

Commissioner Enright and M. Voltaire

By DJUNA BARNES.

SOME ONE who believes that all old masters should be mentioned in a whisper whispered to me: "Do you know who has the largest Voltairean library?" Of course I shook my head.

"Police Commissioner Enright," he said slowly.

Therefore, I traversed Centre street and mounted the steps of Police Headquarters, and sitting in the Commissioner's largest chair, awaited the moment when I could ask him about this somewhat strange passion for a man who is thought of only when one is about to die or when some one mentions religion.

As I sat there thinking of the Police Commissioner's functions and of the rogues' gallery and the whole dramatic side of life called crime there came to mind a fable—the fable of the man who had never known when to end a thing while it still held a little something of beauty.

When he reached the age of 20 he had discovered what was indeed the most beautiful thing — irrevocable finality. Three months later he had invented a button which if pressed at the right moment would end a situation as a knife cuts bread. He could with only a little pressure keep a situation at that point where it had reached perfection.

Never Learned to Press Button.

He was happy, saying: "Now it is in my power to have one really tragic and marvellous moment in my life undisturbed by those incidents that always come after."

The point of the fable is that he never learned when to press the button—died without learning it.

Yes, somehow I could not help thinking of this as I realized how many people die in a year because they do not know where to stop, because the murderer, for instance, does not know where to find his period.

Later I spoke of it to Commissioner Enright as he sat in his office in Police Headquarters and he, looking from under his head of white curls, answered:

"Yes, but then that is the most difficult thing in the world to do. It can only be done by those lower animals who know a higher life or, to be more accurate and less poetic, who find the climax the only necessity and after knowledge not merely an unknown quantity but one with which they could not possibly cope."

I answered: "Well, of course crime is not acknowledged as such among animals; with them it is instinct and very good instinct, though of course it always acts for self-preservation or the preservation of their young, it never reaches into the realm of the fraternal."

"Civilization always brings its troubles and added good always accompanies added evil," Mr. Enright rejoined.

"There is good and evil again," I said. "But what is it?"

"One only needs to define good to define evil also by comparison."

"Anyway, this is plunging in much too deep to start with," I said. "Let us talk about literature."

"Well, now, there's Voltaire."

"I have heard about your great interest in Voltaire—tell me the secret."

"Voltaire was the man who wrote the first detective story," he answered and lowered his lids awaiting my surprise.

"Really?"

Refers to First Detective Story.

He went on: "Do you remember reading the story of 'Zadig,' or rather a set of sketches concerning the life of Zadig, a Babylonian who when disappointed in his love for Semira married Azora? In the end she attempted to cut his nose off for the sake of an admirer, thus driving Zadig to the conclusion that life on the ordinary scale was not right and that thereafter philosophy and loneliness were profitable alone."

"Well, one day as he was reclining against a tree a cunch of the royal house and some officers ran by calling out, 'Hast thou seen the Queen's dog?'"

"And Zadig answered, 'It is a she dog who has just delivered herself of young; she has long ears and runs a little lame.'"

"The same thing occurred about one of the Queen's horses, and Zadig made answer:

"It is the fleetest horse in the King's stable. He is five feet high, with very small hoofs and a tail three feet and a half in length; the studs on his bits are gold of twenty-three carats and his shoes are of silver of eleven pennyweights."

New Police Head Ardent Student of Classics and Expresses Ideas of Past and Present Literature



Police Commissioner Enright.

"He had a lot of trouble proving that he had gathered this information not from having seen the animals but through deduction."

"Finally he explained thus:

"I observed traces in the sand of an animal and knew them to be those of a little dog. The light and long furrows impressed on the little eminences of sand between the marks of the paws made by the beast gave proof that it was a dog that had but lately whelped, and the other marks on the outside of the paws were plainly those left by the dragging of long ears. I knew that she was lame because one foot left a lighter impress in the sand."

"It was the same with the horse. The dust on the trees of a road seven feet wide was a little brushed off at a distance of three feet and a half from the middle of the road, proving his tail, which had whisked off the dust, to be three and a half feet long. I observed under the trees that formed an arbor five feet high that the leaves of the branches were newly fallen; that therefore the horse must have touched them. As to the bit it must be of gold of twenty-three carats for he had rubbed its bosses against a stone which I knew to be a touchstone and which I have tried; the same of his shoes also."

"Thus we see the whole essence of the detective story of the future. Poe, Doyle, Anna Katherine Green, all of them are probably indebted to this one story of Voltaire's."

"Do you consider detective stories of any value to the detective in real life?"

"No use at all. They are only good as tales of amusement, of suspense and ingenuity. A real detective, however, does not go about it in that way."

I looked out of the window at the long, gray heights of the city and I thought of the 43,000 pictures in the rogues' gallery downstairs and I looked back at the Commissioner, who was turning over the leaves of a book.

"They say," he continued, "that we have no art in America. No paintings of value, no poetry of worth. Well, it is true that I love my Balzac and my Hugo, but we have our Richard Harding Davis and our poets are many."

"But you don't mean that seriously do you? Surely you wouldn't put R. H. Davis on a footing with Balzac?"

"Yes, I would; because Davis wrote in English and was an American and might be seen in any of our clubs the people do not value him. Yet I say without hesitation that some of the stories written by him have not been very far surpassed."

"Why should we be the only nation to disregard our art?"

"Because we have learned to value money more. It is a terrible and a shocking thing, but so it is. Until that time comes when we will turn around saying, 'There goes a poet,' instead of 'There is the richest man in New York,' our artists will not be encouraged, and without encouragement of some sort no art attains to its greatest and best."

"Instead of endowing homes for the feeble minded, why doesn't some one secure these of great minds a living? The feeble minded get a home and care and a burial—those of great mind sleep in the gutter and are the gracious unknown dead that line the earth in potter's field."

"For instance, let us think of the matter in a really large way. Take the criminal. What do we do with him? Kill him. What an absurd waste of material, what a scandalous treachery to the potential good in all flesh, what a monstrous blunder!"

"When you stop a heart and a life, strike out forever the little breathing that is in a man, you have by that much crippled society. There are surely things that this same man might have done. I say put him to work, do not kill him and thus end his good. Make him support those he has wronged, let him help sustain the poet and the painter, let him be of value to the State."

As I have said before, the Commissioner has very nice white and curling hair; here he stroked it and smiled.

"Let us talk of less gloomy things," he said.

"Can a Police Commissioner think of less gloomy things?"

"I should go mad if I couldn't."

"Yet it is not so very melancholy, Mr. Enright, for some of the nicest people I know are either potential or real criminals."

He shrugged his shoulders. "I believe in the soul."

"And—"

"Well, if you believe in the soul you know that this life is only a preparation for a next."

"To what avail," asked I, "if we go through this, so unrelated each to the other, on such different levels, a chasm apart?"

"Wouldn't it be deadly if we were all on an equal footing?"

"I'm not so sure."

"I am."

"We will both have to be convinced," I laughed.

"You will have to be," he answered.

"How shall I begin?"

"Go to the stars."

"You believe in the stars?"

"I do."

"That they make the person born under them, that they rule?"

"Emphatically."

"Are you serious?"

"I have never been more serious in my life."

"But this is incredible."

"Nothing is incredible. I don't know, no one knows—but I have a strong suspicion that the stars make us what we are."

"And the criminal is he who has been born under a star ordaining that he should be a murderer?"

"I think so."

"In that case all people born under that star would be criminal and alike."

Modified by Circumstances.

"No two are born under the same star—or if they are I don't doubt but that they are very similar, that is so far as their surroundings permit. Each is modified according to his birthplace and circumstances."

"But this is quite frightful, this puts us beyond the reach of ourselves. If we are good it is the stars; if we are bad they also are to blame."

"Were you under the delusion that good and bad were self-willed?"

"To some extent—yes, I even know it."

He shook his head. "You don't know it, you think you do. I'm not saying that a person cannot do a great deal himself toward becoming either good or evil, but I am saying that the stars have a great deal to do with the initial impulse."

"This makes me quite miserable. I shall have to have my palm read or turn to tea leaves or the cards."

"Those things I don't believe in."

"Why not, if the stars—"

"The stars are a matter of God, the cards a matter of crooked sharpers trying to make a living—bits of pasteboard conceived and executed by a human brain."

"And in the next world that you speak of, will we be ruled by stars?"

"No one knows."

"And would you be willing to live through successive generations?"

"I would be willing not only to live through successive generations, but to go right back over those that I have known."

Few Wish to Live Again.

"You are the first person—or is it the second?—who said he would live his life over again with pleasure."

"Why not? I think it is a wonderful world. I have had a good time and I have suffered. I am willing to suffer again, and I would like to go through all the moments of joy that have been mine—I am not afraid."

"You must, indeed, have been very happy."

"Not so happy—well, yes, very, very happy at times. At others—"

He again shrugged his shoulders. "But you who are so near to suffering, to the down and sad side of life, how can you—"

"That may perhaps be why. I can see something greater coming out of it. Such things cannot be for nothing. There must be some purpose behind it all, some divine power that will set the wrong right."

"But in the meantime?"

"In the meantime, we must do the best we can for those who come nearest us—for me it is crime, for you—"

"Ah, and for me also, perhaps."

He looked at me, puzzled.

"You see," I continued, "I have a lot of friends, as I before said, who are either potential criminals or criminals in action—and these somehow one likes—why?"

"Why—well, you see, we all love the specialist," he answered, and broke out into laughter.