

BURKE AND HARE IN LITERATURE

BY D. FRASER HARRIS



It cannot for a moment be maintained that great criminals have not had their place in literature, although some of them have obtained their dishonourable mention quite as much by reason of their exalted position as by the enormity of their crimes, of whom we might take Nero, Heliogabalus and the Borgia Pope, Alexander VI, as examples. But the Irishmen William Burke and William Hare, who were members of the very lowest stratum of society, have obtained their place in literature solely by reason of the novelty and enormity of the unparalleled wickedness of which they were guilty. They are certainly in literature, for they are referred to by Sir Walter Scott both in his letters and in the *Journal*, by John Gibson Lockhart, by Lord Cockburn, by Thomas de Quincey, by Robert Chambers, by Lord Macaulay, by George Eliot, by James Grant, the novelist, by Professor Saintsbury, by Robert Louis Stevenson, by Archbishop Trench, and by Mrs. Gaskell. The flood of contemporary doggerel verses for consumption on the street was considerable. The trial of Burke and his paramour, Helen Macdougall, is the subject of several treatises, one as early as 1829, the other as late as 1884. The murders were the subject of magazine articles as late as 1867. Dr. James Knox, whose dissecting-

rooms received all the victims, insisted on a commission being called together to investigate the sensational charges made against him; and within three years of the murders, Parliament passed an act for the licensing and supervising of duly qualified teachers of practical anatomy. As recently as April, 1917, in the first number of the first volume of "The Annals of Medical History", published in New York, there is an article by Dr. Charles W. Burr on "Burke and Hare and the Psychology of Murder". Dr. Fielding H. Garrison, in his exhaustive and valuable "History of Medicine", has a brief but accurate account of the murders, in which he discusses Knox's innocence.

William Burke, like Captain Boycott, his fellow-countryman, is one of the few men whose name has become an English verb, for "to burke" an inquiry is to stifle it—stifling or suffocating his intoxicated victims being the method adopted by this murderer to avoid leaving any trace of external violence on the body. In Sir Walter Scott's diary for March 7th, 1829, we read: "This extrication of my affairs, though only a Pisgah prospect, occupies my mind more than is fitting; but without some such hopes I must have felt like one of the victims of the wretch Burke, struggling against a smothering weight on my bosom, till Nature could endure it no longer." Burke's method apparently disturbed