

NOR IRON BARS A CAGE

ERNEST SUTHERLAND BATES

EVERYONE knows *The Mysterious Stranger* of Mark Twain; but how many are aware that another fascinating book with the same title appeared in America almost a hundred years earlier? Days were leisurely in 1816, and words less costly: the full title runs "The Mysterious Stranger; or Memoirs of Henry More Smith; alias Henry Frederick Moon; alias William Newman: who is now confined in Simsbury Mines, in Connecticut, for the crime of burglary. Containing an account of his extraordinary conduct during his confinement in the gaol of King's Cy., Province of New Brunswick, where he was under sentence of death: With a statement of his succeeding conduct before and since his confinement in Newgate. By Walter Bates, High Sheriff of King's County, New Brunswick."

The author, though apparently inferior in intelligence to his great protagonist, as will shortly be seen, was nevertheless a person not devoid of interesting experiences altogether apart from Henry More Smith, alias Henry Moon, alias William Newman. His early years would furnish a useful theme for meditation to those who believe that the American Revolution, unlike others, was essentially a rose-water affair. He was born in Stamford, Connecticut, of an Anglican and Tory family. At the outbreak of hostilities with the British, the Bateses were immediately and without evidence suspected of being in communication with the enemy. Walter, a lad of fifteen, was incontinently seized and taken to the Guard House. What followed may be told in his own words. "I was . . . threatened with sundry deaths if I did not confess what I knew not of . . . At length . . . I was taken out by an armed mob, conveyed through the field gate one mile from the town to back Creek; then having been stripped, my body was exposed to the mosquitoes, my hands and feet being confined to a tree near the Salt Marsh, in which situation for two hours time every drop of blood would be drawn from my body . . . They left me, and the Guard came to me and said they were ordered to give me, if I did not confess, one hundred stripes, and if that did not kill me I would be sentenced to be hanged. Twenty stripes was then executed with severity, after which they sent me again to the Guard House." On the

third day he was released, but a little later was obliged to flee for his life into the Berkshires. Finally, in 1783 he made up the even hundred of New England Loyalists who with their families sailed on the "Union" to Nova Scotia where the king had allotted two hundred acres of land to each. In the new settlement of Kingston, Bates was the first man to be married. He became a personage of some note and for years held the position of sheriff. At his death he left manuscripts, published in 1889 under the title *Kingston and the Loyalists of 1783*, a valuable source-book on the history of the period.

The account of his surprising relations with "the Mysterious Stranger" was brought out immediately after the marvellous events recorded, and while there were still plenty of witnesses to contradict his statements, if untrue. The publisher professed to have corroborative evidence. It is hardly credible that Bates would have imperilled his position as a sober reliable member of society by wholesale fabrication, or even by much exaggeration of facts well-known in his own community. The book itself, while it reveals an intuitive sense of the value of suspense, is written with a seeming artlessness and profusion of details such that it compels conviction—unsafe as such a subjective conviction may be. At any rate, one is left with a dilemma—either Henry More Smith was one of the most remarkable criminals on record, or Walter Bates, as a writer of fiction, has a place in the class with Defoe. The reader may come to his own conclusion from the following summary of Bates's narrative.

* * * * *

It seems that on August second, 1814, the sheriff was called to take into custody a young man charged with horse-stealing, at that time a capital offence. He had been pursued two hundred and fifty miles by the victim, overtaken, and brought back with some hard usage on the way. He was a slender good-looking young fellow of quiet manners who gave his name as Henry More Smith, his age as twenty-two, and later alleged that he was an Englishman and a Cambridge graduate and that he had but recently come to America; the charge against him, he said, must be due to a mistake, as he had obtained the horse from a stranger who, he supposed, must have stolen it from the owner. As he was totally destitute, he requested permission to send for his portmanteau in order that he might sell some of his effects. When this was opened it was found to contain "two or three genteel coats, with vests and pantaloons, of the first cloth and fashion, with silk stockings and gloves, a superfine overcoat, of the modern fashion, faced with black silk",

along with numerous books, all of which induced the bystanders to believe that he "had been fitted out by careful parents, and was possibly innocent of the charge."

From the first, Smith had complained of blows received on the road, and "showed the bruised place in his side, which appeared black, swelled and sore." This seemed to grow worse instead of better; Smith remained cheerful under the pain, but gradually lost his appetite and could partake of only light food; on September eleventh he was put under the doctor's care. "The 12th he appeared to be something better—13th, at evening, grew worse, pains increased—14th, unable to walk, very high fever—15th, puking and raising blood." His condition continued steadily to decline until the twenty-third, when the sheriff found him lying on the floor apparently unable to move. "At 5 o'clock p. m. he was supposed to be dying; all signs of life were gone long enough to go to another room for a bottle of hartshorn, with which he seemed to revive . . . he was told that he had had a fit; he said he was sensible of it; that most of his connections had died that way, and that he could not survive another, which would probably come upon him about the same time next day; that he should not recover, but God would have him; and asked Mr. Scovil to go to prayer, which he did, and prayer was attended with solemnity by all present." Smith's pitiable condition had aroused the sympathy of the whole neighborhood, particularly that of the minister's wife, who the next day "could not bear the reflection that a child, perhaps of respectable parents, should lie so near to her in a strange country, and die upon a bed of straw", and she accordingly prepared to send a feather bed to him. At the appointed hour "a noise was heard from Smith in the gaol. John Dibble (the gaoler's son), who constantly attended him, ran in haste and unlocked the prison door, and found Smith expiring; his feet and legs cold to the knees, and in great pain; he begged of John to run and heat a brick, that was near, to give one moment's relief while he was dying. John, of course, ran in haste from the gaol, round the stairway, through a passage that led to the kitchen, where was a large fire of coals, into which he put the brick, waited not more than three minutes, and returned with it warmed—but to his indescribable astonishment—found no one in the bed. . . *Not only the man was gone, but everything he had in the room was taken away with him.*" The land immediately around the gaol was open country, but nowhere was there a sign of Smith. Just at this moment the servant arrived with the feather bed. She was told to take it home, that "Smith was gone." "Ah", exclaimed her mistress when she heard the

news, "poor man! is he dead? Well, Amy, then you may run and carry over a shirt, and a sheet, to lay Smith out in." Meanwhile the sheriff had come down to the gaol to see the last moments of Smith. "Smith is *gone!*" shouted the gaoler. "Poor fellow!" said Bates. "I expected it." Such was the success of the "unparalleled and abominable deception" by which Smith made his escape.

For over a month he remained at large, making no effort to leave the territory, and living comfortably on his depredations at one farmhouse or another while he gradually recouped his store of clothes by successful burglaries. His favorite rôle was as a deputy in pursuit of a notorious villain that had broke gaol at Kingston. The situation grew increasingly awkward for the good Bates. The court met at the day fixed for Smith's trial, but there was no Smith to be tried. At last came the welcome news that he had been captured and was safely on his way to Kingston—immediately followed by the information that he had knocked down one of his captors with his pair of handcuffs and again escaped. He now stole another horse, and continued his merry career of crime to the increasing wrath of the entire province. Eventually, however, just after a fine haul at the Attorney-General's house, he was once more captured and this time was successfully returned to his old quarters at Kingston. But Bates, as will be seen, had small reason to be thankful.

The prisoner was properly chained in his cell, and for a few days all went quietly. But on the twelfth night, suspicious noises being heard, the sheriff was at once summoned. "On going in, I found him lying in his berth, chained, just as I left him; and said to him, 'Smith, you have not got out yet?' He answered, 'No, *not quite.*'" Careful examination revealed that the inner grate was entirely cut through, although the bar had been cleverly replaced, while the outer grate was so nearly through that two or three more nights' work would have done the business. "I then asked him, what he had cut the grate with; he answered, with indifference, 'with *this saw*, and *this file*'; and, without any hesitation, handed to me, out of his berth, a case-knife steel blade, cut in teeth very neatly, and a common hand-saw file. I then asked him how he got to the grates, and whether he had slipped the shackle off his foot. He said, 'No, he had *cut the chain*'; and calmly showed me where he had cut the chain, in the joint of the links, where it could not be readily discovered."

Smith was now rechained, with the addition of hand-cuffs, and an iron collar about his neck—"all of which he received very

willingly." The next afternoon, to make assurance doubly sure, Bates visited the gaol. "The gaoler informed me he was lying in his berth, with all his irons on, had been enquiring if the sheriff was not coming to examine his chains." Under the circumstances this seemed hardly necessary, and Bates went to bed that night with a free heart. But at midnight he was roused by a messenger from the gaoler with the news "that Smith had got loose from all his irons, had got through the inner grate, was cutting the outer grate, and had nearly escaped"—the gaoler evidently having no fancy to encounter his prisoner without the sheriff at hand to assist him! Bates at once went down, and the ceremony of the previous night was repeated. So things went on during most of the winter and early spring. Smith was searched and stripped and searched again, but he seemed able to create saws and files out of thin air or to wriggle out of his chains or even to break them in pieces in the most disconcerting manner. The gaoler's messages that "Smith is loose again" lost all charm of novelty. The harassed sheriff's diary is filled with such passages as the following:

March 24th. . I was called upon by the gaoler and informed that he was about something. . . On going into the gaol, found him loose from all his irons; his neck-chain was broken in three pieces; the chain from his neck to his legs in three pieces; his screw hand-cuffs in four pieces and all hanging on nails, on the partition wall.

March 28th. . I was then called again by the gaoler, who said he believed he was loose, and was about some mischief,—I went into the gaol, and found him loose; his chain from his neck separated into three pieces, and had bruised the plastering from the stone wall, with his chains, about three feet long. . . At night, I added another chain, from his fetters to his neck, and stapled him to the floor, with about four feet of chain; secured his hand-cuffs to the chain between his neck and feet, so that when standing, he could not reach in any direction, and then left him.

March 31st, I was then called again by the gaoler, who said he was certainly loose again. . . I went immediately to the gaol; found he had broken all his chains; had tied his foot-chain to the staple again, long enough to reach the wicket-door; was lying in bed, as unconcerned as if nothing had happened, with the piece of chain about his neck.

Bates spent his days devising bigger and better chains; leg-chains, arm-chains, neck-chains, timber chains and ox chains, until he had his prisoner fairly wreathed in forty-six pounds of chains. But all to no avail. The abhorrent cry—"Smith is loose again"—continually dinned the sheriff's ears. And as the spring wore on, the good Bates began to show unmistakable signs of fatigue. His faith in chains was failing him:

Notwithstanding every exertion I could make to restrain him, I was still fearful, that as the weather grew warmer, he would find means to effect his escape, as he had already done things that seemed to require more than human power to execute; especially in getting the iron collar off his neck, and drawing the staple from the timber, *which two yoke of oxen could not have done*. The iron collar, which was made of a flat bar of iron, one and a half inch wide, the edges only rounded, he twisted the same as if a piece of leather, and broke it in two.

Given sufficient time, it looks as if Smith might have fairly worn the Sheriff out and walked forth chainless. But time was on the side of the law. The date of the prisoner's trial and indubitable conviction was fast approaching. Furthermore, Smith himself began to act strangely. For weeks he would remain absolutely silent, answering no questions; then he would take to howling all night long, disturbing the country-side; next he would tear up all his clothes and throw things at the gaoler whenever he appeared. Finally, at his trial, when asked to plead, he stood mute, then flew in a passion and kicked the railing in front of the prisoner's box all to pieces. It took three constables and numerous ropes to keep him sufficiently quiet for the trial to proceed. The jury apparently had some doubts of his sanity, but nevertheless convicted him of the crime with which he was charged, and he was duly sentenced to be hanged. Upon his return to prison, he showed no sense of his situation, carrying on at first much as before. Gradually, however, he developed or revealed a new talent, through which he achieved even more surprising feats than any of those hitherto recorded. In a long letter to the Attorney-General, Bates gives a detailed if not altogether clear account of them.

"I never discovered him at work at anything, but he frequently produced effigies, or likenesses, very striking. . . He now produced an effigy of a man in perfect shape, with his features painted, and joints to all his limbs, and dressed him in clothes that he had made, in good shape and fashion, out of the clothes that he had torn off himself (being now naked), which was admired for its ingenuity. This he would put sometimes in one position and sometimes in another, and seemed to amuse himself with it, without taking the least notice of anything else; continuing in his old way hallooing, without any alteration, until the 13th, when the gaoler informed me that he refused to eat, and no doubt was sick. . . All the bread, and other provisions conveyed to him he gave his effigy, strung on a string, and put into his hands. He lay perfectly still day and night, and took no notice of anything—would drink tea or milk, which I gave twice a day, for five days; he then refused to drink

anything for two days, which made seven days he had eaten nothing. *In that time he began to speak*, would ask questions, but would hold no conversation.—But the most extraordinary, the most wonderful and mysterious of all, is that in that time, he had prepared, *undiscovered*, and at once *exhibited*, the most striking picture of genius, art, taste, and invention that ever was, and I presume, ever will be produced, by any human being, placed in his situation; in a dark room, chained and hand-cuffed, under sentence of death, without so much as a nail, or any kind of thing to work with but his hands, and naked. The exhibition is far beyond my pen to describe.—To give you some faint idea, permit me to say, that it consists of ten characters, men, women and children—all made and painted in the most expressive manner, with all the limbs and joints of the human frame. . . Smith sits in his bed by the side of the gaol—his *exhibition* begins about a foot from the floor, and compasses the whole space of the ceiling. The uppermost is a man, whom he calls the tambourine player, or sometimes, Doctor Blunt, standing with all the pride and appearance of a master musician, his left hand a-kimbo, his right hand on his tambourine, dressed in suitable uniform. Next him, below, is a lady—genteelly dressed, gracefully sitting in a handsome swing; at her left hand, stands a man neatly dressed, in the character of a servant, holding the side of the swing with his right, his left hand on his hip, in an easy posture, waiting the lady's motion. On her right hand, stands a man, genteelly dressed, in the character of a *gallant*, in a graceful posture for dancing. Beneath these three figures, sits a young man and a young girl (apparently about 14), in a posture for *tilting*, at each end of a board, decently dressed. Directly under these stands one whom he calls Buonaparte, or sometimes, the father of his *family*; he stands erect; his features are prominent, his cheeks red; his teeth white, set in order; his gums and lips red; his nose shaded black, representing the nostrils; his dress is that of the harlequin; in one hand he holds an infant, with the other he plays or beats music; before him stand two children, apparently three or four years old, holding each other by one hand, in the act of playing or dancing, with a man, dressed in fashion, who appears in the character of a steward, sometimes in one situation, and sometimes in another; and this makes up the show, all of which you have at one view. Then commences the performance. The first operation is from the tambourine-player, or master, who gives three single strokes on his tambourine, that may be heard in any part of the house, without moving his body. He then dances gracefully a few steps, without touching the tambourine; the lady

is then swung two or three times by the steward; then the gallant takes a few steps; then the two below tilt a few times, in the most easy, pleasant manner; then the two children dance a little, holding each other by the hand: after this, Smith begins to sing, or whistles a tune, to which they are to dance, at which the tambourine strikes, and everyone dances to the tune, with motion, ease, and exactness, not to be described."

Was ever before a marionette show constructed under such circumstances? The figures, as Bates elsewhere explains, were made of straw, the strings presumably of pleated straw, while the colours were obtained from a burnt beam and from Smith's own blood. As his prisoner no longer showed any desire to escape, but seemed perfectly happy with his "family", the sheriff now removed most of his chains and permitted him to have needles and thread for sewing and later wood for carving. With this additional equipment, Smith's family grew at an amazing rate. "God", he said, "made men out of the dust of the earth; but *he* made men out of the wood of the earth." His masterpiece was a duel between Buonaparte and an Irishman (how the nationality was indicated we are not told) until one day the Irishman's head was cut off, when he was succeeded by a Scotsman who maintained the honour of his nation more successfully. Smith was now giving regular performances, and the gaol seems to have become the leading house of entertainment in Kingston. Visitors to the town were taken to see Smith's marionettes as the chief feature of the place.

Meanwhile the creator of these marvels, his body perhaps missing its accustomed forty-six pounds of chains, seemed to suffer more and more from hallucinations. He complained that "he was troubled with all sorts of creatures coming about him; great hogs, with cloven feet; all kinds of cattle, and creeping things; snakes and adders, frogs and toads, and every ugly thing. . . He said, these snakes and adders he could 'read' very well; he knew what they all meant, and most of the rest of them; but these frogs and toads, coming together, he could not understand; but he knew he was going to leave this place."

The last idea, at any rate, was no hallucination. Smith's reputation for artistry grew to be such that a movement to obtain his pardon was successful. When Bates brought him the good news however, he took not the slightest notice, but merely said, "I wish you would bring me some potatoes when you come again." The sheriff went on to explain that he would get him some new clothes and a box in which to put his family, as it might be the means of his making an honest livelihood—to all of which Smith's

only reply was an offer to make his figures dance for Bates's children if he would bring them to the gaol. In fact, the prisoner now showed a marked indisposition to leave. He refused to be measured for his new clothes, and exhausted Bates's patience by his obstinacy. "I found", writes the sheriff, "I should have as much trouble to get rid of him as I had to keep him before his trial." On the day when Smith was taken to the Court House to receive his pardon, he returned in a very bad mood, threatening to burn the gaol down. To the end, he remained true to his character.

"*August 29th*", writes Bates, "early in the morning, I went to the gaol to prepare for his removal, but to my great vexation and surprise found it actually on fire. I opened the door immediately, and with a bucket of water extinguished it. Found him, smoking his pipe, as unconcerned as ever. He had broken up some wood-work, and with that, and the chips of his carved work, he had kindled a fire. He said fire was very comfortable, and he had not seen any before in a long time; that he made it with his own hands, and would make it again in ten minutes, as he could not do without some light. I shut him up in a suffocating smoke which did not seem to give him the least inconvenience, and called in some of the neighbours to assist me, and ordered him to put his show into the box. He took no notice of it. I took down one and laid it in the box, when he seemed pleased, said he would put them all in that box immediately, and began very actively to take them down; 'wanted no assistance from anyone; but leave him the light, and he would be all ready in half an hour.' We left him the candle, and went out. When I returned, he was walking the gaol, with everything put up in the neatest manner; it was a curiosity to see with what skill he had packed them; gave him a pair of shoes, and, with his box on his shoulder, he marched off to the boat."

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So Smith sailed away from the scene of his defeats and conquest. On reaching the opposite shore of Nova Scotia, it was afterwards learned, he left his beloved family on board and went ashore, to all appearances as sane as any man in Canada. Taking the name of Henry Frederick Moon, he obtained employment on a farm, and soon after eloped with the farmer's daughter. Whether, like Jessica, she romantically took any of her father's belongings with her, we are not told. Her husband set up as a tailor in the small town of Rawdon, paying, however, frequent business visits to Halifax. When the stock of wearing apparel in Halifax began to

be noticeably depleted, investigations were begun. At about this time Moon suddenly disappeared. He next turned up in New Haven, Connecticut, under the alias of William Newman, and New Haven was soon without spoons for its porridge. Newman, being captured, was again put in the environment most favorable for his talents. But his career in artistry was almost over. He began sadly to repeat himself. Perhaps he looked with British scorn upon Connecticut as unworthy of his best efforts, or perhaps his invention had really begun to flag. At any rate, he was content to astonish the Yankees by his old tricks of sawing his way out of gaol, and, after recapture, by making another puppet-show out of nothing. His only new creation was the comparatively trivial achievement of catching mice with his hand-cuffs on, and it is not even certain that he had not amused himself in this way earlier in Canada. He was sentenced to three years in Simsbury Mines.

Here he was visited by Bates who came down from New Brunswick to identify him. The sheriff found that his old acquaintance was living a life of leisure, the only one of the prisoners not put to hard labour. This was because of his occasional fits, which were dreadful: "in his distress, he would whirl round, on his head and shoulders, like a top." He met Bates with a vacant stare, but later said that he believed he had seen him somewhere in New Haven. He now claimed to be a Frenchman and talked French glibly. Asked if he had ever been in England, he said, Yes, he had been in London and Liverpool, but never, never at *Brighton*. (Was this repugnance to the vulgarest watering-place on earth a last gleam of his artistic conscience?) Had he ever been at Kingston in New Brunswick? No, he did not think so; he had no idea where that was. Here we must at last take leave of our two characters: the rogue with "a firm and steady countenance"; the honest man gaping with amazement at such depravity. Thus ends this tale of the olden days, when sheriffs were men of letters and crooks were geniuses.