

1940 - Charles Reade

CHARLES READE (1940)

Since Charles Reade's books are published in cheap editions one can assume that he still has his following, but it is unusual to meet anyone who has voluntarily read him. In most people his name seems to evoke, at most, a vague memory of 'doing' *THE CLOISTER AND THE HEARTH* as a school holiday task. It is his bad luck to be remembered by this particular book, rather as Mark Twain, thanks to the films, is chiefly remembered by *A CONNECTICUT YANKEE IN KING ARTHUR'S COURT*. Reade wrote several dull books, and *THE CLOISTER AND THE HEARTH* is one of them. But he also wrote three novels which I personally would back to outlive the entire works of Meredith and George Eliot, besides some brilliant long-short stories such as *A JACK OF ALL TRADES* and *THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A THIEF*.

What is the attraction of Reade? At bottom it is the same charm as one finds in R. Austin Freeman's detective stories or Lieutenant-Commander Gould's collections of curiosities--the charm of useless knowledge. Reade was a man of what one might call penny-encyclopaedic learning. He possessed vast stocks of disconnected information which a lively narrative gift allowed him to cram into books which would at any rate pass as novels. If you have the sort of mind that takes a pleasure in dates, lists, catalogues, concrete details, descriptions of processes, junk-shop windows and back numbers of the *EXCHANGE AND MART*, the sort of mind that likes knowing exactly how a medieval catapult worked or just what objects a prison cell of the eighteen-forties contained, then you can hardly help enjoying Reade. He himself, of course, did not see his work in quite this light. He prided himself on his accuracy and compiled his books largely from newspaper cuttings, but the strange facts which he collected were subsidiary to what he would have regarded as his 'purpose'. For he was a social reformer in a fragmentary way, and made vigorous attacks on such diverse evils as blood-letting, the treadmill, private asylums, clerical celibacy and tight-lacing.

My own favourite has always been *FOUL PLAY*, which as it happens is not an attack on anything in particular. Like most nineteenth-century novels *FOUL PLAY* is too complicated to be summarized, but its central story is that of a young clergyman, Robert Penfold, who is unjustly convicted of forgery, is transported to Australia, absconds in disguise, and is wrecked on a desert island together with the heroine. Here, of course, Reade is in his element. Of all men who ever lived, he was the best fitted to write a desert-island story. Some desert-island stories, of course, are worse than others, but none is altogether bad when it sticks to the actual concrete details of the struggle to keep alive. A list of the objects in a shipwrecked man's possession is probably the surest winner in fiction, surer even than a trial scene. Nearly thirty years after reading the book I can still remember more or less exactly what things the three heroes of Ballantyne's *CORAL ISLAND* possessed between them. (A telescope, six yards of whipcord, a penknife, a brass ring and a piece of hoop iron.) Even a dismal book like *ROBINSON CRUSOE*, so unreadable as a whole that few people even know that the second part exists, becomes interesting when it describes Crusoe's efforts to make a table, glaze earthenware and grow a patch of wheat. Reade, however, was an expert on desert islands, or at any rate he was very well up in the geography textbooks of the time. Moreover he was the kind of man who would have been at home on a desert island himself. He would never, like Crusoe, have been stumped by such an easy problem as that of leavening bread and, unlike Ballantyne, he knew that civilized men cannot make fire by rubbing sticks together.

The hero of *FOUL PLAY*, like most of Reade's heroes, is a kind of superman. He is hero, saint, scholar, gentleman, athlete, pugilist,

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navigator, physiologist, botanist, blacksmith and carpenter all rolled into one, the sort of compendium of all the talents that Reade honestly imagined to be the normal product of an English university. Needless to say, it is only a month or two before this wonderful clergyman has got the desert island running like a West End hotel. Even before reaching the island, when the last survivors of the wrecked ship are dying of thirst in an open boat, he has shown his ingenuity by constructing a distilling apparatus with a jar, a hot-water bottle and a piece of tubing. But his best stroke of all is the way in which he contrives to leave the island. He himself, with a price on his head, would be glad enough to remain, but the heroine, Helen Rolleston, who has no idea that he is a convict, is naturally anxious to escape. She asks Robert to turn his 'great mind' to this problem. The first difficulty, of course, is to discover exactly where the island is. Luckily, however, Helen is still wearing her watch, which is still keeping Sydney time. By fixing a stick in the ground and watching its shadow Robert notes the exact moment of noon, after which it is a simple matter to work out the longitude--for naturally a man of his calibre would know the longitude of Sydney. It is equally natural that he can determine the latitude within a degree or two by the nature of the vegetation. But the next difficulty is to send a message to the outside world. After some thought Robert writes a series of messages on pieces of parchment made from seals' bladders, with ink obtained from cochineal insects. He has noticed that migrant birds often use the island as a stopping-place, and he fixes on ducks as the likeliest messengers, because every duck is liable to be shot sooner or later. By a stratagem often used in India he captures a number of ducks, ties a message to each of their legs and lets them go. Finally, of course, one of the ducks takes refuge on a ship, and the couple are rescued, but even then the story is barely half finished. There follow enormous ramifications, plots and counterplots, intrigues, triumphs and disasters, ending with the vindication of Robert, and wedding bells.

In any of Reade's three best books, FOUL PLAY, HARD CASH and IT IS NEVER TOO LATE TO MEND, it is not fair to say that the sole interest is in the technical detail. His power of descriptive writing, especially of describing violent action, is also very striking, and on a serial-story level he is a wonderful contriver of plots. Simply as a novelist it is impossible to take him seriously, because he has no sense whatever of character or of probability, but he himself had the advantage of believing in even the absurdest details of his own stories. He wrote of life as he saw it, and many Victorians saw it in the same way: that is, as a series of tremendous melodramas, with virtue triumphant every time. Of all the nineteenth-century novelists who have remained readable, he is perhaps the only one who is completely in tune with his own age. For all his unconventionality, his 'purpose', his eagerness to expose abuses, he never makes a fundamental criticism. Save for a few surface evils he sees nothing wrong in an acquisitive society, with its equation of money and virtue, its pious millionaires and erastian clergymen. Perhaps nothing gives one his measure better than the fact that in introducing Robert Penfold, at the beginning of FOUL PLAY, he mentions that he is a scholar and a cricketer and only thirdly and almost casually adds that he is a priest.

That is not to say that Reade's social conscience was not sound so far as it went, and in several minor ways he probably helped to educate public opinion. His attack on the prison system in IT IS NEVER TOO LATE TO MEND is relevant to this day, or was so till very recently, and in his medical theories he is said to have been a long way ahead of his time. What he lacked was any notion that the early railway age, with the special scheme of values appropriate to it, was not going to last for ever. This is a little surprising when one remembers that he was the brother of Winwood Reade. However hastily and unbalanced Winwood Reade's MARTYRDOM OF MAN may seem now, it is a book that shows an astonishing width of vision, and

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it is probably the unacknowledged grandparent of the 'outlines' so popular today. Charles Reade might have written an 'outline' of phrenology, cabinet-making or the habits of whales, but not of human history. He was simply a middle-class gentleman with a little more conscience than most, a scholar who happened to prefer popular science to the classics. Just for that reason he is one of the best 'escape' novelists we have. FOUL PLAY and HARD CASH would be good books to send to a soldier enduring the miseries of trench warfare, for instance. There are no problems in them, no genuine 'messages', merely the fascination of a gifted mind functioning within very narrow limits, and offering as complete a detachment from real life as a game of chess or a jigsaw puzzle.