

1943

Bibliomania

Max Sander

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/jclc>

 Part of the [Criminal Law Commons](#), [Criminology Commons](#), and the [Criminology and Criminal Justice Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Max Sander, *Bibliomania*, 34 *J. Crim. L. & Criminology* 155 (1943-1944)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Northwestern University School of Law Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* by an authorized editor of Northwestern University School of Law Scholarly Commons.

BIBLIOMANIA

Max Scuder¹

Some people think that collecting old books is a kind of mild insanity. The collector, on his side, smiles upon the ignorant who cannot understand the enjoyment of collecting. The philosopher says: *Ne quid nimis*, go not too far. But of all adages this one is the most difficult to follow. The bibliophile is the master of his books, the bibliomaniac their slave. With the development of bibliomania, the friendly, warming flame of a hobby becomes a devastating, ravaging wildfire, a tempest of loosened and vehement passions. We are then in the presence of a pathological, irresistible mental compulsion, which has produced more than one crime interesting enough to be remembered. The most noteworthy concerns a Spaniard, Don Vincente, whose circumstances inspired Gustave Flaubert to write a novel (see his *Oeuvres de Jeunesse Inédites*, vol. I, Paris, 1910).

As a young man, Don Vincente was a monk in the Cisterciens cloister Poblet near Tarragona, and because of his passion for books he was made keeper of the cloister's valuable library. During a political disturbance of the time the cloister was pillaged, and there was good reason to believe that Don Vincente had been familiar with the plunderers. It was hinted that he had shown them the place where the cloister's gold and silver treasures were hidden, in order to secure precious books for himself. Be that as it may, he went to Barcelona and opened a bookshop with a remarkable stock of rare books, which was patronized by all collectors although he almost never sold a really important item. His frugal livelihood and small business expenses could be covered by selling cheaper stock. He was never seen reading a book; only to own them and look at them, to turn over their leaves was of interest to him. When he had a chance to buy a precious book, he was obliged to sell something more substantial from his beloved stock, but even then the buyer almost had to wrench away his acquisition before Don Vincente reluctantly parted with it.

In the middle of 1836 a book auction, eagerly awaited by all collectors, was held at Barcelona. Nothing less than the unique copy of a famous book was offered, *Furs e Ordinacions*, printed at Valencia in 1482 by Lamberto Palmar, the first printer in Spain. Every book collector was prepared to make almost any financial sacrifice for this treasure. The booksellers, taking action against Don Vincente, had formed a syndicate in order to buy the book in

¹The author is a scholar specialized in bibliographical-iconographical research work, with a great number of publications—in book form and in articles in reviews dealing with this branch of science—to his credit. His last work in six monumental volumes was published in New York in 1941.—Address, The Huntington Hotel, Pasadena, Cal.

common, for they knew that it would be lost to the trade forever if it once entered his shop. The bidder for the syndicate was Augustino Patxot, a dealer who had his shop near Don Vincente's. When the famous book was called up in the salesroom, it seemed less a sale than a murderous duel. Patxot was victorious, acquiring the volume for 4,555 reali (about \$300.00). Don Vincente appeared insane at this loss, muttered threats, reeled along the street and did not even take the "reales de consolacion", a small amount of money the highest bidder had to pay the next highest, as was the custom at Spanish auctions.

Three days later, in the middle of the night, the inhabitants of the street were awakened by a fire: Patxot's shop was blazing. When the heaps of ashes were cleared away, a charred body was found. And then began a series of inexplicable and gruesome discoveries. A few weeks later, in a suburb, the corpse of a priest was found pierced by two dagger wounds. There followed other sinister discoveries of the same kind: the bodies of an alderman, a young German literator, a well-known poet, a judge, a municipal official—altogether nine men—and all murdered by stabbing. There were never indications of robbery; the victims' clothes always contained their money and valuables. Political motives, too, seemed to be out of the question, since the murdered men belonged to both of the struggling political parties in Spain. And reasons of personal revenge seemed excluded: all of the men had been peaceful, quiet individuals without personal enemies. But there was one thing they all had in common: they were cultured men, dedicated to learning and reading.

The populace was seized with terror; the wildest rumors were afloat, the most absurd surmises. Finally the rumor spread that a revival of the Inquisition, a secret tribunal of the Saint-Office, had begun. As Don Vincente had done very little to ingratiate himself with his colleagues, intimation of his guilt found willing ears; since he was a former monk, it was easy to associate him with such rumors. The authorities, in order to show the populace that they were not sleeping, ordered a search of his home, at first without any practical results. The sheriff rummaged through his belongings, but found no clues. At last he saw on an upper shelf a book, *Directorium Inquisitorum*. Since the public had connected Don Vincente with this hated institution, and in order not to return quite empty-handed, he ordered his assistant to remove the book. In doing so another book tumbled down, open, at the feet of the officer. He was not a bookman, but, remembering the auction sale and the fire in the buyer's shop, the title was well fixed in his mind. Taking quick action, he arrested Don Vincente, in spite of his protestation that the volume that had been found was another copy of the famous book.

In jail he continued to protest his innocence, notwithstanding the fact that a careful examination of his whole stock had shown that some of his books had belonged to the murdered men. The inquiring magistrate understood the kind of maniac he had to deal with and promised that his books would be taken care of and kept together, though their owner were found guilty. As soon as he believed that there was nothing to fear for his beloved books, he told the plain truth. In court he confessed quietly that he had slipped into Patxot's shop, knowing that the man slept in a back room. He strangled his victim, took the famous book, and set the shop afire. Had he also taken money? asked the president. Insulted, Don Vincente answered: "No, I am not a thief." Had he hated Patxot? "Not at all; in order to get the book I had to strangle him, but I did it without bad feelings." Regarding the other homicides, he declared that the priest had insisted upon buying a book and he had been so weak as to yield. As soon as the priest had gone away, he ran after him, attempting to cancel the deal, but without success. When they arrived in a deserted suburb, still quarreling, he stabbed the priest in order to get the book. "But," he said, "I gave him absolution *in extremis* and then finished him with a second stab."

"Explain the other eight homicides." "Oh, they were very simple. I sold to the amateurs only books I had before carefully deprived of one leaf. After some days they discovered the imperfections, came back with the book to my shop, where I maneuvered them into the back room and finished them with a stab. When night came I removed the corpses to a dark place. The Good Thief assisted me, for my hand never failed." Was he remorseful for having murdered so many men? "Remorse? Why? Every man must die, sooner or later, but good books must be conserved. Therefore I took the greatest care to paste in the leaves I had previously taken out."

To defend himself for the crime of murder seemed to him not even worth-while, but to be considered guilty of having mutilated a precious book—that he could not concede. His lawyer pleaded not guilty, contending that it was out of the question to execute an insane man; besides, there was no real evidence: the confession of a lunatic had no value whatsoever. The confession of his client was full of contradictions, and to prove this assertion he produced a catalogue of a French bookseller who offered another copy of the famous book which had prompted the man to become a criminal. Until that moment the defendant had been quite serene; but as soon as he heard these words he shrieked frantically: "Mr. President, I have committed a dreadful mistake; my copy is not unique!" Until execution he repeated again and again: "My copy is not unique."

It would be difficult to find a more typical example of patho-

logical, unrestrained collecting-compulsion.

Another interesting case is that of a protestant clergyman, Johann Georg Tinius, born in 1764 the son of poor parents in the Saxon village of Stanko. His natural capabilities and an enormous zeal for learning qualified him as early as 1798 for the office of minister; in 1809 he became a pastor in the town of Poserna. He was married twice, had four children and was considered an exemplary family man and clergyman. The passion of this shy and timid man was book-collecting. Although he and his family lived thriftily, he hesitated not a moment when a valuable book was offered, and bought at prices far exceeding his financial capacities.

On February 28, 1812, an elderly, rich merchant at Leipzig received the visit of a clergyman. The visitor offered him his snuff-box, filled with tobacco mixed with narcotics, and proceeded to knock out the brains of his victim, robbing him of 3000 thaler's worth of bonds, which he sold the very next morning at a bank. A year later, on February 8, 1813, a clergyman, also at Leipzig, paid a visit to an old lady, tried to strangle her, but was interrupted as the maid returned home. She saw and recognized the man since she came from a village near his pastorate. At first her story was not believed, but eventually a judicial inquiry was ordered. Not until 1823 did the legal proceedings take place, since, after the Napoleonic Wars, Poserna had become Prussian. The clergyman was sentenced to twelve years' penal servitude, a very mild punishment for one homicide and another attempt at murder. He was also suspected of other attempts at murder by stupefying passengers in mail coaches with narcotized snuff, but there was only circumstantial evidence. In prison he wrote a learned treatise on the Revelation of St. John and a Hebrew dictionary, all from memory and without the help of reference books, a really astonishing achievement. Having served his term in 1835, he died in 1846, a tramp. The money he had stolen after the murder he had used to buy books, nothing but books. After his sentence they were sold. There were seventeen thousand volumes.

Another case which became a European "cause célèbre", was the "Affaire Libri", as the French called it. A good deal has been written about it. In 1803 was born in Florence a young Count, Guglielmo B. T. Libri Carrucci della Sommaia, called afterwards by book historians, "Libri". His family belonged to the oldest aristocracy; one of his ancestors was the poet Feo della Sommaia, one of Petrarch's friends. The young Count's father was a less brilliant ancestor: in 1816 he had been sentenced at Lyon to ten years imprisonment for the forgery of bills. The young man had, then, a rather dangerous blending of inherited qualities: literature and dishonesty. The former bestowed on him an almost miraculous facility for learning; at seventeen years of age, he graduated

as a barrister-at-law, and at twenty he was professor of mathematics at the University of Pisa. Implicated in political troubles, he escaped to Paris and was nominated, when he was twenty-nine, to be professor of mathematics at the famous Sorbonne, at this old and exclusive institution an almost unheard of appointment. He published numerous scientific essays and a history of mathematics, which is interesting even today. In addition to his scientific gifts, he was a most brilliant man, with a great social ability, making numerous influential friends. Among these was even the minister-president, Guizot, who was best man at his wedding. And when the Government created a committee to prepare a great catalogue of all the important old manuscripts in the French public libraries, what better man than the learned scientist could be nominated secretary?

Now he had what he wanted and needed to attain his ends: an open door to all French libraries. He began stealing enormous quantities of precious books for his own private library. But in contrast to the previously mentioned criminals, he was no maniac who wanted only to possess books and cling passionately to them. He was the opposite type, who could very easily detach himself from his treasures, and even made use of an agent, a man with a rather dubious reputation. Among other sales he made to Lord Ashburnham, for forty thousand dollars, were old manuscripts, all stolen from French public libraries. In 1847 he told his friends that he had had enough of collecting books, that it took too much of his time, and that he had decided to hold a big public auction. The catalogue of this first Libri sale is a most interesting bibliographical reference book, which is still used. Nevertheless, some of the books described therein may be forgeries, because it was discovered that he had a regular hired man as professional forger, in order to make the stolen books still more interesting.

At the auction some of the assisting directors of libraries were highly astonished and surprised to see badly-erased library stamps in many of the books. But not all of them were surprised, since ugly rumors had been in circulation. A big scandal was about to break, even though the Count's most influential friends backed him to the limit. On the 4th of February, 1848, a judicial inquiry was ordered. In a session of the Académie des Sciences, one member sent Libri a note saying that he should leave France at once to avert an unwanted scandal. Libri did not need to be asked twice; the next day he was on his way to London. On June 22, 1850 the Tribunal de la Seine sentenced him *in contumaciam* to ten years imprisonment. This still did not end the Affaire Libri. In London he published papers asserting that he was a victim of political intrigues, but at the same time he arranged seventeen public sales of his stolen books. The delay between his flight and the opening

of an official inquiry had given him and his accomplices plenty of time in which to mail the books to England. His name was not connected with several of the auctions. Libri died in 1869 at Fiesole, near Florence. His case is not one of real book-madness, not of an indomitable passion, but the combination of highest learning, cunning and criminality.

Another case, interesting because of the personalities involved, is that of Cardinal Pamfilio, who, since September 15, 1644, was Pope under the name of Innocent X. Tallement des Réaux relates in his indiscreet *Historiettes* the amusing episode of a visit he made to the home of the painter, Daniel du Moustier, his attempt to sneak off with a valuable book. Tallement makes the comment that it is not immoral to steal a book if you keep it for yourself and do not sell it!

Another cardinal, Domenico Passionei, was sent in 1721 to Luzern as Nuntius. He paid numerous visits to the Swiss cloister libraries and it was soon generally known that after his visits some rare book usually disappeared. From then on the librarians kept a strict eye on His Eminency, but he found a way out of this little difficulty: on the plea that he did not wish to be disturbed, he asked to be locked up in the library. Then, through the window, he passed to his faithful servant the books he wanted.

The ancestor of all these men of high position who stopped at nothing in order to obtain a coveted book, was Bishop Richard de Bury, 1287-1345, who admits openly in his famous book, *Philobiblon*, that every end justifies the means when dealing with books. In the course of his public life he practiced real mastery of this doubtful maxim. All these cases are most interesting to psychiatrists and criminologists; but there are also harmless maniacs worth mentioning even if there is not robbery or larceny in connection with their collecting activities. The most amusing has to do with the Frenchman, Antoine Marie Henri Boulard, who lived in Paris from 1754 to 1825. Here also, as in the *Affaire Libri*, we have a youthful prodigy of erudition and zeal for learning, for Boulard was gifted enough to be able to take over his father's law office when he was only eighteen. In 1803 he was elected a member of the Corps Législatif, published works on history and linguistics, and since he was a rich man, established a school for teaching drawing to poor children. His passion for wild bookbuying made him turn over his office to his son and from then on, no longer hampered by the demands of a profession, he devoted all of his time to bookbuying. Quality did not matter to him, only quantity. He bought books by units of measure, by the cubic foot, and by the yard; strolling up and down as he bought books, he always carried a stick with a measuring scale carved upon it. He had his tailor make him a special coat with many pockets, each a specific size

for various books—octavo, quarto and folio. When he went home in the evening, the tall man loaded with books looked like a walking tower, according to a contemporary writer. In a very short time his house was crammed with books from the attic to the cellar, so that his poor wife had to find some way to keep him from buying still more. She persuaded him to start a catalogue, and for some time this expedient worked.

If, for a while, tired of writing, he went for a walk, he carefully avoided the streets where the bookshops were. But if we try to escape the way of temptation, the devil brings it to us. One fine morning he met a boy pushing a hand-barrow loaded with books. What was he doing with them? Boulard asked. The boy answered that he was a clerk at a grocer's and the books were to be used for making paper-bags. Boulard followed the clerk, bought the books and barrow from the grocer, and that was the end of his catalogue. He was again in the grip of his passion. From then on, he did not come home for days; he had to make up for lost time. His wife suspected some love affair, perhaps with a tenant in one of her husband's houses, and sent the maid after him to spy. The girl reported that her employer remained for hours in one house, always the same one. Madame Boulard hurried there to wrest her poor husband from the claws of some bad woman. She found no tenants, not to mention tenantesses; the house, however, was stuffed from top to bottom with books.

On a cold day in April, 1825, he came home, so loaded down with books that he was streaming with perspiration. Instead of changing his clothes, he went ahead with the storing of his books; some days later he died of pneumonia. Five of his houses were found crammed with books. There were eight hundred thousand of them, and most were of the big folio format he cherished most. One hundred and fifty thousand were sold to grocers for paper-bags. Those remaining were catalogued from 1828 until 1833. There were five volumes of catalogues, and the books were sold at auction.

An almost identical case, well-known in England, was that of Sir Richard Heber, born in London in 1773. He was a very rich man as well as a gifted scholar. Unlike Boulard, he wanted quality and not quantity. Nor was he intrigued by a large format; on the contrary his mania was to collect books with small margins. Of each book he tried to get three copies, because, he said, in his opinion, a gentleman should have one copy for show, a second for reading, and a third to be lent to friends. Eight houses in England and the Continent were necessary to lodge all of his book treasures. After his death in 1833, the family arranged to sell the greater part of the collection at auction; the sales lasted one hundred and forty-four days!