treading closely upon the fellow's heels, he pushed into the sitting-room after him, and without waiting to be announced, for he had a shrewd suspicion that he might be denied.

As he entered he had a swift vision of Miss Drummond—a tall, fair, showy woman—standing with brows contracted in a frown, regarding his card. Her mother, he was glad to see, was absent.

Mr. Wirgman! she exclaimed, catching sight of him. This is an intrusion!

He bowed and smiled darkly.

I confess it. But I was afraid you might hesitate to see me; and as the communication I wish to make to you is of an urgent and most important character, I am confident that you will ultimately absolve me—thank me, perhaps—for having forced my way in.

I have nothing to say to you.

Possibly not. It was not with the hope of hearing you say anything that I came. But I have something to say to you that you may come to very bitterly regret not having heard if you deny me. I have come down from town and gone to the discomfort of putting up at that appalling hotel the Swan purposely to render you a service. Surely I deserve a hearing?

She was only a woman, and curiosity got the better of her.

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What have you to say? she inquired freezingly.

Wirgman glanced significantly at the interested waiter, whom she at once dismissed. When they were alone he unfolded his mission. He opened with an attempt to refute the slander she had heard against him and followed that up by most virulently maligning Pegram in his turn, dubbing him incidentally, a liar and a low person generally.

Miss Drummond checked his invective in full flow, and desired him to leave the room, whereupon, getting adroitly between her and the bell, he proceeded, with a readiness and elegance of diction that savoured almost of preparation, to tell her with a touching candour and honesty the opinion he had come to concerning herself. Much did he tell her that was scarcely true—but nevertheless fateful to hear—and much that was perfectly true—and therefore more hateful still. He spoke with smiling lips, which added venom to his utterance; and with a master hand he fanned the lady's spirit—an inflammable one at all times—into a very blaze of passion.

Mr. Wirgman, you shall very bitterly regret this insolence before you are a day older! she promised him. Mr. Pegram shall hear of it at once.

Still smiling, Wirgman moved towards the door, leaving her a clear way to the bell should she wish to avail herself of it—as he hoped she might.

He may hear of it, and welcome, said he, with studied offensiveness; but if he has the effrontery to address me now or at any time, I shall receive him with the most picturesque thrashing that was ever bestowed.

She looked him over with quiet scorn. It is like a brave man to tell a woman what he will do, is it not? she inquired with withering sarcasm as she crossed to the bell.

Madam, I do not tell you—I warn you. But send your preux chevalier to me by all means. You will save me the trouble of looking for him.

You shall not have long to wait, she answered, and pressed the button.

Wirgman bowed and withdrew, well satisfied.

On the stairs he met the waiter hastening to answer her bell. It will take her five minutes to tell 'Pegram her story, he reckoned; five minutes for Pegram to console her and regale her with the promises of all the fine things he will perform. So that in ten minutes I may expect that gentleman to ask for me at the Swan Hotel.

He smiled quietly as he stepped out into the street.

I may boast that I have cast my net with singular adroitness, and I am afraid you may find its toils exceedingly difficult to break through, my dear Pegram.

He stood for a moment on the steps of his hotel—a tall, conspicuous figure in his light drab overcoat and soft hat—and he leisurely lighted a cigarette. At that moment the landlord came out.

A fine night Mr. Wirgman, said he.

A very fine night, Wirgman agreed, adding idly: Hardly a night to waste indoors. I think I'll take a stroll as far as the Head. See you later.

He moved away up the steep road that leads to Wimbush Head, with the conviction that he would very shortly be followed. Twice he paused on the way, and drew attention to himself by exchanging a remark upon the night,

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once with a couple of fishermen, and once with a policeman.

He had conjectured aright concerning Harry Pegram. Within a few minutes of his departure that gentleman was excitedly asking for him at the Swan, to receive from the landlord the information that he was gone toward Wimbush Head. After him, hotfoot and blind with fury, came Pegram now. But for all his haste he did not overtake him until he reached the edge of the cliff, where he saw him outlined against the sky.

You blackguard! was the greeting he had for Wirgman, as he rushed at him with stick upraised to strike.

The other caught his wrist as the blow descended, and, holding him for an instant in a crushing grip, he twisted the cane from his hand and flung it over the cliff. They heard it rattle on the shingle below. Then Wirgman spoke.

Don't be a fool, Pegram, he said coldly, in his dominating way. Suppose for a moment that you had struck me then as you intended? You might have killed me!

You would have been rightly served.

Quite so, my dear fellow, quite so; but you would have hanged for it. And it can hardly be worth that to you.

Pegram cursed him and raved in an almost theatrical manner. But Wirgman's stronger mind gradually quelled his spirit, and soothed his anger into a mere dull, expressionless resentment.

Now go home, Pegram, he said in the end; and if, when you have slept on it, you still feel as you feel now, come to me in the morning. I have always found a deal of common sense blossoming in the morning sun. The night, I think, was made for poets, lovers, and other madmen whose ranting needs the cloak of darkness to disguise its sentimentality.

Pegram still lingered a little while, but in the end, with a sulky threat to return to the matter on the morrow in cold blood, he turned away and was gone. Wirgman continued to stand where he was until the other had been assimilated in the night and the sound of his steps had died away. Then with a short laugh of satisfaction, he sat down and carefully thought out the situation as it stood.

By comparison with what he had achieved, his next step was simple, for it depended upon his own unaided efforts and nowise upon such fortuitous circumstances as had help him hitherto.

Satisfied after some few minutes' deliberation, he rose again, and, flinging down his hat—in which were the initials R. W. —he slipped quietly, over the edge of the cliff, and cautiously undertook what even in broad daylight was a difficult descent. Carefully groping his way, he reached the little creek below, and stood at last upon the shingle which the receding tide had left moist. He saw something glimmering, and picked up Pegram's silver-mounted walking-stick. He almost chuckled as he weighed it in his hand.

Another link, he muttered.

Very deliberately he drew out his penknife, and inflicted never so slight a cut upon one of the fingers of his left hand. He smeared the blood upon the stick, and threw it down where it would lie beyond the reach of the tide. That done, he climbed over the rocks that bounded the creek, and struck but briskly along the shore towards Alwyn Bay, a watering-place some five miles along the coast.

At a quarter to eleven he was in Alwyn Bay railway-station, having rid himself of his conspicuous light overcoat on the way, and wearing a soft, black hat, of a light texture that had rendered it easily portable in the pocket of his discarded garment. He presented at the left-luggage office a ticket for a bag which earlier in the day he had left

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there in the name of Hodgson, and which bore the initials C. S. H.

He caught the eleven o'clock train to Liverpool, secured a carriage to himself, and by, means of a safety razor he rid himself of his rather luxurious black beard and moustachios. Such other characteristic changes did he effect that he would have had keen eyes indeed who could have recognised Roger Wirgman in the man who at half-past two in the morning entered the name of Cyril S. Hodgson in the register of the Adelphi Hotel at Liverpool.

Towards noon next day—it was Wednesday—he drove down to the Cunard offices, and booked his passage by the liner sailing that afternoon for New York. This done, he returned to lunch at his hotel well pleased with the general trend of events.

Firstly, his disappearance from the hotel at Port Wimbush would be noticed, and it would be remembered that he had left word that he was going to the Head. The landlord of the Swan would give evidence how Harry Pegram, in an unmistakable state of excitement, had asked for him ten minutes later, and upon being informed whither he was gone, had followed like a man with purpose set. The cliff would no doubt be visited, and his hat would be found. This would arouse the suspicions of the police, and the creek below would be inspected. There they would find Pegram's stick smeared with blood and this would give their suspicions a definite goal. They would make inquiries, and discover the feud that existed between Pegram and himself. They would also hear of the stormy interview he had had with Miss Drummond that same evening. Thus his disappearance and the evidence of foul play, accompanied by the positive evidence that Pegram had been the last man known to have been in his company, and yet the evidence of motive on the part of Pegram, would draw an uncommonly tight net about his rival.

Miss Drummond—by virtue of what had passed, and knowing the spirit in which Pegram had set out—would be the first to believe in his guilt. So that even were he to escape hanging—which Wirgman doubted in view of the singularly heavy combination of circumstantial evidence—his life must become that of an outcast and a pariah, and Miss Drummond he could never marry.

In all this there was a certain sweet satisfaction. Yet Wirgman reflected with still greater satisfaction upon the fact that he had proven that pet theory of his to be correct. Under very exceptional circumstances, and finding himself heavily handicapped, he had accomplished the destruction of a fellow-creature in a manner that could not possibly implicate him.

In the morning and noon editions Of the papers there was no report whatever of any tragedy at Wimbush. As he was going on board at four o'clock that afternoon, he bought a late edition of an evening paper, and with this he stepped briskly toward the gangway. Already he had one foot upon it when suddenly a cheery voice somewhere behind him hailed him with:

Hallo, Wirgman!

Utterly taken off his guard, he looked round. Then, suddenly recollecting himself and his changed identity, he sought to assume an air of naturalness, as though his turning as the name was called had been no more than a coincidence. But a burly individual in a serge suit confronted him, and laid a singularly significant and possessive hand upon his shoulder, murmuring into his ear:

Roger Wirgman, I arrest you!

He started back, and his thoughts worked with the rapidity of lightning. Had Pegram by any chance suspected his conspiracy, and forestalled the discovery of his disappearance?

In God's name, on what charge? he blurted out.

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On the charge of murdering Henry Stanhope Pegram last night on Wimbush Head.

A ghastly pallor spread upon his lean face.

Are you mad? he choked.

You had best not make a scene, murmured the detective, adding the formal reminder that anything he said would be taken as evidence against him.

Like a man in a dream, Wirgman allowed the detective and his companion to lead him away from the gathering crowd, and take him to the waiting-room, where they locked themselves up with him.

Our train is due out in a quarter of an hour, he heard one say to the other.

Then he remembered the paper in his grasp, and, thinking that there he might find the solution of this marvel, he opened it with trembling hands, and was confronted by the headlines:

SHOCKING MURDER AT WIMBUSH. Flight of the Murderer.

Swiftly his eyes devoured the bald, newspaper narrative that told how Harry Pegram's body had been discovered the night before on Wimbush Head, death being due to fracture of the skull. The dead man had been rifled of all money and valuables, and theft had at first been thought the motive of the crime. But the lady to whom Mr. Pegram was engaged had told the police a story—since corroborated—which gave rise to the theory that the theft was a blind rather than a motive. It was known that a deadly enmity existed between the deceased and Mr. Roger Wirgman, of Copmore Gardens, W. This latter gentleman had come down from town that day; and it was known that he and Pegram had been together on Wimbush Head that evening. A hat containing the initials R. W., and which was identified as belonging to Wirgman, was discovered a few hundred yards from the spot where the body, had been found, and, on the beach below, Pegram's stick, smeared with blood which the murderer had no doubt wrenched from his hand and used against him. He read how the police—by means beyond his understanding—had succeeded in tracking him to the left-luggage office at Alwyn Bay, and how they were on the spoor at the time of going to press. That powerful imagination which he had taken such pride in showed him now, as in a flash, how each item of evidence he had manufactured so sedulously to serve against Pegram would weigh a hundredfold more heavily against himself under the existing circumstances. In addition, there was his flight—that most damning incrimination—under an assumed name and in altered personality, to say nothing of the threats he had uttered against Pegram, and the purpose which he had announced was taking him to Port Wimbush.

He realised that he was indeed hoist with his own petard, doomed irrevocably, and for a crime that was none of his committing.

But even in that hour of supreme defeat and bitter agony he contended that his theory was still right. Here was a fortuitous circumstance which he could not have foreseen. The whole of his elaborate scheme had crumbled and collapsed because it had occurred to some vulgar thief to hit Harry Pegram over the head that he might rob him.