Victorian Treasures and Trash

6th Annual Victorian Popular Fiction Association Conference

Reading Pack

'Ghastly tarradiddles': Victorian Penny Dreadfuls

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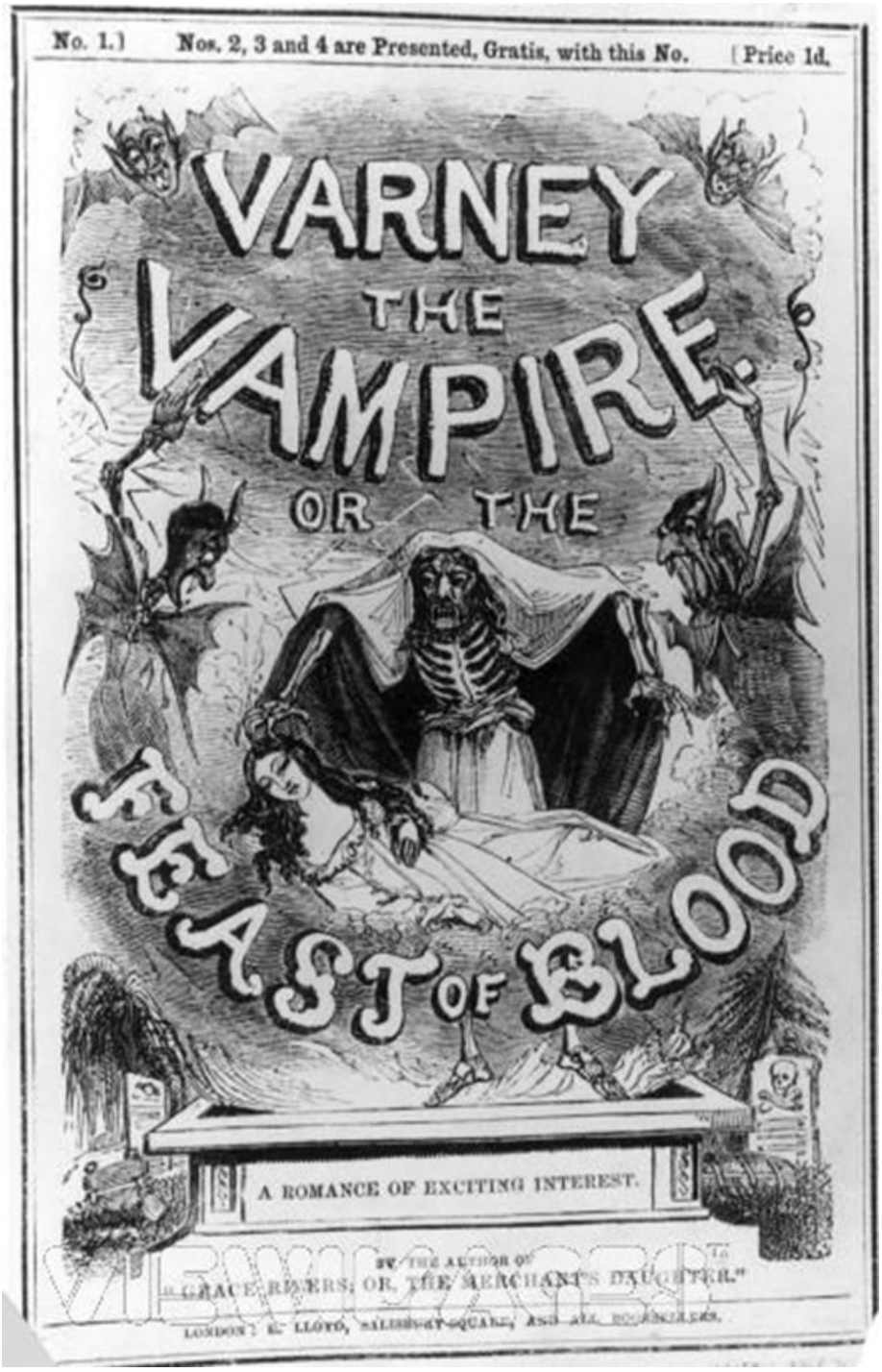
OED definition

penny dreadful *n.* and *adj.* now chiefly *hist.* *(a) n.* a cheaply published crime story written in a sensational or morbidly exciting style; a cheap publication containing such a story; *(b) adj.* of or relating to penny dreadfuls.



Economic History Review, XLVII, 3(1994), pp. 567–584

'Disseminating impure literature': the 'penny dreadful' publishing business since 1860[1]

By JOHN SPRINGHALL

The debate on Britain's late nineteenth-century entrepreneurial performance focused at first on the conventional staple and manufacturing industries, while services featured mainly in the context of financial institutions. A recent attempt to go beyond iron and steel, textiles, or banking, was an article in this journal which drew attention, through close analysis of a single London firm, to Britain's late Victorian and Edwardian ascendancy in the manufacture of hollow-cast toy soldiers.[2] A contemporaneous London service sector initiative, also directed primarily at children and adolescents, offers far more contradictory evidence concerning the 'new' econometric orthodoxy of the relative entrepreneurial achievement of late Victorian Britain.[3] The writing and publishing of 'penny dreadfuls', tasks sometimes performed by a single entrepreneur, is perhaps an unfamiliar economic endeavour; nevertheless, social historians have long taken an interest in its commercial 'representation' of popular tastes and values.[4] This article attempts a modest contribution to the entrepreneurial standards debate by throwing light on a variety of competing individuals and small firms trading, before the arrival of corporate publishing giants, in cheap serial fiction and periodicals for the young.

The market for printed material increased rapidly from the mid nineteenth century onwards, so that the publishing trade generally became a significant aspect of London's commercial development. Railway distribution, the penny post, and a growth of government spending, all helped to raise the scale of demand for print to an entirely new level. Periodical and newspaper publishing, in particular, saw a vast expansion in the second half of the century, owing to the enormous increase in circulations made possible by the rapid spread of literacy and the repeal of the so-called 'taxes on knowledge'. Removal of the advertisement duty in 1853 and, in particular, of the stamp duty on newspapers in 1855 made possible the mass-market penny press. When the paper excise duty was at last repealed, in 1861, slashing the cost of paper, over half of the country's printers could be found

[1] I am grateful to Wally Johnson and Terry O'Brien in the Department of Banking and Commerce of the University of Ulster, Coleraine, for advice on economics and to Patricia Anderson of Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, for help with sources on publishing history.

[2] Brown, 'Models in history'.

[3] McCloskey, *Economic maturity*; *idem*, *Econometric history*; McCloskey and Sandberg, 'From damnation to redemption'; Sandberg, 'The entrepreneur and technological change'.

[4] Turner, *Boys will be boys*; Dunae, 'Penny dreadfuls'; James, 'Tom Brown's imperialist sons'; [Carpenter], *Penny dreadfuls*; Anglo, *Penny dreadfuls*; Springhall, ' "A life story" '.

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in central London. The capital also led the way in a gradual steam-driven, technical revolution of the printing process; for example in 1856 Edward Lloyd (1815-90) became the first British publisher to install a Hoe rotary press, dramatically increasing the speed of printing his popular weekly newspaper. Simultaneously, both machine-manufactured paper and cheaper paper-making materials also helped to bring cheap fiction before a mass audience.[5]

In the 1860s, a decade of phenomenal cheapness for publishing, numerous small firms in or near Fleet Street began to redirect their sensation fiction sales towards the fast growing youth market, aggressively preceding by several years the major commercial publishers in the lucrative field of juvenile literature. Only the rewards anticipated in the late 1860s from John Forster's 1870 Education Act led firms such as Macmillan, Routledge, Nelson, and Longman to set up their own juvenile departments. By the early 1880s, over 900 new juvenile books were being issued annually and 15 secular boys' periodicals were competing simultaneously. In that juvenile publishing became a steady source of business for the flourishing book and magazine trade, the 'penny dreadful' made a little acknowledged contribution to the atomistic business world of the metropolitan economy.[6]

The adult audience for gothic and romantic instalment fiction, or the Edward Lloyd style 'penny blood', had begun to drift away from mid century, with the advent of cheap Sunday newspapers and weekly illustrated magazines now carrying serialized novels. 'Naturally people who read such romances have ceased to take an interest in them since they found that the penny weeklies gave them three or four times as much matter of the same character for the same price', according to critic Francis Hitchman. A form of entertainment recently abandoned by adults was to be appropriated, and in the process transmuted, by a younger age cohort. Thus the literary craft industry scrutinized here was set up in and around London's Fleet Street as a positive response to a new market opportunity, in an age of rising youth literacy, for manufacturing juvenile fiction. Produced in its late Victorian heyday by a bohemian, underpaid, yet highly productive workforce, the 'penny dreadful', broadly defined, became by far the most alluring and low-priced form of escapist reading available to ordinary youth, until the advent in the early 1890s of future newspaper magnate Alfred Harmsworth's price-cutting 'halfpenny dreadfuller'.[7]

The pejorative and habitually misleading 'dreadful' label was adopted into common discourse in England during the 1870s, constructed by middle-class journalists in order to amplify social anxiety or 'moral panic' over the latest commercial innovation directed at the young.[8] Accordingly, 'penny dreadful' is used here, within inverted commas, to represent the profusion of melodramatic and sensational, but generally harmless, serial novels,

[5] Hall, *Industries of London*, pp. 96-112; Michie, *City of London*; Sheppard, *London*, pp. 180-3; Catling, *My life's pilgrimage*, pp. 52-3.

[6] Barnes, *Free trade in books*, p. 99; Dunae, 'New Grub Street for boys', pp. 15-7.

[7] Hoggart, 'Edward Lloyd'; Hitchman, 'Penny press', p. 398; Springhall, ' "Healthy papers for manly boys" '.

[8] [Hotten], *Slang dictionary*, p. 250; Springhall, ' "A life story" ', pp. 226-7.

published in instalment, periodical, and complete novel form that, from the 1860s onwards, found a new following among the increasingly literate young. The accounting costs and profit margins of minor back street publishing concerns producing 'dreadfuls' merit the attention of anyone interested in the commercial potential of what most late Victorian and Edwardian juveniles actually chose to read, as opposed to the improving 'reward book' literature which adults in power over them felt that they *should* read. Our concern here, therefore, is with creative management rather than creative writing, with the business of publishing cheap juvenile fiction for the urban 'masses', rather than ersatz 'popular' fiction reaching a largely middlebrow audience.

19th Century British Newspapers Online
'Penny Dreadful': 531 results August 1870- June 1912

"OF writing many books there is no end, " says Mrs. BROWNING, at the commencement of Aurora Leigh, and truly the great poetess is right .
The Huddersfield Daily Chroni-

"OF writing many books there is no end," says Mrs. BROWNING, at the commencement of *Aurora Leigh*, and truly the great poetess is right. The youth of the present generation has no reason for complaint that he has not enough pabulum for his intellect to feed upon of all kinds, and indeed cynics have said that it is a pity a certain class of people are taught to read, for it makes them so discontented. The number of books, periodical publications, pamphlets, journals, &c., which issue from the press now-a-days is something astounding, and although it may seem rather strange for the journalist to complain, we are distinctly of opinion that there are too many books and papers published—that is to say we have quantity instead of quality, and there is a vast amount of writing which not only has very little sense in it, but it is positively deleterious. No doubt the press performs many a useful function, notably that referred to by CARLYLE when he says :—"In countries that can stand a Free Press—which many cannot, but which England, thanks to her good long training, still can, — it is evident the National Consult, or *real* Parliamentary Debate, goes on of itself, everywhere, continually. Is not the *Times* newspaper an open forum, open as never forum was before, where all mortals vent their opinion, state their grievance—all manner of grievances, from loss of your umbrella on a railway to loss of your honour and fortune by unjust sovereign persons?" The function of the press referred to is certainly a very valuable one, and the free discussion of all sorts of questions which goes on day by day in the columns of our newspapers is a great help to truth. No doubt a vast amount of rubbish is written, but even that has a certain value, as it serves as a warning to people who are always rushing into print.

Looking at the amount of literature with which the country is flooded, it must have seemed strange to many people that no more pains are taken to keep the stream pure. It is not as if we had not constant instances of the danger of pernicious writings. "Evil communications corrupt good manners," said our copybooks, with wearisome iteration, and there are no evil communications more dangerous than those made through evil books. For literature—we use the word as embracing all kinds of writing—has a powerful effect even upon half-educated people. It has of course to be highly spiced to suit their palates, and it is of a very offensive character to those who have had any education ; but still it has its effect, often a very evil one. As DE QUINCEY finely said, "From qualities, for instance, of childlike simplicity, or shy-profundity, or of inspired self-communion, the world does and must turn away its face towards grosser, bolder, more determined, or more intelligible expressions of character and intellect, and not otherwise in literature, nor at all less in literature than it does in the realities of life." What, then, can we expect when the youths of a certain class are nurtured upon that kind of literature of which we hear so often as having tempted lads to crime? Only the other day a couple of boys were convicted of attempting and very nearly carrying out a very bold and ingenious robbery; and it appears that the literature upon which their young minds had fed comprised the following delightful works :—"The Headless Pirate," "Lightening Dick," "The Young Detective" (rather an ominous title), "Margaret Catchpole, or the Female Horse-stealer, Footpad, Smuggler, Prison Breaker, and Murderess." No wonder, after the study of these delightful works, they engaged in the congenial occupation of stealing, and the punishment they are now suffering is only what most of their favourite heroes must have undergone at different periods of their eventful lives. When these young thieves come out of prison they will doubtless find consolation in the thought that Lightening Dick, or some other worthy mentioned in these works, was not always able to avoid the clutches of his natural enemies, the police ; and they will feel that they have received their "baptism of crime" by being in prison, which will confer a certain distinction upon them ever afterwards. It is true they may improve in prison, and we may charitably hope that they will do so; but there is very little chance for them if

prison, and we may charitably hope that they will do so; but there is very little chance for them if, when they emerge from durance, they go back to the perusal of these "penny dreadfuls," which were most likely the means of tempting them to crime.

We must remember further that the case to which we refer is no isolated one. Similar cases occur constantly where juvenile precocity in crime is distinctly traceable to similar books to those we have named. Surely it is time, then, that some stop was put to such publications, and that they were no longer allowed to be disseminated broadcast among the juvenile population of our towns and cities. Bad literature of another kind is promptly repressed, but nothing is done to put an end to the sale of books which inculcate thieving as one of the cardinal virtues. We may be met with the argument that a great number of very vicious and polluting novels are provided for the delectation of the upper and middle classes among us. No doubt such is the case, and it is very much to be regretted. But that fact does not make the publication of these aids to thieving any better. Every now and then, we know, a novel is brought out which as soon as may be after its publication is withdrawn; while there are also a good many in circulation which no decent person could read without a blush. Those we would, in the interest of pure literature, put a stop to, as well as to the "penny dreadfuls;" although it must be admitted that they do not do so much positive harm, because the class of people reading them are better educated than the unfortunate little gaol-birds who eagerly peruse their penn'orths of tempting iniquity. To them the bold robber has a thousand charms, even although they never develop into anything higher than the area sneak. They cannot be expected to know that the careers which they read of are impossible in these days. But they fully believe all they are told; and as the literature to which they devote their spare time incites directly to crime, they commence prigging accordingly, with the inevitable result. It is all very well to punish young thieves, but it would be well if we deprived them of the text-books which they use in their early training.

LITERATURE .
The Examiner (London, England), Saturday, November 14, 1874; Issue 3485

LOST FOR LOVE.

Lost for Love. By the Author of 'Lady Audley's Secret,' &c. In Three Volumes. Chatto and Windus.

The story told of the negro who was unable to count his master's pigs accurately because one of them was running about represents the difficulty a critic has in recognising Miss Braddon's last novel. There is sure to be some work from the teeming pen of this lady cantering through the pages of a single magazine, while, by an arrangement suggesting the conveniences of a gasometer, scores of provincial papers are illuminated with other romances by the same hand. Fecundity may be either a fault, a misfortune, or a gift, but at any rate it is a serviceable quality for the modern writer of fiction to possess. We have not at present before us a catalogue of Miss Braddon's contributions to light literature. An exhaustive list of the kind would be instructive. It is our impression, however, that before 'Lady Audley's Secret' was given to the world Miss Braddon had made her appearance in one of those weekly journals known as "Penny Dreadfuls." She was apprenticed to her present occupation in a rough though strict academy. She became, as it were, at the commencement of her career, acquainted with the coarser tricks of the trade. To compose a novel for a "Dreadful" requires a close acquaintance with what we may venture to term the mechanism of tragic interest. The action must be quick and fierce. Subscribers to a single number must if possible discover a murder for their money within the space they are admitted to traverse. The "Dreadful," like the ogre of the fable, must be largely fed upon blood. Other elements of crime and vice are also developed in the sort of periodical to which we refer. The leading narrative is crammed with villains who are assigned different walks of crime. It is not difficult to perceive how Miss Braddon would, after a while, naturally come out from the ruck of horror-mongers, whose powers of invention were comparatively limited and feeble. The customers of the respectable circulating libraries were languishing for something stronger and hotter than they could procure. Thoughtful or artistic works were not in their way. They wanted stimulating fiction, with the grip in it that the cabman enjoys in his dram. In truth, the broadsheet with the picture that the waiting-maid relished was what the mistress was best prepared to appreciate. 'Lady Audley' was on this account a triumphant success. It was nothing

more than a superior description of "Penny-Dreadful" romance, resembling it in general features, though not in detail. Miss Braddon found an audience upstairs at last. The circumstance was not cheering or encouraging to those who entertained hopeful views on the subject of art or *belles lettres*. With them, however, Miss Braddon had nothing to do: the critics raved, but 'Aurora Floyd' was in demand at the shops. We are not in a position to state how many stories of our authoress were cast in the mould of 'Lady Audley.' Their popularity within certain circles was unquestionable. The result, of course, was that there were soon many imitators who, according to the law of their existence, copied and intensely exaggerated only the faults of their leader. Indeed, it may not be just to render Miss Braddon responsible for half-a-dozen lady novelists whose erotic flights and vagaries were so offensive as to generate a healthy existing reaction against either the hoydens or the matrons, who were best fitted to herd with the unclean rabble at the heel of Comus. They have been put to silence, if not to shame, for some time. To give Miss Braddon her due, she is as wide as the Poles asunder from this tribe. Her books never contain the pestiferous poison and mischief to be found in the debilitating atmosphere of the passionate school, in which morality is only acknowledged in order to give a zest and a flavour to the violation of its precepts. And still the 'Early Braddons' dealt with topics fraught with peril to a writer. We do not assert that in her variations upon murder and bigamy Miss Braddon has exhibited an ethical cultivation of the most exalted and sensitive quality; but what we mean is, that her coarseness, where she is coarse, is obvious and not malignant or infectious, while the coarseness of the boorish sisterhood smacks of the paint, the tunic, and the tambourine of the glee-women who hung upon the skirts of camps to amuse the soldiers, and rob the dead, in the Middle Ages.

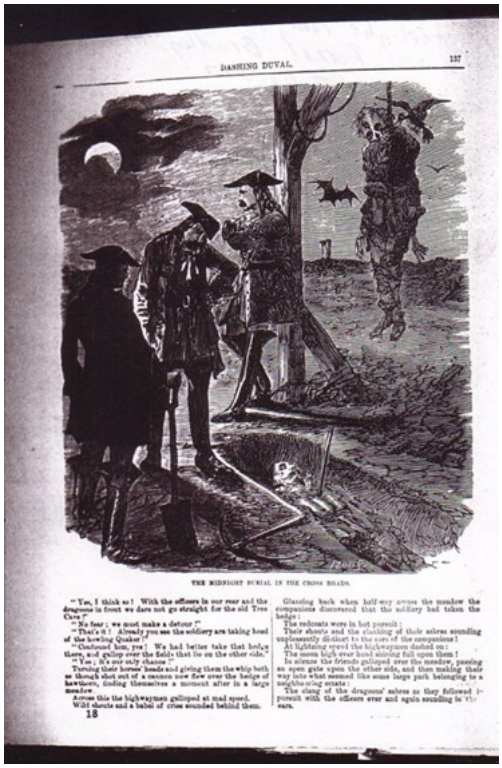
We must give Miss Braddon credit for versatility as well

LONDON, FRIDAY, APRIL 14 .
Daily News (London, England), Friday, April 14, 1871; Issue 7787.

Again, we are accustoming ourselves to take our novels without plots. The celebrated needy knife-grinder was not more innocent of something to tell than forty or fifty of our accepted fabulists who have demonstrated a capacity for finding a certain class of patrons. To give the sensation artists their due, they did not fail to exhibit a faculty for invention of an animated and even thrilling character. Their stage had plenty of business done upon it. The villain skulked about with lights half down, the heroine went mad in white satin, or committed bigamy or trigamy, in yellow hair, and an amount of lurid colouring was thrown on the scenes which did not disappoint people who read in order to have their feelings harrowed. Only the persons who recreate upon the weekly periodicals now come across a novel of incident. The "penny dread-fuls," as they have been termed, keep up, we believe, traditions and practices in fiction as old as the horrific mechanisms of Mrs. RADCLIFFE or "Monk" LEWIS. The caterers for our drawing-rooms, however, have only a single string to harp

Vol. II.—No. 15. THE DISCOVERY OF "JACK THE RIPPER'S" FIRST MURDER.

LONDON: G. PURKESS, 286, STRAND, W.C.



DASHING DUVAL. 137

THE MIDNIGHT BURIAL IN THE CROSS ROADS.

"Yes, I think so! With the officers in our rear and the dragoons in front we dare not go straight for the old Tree Cave."

"No fear; we must make a detour."

"That's it! Already you see the soldiery are taking heed of the howling Quaker!"

"Confound him, yes! We had better take that hedge there, and gallop over the fields that lie on the other side."

"Yes; it's our only chance."

Turning their horses' heads and giving them the whip both as though shot out of a cannon now flew over the hedge of hawthorn, finding themselves a moment after in a large meadow.

Across this the highwaymen galloped at mad speed. Wild shouts and a babel of cries sounded behind them.

Glancing back when half-way across the meadow the companions discovered that the soldiery had taken the hedge:

The redcoats were in hot pursuit.

Their shouts and the clashing of their sabres sounding unpleasantly distinct to the ears of the companions!

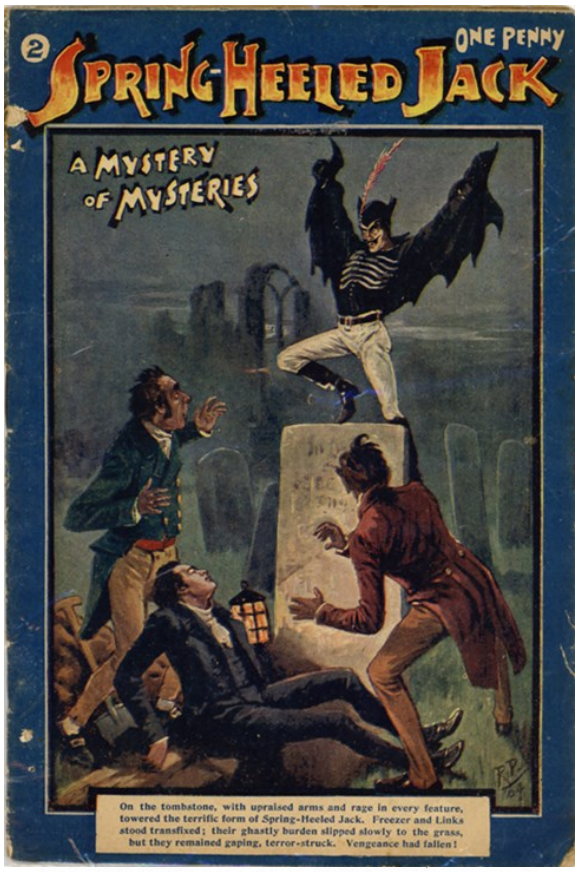
At lightning speed the highwaymen dashed on:

The moon high over head shining full upon them!

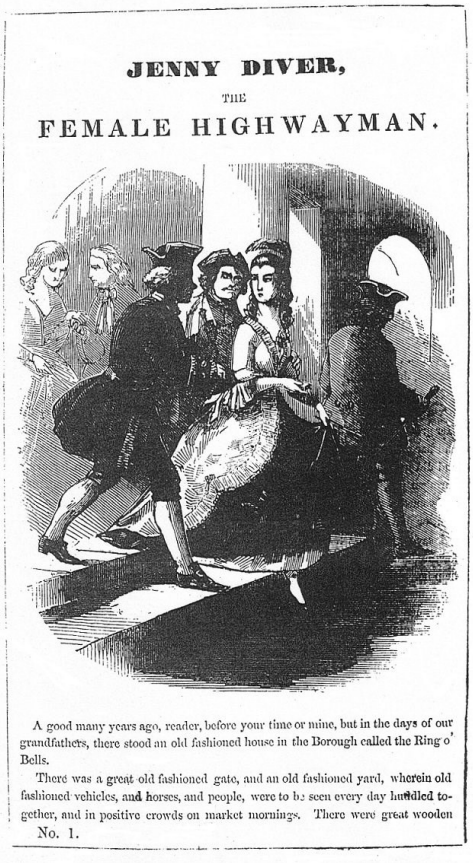
In silence the friends galloped over the meadow, passing an open gate upon the other side, and then making their way into what seemed like some large park belonging to a neighbouring estate:

The clang of the dragoons' sabres as they followed in pursuit with the officers ever and again sounding in their ears.

18


2
ONE PENNY
SPRING-HEELED JACK
A MYSTERY OF MYSTERIES
On the tombstone, with upraised arms and rage in every feature, towered the terrific form of Spring-Heeled Jack. Freezer and Links stood transfixed; their ghastly burden slipped slowly to the grass, but they remained gaping, terror-struck. Vengeance had fallen!

SWEENEY TODD,
THE
DEMON BARBER OF FLEET STREET.


JENNY DIVER,
THE
FEMALE HIGHWAYMAN.
A good many years ago, reader, before your time or mine, but in the days of our grandfathers, there stood an old fashioned house in the Borough called the Ring o' Bells.
There was a great old fashioned gate, and an old fashioned yard, wherein old fashioned vehicles, and horses, and people, were to be seen every day huddled together, and in positive crowds on market mornings. There were great wooden
No. 1.

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THE BOY'S STANDARD.
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SPRING HEELED JACK.
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Varney the Vampire: Chapter I.

-- "How graves give up their dead,
And how the night air hideous grows
With shrieks!"

MIDNIGHT. -- THE HAIL-STORM. -- THE DREADFUL VISITOR. -- THE VAMPYRE.

The solemn tones of an old cathedral clock have announced midnight -- the air is thick and heavy -- a strange, death like stillness pervades all nature. Like the ominous calm which precedes some more than usually terrific outbreak of the elements, they seem to have paused even in their ordinary fluctuations, to gather a terrific strength for the great effort. A faint peal of thunder now comes from far off. Like a signal gun for the battle of the winds to begin, it appeared to awaken them from their lethargy, and one awful, warring hurricane swept over a whole city, producing more devastation in the four or five minutes it lasted, than would a half century of ordinary phenomena.

It was as if some giant had blown upon some toy town, and scattered many of the buildings before the hot blast of his terrific breath; for as suddenly as that blast of wind had come did it cease, and all was as still and calm as before.

Sleepers awakened, and thought that what they had heard must be the confused chimera of a dream. They trembled and turned to sleep again.

All is still -- still as the very grave. Not a sound breaks the magic of repose. What is that -- a strange pattering noise, as of a million fairy feet? It is hail -- yes, a hail-storm has burst over the city. Leaves are dashed from the trees, mingled with small boughs; windows that lie most opposed to the direct fury of the pelting particles of ice are broken, and the rapt repose that before was so remarkable in its intensity, is exchanged for a noise which, in its accumulation, drowns every cry of surprise or consternation which here and there arose from persons who found their houses invaded by the storm.

Now and then, too, there would come a sudden gust of wind that in its strength, as it blew laterally, would, for a moment, hold millions of the hailstones suspended in mid air, but it was only to dash them with redoubled force in some new direction, where more mischief was to be done.

Oh, how the storm raged! Hail -- rain -- wind. It was, in very truth, an awful night.

* * * *

There was an antique chamber in an ancient house. Curious and quaint carvings adorn the walls, and the large chimneypiece is a curiosity of itself. The ceiling is low, and a large bay window, from roof to floor, looks to the west. The window is latticed, and filled with curiously painted glass and rich stained pieces, which send in a strange, yet beautiful light, when sun or moon shines into the apartment. There is but one portrait in that room, although the walls seem paneled for the express purpose of containing a series of pictures. That portrait is of a young man, with a pale face, a stately brow, and a strange expression about the eyes, which no one cared to look on twice.

There is a stately bed in that chamber, of carved walnut-wood is it made, rich in design and elaborate in execution; one of those works which owe their existence to the Elizabethan era. It is hung with heavy silken and damask furnishing; nodding feathers are at its corners -- covered with dust are they, and they lend a funereal aspect to the room. The floor is of polished oak.

God! how the hail dashes on the old bay window! Like an occasional discharge of mimic musketry, it comes clashing, beating, and cracking upon the small panes; but they resist it -- their small size saves them; the wind, the hail, the rain, expend their fury in vain.

The bed in that old chamber is occupied. A creature formed in all fashions of loveliness lies in a half sleep upon that ancient couch -- a girl young and beautiful as a spring morning. Her long hair has escaped from its confinement and streams over the blackened coverings of the bedstead; she has been restless in her sleep, for the clothing of the bed is in much confusion. One arm is over her head, the other hangs nearly off the side of the bed near to which she lies. A neck and bosom that would have formed a study for the rarest sculptor that ever Providence gave genius to, were half disclosed. She moaned slightly in her sleep, and once or twice the lips moved as if in prayer -- at least one might judge so, for the name of Him who suffered for all came once faintly from them.

She had endured much fatigue, and the storm dose not awaken her; but it can disturb the slumbers it does not possess the power to destroy entirely. The turmoil of the elements wakes the senses, although it cannot entirely break the repose they have lapsed into.

Oh, what a world of witchery was in that mouth, slightly parted, and exhibiting within the pearly teeth that glistened even in the faint light that came from that bay window. How sweetly the long silken eyelashes lay upon the cheek. Now she moves, and one shoulder is entirely visible -- whiter, fairer than the spotless clothing of the bed on which she lies, is the smooth skin of that fair creature, just budding into womanhood, and in that transition state which presents to us all the charms of the girl -- almost of the child, with the more matured beauty and gentleness of advancing years.

Was that lightning? Yes -- an awful, vivid, terrifying flash -- then a roaring peal of thunder, as if a thousand mountains were rolling one over the other in the blue vault of Heaven! Who sleeps now in that ancient city? Not one living soul. The dread trumpet of eternity could not more effectually have awakened any one.

The hail continues. The wind continues. The uproar of the elements seems at its height. Now she awakens -- that beautiful girl on the antique bed; she opens those eyes of celestial blue, and a faint cry of alarm bursts from her lips. At least it is a cry which, amid the noise and turmoil without, sounds but faint and weak. She sits upon the bed and presses her hands upon her eyes. Heavens! what a wild torrent of wind, and rain, and hail! The thunder likewise seems intent upon awakening sufficient echoes to last until the next flash of forked lightning should again produce the wild concussion of the air. She murmurs a prayer -- a prayer for those she loves best; the names of those dear to her gentle heart come from her lips; she weeps and prays; she thinks then of what devastation the storm must surely produce, and to the great God of Heaven she prays for all living things. Another flash -- a wild, blue, bewildering flash of lightning streams across that bay window, for an instant bringing out every colour in it with terrible distinctness. A shriek bursts from the lips of the young girl, and then, with eyes fixed upon that window, which, in another moment, is all darkness, and with such an expression of terror upon her face as it had never before known, she trembled, and the perspiration of intense fear stood upon her brow.

"What -- what was it?" she gasped; "real or delusion? Oh, God, what was it? A figure tall and gaunt, endeavouring from the outside to unclasp the window. I saw it. That flash of lightning revealed it to me. It stood the whole length of the window."

There was a lull of the wind. The hail was not falling so thickly -- moreover, it now fell, what there was of it, straight, and yet a strange clattering sound came upon the glass of that long window. It could not be a delusion -- she is awake, and she hears it. What can produce it? Another flash of lightning -- another shriek -- there could be now no delusion.

A tall figure is standing on the ledge immediately outside the long window. It is its finger-nails upon the glass that produces the sound so like the hail, now that the hail has ceased. Intense fear paralysed the limbs of the beautiful girl. That one shriek is all she can utter -- with hand clasped, a face of marble, a heart beating so wildly in her bosom, that each moment it seems as if it would break its confines, eyes distended and fixed upon the window, she waits, froze with horror. The pattering and clattering of the nails continue. No word is spoken, and now she fancies she can trace the darker form of that figure against the window, and she can see the long arms moving to and fro, feeling for some mode of entrance. What strange light is that which now gradually creeps up into the air? red and terrible -- brighter and brighter it grows. The lightning has set fire to a mill, and the reflection of the rapidly consuming building falls upon that long window. There can be no mistake. The figure is there, still feeling for an entrance, and clattering against the glass with its long nails, that appear as if the growth of many years had been untouched. She tries to scream again but a choking sensation comes over her, and she cannot. It is too dreadful -- she tries to move -- each limb seems weighted down by tons of lead -- she can but in a hoarse faint whisper cry, --

"Help -- help -- help -- help!"

And that one word she repeats like a person in a dream. The red glare of the fire continues. It throws up the tall gaunt figure in hideous relief against the long window. It shows, too, upon the one portrait that is in the chamber, and the portrait appears to fix its eyes upon the attempting intruder, while the flickering light from the fire makes it look fearfully lifelike. A small pane of glass is broken, and the form from without introduces a long gaunt hand, which seems utterly destitute of flesh. The fastening is removed, and one-half of the window, which opens like folding doors, is swung wide open upon its hinges.

And yet now she could not scream -- she could not move. "Help! -- help! -- help!" was all she could say. But, oh, that look of terror that sat upon her face, it was dreadful -- a look to haunt the memory for a life-time -- a look to obtrude itself upon the happiest moments, and turn them to bitterness.

The figure turns half round, and the light falls upon its face. It is perfectly white -- perfectly bloodless. The eyes look like polished tin; the lips are drawn back, and the principal feature next to those dreadful eyes is the teeth -- the fearful looking teeth -- projecting like those of some wild animal, hideously, glaringly white, and fang-like. It approaches the bed with a strange, gliding movement. It clashes together the long nails that literally appear to hang from the finger ends. No sound comes from its lips. Is she going mad -- that young and beautiful girl exposed to so much terror? she has drawn up all her limbs; she cannot even now say help. The power of articulation is gone, but the power of movement has returned to her; she can draw herself slowly along to the other side of the bed from that towards which the hideous appearance is coming.

But her eyes are fascinated. The glance of a serpent could not have produced a greater effect upon her than did the fixed gaze of those awful, metallic-looking eyes that were bent down on her face. Crouching down so that the gigantic height was lost, and the horrible, protruding white face was the most prominent object, came on the figure. What was it? -- what did it want there? -- what made it look so hideous -- so unlike an inhabitant of the earth, and yet be on it?

Now she has got to the verge of the bed, and the figure pauses. It seemed as if when it paused she lost the power to proceed. The clothing of the bed was now clutched in her hands with unconscious power. She drew her breath short and thick. Her bosom heaves, and her limbs tremble, yet she cannot withdraw her eyes from that marble-looking face. He holds her with his glittering eye.

The storm has ceased -- all is still. The winds are hushed; the church clock proclaims the hour of one: a hissing sound comes from the throat of the hideous being, and he raises his long, gaunt arms -- the lips move. He advances. The girl places one small foot on to the floor. She is unconsciously dragging the clothing with her. The door of the room is in that direction -- can she reach it? Has she power to walk? -- can she withdraw her eyes from the face of the intruder, and so break the hideous charm? God of Heaven! is it real, or some dream so like reality as to nearly overturn judgment forever?

The figure has paused again, and half on the bed and half out of it that young girl lies trembling. Her long hair streams across the entire width of the bed. As she has slowly moved along she has left it streaming across the pillows. The pause lasted about a minute -- oh, what an age of agony. That minute was, indeed, enough for madness to do its full work in.

With a sudden rush that could not be foreseen -- with a strange howling cry that was enough to awaken terror in every breast, the figure seized the long tresses of her hair, and twining them round his bony hands he held her to the bed. Then she screamed -- Heaven granted her then power to scream. Shriek followed shriek in rapid succession. The bed-clothes fell in a heap by the side of the bed -- she was dragged by her long silken hair completely on to it again. Her beautifully rounded limbs quivered with the agony of her soul. The glassy, horrible eyes of the figure ran over that angelic form with a hideous satisfaction -- horrible profanation. He drags her head to the bed's edge. He forces it back by the long hair still entwined in his grasp. With a plunge he seizes her neck in his fang-like teeth -- a gush of blood, and a hideous sucking noise follows. *The girl has swooned, and the vampyre is at his hideous repast!*

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Questions to think about:

How did the popularity of Penny Dreadfuls and other serial sensation literature change the way people understood crime? Is crime glorified / condemned / problematized / studied? What about the way society deals with deviance?

How did Penny Dreadfuls change the way people evaluated literature? Did people view the possibilities of literature differently because of the serial?

Can we see modern examples that developed from this kind of literature? How do we evaluate them? What function does 'popular' fiction serve in the Victorian period and now?

Penny Dreadfuls – pulp trash or literary treasure?

For questions regarding the reading group please contact the organisers:

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Optional Reading:

"In defence of Penny Dreadfuls" by Arthur K. Chesterton (1901) http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Defendant/A_Defence_of_Penny_Dreadfuls

"The Influence of the Penny Dreadful," The Saturday Review, 1888 http://search.proquest.com/britishperiodicals/docview/9492915/fulltext/38666FAAEF924B6FPQ/2?accountid=13828

Frankel, Oz, "Blue Books and the Victorian reader," *Victorian Studies,* Vol. 46, No. 2, Papers from the Inaugural Conference of the North American Victorian Studies Association (Winter, 2004) , pp. 308-318 http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/3830298?uid=3738032&uid=2134&uid=2&uid=70&uid=4&sid=21103551604807

Law, Graham, "'A Vile Way of Publishing': Gissing and Serials," *Victorian Review,* Vol. 33, No. 1 (Spring 2007), pp. 71-86: Read only the section "Transformation of the Late Victorian Serial Market" (p. 73-77) http://www.jstor.org.eresources.shef.ac.uk/stable/pdfplus/10.2307/27793626.pdf

Springhill, John, "'Pernicious Reading? 'The Penny Dreadful as Scapegoat for Late-Victorian Juvenile Crime," *Victorian Periodicals Review*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (Winter, 1994), pp. 326-349 http://www.jstor.org.eresources.shef.ac.uk/stable/pdfplus/10.2307/20082795.pdf?acceptTC=true&__redirected

*For a complete text of "Varney the Vampire":

http://web.archive.org/web/20110523204248/http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/PreVar1.html

*Complete text of original Sweeny Todd Penny Dreadful, *The String of Pearls*:

http://www.victorianlondon.org/mysteries/sweeney_todd-00.htm