

## **Dr John Dollar: The First Criminal Psychologist in Fiction**

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**E. W - . Hornung's forgotten 'crime doctor', John Dollar.**

Dr John Dollar is a fictional detective with a difference. He is, as one of the characters in *The Crime Doctor* puts it, 'a medical expert in criminology'. He is the forerunner to the fictional criminal psychologists we see in modern police procedural television dramas, probably most famously *Cracker*, the ITV drama created by Jimmy McGovern and starring Robbie Coltrane as Dr Edward 'Fitz' Fitzgerald, a criminal psychologist who helps the Manchester police to investigate crimes.

In the first story in *The Crime Doctor*, which is largely an introduction to Dr John Dollar's history and his methods, he tells the Home Secretary, Topham Vinson:

'It is impossible,' replied the enthusiast, duly drawn, 'to define the scope of an embryonic science. When the crime doctor has come to stay—as he will—I can see him playing a Protean part with the full sanction of his profession and of the law. He will be preventive officer, private detective, and father confessor in one, if not even privileged accessory after some awful fact. The humbler pioneer can hope for no such powers; his only chance is to work in the dark on his own lines, to use his own judgment and to take his own risks as I've done to-night. If he really can save a man by screening him, let him do it and blow the odds! If he can stop a thing without giving it away, all the better for everybody, and if he fails to stop it all the worse for him! Let him be a law unto his patient and himself, but let him stand the racket if his law won't work.'

This idea of the criminal psychologist as a 'father confessor' looks back to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, who often found himself adopting such a role when he confronted a criminal with proof of their guilt; but it also anticipates the police crime dramas of the last few decades. In a television interview, the creator of *Cracker*, Jimmy McGovern, observed that the interrogation scenes between Robbie Coltrane's Fitz and the criminal were like a form of Catholic confession. Hornung, with Dr John Dollar, seems to have prefigured such an idea.

The notion of preventing a crime before it has been committed, merely thought, obviously carries us into potentially unsettling territory: the world of thoughtcrime (popularised by George Orwell in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, of course, although the term actually predates Orwell), and to science-fiction dystopias such as Philip K. Dick's *Minority Report*, where people are arrested before they have even carried out an intended crime and have merely thought about it. But Dollar's motives are not sinister but well-meaning, even if the stories tend to talk about how this crime prevention might happen more than they show it actually happening.

Hornung had already enjoyed considerable literary success with his series of stories involving Raffles, the gentleman thief or amateur cracksman, whose partnership with Bunny was supposedly inspired by Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas ('Bunny' suggests, among other things, 'Bunbury', the name of the alibi given in Wilde's play about men who lead a double life, *The Importance of Being Earnest*). Hornung was also the brother-in-law of Conan Doyle, adding an extra biographical frisson to his creation of a cunning criminal as a counterpoint to Doyle's master of deduction (or, more strictly, induction), Sherlock Holmes. Hornung's subsequent invention of his own fictional detective in the form of Dr John Dollar shows the Raffles creator

seeking to cross over to the right side of the law, but to avoid unfair comparisons between his own sleuth and his brother-in-law's already iconic detective. Whereas Sherlock Holmes tends to wait on the data before he embarks on a case, Dr John Dollar seeks to predict the crime, and prevent it, by knowing the criminal's mind. Sherlock Holmes has little time for new-fangled psychology: hard, physical evidence is the stuff he prefers to work with. Dollar, his very name suggesting the New World across the Atlantic, embraces the new emerging science of psychology and psychoanalysis (he calls himself an 'alienist', which is really an early word for a psychoanalyst in the mould of Sigmund Freud), showing a progressive approach to the detection of crime.

Are the Dr John Dollar stories any good? They appear to have been only mildly successful when first published, and Hornung never wrote any more. Perhaps he felt he'd done everything he could do with the character before he began to repeat himself. They are, in many ways, interesting failures: they lack the dramatic excitement of a Sherlock Holmes adventure and Dollar, although based on a promising concept, lacks the charisma and quirks (or, indeed, endearing flaws) of Holmes. But fans of detective fiction from the Edwardian era and just beyond, before Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers arrived and ushered in the golden age of the genre, can find the Dr John Dollar stories of E. W. Hornung available online [here](#).

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