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# THE CASE OF J. P. WATSON, THE MODERN "BLUEBEARD"

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AND  
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Early in May, 1920, Mr. Thos. Lee Woolwine, district attorney of Los Angeles County, California, apprehended a suspicious person who gave his name as J. P. Watson, from whom was obtained a remarkable confession. This confession was, in effect, that Watson had contracted many illegal marriages and had murdered at least five of his wives. The investigation finally uncovered the most astounding case of criminality ever known in America.

At the time of obtaining this confession the district attorney had *no evidence*, and only unsupported suspicion against Watson, and he was merely holding the man on a technicality of suspected bigamy. Even this had not been proved, and if Watson had made no confession he might have been given his liberty within an hour, since the authorities had no ground upon which to detain him.

Watson's remarkable story, his manner of telling it, and the appearance of the man himself at first aroused the suspicion that the story was the vaporings of a deranged mind, but the detailed accuracy with which he was able to describe his last murder, which he claimed had occurred only a few days before, and his accurate description of the place where the body of the murdered woman was buried, finally impressed the district attorney with the truth of his prisoner's statement. Moreover, it had been determined that the last alleged victim of Watson had disappeared mysteriously and was nowhere to be found; and, furthermore, there was abundant evidence discovered among his effects which indicated that a long series of crimes had actually been committed.

Acting on the information he had received, the district attorney, therefore, sent an investigating group of men into the desert of Imperial Valley to the spot indicated by the prisoner as the burial place of his last victim. Watson himself did not at first accompany this party because at that time he was still in a too weakened condition from the effects of an attempted suicide a few days before. The result of

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the expedition was a failure to find any trace of the alleged burial place. But a few days later the prisoner was able to accompany the officers and direct them to the spot where the body was actually discovered and exhumed.

Watson had been arrested at the instigation of the last of his numerous wives, who suspected that he was a bigamist and probably responsible for other criminal acts. No evidence sufficient to establish these charges, however, had been found by the officers, but Watson had in his possession several thousand dollars worth of Liberty Bonds, which on its face was suspicious. The prisoner stated that he had purchased these bonds in a perfectly legitimate way from a bank in San Diego and volunteered to take the officers in this bank to prove the truth of his statement. The officers accepted his offer and had started in an automobile from Los Angeles to San Diego, and it was during this six-hour ride, which was made during the night, that Watson attempted and nearly accomplished suicide by secretly slashing his throat with a penknife, a fact which was discovered only through the fainting of the prisoner in the automobile. This attempt was made so surreptitiously that it was not discovered until the car had nearly reached its destination, when the officers found that their prisoner in the back seat was in an almost dying condition from loss of blood. He was then hurried to a hospital and revived.

Later in the day the officers visited the bank indicated by their prisoner and found that the Liberty Bonds in question had actually been purchased by Watson in an apparently legitimate manner, as he had indicated. It appeared, therefore, that there were no legal grounds for further detaining the prisoner.

This dearth of evidence, however, was unknown to Watson, and as he was still held in custody, he sent for the district attorney and, after exacting a promise of an appeal to the court for immunity from the death penalty, he made his remarkable confession of a series of undetected crimes, the extent of which is unequalled in recent criminal annals anywhere in the world.

Watson is a medium sized, mild spoken man, of about 42 years of age, quiet, and somewhat deferential in his attitude toward others. He is not cringing or servile, but rather gives the impression of possessing a humble and respectful attitude. He bears no resemblance to the human monsters of fiction, but, as in the case of many notorious criminals, he would be one of the last individuals to be suspected of hideous crimes by the average observer. He makes, in fact, an excellent impression on anyone who chances to meet him.

In conversation he uses good language of carefully chosen words, speaking always in well modulated tones which suggest considerable culture and refinement. When, therefore, this quiet man speaking without emotion, retailed hour after hour the stories of his misdeeds—a total of at least nine murders and twenty-one or more marriages, in a period covering only three years—the unreality of the situation as regards the actual facts will be readily appreciated.

Watson's method of securing his wives is interesting, and one is amazed at the ease with which it appears possible to secure marriages with women of considerable means, intelligence, and some show of refinement and education. So far as known, none of his wives was illiterate, most of them possessed considerable money, and all of them were rather striking in physical appearance. It is a surprising fact that in some instances this man would have from two to four wives at the same time, in the same community; for example, he married four women within a comparatively short period in the city of Tacoma, and he lived there with all of them at the same time. There was little to indicate that his wives had any very unusual suspicions about him until they had been married to him for a considerable period of time. When such suspicions were aroused, for one reason or another, he appears to have promptly made away with the women, though in many instances, at any rate, this was not the sole or principal motive, if we can judge at all from his own statements.

This man's method in advertising for a wife, using one of his many aliases, was usually as follows:

"A gentleman, neat appearing, of courteous disposition, well connected in a business way; has quite a little property, and is connected with several corporations. Has a nice bank account as well as a considerable roll of government bonds. Would be pleased to correspond with refined young lady or widow. Object, matrimony. This advertisement is in good faith. All answers will be treated with respect.

"H. L. GORDON,  
"Hotel Tacoma."

Correspondence or a personal meeting would follow. Watson would then take up the financial affairs of the women, finding out how much they possessed. He would then conduct a rapid-fire courtship with them and urge an early marriage. After marriage, he would obtain from his wife, a list of names of her relatives and friends, and would tell her his reasons for this were that in case anything should happen to his wife, he could notify her friends. As a general rule, he would prevail upon them to give him their bonds or money or deeds

to property, telling them that he would use these with his own property for various successful enterprises with which he was connected, also a very few days after marriage he would suggest that a will be made, each in favor of the other. He would then state that he was in the service of the United States government as a secret service agent and therefore would be obliged to absent himself from home frequently. While away from one wife on this pretense, he would usually be occupied in visiting or marrying another woman, sometimes near by, sometimes at a distance. He would also induce a wife to sign blank bond writing paper at the bottom of the sheet. After he had murdered her he would continue to write to relatives or friends of the woman, using a typewriter above the woman's signature, explaining that "she" was just learning to use it. Strangely enough this plan always worked and the suspicions of relatives were never aroused.

Each wife would be told that she would be taken on a long trip, some to Honolulu, others to South America, or again to Mexico. He would travel most of the time in a first-class automobile, carrying a very complete camping outfit, thereby enabling him to do what he pleased with the women without causing people to become suspicious of him. Letters received from the woman's relatives would show him leaving for a long trip to South America or elsewhere, consequently they would not expect to receive mail again for a long period.

According to Watson's story, the death of the first woman credited to his list of victims was entirely accidental. It seems that this woman and himself were out on a fishing trip in a small row-boat in the Canadian forests, and had attached their boat to a raft of logs that was tied up to the bank of the river where the current was very swift. In some manner, according to his account, the woman fell from the boat and was swept under the log raft by the swift current. Watson attempted to seize her as the current swept her under, but she disappeared and was not seen again.

He says that his first impulse was to rush to one of the logging camps in the vicinity and ask for help. But he was a stranger in the neighborhood and, fearing that he might be suspected of being the cause of the woman's death, he finally decided to say nothing about the matter. In point of fact, the body was never recovered and apparently no knowledge of the woman's disappearance ever came to light until Watson himself referred to it.

Considering the number of murders that followed in rapid succession after this alleged accident, one is warranted in suspecting that the woman's death was not accidental. But since Watson frankly

admits the other murders, and describes them in detail, there seems to be no logical reason why he should deny this one if it were not, indeed, accidental. There is a possibility, of course, that an accidental death which so easily escaped detection or even suspicion may have suggested the series of murders that soon followed. In any event, the first seven women of Watson's list of victims were either drowned or thrown into some body of water after being murdered.

Watson told in detail of these murders without any show of emotion or any pretense of remorse. "What became of this woman?" the district attorney would ask after Watson had narrated the details of his life with one or another of his wives. "I made away with her—I killed her," he would reply in the evenly modulated tone and careful inflection of his narrative. Then he would describe how, for example, when walking beside a lake or river, with this or that woman, he was seized with an impulse to kill her and accordingly proceeded to carry this impulse into effect. Or, again, he would describe calmly and in detail the manner in which he had knocked one victim senseless with an oar, held her head beneath the surface of the water until she was dead, then weighted her clothing with rocks and tossed the body into the lake; how he had beaten one woman to death with an auto wrench, and another with a hammer, omitting no details when pressed by his questioners.

Watson asserted that he was impelled to do these acts by some dominating force that he could not understand. He said that the impulse to kill would come upon him and that he would feel that some mighty power was instructing him and forcing him to commit murder. This feeling so tormented him that he would get no rest or relief until the deed was accomplished; then at once a great sense of relief would come over him—a feeling of satisfaction as though some great load had been lifted from him. At the same time this force which was dominating him would seem to tell him or make him feel that he had "done well." This impulse was, he says, sometimes resisted for days, weeks, or months, and at other times yielded to immediately.

At no time during the narrative of his promiscuous murders, even when giving the most harrowing and revolting details, did he show the least emotion. Moreover, he made no pretense of feeling any remorse; he stated, indeed, most emphatically that he felt no remorse, and explained this fact on the basis of a sort of double personality. Yet, paradoxically, his emotional nature asserted itself on several occasions about events of utter insignificance, comparatively speaking. For example, he was most eager to conceal his actual identity and the events of his life during his early boyhood. When asked to explain

this attitude, he said that there were some people who had been very kind to him when he was a little boy without parents and practically without friends; that these people were very good people indeed, and that it would shock them and hurt them to know of his misdeeds; and it was in speaking of these kindly people and his early boyhood that he choked with real emotion, which prevented him momentarily from continuing his narrative. Yet a moment later he would continue his gruesome narrative of hideous murders without the least trace of emotion, but at the same time with no spirit of bravado. His recital was, indeed, impersonal, calm, and coolly exact.

At the time of our visit he was in bed and had been making copious notes to refresh his memory on certain points in anticipation of our coming. Almost his first statement was to the effect that he *did not believe himself to be a sexual pervert* because all his misdeeds had been committed within the last three years. His argument was that if his crimes had been the result of sexual perversion the tendency to commit them would have shown itself much earlier in his life, as his understanding of perversion was that it always began early in life. He stated that all but one of his murders had been committed within a period of ten months. After that there had been a period of ten months in which he was able to resist the impulse to murder. Then he killed his last wife, the Delano woman. According to this statement, therefore, all his crimes were committed within twenty months, there being an interval of ten months between the last murder and the one just preceding it, which lead him to argue (apparently in all seriousness) that he was "getting better" and would eventually "recover" so that he would not be impelled to do any more murders at all, a singularly childish statement for a man of Watson's intelligence, for he apparently said this with no real appreciation of the horror of his acts or of the result to himself which was sure to follow his trial.

He stated that he was raised in an orphan's home, but later on he confessed that he was brought up by an uncle, and this has been confirmed from other sources. Up to the present, it had been found impossible to obtain any satisfactory history of Watson's early life. As a boy he first attended school in the country and says that he was somewhat older than the other pupils, but asserts that he was a good student. On account of poverty he was not able to continue his school very long, but managed to take up outside studies and also attend night school. He was always fond of reading and has always put in his odd time delving into books and seeking instruction in various branches of learning.

He says that as a boy and as a young man he avoided "evil things," also that he was always kind to animals, fond of children, was not quarrelsome, and seldom had difficulty with any of his playmates. As a boy he remembers having had an attack of some kind of "fever," and later on a very severe illness from typhoid. Still later he had what was called "slow fever," which was no doubt the local name for malaria. At one time he had quite a severe attack of rheumatism. As a young boy he had nocturnal incontinence and did not get over this habit until he was "quite a boy," as he says.

He has always been temperate in his habits but not a teetotaler. In religion he was a Protestant, but had never been very deeply affected religiously, although he had at one time attended church and had been a member of a Young People's League.

Physically, he had the abnormal genital condition known as *hypospadias*, and as the other boys used to make fun of him at times, he always tried to conceal his deformity. For example, he never learned to swim, because he would not go swimming with the other boys and thus expose himself.

He says that he always had normal sexual impulse, but as a young man he was in some doubt as to this matter on account of his deformity. When twenty years of age, however, he fell into company with a woman of the streets and found that he was sexually normal. This experience was a great relief to his mind and later on when a doctor told him that he could be operated upon and cured of his deformity, he says that this information relieved him so that his physical abnormality never worried him very much after this.

Most of his life he had been a salesman of one kind or another, frequently a traveling salesman and usually quite a successful one. At the beginning of the great war he was in Canada living with his legal wife. At the time he was just starting a commercial agency, but at the outbreak of the war the government restrictions practically closed this business. This worried him to such an extent that he had a nervous breakdown. According to his statement, this nervous collapse occurred almost at the outbreak of the war and he remained more or less incapacitated for something over a year. During that time he was unable to perform any great amount of work without becoming utterly exhausted.

During this time and in the period immediately following it, his wife noticed and commented upon the fact that he seemed to be a changed person—"different from what he had been." And he asserts

that this period marked the change in his condition which resulted in his having the impulse to commit the crimes that followed later.

About this time he began having severe headaches, something he had never had before, although he had had several rather severe injuries to his head. Thus, when a boy about ten years old, he had a blacksmith's anvil tip over on him, pinning him to the ground with a considerable portion of the weight of the anvil resting on his head. He was not unconscious, although he was dizzy for several hours following this experience. About eight years ago he was thrown from a motor-cycle, striking on the top of his head. Here again he was not rendered unconscious, but he says that he felt as if something popped in the back of his neck just beneath his skull. He was slightly stunned and dazed for a short time. He did have a pain in the back of his head and neck, however, for some little time after this accident. Again, in 1913, he fell out of an upper berth of a steamship, striking directly on the top of his head. But this did not make him unconscious—merely dazed him for a short time—and he does not believe that he experienced any bad effect from this fall.

A short time before beginning his series of murders he had a severe fright which, he declares, left him in a terribly shaken, nervous condition for more than a month. He says this fright was caused by slipping on the icy deck of a steamer, narrowly escaping being projected into the icy waters where he would certainly have drowned.

It was an extremely narrow escape from almost certain death, and the strain and shock completely unnerved him, and affected him for days, he says, more than any other event in his life before or since that time. On most people such an experience would certainly produce little effect.

At the time of Watson's arrest, the officers found that he was carrying in his pockets, and in his various grips, many trinkets, rings and pieces of jewelry, and also written documents, such as marriage certificates, which were most incriminating. These articles were of no particular value intrinsically, and were the very things that the ordinary normal criminal would have taken great pains to destroy or conceal. Yet he carried these things about with him everywhere with apparently utter disregard of possible consequences.

When asked why he did this, he replied simply, 'I don't know—cannot explain why I did it.' He said he knew they were very incriminating and were a constant menace that might put a noose about his neck any day.

It was reported that Watson had had epileptic fits at one time

when he was a young man. When questioned about this he described these seizures as occurring several times when he was about nineteen or twenty years old. He scouted the idea that they were "fits," describing them simply as "dizzy spells" in which he would be obliged to sit down in order to avoid falling. The attacks lasted only for a few moments and were followed by a feeling of nausea.

Under the circumstances, his own mental attitude about these seizures is interesting and suggestive. He knew the symptoms of epilepsy, and the legal attitude of inclination toward leniency for persons suffering from this disease. He knew that his crimes could easily have been the result of epilepsy—were, indeed, most suggestive of this malady. Also, that a mere suggestion of this affliction might mitigate the severity of his punishment. Yet he was vigorous in combatting the idea that his attacks were epileptic, asserting his belief that "it was probably biliousness." And apparently his diagnosis was correct, since he showed none of the somatic evidences almost certain to result from epileptic seizures.

His "nervous breakdown," which lasted about a year, began, as already stated, during the opening period of the war. It seems to have been a definite case of nervous collapse in which there were periods of mental and physical vigor, followed by days of exhaustion bordering on complete collapse. Of significance at this time also, is the fact that at times he developed mild delusions of persecutions, feeling that people were conspiring to injure him in his business. He also described a condition of mild depression lasting several days, followed by a corresponding period of elation without any adequate cause for either condition. Yet he made no pretense that there was any very great abnormality in this, other than might naturally accompany a protracted nervous strain and collapse. He denied that there was any time in which he was not in full control of his faculties.

Watson stated that he did not get married until he was thirty-three years old because he had not accumulated sufficient means properly to support a wife. And in this connection he was most emphatic in his assertion that there was no abnormal sexual element in this first marriage, or in connection with any of his later matrimonial ventures. Indeed, he asserts that he had been intimate with most of his numerous wives before he married them, and that sexual relations had been normal after marriage. He says also that it was fully three years after his marriage to the first Mrs. Watson before he began his crimes which later became so promiscuous.

This man stated that during the time of depression or mental un-

rest that had come upon him within the last three years he would frequently be obsessed with an indescribable impulse — an indefinable mental compulsion. As a result of this he would sometimes get into his automobile and drive aimlessly miles and miles without any particular plan. Sometimes he would find himself five hundred miles from the starting point before he regained his normal equilibrium.

Curiously enough, he regarded his obsession for killing women as an illness, and showed a childish lack of appreciation of the natural repulsion that his deeds might arouse in others. He stated in all seriousness that he believed it possible for him to be cured of his affliction so that he would no longer have the irresistible impulse to kill women. And one suggestion of this obtuseness—this utter absence of normal introspection—was his statement that since he had gone “almost a year without killing anyone” this last time, he felt that he was “recovering.” And he stated further that he believed “when I am cured, I will be safer to be at large than most men are.”

When we consider that these statements were made at a time when there was a strong probability that he might hang; that in any event, the lightest sentence he could possibly hope for would be incarceration for the rest of his life, there is certainly something very much askew with the mentality of a man having such a past and such a prospective future. Even when reminded somewhat brutally by one of the examiners that he would probably hang, and, at best, would spend the rest of his days in prison, he mildly asserted his belief that “when authorities find I am cured, they will be ready to help me.”

To all appearances he was entirely sincere and deeply in earnest in this statement.

#### CONCLUSION

After taking all the available evidence in this remarkable case into consideration, entirely definite conclusions in regard to it are impossible and the diagnosis is, therefore, left in some doubt. A number of factors enter into the evidence which cause considerable complication. One must, however, consider the following important evidence:

1. Watson appears to have suffered from a pretty definite compulsion neurosis.
  2. He may be a victim of epilepsy in one of its masked forms.
  3. There is a strong probability of sex perversion of either a conscious or subconscious character, particularly as the constant carrying about of women's trinkets and clothing would suggest “fettishism.”
- The fact that this man admits that he experienced a great sense of

mental and physical relief and an actual elation of spirit after his murders leads one to suspect sex perversion as the basis of them, in spite of his apparently honest denial of any such circumstance. It also suggests a strong probability of a sex equivalent, just as epilepsy has its equivalents, and makes it appear not improbable that the whole matter was in the nature of a mental complex or a subconscious experience. Particularly is one impressed with this possibility in hearing this strange man freely and unemotionally admit that he experienced no real regrets, sorrow or worry over his acts, while at the same moment he says that such an act in another would fill him with unspeakable horror! His acts, indeed, suggest an almost automatic and dissociated condition. His regrets appear, therefore, to be entirely outside of the emotional sphere, just as one might have an abstract and coldly logical regret over the suffering and death of individuals of whom one knew nothing.

4. There is a possibility that this man suffered from a combination of mental abnormalities which may include all of the conditions mentioned, that is to say, he may be a sex pervert with some epileptic characteristics, to which may be added a compulsion neurosis.

That Watson is in any sense normal or to any appreciable degree responsible for his acts, no student of behavior could possibly conclude. Whether his mental state is congenital or acquired, or whether it is in part congenital, and onto this certain acquired defects have been grafted, one cannot at present decide. It would appear to us at present that here is a man of constitutionally inferior make-up; one whose history, as far as obtainable, gives evidence of a rather high degree of mental instability; one who has all along lacked moral sense in some important respects; that such a constitutionally inferior personality has been subjected to certain circumstances of environment, which have developed his tendencies into definitely abnormal criminal acts.

There can be no question as to Watson's *intelligence*. His native intellectual capacity is distinctly above the average and this has enabled him to hold positions requiring much judgment and tact. His information is very considerable and covers a wide field; his education is remarkable for a man whose opportunities have been limited, and who has had to depend almost entirely upon his own efforts. He is, therefore, not feeble-minded. Neither could anyone conclude that his case falls into any of the usual classifications of insanity. The most practical diagnosis of the case of this monster criminal would at present appear to be about as follows: Congenital psychic inferiority, with sex perversion, either congenital or acquired, to which is possibly added an

epileptic type of personality. We freely admit the entire inadequacy of such a diagnosis and suggest it only as the most practical one under the present limitations of our knowledge.

Further investigations covering Watson's developmental period of life and his early history would add much to the understanding of this remarkable case, and such information is now being diligently sought. Psycho-analysis might uncover much which now remains unknown. To call such a man "insane," a "moral imbecile" or a "natural born criminal," means nothing and leads to no solution of such problems. We feel that such cases as this one demand the fullest and most complete investigation possible and that the penitentiary authorities should leave no opportunity untouched which might shed light on such tremendously important social, medical and psychological problems.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Recent investigations point to the probability of another murder of a woman found buried a few miles from Oakland.