

# Another Cantry

by JONATHON GREEN

*Ladies and gentlemen, 'guns and 'gunesses,' likewise 'sbisers' - ahem! (Here Duffy glanced towards the 'shakes.') You see before you - ahem! that is (Duffy had been on the 'maundering lay'), you see around and alongside of you a band of staunch adherents and supporters of old Hinglish 'fakeology.' We have here, I am happy and proud to say, high and distinguished representatives of the different branches of that celebrated and world-renowned profession, and, ladies and gentlemen, 'g's' and 'g'ss,' it warms my heart and makes me feel (here his left 'duke' nervously moved toward the gin measure) as they must have felt in the days of Bold Brennan, Tom King, etc., etc., when the 'bag came off to rights.' Yes, ladies and gentlemen. I feel that 'it is good for us to be here.'*

Leaves from the Diary of a Celebrated Burglar and Pickpocket (1865)

Once upon a time, when a villain was an *upright man* or failing that a *ruffler* or, if specialised, a *counterfeit crank* or perhaps a *jarkman*, those who lived beyond the law did so not merely in deed, but in vocabulary. The first slang collections, those of such 16th century glossarists as Robert Copland, John Awdelay or Thomas Harman, JP, offered not slang in its wider sense, the language that we know today, but the very specific words and phrases that, and we can only take such lists as fact, issued forth from the mouths of the mendicant villains, the 'sturdy beggars' who plied the streets and highways of Elizabethan England. This cant, as it was known, echoing the Latin *cantare*, to sing, and thus the sing-song tones affected by beggars of whatever degree of legitimacy, would continue as a thing apart for the next four centuries. The beggars might have mutated into full-time criminals, but the expanding and ever changing vocabulary of the 'canting crew' still marked the country's ne'er-dowells as well as any notional striped sweater, domino mask or sack marked 'swag' (a word that meant literally 'a bulgy bag' - itself linked to Scandinavian *svagga* or *svaga*, terms for 'sway', as would such a bag; to these early villains, it meant a shop's contents, seen as potential booty).

The vocabularies were discrete, but those that used them formed an increasing, and thus more noticeable subset of society. Villainous beggars had long predated Tudor and Elizabethan England (just as 'civilian' slang speakers had not waited until their vocabulary started appearing in the first slang dictionaries towards the late 17th century, for slang to be a regularly spoken lexicon) but it was their increasingly obvious presence in daily life that led the pioneering glossarists to set down the core of their language. Some of those words are extant today: *booze* for drink is the best-known, but *margery prater* for hen or *yarrum* for milk are long gone. People, it was felt, needed to know what these bad lots were saying. As the

lexicographer Elisha Coles would note, when in 1676 his *English Dictionary* became the first mainstream work to acknowledge this arcane vocabulary, "Tis no disparagement to understand the canting Terms. It may chance to save your throat from being cut, or (at least) your Pocket from being pickt.' Perhaps so, although few victims would be likely, as the villains did their work, to be busily consulting their canting dictionary, like some tourist brandishing a phrasebook far from home. In any case the mainstream remained chary of slang, whether 'civilian' or cant. Coles had taken his vocabulary from Richard Head's *Canting Academy* (1673) and it was among such lists that it would stay: not be until the appearance of the all-encompassing *Oxford English Dictionary* would a 'standard' work fully admit the villain's words. (Although even here, in many cases, the citations relied more on recycling older slang dictionaries than in original reading). The conservative Samuel Johnson, unsurprisingly, was loathe to acknowledge the stuff, and while his adjuration to 'clear your mind of cant' referred to the religious sort, his lexicography seems, punningly, to have absorbed the edict: his *Dictionary* is a cant-free zone (but Johnson was consistent in his rejection of anything that he regarded as a usurper to the throne of pure English. Among the many apparently 'standard' words he deplored were *conundrum*, *to doff*, *doings*, *to dumbfound*, *a fuss*, *gambler*, *glum*, *ignoramus*, and up to 800 more.)

Thus the collection of cant remained a specialist task, just as its use remained a specialist preoccupation. One might occasionally, such as in Dekker and Middleton's 1611 play *The Roaring Girdle*, be faced with characters who talked nothing else, but that was showing off by the playwright and must have been well nigh incomprehensible to the average audience. The 'Roaring Girdle' herself, Moll Cutpurse (the real-life pseudonym of the pickpocket Mary Frith who may, since she was alive at the time, have

even seen the play), meets a fellow low-lifer and puts him through an interrogation: Moll: And Tearcat, what are you? a wild rogue, and angler or a ruffler...? Trapdoor: I have, by the salomon, a doxy that carries a kinchin mort in her slate at her back, besides my dell and my dainty wild dell, with all whom I'll tumble this next darkmans in the strommel, and drink ben bouse, and eat a fat grunting cheat, a cackling cheat and a quacking cheat... All good stuff no doubt - no less than sixteen discrete cant terms in this brief example and the whole scene carries on in the same way - but it reads less like a feasible dialogue and more like a cursorily dramatized slang glossary, bereft only of alphabetical order and explanatory definitions.

But so it would go. Other than in the mouths of its actual speakers, cant remained a lexicographer's concern. A few authors would essay the canting lingo, such as Ainsworth, with his 19th century reconstructions of 18th century lowlife, in such 'Newgate novels' as *Rookwood* (1834) and *Jack Sheppard* (1839), whose anti-heroes surely offer up more carefully itemised canting orations than even the most dedicated real-life 18th century *dark engineer* or *rake-jakes* would have attempted. Similar works came from Bulwer Lytton (*Paul Clifford* 1830 - that of the classic opening line: 'It was a dark and stormy night' - and *Eugene Aram* 1832), and of course Dickens, who owned to a 'horrible fascination' with London's most sinister jail and whose own contribution to the genre was *Oliver Twist* (1837-8), although this villainy was reasonably contemporary. Other sources of the lexicon might be found in the police court reports of the press. Villains would occasionally deliver themselves of terms that would have the magistrate begging a definition - and getting it. And there were the expanding procession of sociologists - Henry Mayhew and his brother Augustus, and the indefatigable James Greenwood being prime examples - whose diggings would inevitably unearth and identify the occasional canting term. Yet criminal memoirs, first person, real-life excursions into this rarified vocabulary remained as elusive as ever. There were a few: the adventures of the self-styled 'King of the Beggars' Bampfylde Moore Carew proved a longterm bestseller, running into many editions from its first appearance in 1745, but even here, the vocabulary exists mainly in the glossary appended to the melodramatics, and this, again, seems to have been imported wholesale from Richard Head.

There remains one, perhaps unique exception to this relative desert: the serial appearance in 1863-4 and subsequent book publication in 1865, in New York of *Leaves from the Diary of a Celebrated Thief and Pickpocket*. It is, although more a detailed memoir than a diary as such, just what it says, even if the breathless subtitle, 'Incidents, Hairsbreadth Escapes and Remarkable Adventures' was presumably a sub-editor's addition. There are, as far as can be ascertained, but two extant copies of the book. Both reside on microfilm, one in the British Library, one in the

Library of Congress. This work, running to 178 double-columned pages, in the tiny print that was typical of the era, was published in 1865 by the *New York Police Gazette*, a weekly extravaganza of legshows and larceny, not a million miles from today's *Loaded* and its laddish peers. Like its near contemporary, London's *Sporting Times* or 'Pink 'Un', it was for a period printed on pink stock. Its ads were 'of the most disreputable kind', its features naturally covered crime, and added scandals, hangings, 'news' stories that promoted the bizarre above the topical, along with pictures of burlesque queens in tights, boxing and racing news, and much more of the same. It was not available at most reputable newsstands, but it was to be found in practically every one of those all-male refuges, the barroom and barber shop, in America. That the *Gazette* should take on the 'Celebrated Thief and Pickpocket' was hardly surprising. Given its preoccupations, the magazine was inevitably a great repository of slang. This was doubtless encouraged by its owner, the ertswhile chief of the New York police, that '300 lbs. of blubber and meanness', George Washington Matsell. Matsell was a figure of dedicated and highly lucrative corruption (whether as New York's Jonathan Wild - personally fencing the stolen goods he had confiscated from the robbers who had first obtained them; running a money-spinning 'referral' trade, passing on arrested people to a coterie of lawyers who paid him a kickback for every new client, or working as the sleeping partner of the well-known, and much vilified, abortionist and specialist in contraception Madame Restell). But he was well-versed in both criminals and their language. In 1859 his *Vocabulum* or 'Rogues's Lexicon' had been America's first slang dictionary (for all that it is little more than a marginally expanded version of Pierce Egan's 1823 edition of Captain Francis Grose's *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (itself first published in 1785).

*Leaves* has, it must be assumed, slipped through the lexicographers' searching fingers. It eluded the doyen of cant collection, Eric Partridge, whose *Dictionary of the Underworld* (1949; 1961) would surely have feasted on its hundreds of possible citations, many of them of words hitherto unlisted. In the extra-dictionary context it is unmentioned by those two modern cataloguers of the 19th century New York underworld Irving Lewis Allen (*The City in Slang* 1993) and Luc Sante (*Low Life*, 1992) and indeed by Herbert Asbury, on whose *Gangs of New York* (1927, and the basis, however distant, of the eponymous movie) both of them draw. However, one must be fair: *Leaves*, for all that it is published in the States, is a British story. The author of this first-hand memoir remains anonymous, although he names a variety of confederates, and seems to have little compunction in detailing villainy in a variety of British locations (London, Scotland, Yorkshire) and northern France. The one person who did take notice has been Gerald Cohen of the University of Missouri-Rolla. Professor Cohen is publisher of both the regular bulletin *Comments on Etymology* (much if not all slang-related) and

the less frequent *Studies in Slang*. At some stage in the late 1970s he happened on *Leaves* and in over a decade's worth of *CoE* began publishing a detailed and throughgoing glossary of the terms therein. As he has pointed out, there is but one reference to the author's identity in the entire memoir, 'and even that one may not have been conclusive.' What seems to have happened is that this mid-19th century villain, a veteran of the British crime scene, finally fled his native land, where things had become distinctly 'hot'. He pitched up in New York and for a while continued much as before. But here too he became known. As Professor Cohen puts it, 'At some point he wanted to go straight, but what sort of employment could he find, when all his past professional activities had centered around stealing? Solution: write his memoirs for the National Police Gazette - which as NYC's tabloid journal of the 19th century specialized in crime stories - but without revealing his identity.'

*Leaves* is quite as fascinating and as dense in criminal language as anything ever published. It seems, unlike some of the modern 'hard man' memoirists who hymn their years of criminality in terms that one might feel owe more to the film script they hope to sell than to their actual speech patterns, absolutely without artifice. There is an unself-conscious use of the contemporary cant - or as unselfconscious as it can be when every single instance is bookended with a pair of apostrophes. But the quote-marks soon vanish into the background: this, surely, is how our Burglar spoke. As for the 'incidents and adventures', they are undoubtedly there, albeit a little repetitive, as are the 'escapes', even if the Burglar and 'Joe', his main confederate do serve a few months in jail. What matters, at least to the lexicographer, is of course the vocabulary. There are well over one thousand terms on offer. Among them are these:

*Bartemy*: a whore, from the edible 'Bartemy dolls' sold at Bartholemew Fair; *bedstead bloomer*, a chamberpot; *bludgent* (or *bludgeat*, *bludgeon*, *bludget*), a thug who works with a prostitute: she lures a victim into an alley; he beats and robs him; *brocky* (plus *brocky-faced* or *brocky-mugged*), ugly, from 'brock', a badger; the *Cockney's breakfast*, of gin or brandy and soda; the wide criminal use of *cross*, as in dishonestly or dishonestly come by, with its extensions *cross*

*cop*, a corrupt policeman, *cross cove*, a robber, *cross crib* or *cross drum*, a public house frequented by thieves, *crossman*, a confidence trickster, *cross moll*, a whore who robs her client, and *cross mug*, a villain, lit, (one with a) 'villainous face'. *Dike*, for lavatory occurs some 60 years before its next appearance, and that in a slang dictionary; the *dipping duke* is that with which one pick pockets, the *goosing crib* or *slum* are both brothels; a *farewell sally* is a draught of liquor, *Jack-the-wrong-man* is a policeman and the *Land o'Cakes* is Scotland. The *lardbag*, from its smoothness, is the skull, *Mr Ferguson!* means the coppers are coming; *loosables* is phlegm in the throat, *nammous* means to leave, from the backslang *nammous!*, someone (is coming)!, thus *namaser* is one who absconds or something, usually money, that has disappeared. The *picking up lay* involves posing as a prostitute but actually luring a victim into the hands of a male companion, who would beat and rob him; a *pinching-do* is an arrest, a *pipemaker* is a detective, he 'pipes' or looks at his target, *scammery* means drunk, *shisevag* is something worthless (an extension of the very common *shise*, useless, fake). A *spark-fawney* is a diamond ring and a *ridge-super* a gold watch. *Splodger* (rhymes with 'codger') is an old man, *tingalaro* an upright hand-organ, *turper*, presumably from 'moral turpitude' means a prostitute, *can't tell Q from a bed-wrench* denotes stupidity and *where the Irishman hid his shilling* is the anus.

All, one must assume, were common, if only in criminal circles. All, 'dike' is the single exception and that is hardly common, have vanished. Bereft of *Minder*, of the popularising effects of laddish fantasies of modern 'gangster' novelists or moviemakers, the criminal vocabulary of 1865 might never have existed. Yet all thrived once, meant some thing, were real, 'working' words. A professional vocabulary, a jargon vital for mutual comprehension. We live in a world of instant communications. The slang that once took decades to move from its originators to its mass consumers now takes weeks, thanks to TV, to movies, to records, to the Internet. The celebration of criminals, always part of popular culture, but never nearly so enthusiastic, has meant that this once utterly private language, whether that of the 17th or 19th century, is almost as accessible as any other. It isn't just the tingalaro that's gone.

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