

## Justifiable Homicide

This is a remedial age, an age of keys for all manner of locks; so he cannot be said to ask too much who seeks for exact information as to how a young man ought, in justice to himself and to society, to deal with his relations. During his minority he has lain entirely at their mercy: has been their butt, their martyr, their drudge, their corpus vile. Possessing all the sinews of war, this stiff-necked tribe has consistently refused to "part": even for the provision of those luxuries so much more necessary than necessities. Its members have crammed their victim full of precepts, rules of conduct, moral maxims, and most miscellaneous counsel: all which he intuitively suspected at the time, and has ascertained by subsequent experience, to be utterly worthless. Now, when their hour has come, when the tocsin has sounded at last, and the Gaul is at the gate, they still appear to think that the old condition of things is to go on; unconscious, apparently, of atonement due, of retribution to be exacted, of wrongs to be avenged and of insults to be wiped away!

Over the north-west frontier, where the writ of the English Raj runs not, the artless Afghan is happy in a code that fully provides for relatives who neglect or misunderstand their obligations. An Afghan it was who found himself compelled to reprove an uncle with an unfortunate habit of squandering the family estate. An excellent relative, this uncle, in all other respects. As a liar, he had few equals; he robbed with taste and discretion; and his murders were all

imbued with true artistic feeling. He might have lived to a green old age of spotless respectability but for his one little failing. As it was, justice had to be done, *ruat cælum*: and so it came about that one day the nephew issued forth to correct him with a matchlock. The innocent old man was cultivating his paternal acres; so the nephew was able, unperceived, to get a steady sight on him. His finger was on the trigger, when suddenly there slipped into his mind the divine precept: "Allah is merciful!" He lowered his piece, and remained for a little plunged in thought; meanwhile the unconscious uncle hoed his paddy. Then with a happy smile he took aim once more, for there also occurred to him the precept equally divine: "But Allah is also just." With an easy conscience he let fly, and behold! there was an uncle the more in Paradise.

It was probably some little affair of a similar quality that constrained a recruit in a regiment stationed at Peshawur to apply for leave of absence: in order to attend to family matters of importance. The Colonel knew it was small use refusing the leave, as in that case his recruit would promptly desert; so he could only ask, how long was the transaction like to take? It was told him, after consideration, that, allowing for all possible difficulties and delays, a month would meet the necessities of the case; and on that understanding he allowed his man to depart. At the end of the month he reappeared on duty, a subdued but mellow cheer shining through his wonted impassiveness. His Colonel ventured to inquire of him, in a general way, if the business in question were satisfactorily concluded. And he replied: "I got him

from behind a rock."

There are practical difficulties in the way of the adoption of such methods at home. We must be content to envy, without imitating, these free and happy sons of the hills. And yet a few of the old school are left us still: averse from change, mistrustful of progress, sticking steadily to the good old-fashioned dagger and bowl. I had a friend who disposed of a relative every spring. Uncles were his special line -- (he had suffered much from their tribe, having been early left an orphan) -- though he had dabbled in aunts, and in his hot youth, when he was getting his hand in, he had even dallied with a grand-parent or two. But it was in uncles he excelled. He possessed (at the beginning of his career) a large number of these connections, and pursuit of them, from the mere sordid point of view of £ s. d., proved lucrative. But he always protested (and I believed him) that gain with him was a secondary consideration. It would hardly be in the public interest to disclose his modus operandi. I shall only remark that he was one of the first to realise the security and immunity afforded the artist by the conditions of modern London. Hence it happened that he usually practised in town, but spent his vacations at the country houses of such relations as were still spared him, where he was always the life and soul of the place. Unfortunately he is no longer with us, to assist in the revision of this article: nor was it permitted me to soothe his last moments. The presiding Sheriff was one of those new-fangled officials who insist on the exclusion of the public, and he declined to admit me either in the capacity of a personal

connection or, though I tried my hardest, as the representative of  
"The National Observer." It only remains to be said of my much-tried  
and still lamented friend, that he left few relatives to mourn his  
untimely end.

But our reluctant feet must needs keep step with the imperious march  
of Time, and my poor friend's Art (as himself in later years would  
sorrowfully admit) is now almost as extinct as the glass-staining of  
old, or "Robbia's craft so apt and strange"; while our thin-blooded  
youth, too nice for the joyous old methods, are content to find  
sweetest revenge in severely dropping their relations. This is indeed  
a most effective position: it exasperates, while it is unassailable.  
And yet there remains a higher course, a nobler task. Not mere  
forgiveness: it is simple duty to forgive -- even one's guardians. No  
young man of earnest aspirations will be content to stop there. Nay:  
lead them on, these lost ones, by the hand; conduct them "generously  
and gently, and with linking of the arm"; educate them, eradicate  
their false ideals, dispel their foolish prejudices; be to their  
faults a little blind and to their virtues very kind: in fine, realise  
that you have a mission -- that these wretches are not here for  
nothing. The task will seem hard at first; but only those who have  
tried can know how much may be done by assiduous and kindly effort  
towards the chastening -- ay! the final redemption even! -- of the  
most hopeless and pig-headed of uncles.