

Race to the Bottomley

by Theodore Dalrymple



Horatio Bottomley addressing a World War I recruiting rally in Trafalgar Square, London, September 1915.

I have a soft spot for swindlers—as observer rather than as victim of their activities, of course. Almost by definition they are charming and polite, for these are usually prerequisites of their *métier*, as bravery is the prerequisite of that of soldiers. Swindlers are generally intelligent and even talented, and the purists among them would rather make a small but dishonest fortune than a large but honest one. With them, to cheat is a matter both of pride and of principle. This is integrity, or at least consistency, of a kind.

A prisoner in the prison in which many years ago I worked as a doctor came into my consulting room with a volume of Wittgenstein under his arm.

“You are in for fraud, I see,” said I. The deduction was not at all remarkable. Burglars do not read Wittgenstein.

One of the great British swindlers of the late nineteenth and

early twentieth centuries was a man called Horatio Bottomley (1860–1933). He was exceptional, though one cannot help but wonder whether his given name helped him on his way, since anyone called Horatio is bound to connect himself with the single-handed defense of bridges or with naval battles rather than with safe and humble careers such as clerk in an insurance office. Conversely, “Bottomley” as a surname precluded art as a career.

Bottomley’s origins were not altogether auspicious. He was born in Bethnal Green in the East End of London in 1860. His father was a tailor’s cutter who drank heavily, had once been admitted to a lunatic asylum probably with delirium tremens, and died of a recurrence when Horatio was three. His mother died not long after, and by the age of four Horatio was an orphan.

His mother had been a close friend—just how close is not known—of Charles Bradlaugh, the militant secularist who, repeatedly elected to parliament but refusing to take any oath that mentioned God, would at his meetings stride on to the stage and challenge the deity to strike him dead in five minutes. Horatio strongly resembled Bradlaugh, and it was sometimes suspected that he was Bradlaugh’s offspring, though, if so, Bradlaugh never recognized him as such, as almost certainly he would have done had he known of his paternity.

The young Horatio went to live with his maternal uncle George Jacob Holyoake, a radical propagandist, the editor of a rationalist and socialist review, the coiner of the terms “secularism” and “jingoism,” one of the founders of the cooperative movement that is still in existence today, and the author of a two-volume memoir, *Sixty Years of an Agitator’s Life* (1892). (Horatio’s other maternal uncle was the fairly successful painter William Holyoake, whose portrait of his brother shows him to have been a respectable Victorian bourgeois gentleman.)

When Horatio was eight, however, George Jacob, who had large numbers of children of his own and could not afford any longer to keep him, sent him to the Josiah Mason Orphanage in Birmingham, where he remained until he ran away aged fourteen. Horatio did not shine academically at the orphanage, perhaps because he was too brilliant to have done so. But he must have been well taught there, the orphanage having been run in a comparatively enlightened way, and he was probably not too miserable either, for he remained attached to the orphanage and never failed to visit it when he was nearby, even making detours in his itinerary to do so.

He ran away to London to seek his fortune—or, in the event, other people's fortunes. In many ways, his life had parallels with that of the somewhat later pulp-fiction writer Edgar Wallace. And like Dickens before him, Horatio became an accomplished shorthand writer, so good that he was offered the partnership in a company that produced transcripts for the courts. In this way, Horatio learned a lot about the law, often appearing for himself in the more than one hundred twenty lawsuits in which he was subsequently involved, and often defeating in court the most famous advocates of his day. On one occasion, his performance was so brilliant that the judge called him into his chambers afterwards and suggested that he should read for the bar.

Horatio attended debating societies in the East End of London and became an accomplished speaker—or demagogue. He launched a company that published the proceedings of the societies and never looked back from there as a company promoter. In the course of his life he launched at least seventy-seven companies, most of them soon liquidated, restructured, or declared bankrupt, to the great loss of the shareholders but to the great (if only temporary) enrichment of one Horatio Bottomley. In his career, he is estimated to have raised the modern equivalent of two billion dollars, practically all of it lost. Between 1891 and 1922 he had 256 petitions for

bankruptcy filed against him, though he was personally bankrupted only three times in his life. He so restructured his companies—which varied greatly in supposed activity, from distant mines to rubber plantations to printing ventures and newspapers to timber plantations to hotels to oil companies to finance corporations to theater productions—that tracing the precise course of his financial operations makes the labyrinth seem like the shortest distance between two points. Among his other techniques was that of selling the same shares to two or more different people, explaining the problem, when an explanation was called for, by mere administrative muddle.

His career was wonderfully varied and colorful. He was always short of cash but lived palatially or even pharaonically. Though his country house had six gardeners and he kept (most unsuccessfully) many racehorses, he would beg of his guests £50, of which he said—no doubt truthfully—that he stood at that moment in desperate need. While preaching strict morality, he kept a harem of women. He would sometimes spend—and lose—the equivalent of hundreds of thousands of dollars a day betting at the races (racing debts being the only ones he ever felt morally obliged to honor) and he so loved champagne that he probably consumed at least \$2 million of it in his lifetime, becoming so addicted that he could not function without it. At his trial in 1922, he asked for an adjournment at eleven in the morning so that he could drink some and thus continue to function (it was granted).

He tried to enter parliament at the age of thirty-one, in 1891, doing well in the poll but nevertheless failing. He did win a seat in 1906, however; during the election he paraded his racehorses through the streets of his constituency bearing slogans in his favor, and in those days such signs of worldly success did not evoke envy or resentment but were admired and rather spoke in his favor. Once elected, he was so good a speaker that none of his fellow members of the House of Commons wanted to miss his speeches, and as sophisticated a

lawyer and politician as F. E. Smith (later Lord Birkenhead) believed that Bottomley was the finest parliamentary orator of the latter's time, which was not long, however. In 1912, after a trial the year before for the recovery of monies that Bottomley had, in effect, embezzled, he was bankrupted, and since no undischarged bankrupt was allowed to sit in parliament, he was compelled to resign.

Bottomley was far from crushed: he was more like a cork that bobs up after being pushed for a moment under the water. While still a Member of Parliament, he had begun to publish a wildly patriotic, not to say xenophobic, weekly journal called John Bull that soon had a circulation of half a million, and for which he was the leading writer. He had become by far the most famous journalist in the country.

His generosity—admittedly with what, ultimately, was other people's money—was legendary. He distributed food to the poor and arranged outings for them (which he attended himself), and no one with a hard-luck story ever wrote to him in vain.

When war broke out, he was against it—for about a week—until he caught the patriotic fervor, and not only did he find a rich vein for his articles in ultra-patriotism and the desirability of hanging the Kaiser and dismembering Germany, but he also became an inspirational and fiery patriotic speaker, encouraging young men to join up (before conscription rendered such encouragement redundant). He claimed that he was not paid for his speeches, and that any money raised went straight to funds for the assistance of the wounded soldiers; in fact he made about \$2 million in today's money by them, and at least much from his flag-wagging journalism during the war. This, unfortunately, was far from sufficient for his needs, which always exceeded his means.

Although he had no religious belief whatsoever, he thought it expedient to give a religious, or religiose, tone to his public declarations. He tailored his speeches to his fees: the

larger the fee, the more exalted the tone. We now find his manner of tub-thumping in the midst of general slaughter both repellent and ridiculous, but at the time it was found inspiring:

It may be—I do not know and I do not profess to understand—that this is the great Audit of the Universe, that the Supreme Being has ordered the nations of the earth to decide who is to lead in the van of human progress. If the British Empire resolves to fight the Battle cleanly, to look upon it as Something More than an ordinary war, we shall realize that it has not been in vain, and We, the British Empire, as the Chosen Leaders of the World, shall travel along the road of Human Destiny and Progress, at the end of which we shall see the patient figure of the Prince of Peace pointing to the Star of Bethlehem which leads us to God.

This was known as his “Prince of Peace” speech, and you only got it if receipts for the night were of sufficient size.

Bottomley regarded himself as a valuable recruiter for the British army and asked the prime minister at the time, H. H. Asquith, for a government position, to which Asquith replied, with a feline kind of double entendre, that he thought Bottomley would be of greater value outside the government.

Asquith was not taken in by Bottomley, though he did nothing to halt him, unlike a socialist called C. H. Norman. In common with Bottomley, Norman had been a shorthand writer for the courts, but he was soon to be imprisoned for his uncompromising pacifism, put in a straitjacket, and force-fed (he lived to be eighty-eight, dying in 1974). In 1915, Norman published a pamphlet titled Horatio Bottomley Exposed, in which he quoted from some of the legal judgments made against Bottomley, for example Lord Justice Moulton’s in 1911:

I confess that such a series of transactions [as Bottomley’s] as it has been my duty to travel through in this case I have

never seen before. In the course of a somewhat long professional life I have known many Company-mongers, many Company promoters, and many dealers in shares, but I confess I have never seen a transaction which has impressed me more deeply than this one.

As for Bottomley's journalistic ethics, they were exposed in the case against the solicitor who acted for Dr. Hawley Harvey Crippen, the most famous murderer of the first decade of the twentieth century. Bottomley, through John Bull, paid for Crippen's defense, on condition that the solicitor procure Crippen's written confession of his crime should he be found guilty. Bottomley had absolutely no scruples in publishing a gross and clear forgery.

Norman's pamphlet sold very widely, and the problem for Bottomley was that all its allegations were true. But he was a resourceful and inventive man, admirably so in a way: he persuaded a printer in Birmingham, for a fee, to print six copies of the pamphlet, and then to offer no defense in a suit against him for libel. The judge and jury in the case were completely taken in, and Bottomley was awarded substantial damages that he never claimed, instead paying the printer the sum agreed beforehand. Fearing a suit against them, the publishers of Norman's original pamphlet issued an apology to Bottomley; thus was the pamphlet discredited, though it contained nothing but the truth.

Bottomley's downfall came through frauds audacious and gross even by his high, or low, standards. He had exhausted the possibilities of bilking the rich who no longer trusted him; now he turned his attentions to the poor, in the process confirming the dictum of the sixteenth-century German bishop who said that the poor were a gold mine.

He had discovered the possibilities of sweepstakes in the years before the war. His method was simple: he arranged the winners beforehand. In one sweepstakes, for example, he

announced that the first prize of £25,000 (perhaps sixty times as much in today's money) was a blind widow of Toulouse called Madame Glukad, who was actually the sister of one of his associates. After much initial publicity, she disappeared from view, allegedly to escape all the offers of marriage she had received. In fact, she had been paid £250, with Bottomley keeping the rest (which he had almost certainly spent beforehand).

During and immediately after the war, Bottomley offered the estimated million and a half readers of John Bull a bond of up to £5 each. The scheme was a simple one: Bottomley said that he would invest the money he received in government stock, and every six months would raffle off the interest with big prizes. The original stakes would be returnable in full on demand.

Astonishingly in view of his record, these bonds were subscribed to in huge numbers. Bottomley used the money received to get himself discharged from bankruptcy and re-elected as a member of parliament, to buy two failing newspapers (which continued to fail), on betting and high living, as well as on donations to the poor of his constituency.

One of his previous associates, Reuben Bigland, whose sister had been a beneficiary of a Bottomley sweepstakes, was stricken with conscience at all this barefaced robbery of the poor and turned with ferocity against Bottomley. (His conscience may have been awakened partly by Bottomley's refusal to join him in an enterprise to turn water into gasoline by means of a chemical powder.) Bigland wrote a series of pamphlets attacking Bottomley, perhaps the most memorable being titled What Horatio Bottomley Has Done for His Country and the Wounded Soldiers. It has, I think, a strong claim to being the most eloquent pamphlet ever published. It consisted of the title and twenty-four blank pages.

One of Bigland's pamphlets, however, contained detailed allegations (practically all true) that Bottomley felt had to be answered, and, like Oscar Wilde before him, he took the unwise step of suing for criminal libel. An acquittal of Bigland would almost certainly lead to the conviction of Bottomley, and so it transpired. Aged sixty-two, he was sentenced to seven years' imprisonment, of which, in the event, he served five.

When he arrived in prison, he was so fat that could not remove his own shoes or trousers. (On a morale-boosting visit to the front during the war—Bottomley and his John Bull were immensely popular with the troops—the general with whom Bottomley was touring told him, when some firing began, to get down on his stomach, but Bottomley refused on the grounds that to do so would make him a bigger target than he was when erect.) When Bottomley was first given his prison bread and cocoa in late afternoon, he turned it down, saying that he would rather wait for dinner, not realizing that the bread and cocoa was dinner.

There were no prison clothes to fit him, and until they could be made, he remained in the prison hospital. As perhaps was to be expected of a man of his commanding personality, he was soon granted respect, and the prison warders addressed him as "Sir." When the chaplain found Bottomley sewing mail bags, he said, "Ah, Bottomley, sewing?" "No, padre," Bottomley replied, "Reaping."

He was much diminished when he emerged from prison, and not only in girth and weight. He tried to start a new journal, John Blunt, but it quickly failed. He tried to revive a speaking career, but the world had moved on, and in one of his biographies there is a photograph of him, on stage not long before he collapsed and died aged seventy-two, in which he looks not pompous and bombastic, as he did in his salad days, but pathetic and supplicatory. One cannot but feel for him what one feels for Richard II.

Bottomley published a book of prison poems after his release, called *Songs of the Cell*, with a preface by Lord Alfred Douglas, who after all had a strong personal connection with prison poetry. Bottomley was in apostolic succession, as it were, to A. E. Housman and Oscar Wilde in their poetic accounts of execution by hanging:

And naked to the hangman's noose

The morning clocks will ring

A neck God made for other use

Than strangling in a string. [Housman]

We waited for the stroke of eight:

Each tongue was thick with thirst:

For the stroke of eight is the stroke of Fate

That makes a man accursed,

And Fate will use a running noose

For the best man and the worst. [Wilde]

Three Sabbath days the sentence gave

For penitence his soul to save;

And then to march to gallows shed—

By neck to hang—till he be dead. [Bottomley]

In "A Death," Bottomley recounts the death in prison of a young man wounded in France during the war:

The warders with uncovered head

Walked slowly past my cell;

And then I knew the lad was dead—

The lad we all liked well:

A lad who played a hero's part

In Flanders with the best;

Pierced lung and shattered nerves and heart,

And shrapnel in his chest;

An arm, too, left upon the field—

A present to the Hun—

Aye all that sacrifice could yield

This criminal had done.

The lad committed a minor crime:

Then, by the only arm he had,

They dragged him into court;

The case, they said, was very bad—

The trial was very short.

And thus to Wormwood Scrubs he came

(For such there's always room)

A number now, and not a name;

His "working tools"—a broom . . .

Then:

One day we missed him from his round;

Lung haemorrhage, they said—

They found him choking on the ground,

And brought him in to bed.

And day and night he sighed and groaned,

And struggled hard for breath,

And coughed, and bled, and cried, and moaned;

We knew it meant but death.

“Don’t let me die in here!” he cried—

“When will the order come?”

(His wife and brothers had applied

For leave to take him home.)

They told him it was on the way,

But life was ebbing fast;

“Thank God—Thank God,” he just could say—

“I’m—going—home—at last.”

He spoke no more; another home

Was found for him that day;

The Chariot of Death had come

To take our boy away.

And then, surprisingly, the man who had prided himself so greatly on being the county’s most effective recruiting sergeant adds:

And during restless hours that night,

Half waking, half in trance,

I wondered—Did I wrong or right?

I sent that boy to France.

Bottomley takes us on a tour of the prison hospital; after visiting twelve cells:

Afraid we mustn't go in there—

What means that dreadful yell?

Just take a peep through this small hole—

You'll see the padded cell.

Ah! now he's singing songs and hymns,

And soon he'll laugh or cry—

Oh yes, we often get them there,

They call it gpi.

gpi: General Paralysis of the Insane, the last stage of neurosyphilis. Bottomley's description exactly fits one of the only two cases I ever saw as a doctor, and her dreadful screams ring in my mind's ear still; I can conjure them up mentally forty-five years later.

In the next cell:

Observe this shrivelled up old man

Who sleeps through night and day—

And soon will sleep for evermore—

Advance senile decay!

They brought him in from Workhouse ward,

His sentence, "One month hard";

His crime—they found a false return

On Old Age Pension Card!

Of course such frauds must be put down—

Sans favour and sans fear;

There's one thing, though, I must explain—

He doesn't know he's here.

There's one thing though, I must explain: the case to which Lord Justice Moulton referred was that of a senile man in his eighties whom Bottomley had cheated of the equivalent of something like \$5,000,000. Was Bottomley, then, simply a heartless opportunist, a total hypocrite, or a man genuinely remorseful? Or was his mind so compartmentalized that he was unable to make any connections between the compartments? Without any knowledge of Bottomley's life, I would have sworn that these poems were both sincere and deeply felt. But, as it is, he remains for me an enigma, as in the last resort I suppose we all are. The enigma is captured by a gift inscription in my copy of *The Real Horatio Bottomley* by Henry Houston, for years one of Bottomley's closest aides and confidants, published in 1923. "Copy this man," it says, "and you will get there." But where is there: the height of fame, or the notoriety of prison?

One thing is certain. When Bottomley was penniless and ailing unto death, he was looked after by his favorite mistress, Peggy Primrose, the love of his life, a minor failed actress upon whose career he had spent a fortune trying to promote. She stayed with him until he died. She provided a wreath of red roses at his funeral (for which she paid) with the message "Rest, beloved. I am so glad you worked out the Karma." She was overcome with grief as they led the coffin away.

At the very least, Bottomley must have been fun to be with. But then that is how a murderer who had dismembered the body of his best friend once described himself to me—fun to be

with.

First published in the