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TRIAL OF OSCAR SLATER. Edited by *William Roughead*. 4th ed.; London and Edinburgh, William Hodge and Company, Limited, 1950. Pp. lxiii, 338, appendices, illustrations. \$3.50.

From musty court records bizarre tales more fantastic than fiction, actual dramas more mysterious than artificially concocted fantasies can occasionally be gleaned. Stripped of its tone of ponderous legality and unwieldy detail, the circumstances woven into the *Trial of Oscar Slater* make up such a strange, real-life narrative.

The murder of an aged recluse, Marion Gilchrist, on December 21, 1908 in her Glasgow home was to lead to the "railroading" of an innocent man to prison, to a riddle of crime in which Sir Arthur Conan Doyle himself played Sherlock Holmes, and to an extended controversy in which an unknown German Jew became a Scottish Dreyfus. With an apparent disregard of motive or weapon or opportunity, Oscar Slater, a friendless alien of dubious morals and income, was arrested for the Gilchrist murder on a clue known by the Scottish police to be false. He was identified by methods which were fraudulent and at times a scandalous travesty upon the truth. He was convicted by testimony invoking prejudice and mis-stating facts, and by the prosecution's wilful suppression of evidence adduced to be favorable to the accused. Slater's defense was disfigured by a misdirected charge of the Lord Advocate to the jury, that the defendant's character was such that he was not to have the benefit of the ordinary presumption of innocence.

Courtroom experts agree that the evidence of identity upon a personal impression, however *bona fide*, when relied upon alone, admits of such uncertainty as to increase the liability to legal error. However, the case against Oscar Slater lay solely in the twisted testimony of three identifying witnesses. Three women, possessed of only a fleeting glimpse of the murderer, described originally a man who failed to resemble the accused in one single detail and then, under police prodding, changed their testimony to fit Slater.

Despite the intervention of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in 1912 in which he used Holmesian deductions to establish Oscar Slater's innocence, it was not until 1927, eighteen years after Slater's conviction, that an outraged public opinion forced an act of Parliament to set up a Court of Criminal Appeal for Scotland to review the original trial. The five judges ruled unanimously to quash the verdict. For his unmerited sufferings, Oscar Slater was given a solatium of £6000, final and indisputable testimonial to his innocence.

In spite of the drama of this legal tragedy, the trial testimony and appeal proceedings are lengthy and often tedious to the reader. What the account needs is the fine hand of a skilled writer of fiction. William Roughead, editor of the *Trial*, has described his task to be that "which no editor of any other trial, however notable, will probably be called upon to essay." Yet who knows how many other Oscar Slaters have been judicially wronged and now await their public vindication?

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