MICHAEL CRICHTON

THE GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY

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Michael Crichton

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To Barbara Rose

Satan is glad—when I am bad,
And hopes that I—with him shall lie
In fire and chains—and dreadful pains

—VICTORIAN CHILD'S POEM, 1856

"*I wanted the money.*"

—EDWARD PIERCE, 1856

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About the Author
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INTRODUCTION

It is difficult, after the passage of more than a century, to understand the extent to which the train robbery of 1855 shocked the sensibilities of Victorian England. At first glance, the crime hardly seems noteworthy. The sum of money stolen—£12,000 in gold bullion—was large, but not unprecedented; there had been a dozen more lucrative robberies in the same period. And the meticulous organization and planning of the crime, involving many people and extending over a year, was similarly not unusual. All major crimes at the mid-century called for a high degree of preparation and coordination.

Yet the Victorians always referred to this crime in capital letters, as The Great Train Robbery. Contemporary observers labeled it The Crime of the Century and The Most Sensational Exploit of the Modern Era. The adjectives applied to it were all strong: it was "unspeakable," "appalling," and "heinous." Even in an age given to moral overstatement, these terms suggest some profound impact upon everyday consciousness.

To understand why the Victorians were so shocked by the theft, one must understand something about the meaning of the railways. Victorian England was the first urbanized, industrialized society on earth, and it evolved with stunning rapidity. At the time of Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo, Georgian England was a predominantly rural nation of thirteen million people. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the population had nearly doubled to twenty-four million, and half the people lived in urban centers. Victorian England was a nation of cities; the conversion from agrarian life seemed to have occurred almost overnight; indeed, the process was so swift that no one really understood it.

Victorian novelists, with the exception of Dickens and Gissing, did not write about the cities; Victorian painters for the most part did not portray urban subjects. There were conceptual problems as well —during much of the century, industrial production was viewed as a kind of particularly valuable harvest, and not as something new and unprecedented. Even the language fell behind. For most of the 1800s, "slum" meant a room of low repute, and "urbanize" meant to become urbane and genteel. There were no accepted terms to describe the growth of cities, or the decay of portions of them.

This is not to say that Victorians were unaware of the changes taking place in their society, or that these changes were not widely —and often fiercely—debated. But the processes were still too new to be readily understood. The Victorians were pioneers of the urban, industrial life that has since become commonplace throughout the Western world. And if we find their attitudes quaint, we must nonetheless recognize our debt to them.

The new Victorian cities that grew so fast glittered with more wealth than any society had ever known—and they stank of poverty as abject as any society had ever suffered. The inequities and glaring contrasts within urban centers provoked many calls for reform. Yet there was also widespread public complacency, for the fundamental assumption of Victorians was that progress—progress in the sense of better conditions for all mankind—was inevitable. We may find that complacency particularly risible today, but in the 1850s it was a reasonable attitude to adopt.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, the price of bread, meat, coffee, and tea had fallen; the price of coal was almost halved; the cost of cloth was reduced 80 percent; and per-capita consumption of everything had increased. Criminal law had been reformed; personal liberties were better protected; Parliament was, at least to a degree, more representative; and one man in seven had the right to vote. Per-capita taxation had been reduced by half. The first blessings of technology were evident: gaslights glowed throughout the cities; steamships made the crossing to America in ten days instead of eight weeks; the new telegraph and postal service provided astonishing speed in communications.