

## CHAPTER ONE

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# The Dawning Age of Sensation

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**Sensation** (noun): 3 (a) An exciting experience; a strong emotion (e.g. of terror, hope, curiosity, etc.) aroused by some particular occurrence or situation. Also, in generalized use, the production of violent emotion as an aim in works of literature or art. (b) A condition of excited feeling produced in a community by some occurrence; a strong impression (e.g. of horror, admiration, surprise, etc.) produced in an audience or body of spectators, and manifested by their demeanour.

—*Oxford English Dictionary*

Some applications of the word, at least in England, were new in 1861; the social phenomenon they referred to was not. Sixty years earlier, William Wordsworth, in, of all places, the preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, deplored the “craving for extraordinary incident,” the “degrading outrageous stimulation” that affected his countrymen. The human desire to be shocked or thrilled, so long as whatever danger there was did not imminently affect the beholder, had always been a normal accompaniment to life in society, perhaps intensified in modern times, as Wordsworth hazarded, by “the accumulation of men in cities” and “the rapid communication of intelligence.” Sometimes this fascination with the extraordinary, the perilous, the violent erupted, briefly, into a fever, stirred by a single well-publicized or particularly novel event. But what distinguished the outburst in 1861 was that sensation itself, so to speak, was the sensation. It was a craze that lasted an entire decade, evoking a spate of worried commentaries in the intellectual periodicals and leaving a lasting mark on English fiction and popular drama. Although one

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cannot say with absolute certainty that a single event ignited the sensation mania of the 1860s, a pair of mysterious, murderous attacks in and near London in the summer of 1861, covered by the energetic press with almost unprecedented thoroughness and excitement, occurred in a gathering atmosphere for which they were providentially suited.

On Saturday, 20 July, just one week after the Murray and Vidil cases first broke in the London press, *Punch* ran a set of lighthearted verses that had obviously been written before those crimes immediately lent a more sinister connotation to the new vogue word:

Some would have it an age of Sensation,  
If the age one of Sense may not be—  
The word's not *Old England's* creation,  
But *New England's*, over the sea—  
Where all's in the high-pressure way,  
In life just as in locomotion,  
And where, though you're here for to-day,  
Where to-morrow you'll be, you've no notion.

In that land of fast life and fast laws—  
Laws not faster made than they're broken—  
Sensation's the spirit that draws  
To a head, whate'er's written or spoken.  
If a steamer blow up on the lakes,  
Or a statesman prove false to the nation,  
Its impression the circumstance makes  
In a paragraph headed "Sensation."

If a senator gouges a friend  
In the course of a lively debate;  
Or a pleasure-train comes to an end  
By trying to leap a lock-gate;  
If the great Hiram Dodge takes the stump,  
Or the President makes an oration,  
The event able Editors lump  
Under one standing head of "Sensation."

The last horrid murder down South,  
The last monster mile-panorama;

Last new sermon, or wash for the mouth,  
New acrobat, planet or drama;  
All—all is Sensation—so fast  
Piled up by this go-a-head nation,  
That by dint of Sensation at last,  
• There's nothing excites a "Sensation."

And now that across the Atlantic  
Worn threadbare "Sensation" we've seen,  
And the people that lately were frantic,  
Blush to think that such madmen they've been;  
Mr. Punch sees with pain and surprise,  
On the part of this common sense nation,  
Every here and there, on the rise,  
This pois'nous exotic "Sensation."

When an acrobat ventures his neck,  
In the feats of the flying trapeze,  
Or some nigger minstrel would deck  
His wool-wig with extra green bays;  
If a drama can boast of a run,  
By dint of a strong situation,  
The posters e'en now have begun  
To puff the thing up as "Sensation."

Mr. Punch 'gainst the word and the things  
It applies to, his protest would enter:  
For the vulgar excitement it brings  
May England ne'er prove fitting centre.  
If you've got something good, never doubt it  
By deeds will avouch its vocation;  
And be sure that not talking about it  
Is the true way to *make* a "Sensation."

The United States had no monopoly on railroad wrecks, steamship explosions, political melodrama, or daredevils: the stuff of sensation was as abundant in Britain as in America. To be sure, some of the most exciting events and persons in the English newspapers in the past two decades had been American importations. P. T. Barnum's winsome midget, General Tom Thumb, had been the adored star of the

nation's entertainment world in the 1840s, closely followed by George Catlin's troupe of Red Indians. The visit of Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a book that broke all best-seller records in Britain in 1851, took the form of a royal progress, marked by almost hysterical outpourings of adulation. "Monster mile-panoramas"—visual travelogues, the first being of a trip down the Mississippi, embodied in painted lengths of canvas that unrolled before a rapt audience—had been a popular and profitable novelty in English theaters.

What had, up to this point, distinguished the British sensations from their American counterparts was that the former had not yet been given that name, which had originated in an American press that, as Dickens and other travelers had noted, was uninhibited by any considerations of decorum or discretion. Their eyes steadily fixed on a readership that craved constant shocks and thrills, American newspapers were in the habit of "sensationalizing" any events that even faintly lent themselves to such treatment. The same was true of publicity, not only for theatrical and other forms of entertainment but for some kinds of consumer goods, largely nonessential items. Today's word to cover all of this would be simply "hype."

Although *Punch* deplored journalistic and commercial sensationalism as a Yankee abomination to be firmly barred from sedate, low-key Britain, there was a strong native strain of the same malady. Until recently, the daily press had been relatively sober, though thorough, in its coverage of domestic news; the Sunday papers, however, like the mass circulation ones in today's London, specialized in vividly written stories of violence and scandal, particularly such as occurred, or were said to occur, in the higher reaches of society. The generally radical politics of such sheets as *Reynolds' Weekly Newspaper* and *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper* harmonized well with news columns calculated to stir the cruder feelings of their working-class and lower-middle-class readers. The London daily press took on a more "popular" tone, with no scanting of quantity, when the abolition of the old newspaper tax in 1855 enabled the *Daily Telegraph* to become the first penny daily in British history. And as far as commercial publicity was concerned, London had its own brand of hype in the specially built wagons, some bearing hugely enlarged imitations of the products advertised (a seven-foot hat, for example) that clogged traffic in central London, and the corps of sandwich board men who likewise clogged the sidewalks in behalf of current entertainments and products.

Although it occupied only an incidental place in *Punch's* list of American sensations, murder was a staple of the English entertain-

ment diet. It had long been so, as the survival of countless broadsides, ballads, "last dying speeches," and catchpenny pamphlets for the delectation of the populace, attests, as does the popularity, on a higher social level, of the several nineteenth-century editions of the *Newgate Calendar*, a compendium of accounts of famous murder trials. Now, however, a formidably expanding daily press had acquired the capacity to spread news of the latest homicides to the remotest part of the British Isles within hours. The previous half-dozen years had witnessed a series of well-publicized murders that were distinguished from the ordinary run of contemporaneous homicides by their occurrence in middle-class families, a realm of Victorian society that had always been assumed to be exempt from such catastrophes by virtue of its much-vaunted "respectability." In 1856, after a trial to which the press gave the heaviest coverage to date, a Staffordshire physician named William Palmer was convicted of poisoning six people, including one of his illegitimate children, his mother-in-law, his alcoholic brother, and his wife. The next year, Madeleine Smith, the pretty and spirited daughter of a prosperous Edinburgh architect, stood trial for poisoning her French lover with hot chocolate laced with arsenic; she was neither convicted nor acquitted, the jury rendering the ambiguous Scottish verdict of "not proven." In 1859, another physician, Thomas Smethurst, was tried for allegedly murdering a woman to whom he was bigamously married. He was convicted, but, largely because the circumstantial and scientific case against him was palpably inadequate, he was granted a pardon. Scarcely had the furor over Smethurst subsided than Constance Kent, the sixteen-year-old daughter of a government factory inspector, was accused of killing her four-year-old step-brother at their home at Road, Wiltshire. Despite the strong case against her made by a Scotland Yard detective who had been called in after the local constabulary found themselves hopelessly out of their depth, the magistrates before whom she was arraigned set her free; upon which Inspector Whicher resigned from the force. The question of Constance's guilt or innocence continued to be debated as 1861 began. (She confessed to the deed five years later, but this did little to resolve the question even then. In 1868, Wilkie Collins would take advantage of the still lively memories of the Road mystery, as it was called, by using several of its features in *The Moonstone*.)

Three major news stories in the first half of 1861 qualified as sensations, although the word was not used as yet outside the theater. The first (21 February–8 March) was the trial, in Dublin, of *Thelwall v. Yelverton*. At first glance it was the most prosaic of actions, merely that

of a tradesman suing a man for £259 he owed for goods supplied to his wife; but the crucial question of law was whether they were in fact married. Theresa Longworth, daughter of a Manchester silk merchant and descendant of an ancient family, had become the object of the attentions of Major Yelverton, second son of Lord Avonmore, who pursued her all the way across Europe to the Crimea, where he was serving with the army and she was doing nursing service as a vowless Sister of Charity. Upon their return to England in 1857, with her consent they went through a form of do-it-yourself ("Scotch") marriage, whereby the private reading of the Anglican marriage service was sufficient to unite bride and groom. The lady, however, held out in addition for a Roman Catholic service, which was performed secretly some days later by a complaisant priest. But the following year, having left his Theresa, the major married another woman, the widow of an Edinburgh professor. Was this a bigamous marriage, or had either or both of the preceding ceremonies been without legal standing?

The dry point of law was eclipsed by the dramatic testimony, the star witness being the vivacious, intelligent, "ladylike" young woman who insisted on calling herself "Mrs. Yelverton." Day after day, newspaper readers were regaled with "the strange revelations of life incident to the Crimean campaign—the beauty, talent, and ill-regulated passions of the victim—the conventional moral maxims of the seducer and the phantasmagoric manner in which foreign convents, Sisters of Charity, Greek priests, priestless Scotch marriages, and Roman Catholic priests, came and went." Newspapers even sacrificed their leading articles (editorials) and advertising space to provide maximum coverage, which was strongly biased in favor of the imprudent but victimized woman. When the jury decided that both the Scotch and the Roman Catholic marriages were valid in law, "the whole audience rose and cheered tumultuously, the ladies waving their handkerchiefs, the gentlemen their hats, and the barristers their wigs."

The Yelverton case was rich in titillation. The major, for example, described spending one memorable afternoon with the temporary-duty Sister of Charity in a room at the Crimean hospital, where he "formed—not the 'design,' that was too strong a word, not the 'desire,' that was too strong a word, but the 'idea' of making her his mistress." But persons who preferred other kinds of vicarious excitement had to look elsewhere, and on the first of June they were obliged. On that day, the French acrobat Blondin made his first appearance at the Crystal Palace, the spacious entertainment center in the south Lon-

don suburb of Sydenham, which had been built with the materials salvaged from the iron-and-glass structure that housed the Great Exhibition in Hyde Park in 1851. Blondin, a former infant prodigy who had taken to the air at the age of four, was, in a sense, another American importation, for he had most recently been in the news as the man who the previous year had walked a tightrope across the 1,200-foot chasm of Niagara Falls. During his summer engagement at the Crystal Palace he worked on an inch-and-a-half-thick rope suspended 180 feet above the central transept. One highlight of his performance before sellout crowds was walking blindfolded with a sack over his head, then standing on his head and doing a backward somersault. In another act, he took a fifty-pound stove with him onto the rope, lighted a fire, cooked an omelette, and served himself with dishes on a tray, topping the aerial repast with a bottle of wine. Only a newly enlisted word like “sensation” was adequate to describe such a series of feats.

Three weeks after Blondin’s Crystal Palace debut, on Saturday, 22 June, a sprawling complex of wharves and warehouses between the Thames and Tooley Street, opposite the City, caught fire. The crowds that watched from London Bridge were as large as those that had witnessed from Westminster Bridge the destruction of the old Houses of Parliament in 1834. By the time the fire was finally brought under control—Dickens saw it still “blazing furiously” a week later—it had devastated a quarter-mile of Bermondsey waterfront and caused the then stupendous loss of £2 million in buildings and their contents. The chief of the London Fire Brigade, James Braidwood, was killed in action. It is curious to reflect that just three weeks later, on Friday, 12 July, Major Murray would have seen the still smoldering ruins as he changed from his train at London Bridge to the riverboat that would carry him to his fateful encounter with “Mr. Gray” in Hungerford Market.

Meanwhile, from mid-April onward, the outbreak of the American Civil War commanded much space in the press; but though the dispatches from Washington and Charleston were interesting enough, they could be read with placid detachment. President Lincoln’s call to preserve the Union and the blockade of Confederate ports, events occurring thousands of miles away, had no immediate pertinence either to the affairs of empire or to everyday life in Britain.

For readers whose appetites ran to murder above all, it was a lean six months. Late in August, a newspaper reviewing the furor over the Murray and Vidil cases commented that until they had commenced

their run in the press “public attention . . . had seemed palled into incurable lethargy by the Barmecide feast of less romantic atrocities that had been preceding them.” On 13 July the weekly *Spectator* reported that apart from a number of commonplace murders, “the week has been a dull one, distinguished socially only by the celebration of the Queen’s birthday, which occurs whenever Her Majesty pleases, and was this year fixed for 10th July, and by the meeting of the National Rifle Association at Wimbledon.” Had the *Spectator* but known it, the doldrums were suddenly at an end. Elsewhere in its pages was a brief mention of the Vidil case, picked up from the preceding day’s *Morning Post*. But nowhere did it mention the other stop-press affair that the morning papers piled alongside it at London newsagents’ were featuring in adjacent columns. Between them, in the weeks to come, the unfolding stories of the blood bath in a Northumberland Street office and the brutal assault of father upon son that had occurred earlier in a secluded Surrey lane would usher in what soon came to be called the Age of Sensation.