

ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE



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Tragedy of a Handkerchief
Little Boy Lost
The Fourth Man
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Snake
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The Leap Ware

Number 47

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AN ANTHOLOGY OF THE BEST DETECTIVE STORIES, NEW AND OLD

ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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PUBLISHER: *Laurence E. Spivak*

EDITOR: *Ellery Queen*

Vol. 10, No. 47, OCTOBER 1947. Published monthly by *The American Mercury, Inc.*, at 25¢ a copy. Annual subscription \$3.00 in U. S. and possessions, Canada, and in the countries of the Pan-American Union; \$4.00 in all other countries. Publication office, Concord, N. H. Editorial and General offices, 570 Lexington Avenue, New York 22, N. Y. Copyright, 1947, by *The American Mercury, Inc.* All rights, including translation into other languages, reserved by the publishers in the U. S., Great Britain, Australia, Mexico, and all other countries participating in the International Copyright Convention and the Pan American Copyright Convention.

Entered as second class matter August 28, 1941, at the post office at Concord, N. H., under the act of March 3, 1879.

Published also in a Talking-Record Edition by *The American Printing House for the Blind, Louisville, Kentucky.* Manufactured in the United States of America.

Cover and Typography by *George Salter*

MILDRED FALK, *Managing Editor*
CHARLOTTE R. SPIVAK, *Associate Editor*

JOSEPH W. FERMAN, *Business Manager*
ROBERT P. MILLS, *Assistant Editor*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: *We call Michael Innes (whose real name is John Innes Mackintosh Stewart) to the stand so that he may testify in his own behalf . . . "I was born just outside Edinburgh and almost within the shadow of the centenary monument to the author of WAVERLEY. Edinburgh Academy, where I went to school, had Scott as one of its founders, and Robert Louis Stevenson was a pupil there for a short time. My headmaster told me that one day I might write a KIDNAPPED or a TREASURE ISLAND; I remember his tone as one of mild censure . . . At Oxford I had a great Elizabethan scholar as my tutor; he got me a first class in English and then I went to Vienna for a year to recover. After that I had the good luck to fall in with Francis Meynell, and for him I edited the Nonesuch Edition of Florio's MONTAIGNE; this in turn got me a job as a lecturer in the University of Leeds . . . Leeds lasted five years and then, when I . . . was rather wondering about the rent, I was invited to become professor of English at Adelaide University. It was on the way out that I wrote my first mystery story. For nine months of the year, and between six and eight o'clock in the morning, the South Australian climate is just right for authorship of this sort, so I have written a good many similar stories since. I would describe some of them as on the frontier between the detective story and fantasy; they have a somewhat 'literary' flavor but their values remain those of melodrama and not of fiction proper. Sometimes I lie on the beach in the sun and wonder if I mightn't some day write something else." The "Saturday Review of Literature" has characterized Michael Innes's novels as "caviar to the general reader, but the caviar is of the very best grade, with every bead a pearl." John Strachey has nominated Michael Innes, together with Margery Allingham and Nicholas Blake, as the three "white hopes" of the contemporary English detective story. EQMM nominates Michael Innes's "Tragedy of a Handkerchief" as one of the most interesting "literary" detective stories we have ever read or published . . .*

TRAGEDY OF A HANDKERCHIEF

by MICHAEL INNES

THE CURTAIN ROSE on the last scene of Shakespeare's *Othello*, the dreadful scene in which Desdemona is smothered, the scene which Dr. Johnson declared is not to be endured. But by this audience, it seemed to

Inspector Appleby, it was going to be endured tolerably well. For one thing, the smothering was apparently to be staged in the reticent way favored by touring companies that depend on the support of organized parties of school

children. Not that the school children, probably, would take a thoroughly Elizabethan robustness at all amiss. But head-mistresses are different. If their charges must, in the sovereign name of Shakespeare, be taken to see a horrid murder, let it at least be committed in hugger-mugger in a darkened corner of the stage.

But if the audience was not going to be horrified, neither — so far — had it been gripped. Whatever currents of emotion had been liberated behind this proscenium arch, they were not precisely those intended by the dramatist. Or rather, Inspector Appleby thought, it was as if across the main torrent of feeling as Shakespeare had designed it, there were drifting eddies of private passion muddying and confusing the whole. One was familiar with something of the sort in amateur theatricals, in which the jealousies and spites of rival performers occasionally reveal themselves as absurdly incongruous with the relationships designed by the story. But it is a thing less common on the professional stage, and during the preceding act the audience had been growing increasingly restless and unconvinced. Perhaps only Appleby himself, who had dropped into this dilapidated provincial theatre merely to fill an empty evening in a strange town, was giving a steadily more concentrated attention to the matters transacting themselves on the stage. Around him were the gigglings of bored children and the rustling of stealthily-opened paper bags. Apple-

by, however, studied Desdemona's bedchamber with a contracted brow.

Othello was about to enter with a taper and announce that *It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul. . . .*

But there was a hitch. For one of those half-minute intervals which can seem an eternity in terms of theatrical time Othello failed to appear. The stage stood empty, with the sleeping Desdemona scarcely visible in her curtained and shadowy bed at the rear. And this delay was only one of several signs that all was not well behind the scenes.

Most striking had been the blow — that public indignity to which Othello subjects his wife in the fourth act. The crack of an open palm across a face is a thing easily simulated on the stage; the assailant makes his gesture, his victim staggers back, and at the same time someone watching from the wings smartly claps his hands together. But on this occasion there had been the sound of *two* blows: one from the wings and one from the stage itself. And as Desdemona fell back it had been just possible to discern first a cheek unnaturally flushed and then a trickle of blood from a nostril. Almost as if *Othello* were the brutal pot-house tragedy which some unfriendly critics have accused it of being, the hero had given his wife a bloodied nose. . . . And the ensuing twenty lines had been uncommonly ticklish, with Desdemona playing out her shock and horror while covertly dabbing at her face with a handkerchief. No doubt an actor may be car-

ried away. But an Othello who allowed himself this artistic excess would be decidedly dangerous. What if he permitted himself a similar wholeheartedness when the moment for smothering Desdemona came?

Still staring at the empty stage, Inspector Appleby shook his head. There had been other hints that private passions were percolating through the familiar dramatic story. *Othello* is a tragedy of suspicion, of suspicion concentrated in Othello himself — the hero who, not easily jealous, is yet brought by the triumphant cunning of the villain Iago to kill his wife because of a baseless belief in her adultery. But among the people on this stage suspicion was not concentrated but diffused. Behind the high dramatic poetry, behind the traditional business of the piece, an obscure and pervasive wariness lurked, as if in every mind were a doubtful speculation as to what other minds knew. Desdemona, Appleby could have sworn, was more frightened than Shakespeare's heroine need be; Iago was indefinably on the defensive, whereas his nature should know nothing but ruthless if oblique attack; Iago's wife, Emilia, although she played out the honest, impercipient waiting-woman efficiently scene by scene, was perceptibly wishing more than one of her fellow-players to the devil. As for Michael Cassio, he was harassed — which is no doubt what Cassio should chiefly be. But this Cassio was harassed behind the mask as well as across it. Appleby, knowing

nothing of these strolling players without name or fame, yet suspected that Cassio was the company's manager, and one despairingly aware that the play was misfiring badly.

On one side of Appleby a small girl massively exhaled an odor of peppermint drops. On the other side an even smaller boy entertained himself by transforming his program into paper pellets and flicking them at the audience in the seats below.

And now here was Othello at last — a really black Othello of the kind fashionable since Paul Robeson triumphed in the part. Only about this fellow there had been a faint flavor of minstrel from the start and it had long been plain that there was nothing approaching great acting in him. Yet the theatre fell suddenly silent. The man stood there framed in a canvas doorway, the customary lighted taper in his hand. His eyes rolled, fixed themselves, rolled again. His free hand made exaggerated clawing gestures before him. As far as any elevated conception of his rôle went, he was violating almost every possible canon of the actor's art. And yet the effect was queerly impressive — startling, indeed. The child on Appleby's left gulped and regurgitated, as if all but choked by peppermint going down the wrong way. The boy on the right let his ammunition lie idle before him. From somewhere higher up another child cried out in fright.

Othello stepped forward into a greenish limelight which gave him the appearance of a rather badly de-

composed corpse.

Some forty-five seconds behind schedule, the unbearable scene had begun.

*It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul, —
Let me not name it to you, you chaste
stars! —*

It is the cause. . . .

The mysterious words rolled out into the darkness of the auditorium. And, of course, they were indestructible. Not even green limelight, not even an Othello who made damnable faces as he talked, could touch them.

*Yet I'll not shed her blood,
Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than
snow. . . .*

To the dreadful threat Desdemona awoke. Propped up on the great bed, she edged herself into another lime-light which again offended all artistic decorum.

Will you come to bed, my lord?

With mounting tension the scene moved inexorably forward. Othello — who at least had inches — was towering over the woman on the bed.

*That handkerchief which I so loved and
gave thee
Thou gavest to Cassio. . . .*

The Tragedy of the Handkerchief, this play had been contemptuously called. And the French translator, Inspector Appleby remembered, had preferred the more elevated word *bandeau*. . . .

*By heaven, I saw my handkerchief in 's
hand.*

*O perjured woman! thou dost stone my
heart,*

*And makest me call what I intend to do
A murder, which I thought a sacrifice;
I saw the handkerchief. . . .*

The limelights faded, sparing the susceptibilities of the schoolmistresses. It was just possible to discern Othello as taking up a great pillow in his hands. His last words to Desdemona rang out. There followed only horrible and inarticulate sounds. For, as if to give the now appalled children their money's worth after all, the players in their almost invisible alcove were rendering these final moments with ghastly verisimilitude: the panting respirations of the man pressing the pillow home; the muffled groans and supplications of the dying woman. And then from a door hard by the bed-head came the cries of Emilia demanding admission. Othello drew the bed-hangings to, reeled backwards like a drunken man, plunged into rambling speech as Emilia's clamor grew:

*My wife! my wife! what wife? I have
no wife.*

From despairing realization his voice swelled in volume, swelled into its vast theatrical rhetoric, and from behind the hangings the dying Desdemona could be heard to moan anew.

*O, insupportable! O heavy hour!
Me thinks it should be now a huge
eclipse*

*Of sun and moon, and that the affrighted
globe
Should yawn at alteration. . . .*

Emilia was calling again. Othello drew the hangings closer to, staggered to the door and unlocked it. The woman burst in with her news of disaster and in rapid colloquy Othello learned that his plot for the death of Cassio had failed. Again his voice rang out in despair:

*Not Cassio kill'd then murder's out of
tune,
And sweet revenge grows harsh. . . .*

And suddenly there was absolute silence on the stage. Othello and Emilia were standing still — waiting. Again, and with a different note of anxiety, Othello cried out:

And sweet revenge grows harsh. . . .

Inspector Appleby shivered. For again there was silence, the repeated cue producing nothing. It was now that Desdemona should call out, that Emilia should wrench back the hangings upon the heroine's death-agony and her last sublime attempt to free her lord from blame. But only silence held the boards.

With a swift panicky bump the curtain fell, blotting out the stage.

"Their names?" asked Inspector Appleby. "We'll stick to Shakespeare for the moment and avoid confusion. And I think Cassio is the man who runs the show?"

The sergeant of police nodded. He

was uncertain whether to be relieved or annoyed that a Detective-Inspector from Scotland Yard had emerged helpfully but authoritatively from the audience. "That's so, sir. And here he is."

Chill drafts blew across the stage. The great curtain stirred uneasily, and from behind it there could still be heard the tramp and gabble of bewildered children being shepherded out. Here amid the scenes and tawdry properties everything showed shadowy and insubstantial. The dead woman lay on what had seemed a bed and beneath its grease paint her face showed as black as Othello's. The players, still in costumes, wigs and beards to which theatrical illusion no longer attached, hovered in a half-world between fantasy and fact. And Cassio stood in the midst of them, his hand nervously toying with the hilt of a rapier, his weak and handsome face a study in despair. Inspector Appleby nodded to him. "This is your company?" he asked. "And Desdemona's death means pretty well the end of it?"

Cassio groaned. "That is so. And it is an unimaginable disaster, as well as being" — he glanced fearfully towards the bed — "unspeakably horrible and painful."

"In fact, if somebody wanted to smash you, this would have been a thoroughly effective way of going about it?"

The actor-manager looked startled. "It certainly would. The sort of audience we get will never book a seat

with my company again. But I don't think —"

"Quite so. It is a possible motive but not a likely one. Now, please tell me of the relationships existing between your different members."

The man hesitated. "I am myself married to Bianca."

A fellow, thought Appleby, *almost damned in a fair wife*. Aloud he said: "And the dead woman was actually married to Othello?"

"Yes. And so too are Iago and Emilia."

"I see. In fact, your private relations are quite oddly akin to those in the play? And you may be said to be an isolated community, moving from town to town, with the rest of your company not much more than extras?"

Cassio licked his lips. "That is more or less true. We can't afford much."

"You certainly can't afford murder." Appleby's glance swept the players who were now ranged in a semicircle round him. "I suppose you know that your performance this evening was all at sixes and sevens? Even the children were at a loss." His finger shot out at Othello. "Why did you strike your wife?"

"Yes, why did you strike her?" Emilia had stepped forward. Her eyes, though red with weeping, snapped fire. "And why did you murder her, too?"

"Strike her?" Othello, his face a blotched pallor beneath its paint, had been glaring at Iago; now he swung round upon Iago's wife. "You foul-

mouthed —"

"That will do." Appleby's voice, although quiet, echoed in this resonant space. "There were six of you: Othello and Desdemona, Iago and Emilia, Cassio and Bianca. Your emotional relationships were a sordid muddle and tonight they got out of hand. Well, I'm afraid we must have them into the limelight. And if you won't confess to what was troubling you, I expect there are minor members of your company who can be informative enough."

"But this is outrageous!" It was Bianca who spoke — a beautiful girl with every appearance of self-control. "You can't bully us like that, no matter what has happened." She looked defiantly at the still figure on the bed and then turned to her husband. "Isn't that so?"

But it was Iago, not Cassio, who answered. He was a dark man with a constantly shifting eye and a lip which twitched nervously as he spoke. "Certainly it is so. In interrogating possible witnesses in such an affair the police are bound by the strictest rules. And until a solicitor —"

"Rubbish!" Unexpectedly and with venom Emilia had turned upon her husband. "Let the man go his own way and it will be the sooner over."

"But at least there are the mere physical possibilities to consider first." Cassio was at once agitated and reasonable. "Just when did the thing happen? And is it possible therefore to rule anyone out straight away?"

Inspector Appleby nodded. "Very

well. Opportunity first and motive second . . . At line 83 Desdemona was alive." Appleby glanced up from the text which had been handed to him. "And at line 117 she was dead. Throughout this interval she was invisible, since at first she was lying within heavy shadow and subsequently the bed-hangings were drawn to by Othello. It is clear that Othello himself may simply have smothered her when the action required that he should appear to do so. But there are other possibilities.

"The bed is set in a recess which is accessible not from the main stage alone. Behind the bed-head there is only a light curtain, and it would thus be accessible to anybody behind the scenes who was passing forward towards the wings. Othello ceased to have Desdemona under his observation at about line 85. There are then nearly twenty lines before Emilia enters. These lines are taken up partly by Othello in desperate soliloquy and partly by Emilia calling from 'without.' When Emilia does enter it is by the door close by the bed-head. And it follows from this that Emilia could have smothered Desdemona during these twenty lines, some five or six of which she had to speak herself. It would be a procedure requiring considerable nerve, but that is no convincing argument against it.

"A third possibility, however, remains. After Emilia has entered, and until the moment that Desdemona cries out that she has been murdered, there are some twelve broken lines,

with a certain amount of time-consuming mime increasing the suspense. During this period any other actor, standing near the wings, might have slipped to the bed-head and committed the murder. So the position is this: Othello and Emilia are definitely suspects, so far as opportunity goes. And so is anybody else who could have approached the bed-head unobserved during the twelve lines after Emilia's entry."

"Which rules me out." Cassio spoke without any apparent relief and it was clear that with him the disaster which had befallen his company overshadowed everything else. "I was on the opposite side with the electrician when we heard the cue for Emilia's going on. I just couldn't have made it."

"But your wife could." And Emilia, who had broken in, turned with venom on Bianca. "For I saw you not far behind me when I stepped on stage."

"No doubt you did. And I saw your husband." Bianca, still perfectly calm, turned a brief glance of what was surely cold hatred on Iago. "I saw him standing in the wings there and wondered what he was about."

Iago's lip twitched more violently than before. Then he laughed harshly. "This will get the police nowhere. And what about all the other conventional questions, like who last saw the victim alive?"

Suddenly Othello exclaimed. "My God!" he cried, and whirled upon Emilia. "You know whether I smoth-

ered her. Everyone knows what your habit is."

"What do you mean?" Emilia's hand had flown to her bosom and beneath the grease paint she was very pale.

"When waiting to come on you have always parted the curtain at the bed-head and had a look at her and perhaps whispered a word. I can't tell why, for you weren't all that friendly. But that's what you always did, and you must have done it tonight. Well, how was it? Was she alive or dead?"

"She was alive." It was after a moment's hesitation that Emilia spoke. "She didn't say anything. And of course it was almost dark. But I could see that she — that she was weeping."

"As she very well might be, considering that her husband had actually struck her on the open stage." The police sergeant spoke for the first time. "Now, if you'll —"

But Appleby brusquely interrupted. "Weeping?" he said. "Had she a handkerchief?"

Emilia looked at him with dilated eyes. "But of course."

Appleby strode to the body on the bed and in a moment was back holding a small square of cambric, wringing wet. "Quite true," he said. "And it was right under the body. But this can't be her ordinary handkerchief, which was blood-stained as a result of the blow and will be in her dressing-room now. So perhaps this is —"

Cassio took a stride forward. "Yes!" he said, "it's the love-token — Oth-

ello's magic handkerchief which Desdemona loses."

And Inspector Appleby nodded sombrely. "Sure," he said slowly, "*there's some wonder in this handkerchief.*"

Remorselessly the investigation went on. Cassio was the last person in whose hand the handkerchief was seen — but on going off-stage Cassio had tossed it on a chair from which anyone might have taken it up. And it seemed likely that a Desdemona overcome with grief had done so.

Emilia's story then was plausible, and if believed it exonerated both Othello and herself. What followed from this? It appeared that of the rest of the company only Iago and Bianca had possessed a reasonable opportunity of slipping from the wings to the bed-head and there smothering Desdemona in that twelve-line interval between Emilia's going on-stage and the play's coming to its abrupt and disastrous end. But further than this it was hard to press. Appleby turned from opportunity to motive.

Othello and his wife Desdemona, Iago and his wife Emilia, Cassio and his wife Bianca: these were the people concerned. Desdemona had been murdered. Cassio was not the murderer. And upon the stage, just before the fatality, there had been perceptible an obscure interplay of passion and resentment. What situation did these facts suggest?

Not, Appleby thought, a situation which had been common property

long. For it was unlikely that the company had been playing night after night in this fashion; either matters would have come to a head or private passions would have been brought under control at least during the three hours' traffic on the stage. Some more or less abrupt revelation, therefore, must be the background of what had happened tonight.

Three married couples living in a substantially closed group and with the standards of theatrical folk of the seedier sort. The picture was not hard to see. Adultery, or some particularly exacerbating drift taken by a customary promiscuity, was the likely background to this Desdemona's death. And Appleby felt momentarily depressed. He turned abruptly back to them. Detective investigation requires more than the technique of reading fingerprints and cigarette ends. It requires the art of reading minds and hearts. How, then, did these people's emotions stand now?

Othello was horrified and broken; with him as with Cassio — but more obscurely — things had come to an end. Well, his wife had been horribly killed, shortly after he had struck her brutally in the face. In a sense, then, Othello's immediate emotions were accounted for.

What of Iago? Iago was on the defensive still — and defensiveness means a sense of guilt. He was like a man, Appleby thought, before whom there has opened more evil than he intended or knew. And in whatever desperation he stood, he seemed

likely to receive small succor or comfort from his wife. Emilia hated him. Was it a settled hate? Appleby judged that it had not that quality. It was a hatred, then, born of shock. Born of whatever abrupt revelation had preluded the catastrophe.

There remained Bianca, Cassio's wife. She, perhaps, was the enigma in the case, for her emotions ran deep. And her husband was out of it. Cassio was the type of chronically worried man; he expended his anxieties upon the business of keeping his company financially afloat, and emerged from this only to play subsidiary rôles. As a husband he would not be very exciting. And Bianca required excitement. That hidden sort did.

The analysis was complete. Appleby thought a little longer and then spoke. "I am going to tell you," he said quietly, "what happened. But only the principal actors need remain."

There was a sigh from the people gathered round. Like shadows they melted into the wings — some with the alacrity of relief, others with the shuffle of fatigue. It had grown very cold. The curtain stirred and swayed, like a great shroud waiting to envelop those who remained.

"It began with Desdemona's seduction, or with the revelation of it. Is that not so?" Appleby looked gravely round. There was absolute silence. "Is that not so?" he repeated gently. But the silence prolonged itself. And Appleby turned to Othello. "You struck her because of that?"

And abruptly Othello wept. His

blotched black face crumpled. "Yes," he said, "I struck her because I had discovered that."

Appleby turned to Iago. "You seduced this man's wife. And the result has been wilful murder. But did you know the truth was out? Or was it you yourself who smothered her to prevent confession and disclosure?"

Iago stepped back snarling. "You've got nothing on me," he said. "And I won't say a word."

From this time forth I never will speak word. . . . But Appleby was now facing Emilia. "Your husband had betrayed you. You had discovered he was sleeping with this man's wife. Did you, in the frenzy of your jealousy, smother her?"

Emilia's face had hardened. "These accusations mean nothing. Nobody knows who smothered her. And you will never find out."

There was a pause. Appleby turned slowly to Bianca. "And you?" he asked. "For how long had you been Iago's mistress? And what did you do when you found he had cast you off?"

"Nothing! I did nothing! And she's right. Nobody saw. Nobody can tell anything."

"And so the mystery will be unsolved?" Appleby nodded seriously. "It is not impossible that you are right. But we shall know in the morning." He turned to Cassio. "Did Desdemona have a dressing-room of her own? I'll just look in there before I go."

"They probably won't hang her,"

Appleby said next day to the police sergeant. "It was a crime of sudden impulse, after all. And of course there was provocation in the adultery she had discovered." He paused. "Will it be any consolation to her in prison to know that she has made history in forensic medicine? I suppose not."

The sergeant sighed. "It's been neat enough," he said, "and something quite beyond our range, I must admit. But how did you first tumble to its being Emilia?"

"It was because she changed her mind about whom to blame. At first she had resolved to plant it on Othello, simply as the likeliest person. 'And why did you murder her, too?' she had asked him. But later on she told a story that pointed to either Bianca or her own husband, Iago. Desdemona, she said, had been alive and weeping when she looked through the curtain at the bed-head. And that, of course, let Othello out, as he had no subsequent opportunity for the murder.

"I asked myself what this change of front meant. Was it simply that Emilia had no grudge against Othello and altered her story in order to implicate her unfaithful husband whom she now hated? Somehow, I didn't think it was that. And then I recalled a gesture she had made. Do you remember? It was when Othello revealed that she was accustomed to draw back the curtain behind the bed and speak to Desdemona before going on-stage."

The sergeant considered. "I seem to

remember her hand going to her bodice. I thought it a bit theatrical — the conventional gesture of an agitated woman."

Appleby shook his head. "It wasn't quite that. What you saw was a hand flying up to where something should be — something that was now lost. And that something was a handkerchief. I saw the truth in a flash. *She had lost a handkerchief — a tear-soaked handkerchief — while smothering Desdemona.* And my guess was confirmed seconds later when she made her change of front and declared that she had seen Desdemona alive and weeping. For of course her change of story came from a sudden feeling that she must somehow account for the presence of the handkerchief beside the corpse."

"I see." The sergeant shook his head. "It was clever enough. But it was dangerous, being an unnecessary lie."

"It was fatal, as it turned out. But first I saw several things come together. A man may weep, but he won't weep into a small cambric handkerchief. Emilia showed signs of weeping, whereas another suspect, Bianca, was entirely self-controlled. So what had happened was pretty clear. Emilia had discovered her husband's infidelity and had been under strong stress of emotion. She had snatched up the handkerchief — Othello's magic handkerchief — perhaps while running to her dressing-room, and there she had wept into it. When her call came she thrust it into

her bodice. Later, when she yielded to an overwhelming impulse and smothered Desdemona, the handkerchief was dropped in the struggle and the body rolled on top of it.

"But how could all this be proved? Perhaps, as those people said, it couldn't be, and we should never get further than suspicion. But there was one chance — one chance of proving that Emilia had lied.

"A substantial proportion of people are what physiologists call secretors. And this means, among other things, that there is something special about their tears. From their tears, just as well as from their blood, you can determine their blood-group. Well, I had Desdemona's blood on one handkerchief and I had tears on another. I went straight to your local Institute of Medical Research. And they told me what I hoped to learn. *Those tears could not have come from a person of Desdemona's blood-group.*"

The sergeant sighed again. "Yes," he said, "it's neat — very neat, indeed."

"And we shall certainly learn, as soon as the law allows us to make a test, that the tears could have been Emilia's. And as Bianca, who has allowed herself to be blood-grouped, is ruled out equally with Desdemona, the case is clear."

Inspector Appleby rose. "Incidentally there is a moral attached to all this."

"A moral?"

"The moral that one savage old critic declared to be all there is to

learn from Shakespeare's play. Housewives, he said, should look to their linen. In other words, it's dangerous to drop a handkerchief — and particularly in the neighborhood of a dead body."

ABOUT THE STORY: Many detective-story writers have used the theatre as a backdrop to murder. Sometimes the murder occurs on the stage, sometimes backstage, and sometimes in the audience. There is a glamor about theatricals, both amateur and professional, and about the people associated with the footlights, that lends itself to melodrama; love, hate, passion, revenge, ambition — all are the stuff as drama is made on. If all the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players, then there are countless detective-story plots still to be drawn from the heartache and the thousand natural shocks that thespians are heir to.

The general background of Michael Innes's "Tragedy of a Handkerchief" may therefore lack novelty but the author's treatment of the theatrical theme is distinguished on at least three counts. To the best of our recollection no previous detective story has been based on Shakespeare's "Othello" — and now that Mr. Innes has put "Othello" to his own rich uses, we can't help wondering why no one thought of it before. "Othello" is one of the most perfect literary springboards for make-believe murder that becomes murder in fact. All truly classic ideas have that natural simplicity which we come to associate with the inevitable. Having moulded "Othello" to his detective-story needs, Mr. Innes then showed his mettle: he did not hesitate to incorporate generous portions of Shakespeare's own dialogue, interlarding some of the finest writing of all time with straight detective-story "stuff"; and he dared to borrow Shakespeare's own character-names for his own strolling players. Not many modern writers would have had the courage to "use" Shakespeare so abundantly.

Mr. Innes did something else worthy of comment: he took one of the commonest of detective-story clues and gave it a freshness that transformed it from the hackneyed to the unhackneyed. The lowly handkerchief has long been considered too trite for contemporary usage — it is in the same class with the torn-off button, cigarette ashes, and similar commonplace clues. Yet Mr. Innes deliberately made a handkerchief his chief "gimmick," endowing it with "magical" properties, and proving once more that even the oldest and most banal of physical clues can be resurrected and reanimated. There is no such thing as a device being too old-fashioned — not in the hands of an imaginative craftsman . . .

