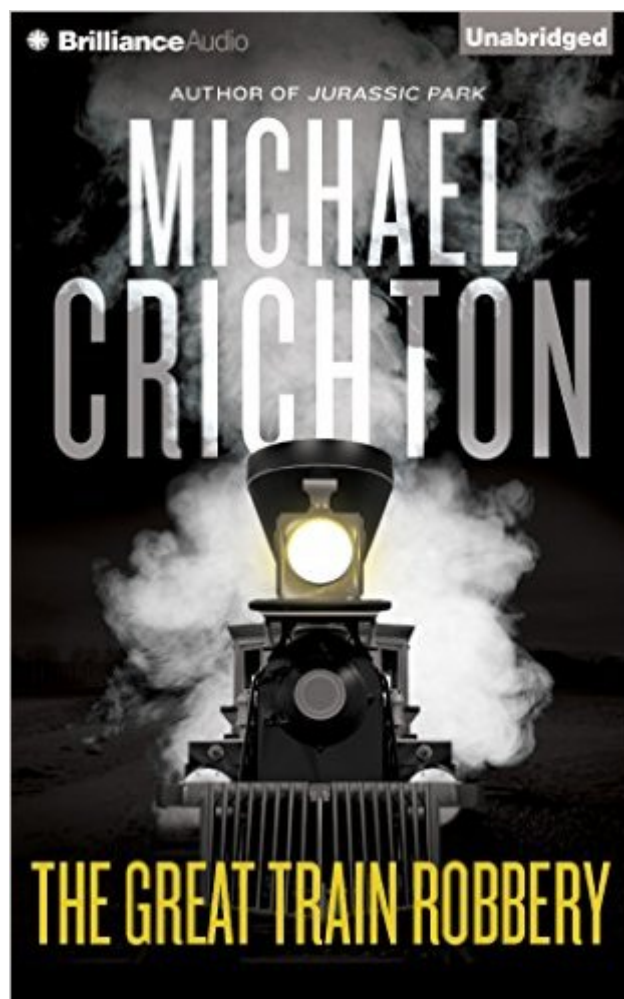


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The Great Train Robbery



Synopsis

In teeming Victorian London, where lavish wealth and appalling poverty live side by side, Edward Pierce charms the most prominent of the well-to-do as he cunningly orchestrates the crime of the century. Who would suspect that a gentleman of breeding could mastermind the daring theft of a fortune in gold? Who could predict the consequences of making the extraordinary robbery aboard the pride of England's industrial era, the mighty steam locomotive? Based on fact, as lively as legend, and studded with all the suspense and style of a modern fiction master, here is a classic caper novel set a decade before the age of dynamite—yet nonetheless explosive. Michael Crichton wrote and directed the screen adaptation of *The Great Train Robbery*, starring Sean Connery and Donald Sutherland.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This true story set in Victorian London in 1855 is a beauty of a read. With Michael Crichton weaving his magic over the scene and Edward Pierce, mastermind and protagonist, we have an unbeatable combination. The author does wonders describing authentic period scenes and showing us the huge divide between the English middle class and the wretched poor in Victorian times. Edward Pierce wants 12,000 pounds sterling that will be sent by rail to fund the Crimean War. The obstacles are huge. It takes four keys to get to and unlock the safe. This was before the days of nitroglycerine, so the safe could not be blown, and it was too heavy to carry away. All four keys are held by separate persons and must be found and copied. The thieves have to get the payload unseen off of a moving train. Mr. Pierce has a hazy background, presents himself as a wealthy traveling

businessman with a fine home in London, a well-dressed gentleman with an appreciation of the finer things. As we get to know him better, we learn he has nerves of steel, a quick and clever wit, and is relentless planner with infinite patience. He is blessed with a mysterious mistress, Miriam, whose acting abilities could put Meryl Streep to shame. The suspense and tension as Pierce and his accomplice, Robert Algar, work for a solid year on their plan is riveting. Naturally, when the heist takes place, even the most careful plans have to change with unforeseen circumstances. Will they get away with it? Read it and see. The author puts us in the skins of Victorian people of the time. For instance, the police department is only 25 years old. London citizens were accustomed to being very hands-on when a crime is committed. Not like today when one's first thought is to call the police.

Drawing heavily from court records and testimony, Crichton's novel of historical fiction recreates the ingenious planning and execution of perhaps the most famous crime in British history. It's a novel in a very loose sense of the word, since throughout the book, Crichton stops the proceedings to explain Victorian social customs for several pages at a time. But this is not a complaint at all, for the details on dog fighting, rats, gender roles, fear of premature burial, chimney sweeps, tipping servants, the Crimean War, safecracking, and most importantly urbanization and railroads, are all integral to the crime, and fascinating historical tidbits in their own right. Central to the entire crime is the understanding that in the 1855, there was no such thing as dynamite or other explosives, so safes really were impregnable without keys or unlimited time to pick them. Thus, the robbery of the monthly gold shipment that traveled by rail to France to pay for the Crimean War was deemed inconceivable, as opening the safes required four keys which were held in three separate locations. However, along comes Edward Pierce, a safecracker and master con artist who wanted that gold. The book tells how using an incredible array of scams, assistants and associates, misdirection, boldness, and quick thinking, he obtains copies of the four keys and embarks on the theft of the century. Crichton does this in a fairly documentary style for the most part, however the dialogue amongst the criminals sparkles with period underworld slang (all of which he stops to explain). The story is recounted with continual reference to the trial, so it's clear from the get go that the plot was successful, yet somehow the plotters were caught.

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