THE ART OF THE
Mystery Story

A COLLECTION OF CRITICAL ESSAYS

EDITED AND WITH A COMMENTARY BY

HOWARD HAYCRAFT

The Universal Library

GROSSET & DUNLAP

NEW YORK

BY ARRANGEMENT WITH HOWARD HAYCRAFT

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

FOREWORD

THE PURPOSE of this book is to bring together under one cover a representative selection of the best critical and informative writing about the modern mystery-crime-detective story, from Poe to the present time. Ever since the day some five years ago that I ventured to perpetrate a history of detective fiction,* lovers of this variety of literature have been writing me of the need for such a book. Concurrently, the last few years have witnessed in the public prints an outpouring of serious critical discussion of the once-lowly who-dunit and its relations-by-marriage unequalled in any comparable period in the 100-year history of the genre. In view of these circumstances, it seemed to my publishers and myself that the time had arrived for the compilation of the first and definitive anthology devoted solely to this aspect of the subject. It is our hope that the resulting volume will serve equally well the uses of pleasure and reference.

In choosing the material to be included, I have been guided by a few simple but necessary rules-of-thumb which it may be helpful to state. Except for certain historically obligatory selections in the opening section, I have tried diligently throughout the volume to avoid material that repeated too closely either the information or themes found in other selections. That this unavoidably ruled out many otherwise fine essays and articles is the occasion of sincere sorrow. (The anthologist's life, as every member of the profession will testify, is a constant succession of hard choices and regret at never having the space to include everything and everybody he would like.) Some exclusions based on types of subject matter were also found necessary. Thus, appreciations of individual authors have had to be omitted as not quite germane to the principal consideration (with two exceptions only: Poe and Doyle) and, likewise, selections however excellent in themselves that were believed too

* *Murder for Pleasure: The Life and Times of the Detective Story* (New York: Appleton, 1941; London: Davies, 1942).

limited, specialized, or recondite for the general reader's interest. Articles of a purely "How-To-Write-It" nature have been avoided, both because this is a book for readers rather than writers of detective stories, and because there is already a satisfactory collection of such pieces available in the volume *Writing Detective and Mystery Fiction,* edited by A. S. Burack (Boston: The Writer, Inc., 1945). On the other hand, a chapter from Marie F. Rodell's textbook *Mystery Fiction: Theory & Technique* (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1943) has been given space because of the interest of its subject matter to lay as well as professional readers.

So much for the principles of selection. The final choices for inclusion simply represent (as they must in any anthology) the editor's best judgment as to what the putative reader of the book would like to find in it. Taste being the variable thing it is, anyone else performing the same task would doubtless have chosen differently in many instances; quite possibly more wisely. I can only hope that the reader who is disappointed by the omission of some personal favorite will be reimbursed by the discovery of new material and delights he knew not of.

In addition to the formal acknowledgments at the end of the book, I wish to thank specially those authors, critics, and editors who so generously wrote original essays for this volume and thereby increased inestimably whatever value it may possess: Erle Stanley Gardner, Craig Rice, Anthony Boucher, Lee Wright, Isabelle Taylor, Richard Mealand, Ken Crossen, "Judge Lynch," and Isaac Anderson. To several of these, and to Ellery Queen and James Sandoe, I am additionally indebted for invaluable editorial advice and assistance.

New York City
July, 1946

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Murder at $2.50 a Crime

By Stephen Leacock

The beloved Canadian humorist Stephen Leacock (1869–1944) was a lifelong devotee of detective stories and wrote and lectured frequently on the subject. The selection below is from his Here Are My Lectures and Stories *(New York: Dodd, Mead, 1937; London: Lane, 1938).*

I PROPOSE tonight, ladies and gentlemen, to deal with murder. There are only two subjects that appeal nowadays to the general public, murder and sex; and, for people of culture, sex-murder. Leaving out sex for the minute—if you can—I propose tonight to talk about murder as carried on openly and daily at two dollars and fifty cents a crime.

For me, I admit right away that if I'm going to pay two dollars and fifty cents for a book I want to make sure that there's going to be at least *one* murder in it. I always take a look at the book first to see if there's a chapter headed "Finding of the Body." And I know that everything is all right when it says, *The body was that of an elderly gentleman, well dressed but upside down.* Always, you notice, an "elderly gentleman." What they have against us, I don't know. But you see, if it said that the body was that of a woman—that's a tragedy. The body was that of a child! —that's a horror. But *the body was that of an elderly gentleman* —oh, pshaw! that's all right. Anyway he's had his life—he's had a good time (It says he's well dressed.)—probably been out on a hoot. (He's found upside down.) That's all right! He's worth more dead than alive.

. . . .

But as a matter of fact, from reading so many of these stories I get to be such an expert that I don't have to wait for the finding of the body. I can tell just by a glance at the beginning of the book who's going to *be* the body. For example, if the scene is laid on this side of the water, say in New York, look for an opening paragraph that runs about like this:

Mr. Phineas Q. Cactus sat in his downtown office in the drowsy hour of a Saturday afternoon. He was alone. Work was done for the day. The clerks were gone. The building, save for the janitor, who lived in the basement, was empty.

Notice that, *save for the janitor.* Be sure to save him. We're going to need him later on, to accuse him of the murder.

As he sat thus, gazing in a sort of reverie at the papers on the desk in front of him, his chin resting on his hand, his eyes closed and slumber stole upon him.

Of course! To go to sleep like that in a downtown deserted office is a crazy thing to do in New York—let alone Chicago. Every intelligent reader knows that Mr. Cactus is going to get a crack on the cocoanut. He's the body.

. . . .

But if you don't mind my saying so, they get a better setting for this kind of thing in England than they do with us. You need an old country to get a proper atmosphere around murder. The best murders (always of elderly gentlemen) are done in the country at some old country seat—any wealthy elderly gentleman has a seat—called by such a name as the Priory, or the Doggery, or the Chase—that sort of thing.

Try this for example:

Sir Charles Althorpe sat alone in his library at Althorpe Chase. It was late at night. The fire had burned low in the grate. Through the heavily curtained windows no sound came from outside. Save for the maids, who slept in a distant wing, and save for the butler, whose pantry was under the stairs, the Chase, at this time of the year, was empty. As Sir Charles sat thus in his arm-chair, his head gradually sank upon his chest and he dozed off into slumber.

Foolish man! Doesn't he know that to doze off into slumber in an isolated country house, with the maids in a distant wing, is little short of madness? But do you notice—Sir Charles! He's a baronet. That's the touch to give class to it. And do you notice that we have *saved* the butler, just as we did the janitor? Of course he didn't really kill Sir Charles, but the local police always arrest the butler. And anyway, he'd been seen sharpening a knife on his pants in his pantry and saying, "I'll do for the old Devil yet."

. . . .

So there is the story away to a good start—Sir Charles's Body found next morning by a "terrified" maid—all maids are terrified—who "could scarcely give an intelligent account of what she saw"—they never can. Then the local police (Inspector Higginbottom of the Hopshire Constabulary) are called in and announce themselves "baffled." Every time the reader hears that the local police are called in he smiles an indulgent smile and knows they are just there to be baffled.

. . . .

At this point of the story enters the Great Detective, specially sent by or through Scotland Yard. That's another high class touch—Scotland Yard. It's not a Yard, and it's not in Scotland. Knowing it only from detective fictions I imagine it is a sort of club somewhere near the Thames in London. You meet the Prime Minister and the Archbishop of Canterbury going in and out all the time—but so strictly incognito that you don't know that it is them, I mean that they are it. And apparently even "royalty" is found "closeted" with heads at the yard—"royalty" being in English a kind of hush-word for things too high up to talk about.

Well, anyway, the Yard sends down the Great Detective, either as an official or as an outsider to whom the Yard appeal when utterly stuck; and he comes down to the Chase, looking for clues.

Here comes in a little technical difficulty in the narration of the story. We want to show what a wonderful man the Great Detective is, and yet he can't be made to tell the story himself. He's too silent—and too strong. So the method used nowadays is to have a sort of shadow along with him, a companion, a sort of Poor Nut, full of admiration but short on brains. Ever since

Conan Doyle started this plan with Sherlock and Watson, all the others have copied it. So the story is told by this secondary person. Taken at his own face value he certainly is a Poor Nut. Witness the way in which his brain breaks down utterly and is set going again by the Great Detective. The scene occurs when the Great Detective begins to observe all the things around the place that were overlooked by Inspector Higginbottom.

"But how," I exclaimed, "how in the name of all that is incomprehensible, are you able to aver that the criminal wore rubbers?"

My friend smiled quietly.

"You observe," he said, "that patch of fresh mud about ten feet square in front of the door of the house. If you would look, you will see that it has been freshly walked over by a man with rubbers on."

I looked. The marks of the rubbers were there plain enough—at least a dozen of them.

"What a fool I was!" I exclaimed. "But at least tell me how you were able to know the length of the criminal's foot?"

My friend smiled again, his same inscrutable smile.

"By measuring the print of the rubber," he answered quietly, "and then subtracting from it the thickness of the material multiplied by two."

"Multiplied by two!" I exclaimed. "Why by two?"

"For the toe and the heel."

"Idiot that I am," I cried, "it all seems so plain when you explain it."

In other words, the Poor Nut makes an admirable narrator. However much fogged the reader may get, he has at least the comfort of knowing that the Nut is far more fogged than he is. Indeed, the Nut may be said, in a way, to personify the ideal reader, that is to say the stupidest—the reader who is most completely bamboozled with the mystery, and yet intensely interested.

Such a reader has the support of knowing that the police are entirely "baffled"—that's always the word for them; that the public are "mystified"; that the authorities are "alarmed"; the newspapers "in the dark"; and the Poor Nut, altogether up a tree. On those terms, the reader can enjoy his own ignorance to the full.

Before the Great Detective gets to work, or rather while he is getting to work, the next thing is to give him *character, individuality*. It's no use to say that he "doesn't in the least look like a detective." Of course not. No detective ever does. But the point is not what he doesn't look like, but what he does look like.

Well, for one thing, though its pretty stale, he can be made extremely thin, in fact, "cadaverous." Why a cadaverous man can solve a mystery better than a fat man it is hard to say; presumably, the thinner a man is, the more acute is his mind. At any rate, the old school of writers preferred to have their detectives lean. This incidentally gave the detective a face "like a hawk," the writer not realizing that a hawk is one of the stupidest of animals. A detective with a face like an orang-outang would beat it all to bits.

Indeed, the Great Detective's face becomes even more important than his body. Here there is absolute unanimity. His face has to be "inscrutable." Look at it though you will, you can never read it. Contrast it, for example, with the face of Inspector Higginbottom, of the local police force. Here is a face that can look "surprised," or "relieved," or, with great ease, "completely baffled."

But the face of the Great Detective knows of no such changes. No wonder the Poor Nut is completely mystified. From the face of the great man you can't tell whether the cart in which they are driving jolts him or whether the food at the Inn gives him indigestion.

To the Great Detective's face there used to be added the old-time expedient of not allowing him either to eat or drink. And when it was added that during this same period of about eight days the sleuth never slept, the reader could realize in what fine shape his brain would be for working out his "inexorable chain of logic."

But nowadays this is changed. The Great Detective not only eats, but he eats well. Often he is presented as a connoisseur in food. Thus:

"Stop a bit." Thus speaks the Great Detective to the Poor Nut and Inspector Higginbottom, whom he is dragging round with him as usual. "We have half an hour before the train leaves Paddington. Let us have some dinner. I know an Italian restaurant

near here where they serve frogs' legs à la Marengo better than anywhere else in London."

A few minutes later we were seated at one of the tables of a dingy little eating place whose sign board with the words "Restauranto Italiano" led me to the deduction that it was an Italian restaurant. I was amazed to observe that my friend was evidently well known in the place, while his order for "three glasses of Chianti with two drops of vermicelli in each," called for an obsequious bow from the appreciative padrone. I realized that this amazing man knew as much of the finesse of Italian wines as he did of playing the saxophone.

We may go further. In many up-to-date cases the detective not only gets plenty to eat but a liberal allowance of strong drink. One generous British author of today is never tired of handing out to the Great Detective and his friends what he calls a "stiff whiskey and soda." At all moments of crisis they get one.

For example, when they find the body of Sir Charles Althorpe, late owner of Althorpe Chase, a terrible sight, lying on the floor of the library, what do they do? They reach at once to the sideboard and pour themselves out a "stiff whiskey and soda." It certainly is a great method.

But in the main we may say that all this stuff about eating and drinking has lost its importance. The Great Detective has to be made exceptional by some other method.

And here is where his music comes in. It transpires—not at once but in the first pause in the story—that this great man not only can solve a crime, but has the most extraordinary aptitude for music, especially for dreamy music of the most difficult kind. As soon as he is left in the Inn room with the Poor Nut, out comes his saxophone and he tunes it up.

"What were you playing?" I asked, as my friend at last folded his beloved instrument into its case.

"Beethoven's Sonata in Q," he answered modestly.

"Good Heavens!" I exclaimed.

. . . .

Up to this point the story, any detective story, has been a howling success. The body has been found; they're all baffled and full of whiskey and soda, and everything's fine! But the only trouble is how to go on with it! You can't! There's no way to make crime really interesting except at the start; it's a pity they have to go on, that they can't just stay baffled and full, and call it a day.

But now begin the mistakes and the literary fallacies that spoil a crime story. At this point in comes the heroine—the heroine!—who has no real place in a murder story but is just a left-over remnant of the love story. In she comes, Margaret Althorpe, wild and all dishevelled. No wonder she's wild! Who wouldn't be? And dishevelled—oh, yes, the best writers always dishevel them up like that. In she comes, almost fainting! What do they do, Inspector Higginbottom and the Great Detective? They shoot a "stiff whiskey and soda" into her—and hit one themselves at the same time.

. . . .

And with that, you see, the story drifts off sideways so as to work up a love-interest in the heroine, who has no business in it at all. Making a heroine used to be an easy thing in earlier books when the reading public was small. The author just imagined the kind of girl that he liked himself and let it go at that. Walter Scott, for example, liked them small—size three—"sylph-like" was the term used; in fact the heroine was just a "slip of a girl"—the slippier the better.

But Margaret Althorpe has to please everybody at once. So the description of her runs like this:

Margaret Althorpe was neither short nor tall.

—That means that she looked pretty tall standing up but when she sat down she was sawed off.

. . . *Her complexion neither dark nor fair, and her religion was neither Protestant nor Roman Catholic. She was not a prohibitionist but never took more than a couple of gins at a time. Her motto was, "No, boys, that's all I can hold."*

That at least is about the spirit of the description. But even at that, description of what is called her "person" is not sufficient by itself. There is the question of her "temperament" as well. Unless a heroine has "temperament" she can't get by; and temperament consists in undergoing a great many physiological changes in a minimum of time. Here, for example, are the physiological variations undergone by the heroine of a book I read the other day, in what appeared to be a space of seventeen minutes:

A new gladness ran through her.

. . . .

A thrill coursed through her (presumably in the opposite direction).

. . . .

Something woke up within her that had been dead.

. . . .

A great yearning welled up within her.

. . . .

Something seemed to go out from her that was not of her nor to her.

. . . .

Everything sank within her.

That last means, I think, that something had come unhooked.

. . . .

But, you see, by this turn the novel has reached what the diplomats call an *impasse,* and plainer people simply a *cul de sac* or a *ne plus ultra.* It can't get on. They arrested the butler. He didn't do it. Apparently nobody did it.

In other words all detective stories reach a point where the reader gets impatient and says to himself: "Come now; *somebody* murdered Sir Charles! Out with it." And the writer has no answer. All the old attempts at an answer suitable for literary purposes have been worn thin. There used to be a simple and easy solution of a crime mystery by finding that the murder was done by a "tramp." In the old Victorian days the unhappy creature called a tramp had no rights that the white man had to respect, either in fiction or out of it. They'd hang a tramp as unconcernedly as they'd catch a butterfly. And if he belonged to the class called a "villainous-looking tramp" he registered as A.1., and his execution (indicated but not described) was part of the happy ending, along with Margaret Althorpe's marriage to the Poor Nut as a by-product on the side—not of course to the Great Detective. Marriage is not for him. He passes on to the next mystery, in which "royalty" itself is deeply concerned.

. . . .

But all the tramp stuff is out of date. With a hundred million people "on the dole" and on "relief," we daren't set them to work at murder. We have to get another solution.

Here is one, used for generations but still going fairly strong. The murderer is found; oh, yes, he's found all right and confesses his guilt, *but* it is only too plain that his physical condition is such that he must soon "go before a higher tribunal." And that doesn't mean the supreme court.

It seems that at the moment when the Great Detective and Inspector Higginbottom have seized him he has developed a "hacking cough." This is one of those terrible maladies known only in fiction—like "brain fever" and a "broken heart," for which all medicine is in vain. Indeed in this case, as the man starts to make his confession, he can hardly talk for hacks.

"Well," said Garth, looking round at the little group of police officers, "the game is up—hack! hack!—and I may as well make a clean breast of it—hack, hack, hack."

Any trained reader when he hears these hacks knows exactly what they are to lead up to. The criminal, robust though he seemed only a chapter ago when he jumped through a three-story window after throttling Sub-Inspector Juggins half to death, is a dying man. He has got one of those terrible diseases known to fiction as a "mortal complaint." It wouldn't do to give it an exact name, or somebody might get busy and cure it. The symptoms are a hacking cough and a great mildness of manner, an absence of all profanity, and a tendency to call everybody "you gentlemen." Those things spell finis.

In fact, all that is needed now is for the Great Detective himself to say, "*Gentlemen*" (They are all gentlemen at this stage of the story.), "*a higher conviction then any earthly law has, et cetera, et cetera.*" With that, the curtain is dropped, and it is understood that the criminal made his exit the same night.

That's better, decidedly better. And yet, lacking in cheerfulness, somehow.

In fact this solution has something a little cowardly about it. It doesn't face the music.

One more of these futile solutions may be offered. Here's the way it is done.

The Great Detective stood looking about him, quietly shaking his head. His eye rested a moment on the prostrate body of Sub-Inspector Bradshaw, then turned to scrutinize the neat hole drilled in the glass of the window.

"I see it all now," he murmured. "I should have guessed it sooner. There is no doubt whose work this is."

"Who is it?" I asked.

"Blue Edward," he announced quietly.

"Blue Edward!" I exclaimed.

"Blue Edward," he repeated.

"Blue Edward!" I reiterated, "but who then is Blue Edward?"

This, of course, is the very question that the reader is wanting to ask. Who on earth is Blue Edward? The question is answered at once by the Great Detective himself.

"The fact that you have never heard of Blue Edward merely shows the world that you have lived in. As a matter of fact, Blue Edward is the terror of four continents. We have traced him to Shanghai, only to find him in Madagascar. It was he who organized the terrible robbery at Irkutsk in which ten mujiks were blown up with a bottle of Epsom salts.

"It was Blue Edward who for years held the whole of Philadelphia in abject terror, and kept Oshkosh, Wisconsin, on the jump for even longer. At the head of a gang of criminals that ramifies all over the known globe, equipped with a scientific education that enables him to read and write and use a typewriter with the greatest ease, Blue Edward has practically held the police of the world at bay for years.

"I suspected his hand in this from the start. From the very outset, certain evidences pointed to the work of Blue Edward."

After which all the police inspectors and spectators keep shaking their heads and murmuring, "Blue Edward, Blue Edward," until the reader is sufficiently impressed.

. . . .

The fact is that the writer *can't* end the story, not if it is sufficiently complicated in the beginning. No possible ending satisfies the case. Not even the glad news that the heroine sank into the Poor Nut's arms, never to leave them again, can relieve the situation. Not even the knowledge that they erected a handsome memorial to Sir Charles, or that the Great Detective played the saxophone for a week can quite compensate us.