

Terror of Britain's Murderers Is a Doctor, Not a Detective

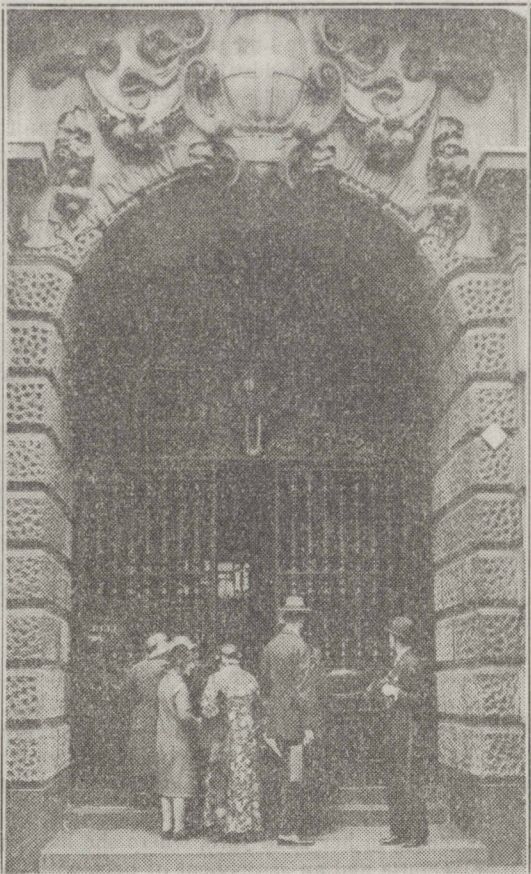
By John Steele

London

SPILSBURY, Sir Bernard Henry, Kt., ct. 1923; Hon. Pathologist Home Office. Lecturer in Special Pathology St. Bartholomew's Hospital; Fellow Royal Society of Medicine. Educated Oxford M.A., B.M., B.Ch., St. Mary's Hospital Address 31, Marlborough Hill, St. John's Wood, N.W. 8. Tel. Hampstead 2695

NOT very exciting, is it? Reads just like one more entry in "Who's Who," and that's what it is, but it covers one of the most remarkable personalities in modern England. Sir Bernard Spilsbury is the terror of murderers and is said to be the one man of whom Britain's greatest criminal barristers are afraid. With Spilsbury against them their case is as good as lost, and perhaps to Spilsbury more than any other man is due the fact that few murderers in England escape punishment.

He sometimes has been called Sherlock Holmes in real life, but Spilsbury himself would be the first to deny that. The Sherlock Holmes of fiction was a superdetective who undertook all sorts of investigation and built up his cases by deductive methods which modern police scorn. Spilsbury is not a detective. He has nothing to do with the pursuit and capture of criminals. He is simply about the best pathologist in Britain, and given the smallest possible data about a body, he can



(Photo Associated Press of Great Britain, Ltd.)
Main entrance to Old Bailey, London's central criminal court.



'Sir Bernard Spilsbury . . . terror of murderers . . . looks less than fifty . . . with a charming smile which comes rarely, but, when it does, lights up his face with a spirit of kindness.'



(Photo Associated Press of Great Britain, Ltd.)
' . . . chief interests are art and music . . . ' (Sir Bernard in topper.)

identified as the husband in two or three of them and arrested. His defense was that the women had died from apoplexy or some such cause, and his lawyer argued that Smith, who was a small, lightly built man, could not possibly have held these women, some of whom were strong and healthy, under water until they drowned. Spilsbury staged a demonstration. He got a nurse from his hospital, told her to put on a bathing suit and get in a bath. Then suddenly he grabbed her heels and pulled. The girl slid down in the bath and would have drowned helplessly had not Spilsbury hauled her out.

Always on Crown's Side

No professional man figures more in the English newspapers than Spilsbury. He is in every big case where the services of a pathologist are needed, and always on the side of the crown. This has given rise to the idea that he is a public official, but the reason for it is that the crown, wanting the best talent it can get, always hires him first. Under the English system even the lawyers for the prosecution are engaged for each trial, and a famous criminal counsel may be prosecuting today and defending tomorrow in the same court. The fact that Spilsbury is always on the side of the crown has also given rise to stories that his opinions are for sale to the highest bidder. They are not. If he does not believe in a man's guilt he will work as hard to prove his innocence as to hang a guilty man; or, rather, the question of guilt or innocence does not enter into his consciousness. His job is to find facts and lay them before a jury. It is for the jury to decide what they mean.

What is held by many lawyers to be true, however, is that Spilsbury on account of his reputation weighs too heavily with juries. The average jurymen is overawed and disposed to accept what he says as gospel, ignoring evidence on the other side by men likewise well qualified.

Spilsbury's laboratory in Gray's Inn road, a semi-manufacturing, semi-slum district in central London, is a place of romance for the crime writers, but in reality it is a drab workshop. A few tanks with running water, rows of bottles on the shelves, some containing chemicals used in his investigations and some containing "material" under investigation, for even where he does not make the autopsies himself, organs of persons whose death is suspected to be due to poison are sent to him for investigation from all over England. There in his white smock he works when he is not in court or making autopsies or lecturing, and no one entering would take the place for a home of mysteries. It looks more like the laboratory of an experimental chemist, which is what in fact it is. His favorite work, however, is teaching.

When he is not at work he lives in a pleasant house at Hampstead, in North London, with his daughter, Evelyn, who would like to go to Hollywood. He gives intimate little dinner parties at which he never talks shop. His chief interests are art and music, and he has no use for politics, which he despises as an inexact science. Even in private life his passion is for accuracy and minute observation, and he simply doesn't understand people who talk of "hunches" and intuition. "A dispassionate intelligence" describes him best.



(Central Press photo.)
' . . . Crippen was convicted and hanged.' (Dr. Hawley H. Crippen [muffled figure] being landed in England after his flight to Canada with his girl secretary and subsequent arrest.)



(Photo Associated Press of Great Britain, Ltd.)
' . . . Spilsbury comes along with his little black bag . . . '

and unpaid post of honorary pathologist. All that this post means is that he is called in from time to time as a scientific adviser to express an opinion on new regulations or perhaps on proposed legislation.

Real Age Is a Secret

Spilsbury is now nearing sixty. No one knows his real age, and he is said to be rather sensitive about it. He looks less than fifty. Picture a tall, grave man with a charming smile which comes rarely but, when it does, lights up his face with a spirit of kindness. His voice is low and soft and he speaks slowly and precisely. He weighs every word even in private conversation as he does when giving evidence in court. He is always positive. It is said that he believes he always has been right even in the few cases in which juries have refused to take his view. He is impatient of other pathologists who, he declares, cannot see what is plainly in sight for him. He is a great teacher and one of the most popular professors at "Bart's" great medical school. When the word goes around the hospital that "Spils" is demonstrating, the students flock into his room and hang on his every word and action. With them, as with everyone else, he stresses the importance of observation of small things and of logical deduction from what they observe. One of the "Spils" stories told in the hospital is of a demonstration of postmortem work. He was brought into the theater, where there was the corpse of a woman, and asked to make a post-mortem for the benefit of a postgraduate class of doctors, many of whom were themselves experienced pathologists. He talked as he worked, explaining various deductions as he went along. Then he made a particular cut and remarked, "And she was a poor woman." At this one of his medical hearers interrupted, saying he had been able to follow his line of thought most of the way up till then, but he just couldn't believe that Spilsbury wasn't faking when he tried to tell the woman's position in life. "Why, you damned fool," said Spilsbury, "look at that appendix. It's perfectly healthy. She has never paid you or anyone else to cure a stomach ache."

build up with uncanny accuracy what the body looked like in life and how it died. He is not interested in crime as such. He is simply a scientist to whom a problem has been sent and who solves it to the best of his ability. It is up to the police and prosecuting authorities then to make use of the information Spilsbury has placed in their hands.

Afraid of Spilsbury

"A dispassionate intelligence" was the description given of him once by the late Sir Edward Marshall Hall, who in his day was England's greatest criminal lawyer and who measured wits with him many times while defending accused murderers, and had him on his side when he appeared for the crown. Hall is also said to have remarked that the one man in the witness box that he was afraid of was Spilsbury.

Now, who is this terror of evildoers and sup-

porter of the law? First of all, he holds no official position. He is a doctor in private practice, specializing in pathology, and a lecturer on that subject at St. Bartholomew's Hospital Medical school. But he is engaged as expert for the crown in almost every murder case in which poison or pathological mystery enters, and there is hardly a day in which he does not appear three or four times in one or other of London's half dozen coroner's courts to give evidence after having made an autopsy. It should be explained that in England there is no full-time system of coroners' physicians, as in the United States. When a sudden death occurs, the coroner, who is himself either a lawyer or a doctor, or sometimes both, is notified. If it is a simple, straightforward case in which the cause of death is evident and there is no reason to suspect foul play, the coroner may issue a burial permit and dispense with an inquest. If, however, there is any doubt about the cause of death, or any reason to suspect that something is wrong, the coroner orders an autopsy and holds an inquest. He may engage a qualified medical man to make the autopsy, but in nine cases out of ten in London he sends for Spilsbury, who comes along with his little black bag, makes his investigation, and at the inquest gives evidence of what he has found. For this—that is, making an autopsy and giving evidence at the inquest—if the case is a simple one not taking an unusual amount of time, he receives the statutory fee of three guineas—about fifteen dollars; and, as he sometimes does as many as six of these cases in a day, this part of his practice adds comfortably to his income. If, however, the investigation is long and difficult, involving much scientific work and many appearances in court, he is paid accordingly, usually by agreement with the home office, to which he holds the complimentary



' . . . Norman Thorne, who was hanged for the murder of his sweetheart.' (Norman Thorne and Elsie Cameron, murderer and victim.)



(Central Press photo.)
Old Bailey, in which London's murderers are tried and in which evidence supplied by Sir Bernard Spilsbury, Britain's foremost pathologist, has sent more than a few to the gallows.