GREAT DETECTIVES

A CENTURY OF THE BEST MYSTERIES FROM ENGLAND AND AMERICA

EDITED BY DAVID WILLIS McCULLOUGH

NOVELS

Ross Macdonald's The Chill

Ruth Rendell's Death Notes

A NOVELLA

Israel Zangwill's The Big Bow Mystery

AND STORIES BY

Dorothy Sayers
G.K. Chesterton
Agatha Christie
Robert van Gulik
William Faulkner
Dashiell Hammett
Edmund Crispin
Raymond Chandler
Ellery Queen
Rex Stout
Ray Bradbury
P.D. James
Donald Westlake
Ed McBain

For enthralling suspense and brilliant detection, there has never been a collection to match this one, with complete novels by Ross Macdonald and Ruth Rendell, a novella by Israel Zangwill, and sixteen short stories by the best mystery writers from England and America—Dorothy Sayers, G. K. Chesterton, Agatha Christie, Robert van Gulik, William Faulkner, Dashiell Hammett, Edmund Crispin, Raymond Chandler, Ellery Queen, Rex Stout, Ray Bradbury, P. D. James, Donald Westlake, and Ed McBain. From Zangwill's 1892 classic *The Big Bow Mystery* to James's never-before-published "The Murder of Santa Claus," these detective stories offer every kind of tension, shock and intrigue—a century's worth of excitement.

The New York Times has called Ross Macdonald's Lew Archer novels "the best series of detective novels by an American," and *The Chill* is vintage Archer, His investigation of the disappearance of a bride on her honeymoon leads him to a small southern California college and to three related murders spanning two decades and half a continent.

In Ruth Rendell's *Death Notes,* Inspector Wexford is called upon to investigate the accidental death of a world-famous flutist. As he probes the case, he discovers false identities, odd coincidences, and the certainty that the death was no accident, but a meticulously planned murder.

Dashiell Hammett's private eye Sam Spade appears only in *The Maltese Falcon*—and in three short stories, "A Man Called Spade," "They Can Only Hang You Once," and "Too Many Have Lived." All three are included here—together for the first time in decades.

Featuring Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlow, Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe, Dorothy Sayers's Lord Peter Wimsey, and the formidable Ellery Queen, *Great Detectives* assembles the star sleuths of the last century and a dazzling array of tales—the best by the best.

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David Willis McCullough, author of *People, Books, and Book People,* and *Brooklyn and How It Got That Way,* is on the editorial board of the Book-of-the-Month Club.

Great Detectives

A Century of the Best Mysteries from England and America

Edited by

David Willis McCullough

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For the Davies girls and Elizabeth Fischer,
And for Mary and Margaret, too.

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FOREWORD

The Elegant Art of Detection

THE PLACE is a quirky but suitably stately English country house, well stocked with servants, champagne, and eccentric weekend guests. It is the night of Sir Charles and Lady Deverill's Christmas costume party, and the hostess has asked everyone to come dressed as a game. Most are rigged out as playing cards or chess pieces, but one imaginative sort is disguised as a miniature billiards table and Nina Hartford has had the audacity to turn up in a bathing suit and claim she represents water polo.

It is well past midnight and the vicar is leading the local carolers in a chorus of "Good King Wenceslas" when someone dressed as the white king bursts into the ballroom and shouts, "Charmian. . .in the tapestry room. . .dead. . .strangled." Within hours Superintendent Jones is systematically questioning guests in the library, while Lord Peter, one of the guests himself and the Dowager Duchess of Denver's younger son, a chap known to be quite clever at this sort of thing, has begun to make certain inquiries of his own.

We are of course in the world of detective fiction. These events are from a story Dorothy L. Sayers wrote back in what has been called the Golden Age of detective literature, the late twenties and thirties. It is a rarefied, elegant, and always comforting world. There may be a corpse in the tapestry room (and therefore a murderer in the ballroom) and the solution may be devilishly intricate, but rules are observed, clues are served up in proper order (allowing naturally for an acceptable number of red herrings) and in time the debonair amateur detective (the superintendent and his men being hopelessly dense when it comes to actually solving crimes) announces the name of the villain.

For all their grit, grime, and street-wise world-weariness, the supposedly more realistic detectives who began to flourish a decade later in the United States dwell in a world no less romantic—or fanciful—than Lord Peter's. The difference is basically one of style and perspective. As Ellery Queen once wrote of Dashiell Hammett's work: "The stories are flamboyant extravaganzas, but the characters

in those stories are authentic human beings who talk, think and act like real people." Sayers's Lord Peter and Hammett's Sam Spade and all their brother and sister detectives with or without badges are more alike than not.

Raymond Chandler once called murder a "simple art." Maybe so, but detection is a decidedly elegant one, elegant in the way a mathematician calls a tidy solution to a particularly knotty problem elegant. Sherlock Holmes used logic, Father Brown an ability to put himself in the murderer's skin, Lord Peter a knack for intuitive bursts of inspiration, Sam Spade an instinct to distrust his suspects only so far, Lew Archer a belief that more crime can be explained by Freud than Blackstone. But more central than the methods and mannerisms of the great detectives is the fact that they cut through confusion and chaos, solve puzzles, and set things right to make the world seem quite a logical place after all. They restore order. As for those methods and mannerisms—there, for the readers of detective stories, is where the fun lies.

It all began with Edgar Allan Poe. Back before there was a Scotland Yard, Poe created the first fictional detective (although the word "detective" was never used), the Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin, and sent him, in 1841, to investigate some murders in the rue Morgue. Other "tales of ratiocination," as Poe called them, followed —"The Gold-Bug," "The Purloined Letter." In "The Mystery of Marie Roget," he took the mysterious death of an actual New York tobacconist named Mary Rogers and Gallicized all the names and locations so his Parisian detective could try his hand at solving the case.

Poe's claim as father of the detective story does not, of course, go unchallenged. Germans like to give that honor to E. T. A. Hoffmann, who in 1818 published "Das Fräulein von Scuderi," a mysterious tale about a series of murders and jewel thefts in the Paris of Louis XIV. It became the basis of a Hindemith opera (many of Hoffmann's other tales having already been appropriated by Offenbach), but Mademoiselle de Scuderi, a romantic novelist with good connections in the royal court, is not so much a detective as a sympathetic listener to convenient confessions.

Since all these early stories seem to be set in France, it is fitting that the French themselves have a candidate for the founding father, François-Eugene Vidocq. Vidocq was a criminal, a retired criminal who organized his own Sûreté, and in 1828 published the first of a series of books about his most spectacular cases. Since Vidocq's agents were former associates from the underworld he was accused of engineering crimes that he could solve with a flourish, and more than a few of the exploits in his *Mémoires* are suspected of being more fiction than fact. But with all his skill at disguises and his forensic theories (an unusually high percentage of criminals, he noted, are bowlegged) Vidocq seems more a subject for detective fiction than a writer. Indeed, his friend Balzac used him—under the name Vautrin—in several novels, and the memoir-writing former detective in Israel Zangwill's *The Big Bow Mystery* owes more than a little to the French Chef de la Sûreté.

In 1878, thirty-seven years after the first appearance of Poe's Dupin and seven years before Sherlock Holmes arrived on the scene, Anna Katharine Green of Brooklyn, daughter of a fashionable criminal lawyer, published *The Leavenworth Case.* The British mystery writer Julian Symons believes it to be the first detective novel written by a woman. In any case, according to the critic Michele Slung, it was the first mystery novel to attract "the interest of the respectable classes." The novel was an astonishing best seller, and both Woodrow Wilson and British prime minister Stanley Baldwin later listed it among their favorite novels. Miss Green's detective, whom she used in ten more mysteries, was Ebenezer Gryce, and if his euphonious name is no longer a household word, he said something that has echoed through detective fiction ever since. Asked, soon after taking charge of the Leavenworth murder, whom he suspected, Gryce answered: "Everyone and nobody. It is not for me to suspect, but to detect."

By the time Holmes had established himself, first with *A Study in Scarlet* (1887) and then with dozens of other adventures, the detective story was recognized as fit reading material for just about everyone. W. H. Auden has written that the form flourishes in predominantly Protestant countries (but then he believed that the

average mystery reader to be one like himself, "who suffers from a sense of sin"), while Dorothy Sayers thought they do best in societies—like England—where respect for law and fair play is stronger than admiration for criminal cunning. One point, however, is clear—that whether guilt-ridden or legalistic, the society most hospitable to the detective is an urban one.

G. K. Chesterton, the creator of Father Brown, noted that the detective story was the first form of popular literature that "expressed some sense of the poetry of modern life," by which he meant city life. The early fictional detectives were all city men. Holmes might have gone off for the odd country visit—to the Baskervilles, for instance—but he kept his Baker Street apartment and he had a city man's knack for being able to catch a cab when he needed one. During the so-called Golden Age the detective story took a long English weekend in the country, with Agatha Christie, Josephine Tey, Dorothy Sayers, and others finding all sorts of mayhem hidden away in vicarages, manor houses, boarding schools, and the like, but with the flowering of the American crime story, detectives got back to the cities, where they belong.

The tough new American writers did not look to their English country cousins with undue reverence. "The English may not always be the best writers in the world," Raymond Chandler, the creator of Philip Marlowe, observed, "but they are incomparably the best dull writers." For Chandler it was his and Dashiell Hammett's and the other realists' job "to get murder away from the upper classes, the weekend house party and the vicar's rose-garden and back to the people who are really good at it."

Hammett himself was probably more critical of American writers who tried to mimic British airs, the most offensive to him being S. S. Van Dine, whose dandified detective Philo Vance he once described as having the conversational manner of a "high-school girl who has been studying the foreign words and phrases in the back of her dictionary." When Hammett created his own debonair detective in *The Thin Man,* he introduced a witty, caustic, hard-drinking realist who, with his wife, Nora, and their dog, Asta, was cannily beating

the society swells at their own game. His engraved calling cards may have read Nick Charles, but his real name was Charalambides.

Typically, Hammett was offended as much by the way Philo Vance talked as he was by his author's ignorance of actual police methods. Setting the right conversational tone was just as important to him as using realistic procedures of detection. Today the deadpan but slightly florid Hammett "sound" still reverberates through the contemporary American detective story. "The cheaper the crook," as Sam Spade says in *The Maltese Falcon,* "the gaudier the patter."

Ernest Wilhelm Julius Borneman, a German who in 1935 wrote an English detective novel, *The Face on the Cutting Room Floor,* under the pseudonym Cameron McCabe, was an admirer of the American tough-guy persona, but he included in his novel a character who wasn't. And that character nicely sums up the American style: "How funny, those modern he-mannerisms: telling important things in a trifling way and trifles with an important air, saying things you don't think and thinking things you don't say."

The Face on the Cutting Room Floor, a rather pale Nabokovian send-up of a number of mystery genres, offended some critics and titillated others by the cavalier way it treated the all-but-sacred rules of detective writing. There are no doubt more rules to writing a proper sestina than to writing a detective story, but there is probably no other prose form that at least pretends to be governed by so many notions of what a writer can or cannot do. Luckily, like the British constitution, the rules have never been written down in one place, so they are always changing. And they are always being broken.

The narrator can't be the killer; key facts cannot be withheld from the reader; the killer can't be introduced in the last few pages; there are to be no rare poisons that can't be detected; the murderer cannot turn out to be an animal; the butler (or detective) can't do it unless it is someone pretending to be a butler (or detective). In every case a seasoned reader can name a well-established writer who has broken each of those rules.

Other strictures are more specialized. W. H. Auden demands that "if there is more than one murder, the subsequent victims be more

innocent than the initial victim, i.e., the murderer should start with a real grievance and, as a consequence of righting it by an illegitimate means, be forced to murder against his will where he has no grievances but his own guilt." S. S. Van Dine ruled, "There must be no love interest," but there must always be a corpse ("No lesser crime than murder will suffice"), and the murderer must never be a servant, since "the culprit must be a decidedly worth-while person—one who wouldn't normally come under suspicion."* Monsignor Ronald A. Knox declared, perhaps just short of *ex cathedra,* that "not more than one secret room or passage is allowable," that the intelligence of the detective's friend, the Watson character, be "slightly, but very slightly, below that of the average reader," and that identical twins always be handled with exceptional care.

*This sort of blasé snobbery and genteel racism was common during the Golden Age. In Josephine Tey's first novel, *The Man in the Queue* (1929), the victim is quietly stabbed to death while waiting in a theater line, and the much-admired detective immediately observes that the murderer cannot be an Englishman. Englishmen don't stab. "The very femininity of it proclaimed the dago," he declares and chooses as his chief suspect a poor soul with the bad luck of having an Italian grandmother. When the novel was reissued decades later the word *dago* was replaced with *Levantine.*

R. Austin Freeman, creator of the "scientific" detective Dr. Thorndyke and a popular writer of the twenties, served up what may be the detective writer's ace in the hole: "The reader can always be trusted to mislead himself, no matter how plainly the data are given. . .This failure of the reader to perceive the evidential value of the facts is the foundation on which detective fiction is built."

Yet all this worry over rules and fair play, while not always serious even on the part of the law-givers, is indicative of how fragile the world of the detective story actually is. In *The Great Cat Massacre,* Robert Darnton retells an old French folk tale in which a hunchback comes upon a band of witches dancing about and singing the words "Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday" over and over. Inspired, he jumps up and sings, "Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday." The witches are so delighted with this improvement that they remove his deformity. Another hunchback, seeing what happened,

jumps up and sings, “Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday.” The witches are horrified. One of them says, “That doesn’t go.” Another adds, “Not at all,” and they punish him by giving him the hump they removed from the first man. Now doubly deformed, the second man is tormented to death by his fellow villagers.

That is the sort of perverse irrationality that could never be tolerated in the tidy and—no matter how violent—basically just world of detective fiction. We all know that in the real world, crimes go unsolved and that chance and paid informants often have more to do with criminal justice than does old-fashioned detection. But when a detective novel breaks the rules and accepts the inelegant irrationality of the witches—and the real world—it can be profoundly disturbing. Chester Himes’s often comic *Blind Man with a Pistol* is just such a book. It deals with a series of crimes and murders in Harlem, and just as Himes’s black detectives, Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones, seem to be closing in on a solution, a bizarre riot sparked by a blind man randomly shooting up a subway train spills out of the 125th Street station. None of the loose ends connect or can be tied up, and the novel ends—in one of the most jarring conclusions in detective fiction—with a policeman saying, “That don’t make any sense,” and Coffin Ed replying, “Sure don’t.”

Dorothy Sayers compares the detective to Sir Roland and Lancelot. To the critic Leslie Fiedler he is “the cowboy adapted to life on the city streets, the embodiment of innocence moving untouched through universal guilt.” Ross Macdonald has rejected such notions as “sentimental romance,” but the detective remains a figure readers cannot accept as being powerless amid chaos.

All this talk of the detective as knight-errant, cowboy, and redeemer can become pretentious. Edmund Wilson, in his essay “Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?” dismissed the reading of detective stories as “a kind of vice that, for silliness and minor harmfulness, ranks somewhere between smoking and crossword puzzles.” It was an essay that brought a record number of irate letters to the New Yorker, as readers proclaimed their favorite vice to be something more than that.

But it is curious the way mystery fans talk of their love for detective stories. They tend to speak of it as a vice or an addiction or a habit that perhaps should be broken (but not today). Cyril Connolly has written about his "recurrent habit" almost in terms an alcoholic would use reminiscing about vaguely remembered binges: "For months, sometimes for years, one does not read them all; then an illness or a visit or a trip abroad sends one back to them, and it seems for a time inconceivable that one would want to read anything else." A favorite line of compulsive mystery readers, said almost as though it might excuse the whole problem, is that they never remember a story once it is finished and that they can reread almost an entire novel without realizing it, until some phrase or clue reminds them. Since Agatha Christie's paperback publishers regularly produce new cover designs for her novels, thousands of fans no doubt find themselves going down paths in Miss Marple's village of St. Mary Mead with a curious sense of *déjà vu.*

The simple fact, of course, is that detective stories are fun. Puzzles are fun. The detectives' eccentricities are fun. Knowing a culprit is not going to get away with something the reader dared not try himself is satisfying. And at a time when serious fiction is not as strong on plot as it once was, the very form of a detective story makes a reader ask, "What happens next?" That, too, is fun.

The victim, of course, isn't part of this fun. Ellery Queen once quoted the literary agent Carl Brandt comparing the victim in a murder mystery to a rock thrown into a fishpond: "The reader doesn't want to know what happened to the rock—the reader wants to know what happened to the fish." Leslie Charteris's Simon Templar, the Saint, seems to feel the rock is being slighted. In a short story published in the late forties we learn that "one of Simon Templar's stock criticisms of the classic type of detective story is that the victim of the murderer, the reluctant spark plug of all the entertaining mystery and strife, is usually a mere nonentity who wanders vaguely through the first few pages with the sole purpose of becoming a convenient body in the library by the end of Chapter One."

In its trend toward increased realism in speech, setting, and characterization the detective story has in recent years updated the role of that once merely convenient corpse. As the influence of Ross Macdonald spreads it may be said that the body on the library floor is no longer a nonentity but bears a weight in the story that is as important and as mysterious as the killer's.

The detective story has been around now for over a hundred years, and even with all its rules and traditions shows no sign of atrophying. Bodies still turn up in inconvenient places. New detectives continue to search for clues in ways that range from the mundane to the bizarre, and if asked whom they suspect they will answer along the lines of "Everyone and nobody"—a very elegant answer indeed.

The stories in this anthology of great—and perhaps not so great as beguiling—detectives are arranged in vaguely chronological order, although no attempt has been made to be doggedly systematic about this. It begins not with the usual appearances by Poe and Conan Doyle, since their stories are easily available from many other sources, but by a more obscure and perhaps more entertaining nineteenth-century novella; it continues with detectives —official, unofficial, and accidental—from England and America.

DAVID WILLIS MCCULLOUGH

April 1, 1984

P. D. James

THE MURDER OF SANTA CLAUS

Until now Phyllis Dorothy James (1920-) has been associated with two detectives: Adam Dalgliesh, Chief Superintendent of Scotland Yard, and Cordelia Gray, proprietor of Prydes Detective Agency. In "The Murder of Santa Claus," which is published here for the first time, P. D. James introduces a new detective, Charles Mickledore, a none-too-prosperous writer of unfashionably old-fashioned detective stories who asks, frankly enough, "Why should I expect my writing to be any more successful than my life?"

Dalgliesh—then a lowly inspector—appeared in P. D. James's first novel, *Cover Her Face* (1962). A widower, the son of a clergyman, a published poet (who, considering his line of work, meets an unusual number of people who know about his poetry), Adam has been described by a marriage counselor as "self-sufficient, uninvolved, a professional detective dedicated to his job, totally unused to the claims, emotional and domestic, which a wife and family would make on him." The counselor was describing him to Cordelia Gray (they tend to pop up in each others novels), who has been called "slight but tough." Cordelia made her debut in the ironically titled *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman* (1973), in which she takes over a down-at-the-heels detective agency after the death of her boss, Bernie Pryde.

P. D. James has written eight novels featuring either Dalgliesh or Gray, and a serious, non-detective one, *Innocent Blood.* Cordelia's books tend to be more whimsical than Adam's, as he is apt to brood on human frailty, while she, being self-employed with a payroll to meet, is more concerned with giving her clients good value for their money. The settings of many of the novels are medical or institutional, reflecting the years the author worked in hospital administration and later as a civil servant in the British Home Office criminal division.

With Charles Mickledore—who is, were told, "no Dick Francis, not even a P. D. James"—P. D. James herself seems to be having a bit of fun with some of the hoarier traditions of detective fiction.

The Murder of Santa Claus

1

IF YOU'RE AN ADDICT of detective fiction you may have heard of me, Charles Mickledore. I say "addict" advisedly; no occasional or highly discriminating reader of the genre is likely to ask for my latest offering at his public library. I'm no H. R. F. Keating, no Dick Francis, not even a P. D. James. But I do a workmanlike job on the old conventions, for those who like their murders cozy, and although my amateur detective the Hon. Martin Carstairs has been described as a pallid copy of Peter Wimsey at least I haven't burdened him with a monocle, or with Harriet Vane for that matter. I make enough to augment a modest private income. Unmarried, solitary, unsociable—why should I expect my writing to be any more successful than my life?

Sometimes I'm even asked to do a radio chat show when one of the more distinguished practitioners of death isn't available. I've gotten used to the old question: Have you ever, Mr. Mickledore, had personal experience of murder? Invariably I lie. For one thing, interviewers never expect the truth; there isn't time. And for another, they wouldn't believe me. The murder I was involved with was as complicated, as bizarre, as histrionic as any fictional mayhem I've managed to concoct even in my more inspired moments. If I were writing about it I'd call it the Murder of Santa Claus. And that, essentially, was what it was.

Appropriately enough it took place in the heyday of the cozy "whodunits," the Christmas of 1939, the first Christmas of the war. I was sixteen, an awkward age at the best of times and, as a sensitive and solitary only child, I was more awkward than most. My father was in the Colonial Service serving in Singapore and I usually spent the winter holiday with my housemaster and his family. But this

year my parents wrote that my father's elder half-brother, Victor Mickledore, had invited me to his Cotswold manor house at Marston Turville. His instructions were precise. I was to arrive by the 4:15 train on Christmas Eve and would depart on the morning of Wednesday 27 December. I would be met at Marston station by his housekeeper/secretary, Miss Makepiece. There would be four other guests: Major and Mrs. Turville, from whom he had bought the Manor five years previously; his stepson Henry Caldwell, the famous amateur flyer; and the actress, Miss Gloria Belsize. I had, of course, heard of Caldwell and of Miss Belsize although I don't suppose that even I, naïve as I was, supposed it to be her real name.

My uncle—or should it be step-uncle?—apologized for the fact that there would be no other young guests to keep me company. That didn't worry me. But the thought of the visit did. I had only met my uncle once, when I was ten. I had the idea, gleaned as children do from half-spoken sentences and overheard remarks, that my parents and he were on bad terms. I think he had once wanted to marry my mother. Perhaps this was an attempt at reconciliation now that war, with its uncertainties, had started. My father had made it plain in his letter that I was expected to accept the invitation and that he was relying on me to make a good impression. I put out of my mind the treacherous thought that my uncle was very rich and that he had no children.

Miss Makepiece was waiting for me at Marston station. She greeted me with no particular warmth and as she led the way to the waiting Rover I was reminded of the school matron on one of her more repressive days. We drove through the village in silence. It lay somber and deserted in its pre-Christmas calm. I can remember the church half-hidden behind the great yews and the silent school with the children's Christmas chains of colored paper gleaming dully against the windows.

Marston Turville is a small seventeenth-century manor house, its three wings built round a courtyard. I saw it first as a mass of gray stone blacked out, as was the whole village, under low broken clouds. My uncle greeted me before a log fire in the great hall. I came in, blinking, from the December dusk into a blaze of color:

candles sparkling on the huge Christmas tree, its tub piled with imitation snowballs of frosted cottonwool; the leaping fire; the gleam of firelight on silver. My fellow guests were taking tea and I see them as a tableau, cups half way to their lips, predestined victims waiting for the tragedy to begin.

Memory, perverse and selective, has even clothed them appropriately. When I picture that Christmas Eve, I see Henry Caldwell, that doomed hero, in his RAF uniform with his medal ribbons on his breast. But he couldn't have been wearing it. He was only then waiting to report for his RAF training. And I invariably picture Gloria Belsize in the slinky golden evening dress which she changed into for dinner, her nipples pointing the satin; I found it difficult to keep my eyes from them. I see the plain, intimidatingly efficient Miss Makepiece in her gray woolen dress severe as a uniform, the Turvilles in their shabby country tweeds, my uncle always in his immaculate dinner jacket.

He bent on me with his dark sardonic face. "So you're Alison's boy. I wondered how you'd turn out."

I thought I knew what he was thinking; that the right father would have made all the difference. I was aware of my lack of height besides his six foot two—only Henry could match him—and of my adolescent crop of pimples. He introduced me to my fellow guests. The Turvilles were a gentle-faced white-haired couple, older than I had expected and both rather deaf. I found Henry's austere good looks rather formidable; shyness and hero-worship made me dumb. Miss Belsize's face was known to me from the papers. Now I saw what tactful touching-up had concealed: the deepening lines under the eyes, the sagging jawline, the hectic flush under the remarkable eyes. Then I wondered why she should be so excited by Christmas. Now I realize that she was half-drunk for most of the day and that my uncle saw it, was amused by it, and made no attempt to curb her. We were an ill-assorted party. None of us was at ease, myself least of all. After that first greeting my uncle hardly spoke to me. But whenever we were together I was aware of his intense scrutiny, of being in some way under approval.

The first intimation of horror, the Christmas cracker with its message of menace, was delivered at seven o'clock. It was a long tradition at Marston Turville that carol singers from the village sang to their squire on Christmas Eve. They arrived promptly, sidling in under the blackout curtain one by one, as the lights in the great hall were lowered. There were ten of them, seven men and three women, cloaked against the cold of that frosty night, and each carrying a lantern which was lit as soon as the heavy door was closed. I stood, uneasy in my newly acquired dinner jacket, between Mrs. Turville and Henry to the right of the fire, and listened to the old innocently nostalgic carols resolutely sung in their hearty country voices. Afterwards the butler, Poole, and one of the maids brought in mince pies and hot punch. But there was an air of constraint. They should have been singing for the Turvilles. The manor was in alien hands. They ate and drank with almost unseemly haste. The lights were put out, the door opened, and my uncle with Miss Makepiece at his side thanked them and said goodnight. Miss Belsize fluttered round them as they left almost as if she were chatelaine of the manor. The Turvilles had stood distanced at the far end of the room and, when the singing began, I saw her hand steal out to his.

We saw the cracker almost at once. It had been placed on a small table near the door. It was fashioned of red-and-yellow crepe paper, overlarge, obviously an amateur effort but made with some skill. Miss Belsize seized it and read:

"'Victor Mickledore!' It's got your name on it, darling. Someone's left you a present. What fun! Do let's pull it!"

He didn't respond but pulled on his cigarette and gazed at her contemptuously through the smoke. She flushed, then held the cracker out to me and we pulled together. The paper tore apart without a bang and a small object fell out and rolled over the carpet. I bent and picked it up. Wrapped neatly in an oblong of paper was a small metal charm in the shape of a skull attached to a key ring; I had seen similar ones in gift shops. I opened the paper folded round it and saw a verse handprinted in capitals. Gloria cried:

“Read it out, darling!”

I glanced at my uncle’s impassive face and heard my nervous, overloud voice:

Merry Christmas, Mickledore!
Go to bed and sleep no more.
Take this charm and hold it fast;
This night’s sleep shall be your last.

Christmas bells ring merrily;
Bells of hell shall ring for thee.
Happy Christmas, Mickledore.
Go to bed and sleep no more.

There was a moment’s silence. Then Henry said calmly:

“One of your neighbors doesn’t like you, Victor. He’s wrong about the bells, though. No Christmas bells in wartime. The bells of hell are another matter. No doubt they aren’t subject to Defense Regulations.”

Gloria’s voice was high:

“It’s a death threat! Someone wants to kill you. That woman was among the singers, wasn’t she? The one whose child you ran over and killed last Christmas Eve. The village schoolmistress. Saunders. That’s her name. Mrs. Saunders was here!”

There was a dreadful silence. My uncle spoke in a voice like a whiplash:

“A witness saw a dark Daimler but it wasn’t mine. My Daimler never left the garage last Christmas Eve. Poole confirmed it.”

“I know, darling. I didn’t mean anything. . .”

“You seldom do.” He turned to Poole:

“The best place for this is the kitchen grate.”

Then Henry spoke:

“I shouldn’t destroy it, not for a time anyway. It’s harmless enough, but if you get another and the thing becomes a nuisance it might be as well to let the police see it.”

Miss Makepiece said in her cool voice:

“I’ll put it in the study desk.”

She took it away and the rest of us followed her with our eyes. Gloria said:

“But you’ll lock your door, darling. I think you ought to lock your bedroom door.”

Victor said:

“I lock my door against no one in my house. If I have an enemy I meet him face to face. And now perhaps we could go in to dinner.”

It was an uncomfortable meal. Gloria’s loud, half-tipsy volubility served only to emphasize the general cheerlessness. And it was at dinner that she told me about another of my uncle’s traditions. Promptly at one o’clock, “to give us time to get to sleep or at least be in our proper beds, darling,” he would put on a Santa Claus costume and distribute gifts to each of his guests. We would find a stocking ready at the foot of each bed.

“See what I got last year,” she exulted, stretching out her arm to me across the table. The diamond bracelet sparkled in the candlelight. My uncle cracked a walnut in his palm like a pistol shot.

“You may do better this year if you’re a good girl.”

The words and the tone were an insult.

I remember the rest of the evening in a series of brightly lit cameos. Dancing after dinner, the Turvilles staidly circling, Gloria clinging amorously to Henry, Miss Makepiece watching with contemptuous eyes from her seat by the fire. How evocative those records are now! Beer Barrel Polka, Deep Purple, Run Rabbit Run, Jeepers Creepers and Tiger Rag. Then the game of hunt the hare; according to Henry this was another of Victor’s Christmas traditions, one in which the whole household was required to take part. I was chosen as hare. A balloon was tied to my arm and I was given five minutes to hide anywhere in the house. The aim was to regain the front door before I was caught and the balloon punctured. For me it was the only jolly part of the evening. I remember giggling housemaids; Gloria, chasing me round the kitchen table, making ineffectual lunges with a rolled magazine; my last mad rush to the door as Henry burst from the study and exploded the balloon with

one swipe of a branch of holly. Later, I remember the dying firelight gleaming on crystal decanters as Poole brought in the drinks tray. The Turvilles went to bed first—she wanted to listen to the 10:45 Epilogue in her own room—and were shortly followed by Gloria and Miss Makepiece. I said my goodnights at 11:45, leaving my uncle alone with Henry, the drinks tray between them.

At my bedroom door I found Miss Makepiece waiting for me. She asked me to change rooms with Henry. He was in the red room with its curtained four-poster and, after his accident in June when he had been forced down in his flight to South America and had escaped in seconds from the blazing cockpit, she thought he might find the bed claustrophobic. She helped me move my few belongings into the new room on the back corridor and bade me goodnight. I can't say I was sorry to be farther from my uncle.

Christmas Eve was nearly over. I thought about my day as I undressed and made my way to the bathroom at the turn of the corridor. It hadn't been too bad, after all. Henry had been remote but amiable. Miss Makepiece was intimidating, but she had left me alone. I was still terrified of Victor, but Mrs. Turville had been a motherly and protective presence. Deaf and shabby, she yet had her own gentle authority. There was a small carved statue of the Virgin in a niche to the right of the fireplace. Before the game of hunt the hare, someone had tied a balloon to its neck. Quietly she had asked Poole to remove it and he had at once obeyed. Afterwards she had explained to me that the statue was called the Turville Grace and for three hundred years had protected the heir from harm. She told me that her only son was in a Guards regiment and asked about my own family. How glad I must be that they were in Singapore where the war could not touch them. Could not touch them! The irony stings even now.

The lined bed curtains and the canopy were of heavy crimson material, damask I suppose. Because of some defect in the rails they couldn't be fully drawn back except at the foot and there was barely space for my bedside table. Lying on the high and surprisingly hard mattress I had the impression of being enveloped in flames of blood, and I could understand Miss Makepiece's concern that Henry should

sleep elsewhere. I don't think I realized then, child that I was, that she was in love with him any more than I accepted what I surely must have known, that Gloria had been my uncle's mistress.

I slept almost immediately, but that internal clock which regulates our waking made me stir after little more than two hours. I switched on my bedside lamp and looked at my watch. It was a minute to one o'clock. Santa Claus would be on his way. I put out the light and waited, feeling again some of the excitement I had felt as a young child on this most magical night of the year. He came promptly, gliding in soundlessly over the carpet. Curtained as I was I could hear nothing, not even the sound of his breathing. I half covered my head with the sheet, feigned sleep, and watched with one narrowed eye. He was holding a torch and the pool of light shone momentarily on his fur-trimmed robe, the peaked hood drawn forward over his face. A white-gloved hand slipped a package into the stocking. And then he was gone as silently as he had come.

At sixteen one has no patience. I waited until I was sure he had gone then crept down the bed. The present, wrapped in red striped paper, was slim. I untied the ribbon. Inside was a box containing a gold cigarette case carved with the initials H.R.C. How odd that I hadn't remembered! This present was, of course, meant for Henry. I should have to wait for mine until morning. On impulse I opened the case. Inside was a typed message.

> Happy Christmas! No need to get it tested. It's gold all right. And in case you're beginning to hope, this is the only gold you'll get from me.

I wished I hadn't opened it, hadn't seen that offensive gibe.

I took some time replacing the wrapping and ribbon as neatly as I could, put the package back in the stocking, and settled myself to sleep.

I woke once again in the night. I needed to go to the lavatory. The corridor, like the whole house, was blacked out, but a small oil lamp was kept burning on a table and I groped my sleepy way by its light. I had regained my room when I heard footsteps. I slipped back

into the recess of the door and watched. Major and Mrs. Turville, dressing-gowned, came silently down the corridor and slipped into the bathroom, furtively as if gaining a refuge. He was carrying what looked like a rolled-up towel. I waited, curious. In a few seconds she put her head round the door, glanced down the passage, then withdrew. Three seconds later they came out together, he still carrying the rolled towel as if it were a baby. Afraid of being detected in my spying, I closed the door. It was a curious incident. But I soon forgot it in oblivion.

I had drawn back my curtain before sleeping and was woken by the first light of dawn. A tall dressing-gowned figure was standing at the foot of the bed. It was Henry. He came up to me and handed me a gift-wrapped package, saying:

"Sorry if I disturbed you. I was trying to exchange presents before you woke."

He took his own but didn't open it, and watched while I tore the paper off mine. My uncle had given me a gold watch wrapped in a ten-pound note. The richness of it left me speechless but I knew that I was pink with pleasure. He watched my face, then said:

"I wonder what price he'll exact for that. Don't let him corrupt you. That's what he uses his money for, playing with people. Your parents are overseas, aren't they?"

I nodded.

"It might be sensible to write to them that you'd rather not holiday here. It's your affair. I don't want to interfere. But your uncle isn't good for the young. He isn't good for anyone."

I don't know what, if anything, I should have found to say. I recall my momentary resentment that he should have spoiled some of my pleasure in my present. But it was then that we heard the first scream.

It was high, horrible, a wild female screeching. Henry ran out and I scrambled out of bed and followed, down the corridor and round to the front of the house. The screams were coming from the open door of my uncle's bedroom. As we reached it, Gloria appeared in the doorway, disheveled in her mauve silk dressing gown, her

hair loose. Clutching at Henry, she stopped screaming, caught her breath and gasped:

"He's dead! Murdered! Victor's murdered!"

We slackened our pace and walked almost slowly up to the bed. I was aware of Miss Makepiece behind us, of Poole coming down the corridor bearing a tray with early morning tea. My uncle lay stretched on his back, still in his Santa Claus costume, the hood framing his face. His mouth was half open in a parody of a grin; his nose was sharply beaked like a bird's; his hands, neatly disposed at his side, seemed unnaturally white and thin, too frail for the heavy signet ring. Everything about him was diminished, made harmless, almost pathetic. But my eyes came back and fixed themselves finally on the knife. It had been plunged into his chest, pinning to it the menacing rhyme from the Christmas cracker.

I felt a dreadful nausea, which, to my shame, gave way to a heady mixture of fear and excitement. I was aware of Major Turville coming up beside me. He said:

"I'll tell my wife; she mustn't come in here. Henry you'd better ring the police."

Miss Makepiece said:

"Is he dead?"

She might have been asking if breakfast was ready.

Henry answered:

"Oh yes, he's dead all right."

"But there's so little blood. Round the knife. Why didn't he bleed?"

"That means he was dead before the knife was put in."

I wondered that they could be so calm. Then Henry turned to Poole: "Is there a key to this room?"

"Yes, sir. On the keyboard in the business room."

"Fetch it please. We'd better lock up here and keep out until the police arrive."

They ignored Gloria, who crouched sniveling at the foot of the bed. And they seemed to have forgotten me. I stood there, shivering, my eyes fixed on that grotesque red-robed corpse which had been Victor Mickledore.

Then Poole coughed, ridiculously deferential:

"I'm wondering, sir, why he didn't defend himself. Mr. Mickledore always kept a gun in the drawer of the bedside table."

Henry went over and pulled it open.

It was then that Gloria stopped crying, gave a hysterical laugh, and sang out in a high quavering voice:

> "Happy Christmas, Mickledore,
> Go to bed and wake no more.
> Merry Christmas, sound the knell,
> Murdered, dead and gone to hell."

But all our eyes were on the drawer.

It was empty. The gun was missing.

2

A retired seventy-six-year-old police officer, even from a small country force, isn't short of memories to solace his fireside evenings and, until Charles Mickledore's letter arrived, I hadn't thought about the Marston Turville killing for years. Mickledore asked me to give my version of the case as part of a private account he was writing and I was surprised how vividly the memories came flooding back. I don't know how he managed to run me to earth. He mentioned that he wrote detective fiction and that may have helped. Not that I read it. In my experience police officers rarely do. Once you've had to cope with the real thing, you lose the taste for fantasy.

I was interested to learn what had happened to that shy, unattractive, secretive boy. At least he was still alive. Too many of that little group which had spent Christmas Eve 1939 with him at Marston Turville had come to violent ends. One murdered; one shot down in flames; one killed in a car smash; two caught in a London air raid; and one, largely due to my activities, ignominiously dead at the end of a rope. Not that I lose any sleep over that. You get on with your job and let the consequences look after themselves. That's

the only way I know to do police work. But I'd better get on with my story.

My name is John Pollinger and in December 1939 I was a newly promoted Detective Inspector in the County Force. The Mickledore killing was my first murder. I arrived at the Manor with my sergeant at nine-thirty and old Doc McKay, the police surgeon, was hard on my heels. Henry Caldwell had taken charge and had done all the correct things. The death room was locked, no one had been allowed to leave the house and they had all kept together. Only Mrs. Turville was missing—locked in her bedroom and, according to her husband, too distressed to see me. But the Major was willing to let me in as soon as Doc MacKay had taken a look at her. He was their family doctor; but then, he was doctor to all the village. Most of us involved in the case knew one another. That was my strength; it was also my weakness.

Once we had parted the heavy Santa Claus robe, its inner fold stiffened and darkened with blood, it didn't need the missing gun to tell us that Mickledore had been shot. The bullet had been aimed at short range to the heart. And I couldn't see Mickledore lying there meekly waiting for it. There was an empty glass on his bedside table. Taking it up, I could just detect the faint smell of whisky. But I had an open mind on what else it might have contained.

Doc McKay pulled out the knife—an ordinary sharp-bladed kitchen knife—with one quick jerk of his gloved hand. He sniffed round the larger gunshot wound for signs of scorching, then checked the body temperature and the progress of rigor mortis. The timing of death is always chancy, but he finally estimated that Mickledore had been killed sometime between 11:30 and two o'clock. It was an opinion that the post-mortem examination subsequently confirmed.

We were short of manpower in that first winter of the phony war and I had to manage with one sergeant and a couple of detective constables new to the job. I interviewed the suspects myself. It wouldn't have been convincing if they'd pretended any grief and, to give them their due, they didn't try. They spoke the conventional platitudes and so did I; but we didn't fool one another.

Caldwell said that he had last seen Mickledore carrying a glass of whisky to his room when they parted in the corridor shortly before midnight. The Turvilles and Miss Belsize, who had retired earlier, claimed that they were asleep by midnight and hadn't stirred until morning. Charles Mickledore admitted that he had gone to the bathroom sometime after one—he hadn't looked at his watch—but insisted that he had seen no one and heard nothing. I had a strong impression he was lying but I didn't press him at that first interview. The young seldom lie convincingly. They haven't had time to practice like the rest of us.

Poole and the cook, Mrs. Banting, lived in separate flats in the stable block; Mickledore had a dislike of servants sleeping in the house. The other three maids were local girls who came in part-time from the village and had gone home after dinner. Mrs. Banting had put the turkey and Christmas pudding in the pantry before leaving for her bed at eleven and Poole had left with her. She had returned at six to begin her Christmas preparations and Poole had arrived at seven to take-up the early morning tea trays. Both claimed to have spent a night of innocent oblivion and swore that their keys hadn't left their possession. No one heard the gunshot. The Turvilles were deaf, Miss Belsize probably half drunk and doped, the young sleep soundly, and Mickledore's door was of heavy oak. All the same, it was odd.

I may as well admit that my first suspect was Caldwell. This was a murder requiring nerve and that he had in plenty. I reckoned that his country had a better use for him than stringing him up in a hangman's noose. But if the law found him guilty, he'd be for the drop war or no war. But one thing, in particular, puzzled me. His mother had died in 1934. Why wait five years to take his revenge? Why this Christmas? It didn't make sense.

Caldwell and Miss Makepiece were the only two, apart from the boy, who admitted having left their rooms that night. Miss Makepiece said that, shortly after one o'clock, she had been woken by a call on her bedside telephone; Mickledore never took night calls and the extension was in her room. The call was from Bill Sowers, our Air Raid Warden, complaining that a strip of light was

showing from one of the first-floor windows. Miss Makepiece had roused Caldwell and they had taken torches, unbolted a side door from the kitchen quarters, and had gone out together to identify the source of the light and check that the rest of the house was properly blacked out. Afterwards they had taken a nip of whisky from the decanter still in the great hall—it was a cold night to go traipsing round in dressing gowns, and had decided to play a game of chess. It seemed a bit odd to me; but they said they were by now thoroughly awake and disinclined for sleep. Both were experienced players and they welcomed the chance of a peaceful game. They couldn't remember which of them had suggested it, but both agreed that the game had ended just before three, when they had gone to their rooms for what remained of the night.

And here I thought I had them. I play a reasonable game myself so I asked them to sit at different ends of the room and write down as many of the moves as they could remember. It's strange, but I can recall some of that game to this day. Miss Makepiece was white and opened with pawn to king four. Caldwell responded by playing the Sicilian. After about ninety minutes white managed to queen a pawn and black resigned. They were able to remember a remarkable number of moves and I was forced to accept that the game had been played. Caldwell had nerve. But had he nerve enough to play a complicated game of chess while his victim, still warm, lay murdered upstairs?

And that call from Bill Sowers was genuine, too. I had been with him when he made it from the village call box. We had come out of church together after Midnight Service and had immediately seen the offending light, as had most of the congregation. And Bill, always punctilious, had looked at his watch. His call to the Manor had been made at six minutes past one.

It was four-thirty before I finally left the Manor to report to the Chief Constable. Those were the days of the old-fashioned chiefs—none of your university special entrants or Police College intellectuals. I loved old Colonel Maybricke. My own father had been killed at Ypres and I suppose he was some kind of substitute. He didn't start talking about the murder until his wife had settled

me in front of their roaring fire with tea and a hefty slice of her homemade Christmas cake. He listened in silence to my account, then said:

"I've had Major Turville on the telephone. Perfectly proper. What you'd expect from a gentleman. He thinks he ought not to sit on the Bench until his business is cleared up. Must say I agree with him."

"Yes, sir."

"What's odd, although I didn't say so to him, is what he and Mrs. Turville are doing at the Manor. Hardly the sort of Christmas invitation you'd expect them to accept. Mickledore insisted on taking the place away from them complete, lock, stock and barrel, cheated them on the price if rumor's correct, and they choose to spend Christmas under his roof. Damned odd. And then there's the curious reaction of Mrs. Turville. You still haven't had a chance to question her or search the room?"

"She let me in after Doc McKay had examined her. She was upset, naturally enough, but perfectly calm. All she could tell me was that she'd gone to sleep shortly after listening to the Dvorak String Quartet at 10:55—they had twin beds—and didn't stir until her husband woke her with news of the murder."

"Which promptly threw her into a state of shock. Not very likely, not with Mary Turville. Ever see her in the hunting field?"

"No, sir."

"She was younger then, of course. A different world. But Mrs. Turville's not the kind to be thrown into shock by a body she didn't see."

I said nothing. But I reckon he guessed my thoughts. She could have seen it; been the first person to see it; seen it at that moment when it ceased to be Mickledore and became a body. The Chief went on:

"And that secretary cum housekeeper. Why does she stay? Rumor has it that he treats her like a slave."

"I doubt that, sir. She's too useful. It can't be easy to find a first-class secretary who'll also run your house."

"Even so, it can't be an agreeable job."

“She was quite frank about it. She has an invalid mother. Mickledore pays the nursing home fees.”

“And a good salary in addition, no doubt.”

It was odd, I thought, how we were speaking of him in the present tense.

“And Gloria Belsize. What attracts her to the Manor?”

I knew the answer to that one; it was to be found in a Christmas stocking. Last year, a diamond bracelet. This year an emerald clasp. Her story was that she had rushed impulsively into Mickledore’s room to thank him for it and had found him dead. The Chief cut me another wedge of cake:

“That light we all saw after church. Anyone admit to that bit of carelessness?”

“It came from the back bathroom on the first floor. Only Charles Mickledore admits to visiting it in the night. He says he could have pulled back the curtain to look out over the fields, but he isn’t sure.”

“Odd thing to be vague about. Still, it was Christmas Eve. Excitement. A strange house. This Father Christmas nonsense of Mickledore’s. You say that the boy was the only one to see him.”

“The only one to admit it.”

“Then he’s a vital witness. Did he recognize his uncle?”

“Not definitely, sir. But he says it never occurred to him that it wasn’t Mickledore. And then there’s the fact that he was given the present intended for Caldwell. Miss Makepiece says that only the boy, Caldwell and herself knew about the change of rooms.”

“Which suggests that Santa Claus didn’t know, whoever he was. Or we are intended to believe just that?”

I said:

“What I can’t understand is why the gun wasn’t left by the body or replaced in the drawer. Why take it away and hide it?”

“Probably to cast doubt on whether it really is the weapon. We can’t prove that until we find it. There are plenty of old Service revolvers still around from the last war. Come to that, Saunders still has his uncle’s. He mentioned it to me last month when we were discussing civilian defense. I’d forgotten that. Saunders has a revolver!”

“Not now, he hasn’t, sir. That’s one thing I asked him when I went to question him and his wife about the cracker. He said he got rid of the weapon after his daughter was killed.”

“Did he say why?”

“Because he was afraid that the temptation to shoot Mickledore might get too much for him.”

“That’s candid enough. What did he do with it?”

“Threw it in Potter’s Pool, sir.”

“Where it’s now well down in the mud. Very convenient. No one has ever dredged anything from Potter’s Pool. Still, you’d better try. We need that gun wherever it came from.”

I hadn’t enjoyed my interview with the Saunders. All the village respected Will and Edna—a decent, hardworking couple who had doted on their only daughter. We had been pretty friendly, but I knew that he and his wife resented the fact that we hadn’t caught the hit-and-run driver of the Daimler that knocked down and killed their Dorothy. It wasn’t for lack of trying. We knew, and they knew, that Mickledore was the suspect. He was the only owner of a Daimler in the neighborhood and the accident had happened in the narrow lane from the Manor. But there had been no identifiable damage to his car and Poole had been ready to swear that it had never left the garage. We couldn’t arrest him on unsupported suspicion.

So I had to handle the interview with tact. They were just back from church when I arrived. We settled down in their neat sitting room and Mrs. Saunders made up the fire. But they didn’t offer me a drink as they once would have done and I knew that they would be glad to see the back of me. And there was something else I knew. The murder of Mickledore wasn’t news to them. They were on the telephone—Saunders ran the one village taxi—and I guessed that someone from the Manor had telephoned a warning. And I thought I knew who. Miss Makepiece and Edna Saunders were old college friends.

They denied any knowledge of the Christmas cracker or its message. After Mrs. Saunders had returned from the carol singing they had spent the evening by the fire listening to the wireless. The

news at nine o'clock, *Robinson Crusoe* at 9:15 and the *Crime Wave at Blandings* at 10:00. Mrs. Saunders had particularly wanted to hear the Wodehouse play, as the actors Gladys Young and Carleton Hobbs were particular favorites.

They were able to tell me what had been on the nine o'clock news—the awards to officers and men of the submarine Ursula, the big IRA raid in Dublin, the Pope's Christmas message. I led them on gently to the crucial time. They said that they had listened to the Solemn Midnight Mass from Downside, which had ended at 12:45, and had then gone to their bed. They were even able to describe the music. But that didn't mean that both of them had been listening. It hadn't taken more than one hand to put that bullet into Mickledore.

I wrenched my mind back to the present. The Chief was saying:

"It looks as if the cracker must have been brought into the house by one of the carol singers. But I suppose it's not impossible for one of the house party to have planted it."

"Only those who were near the door."

"But if one or both of the Saunders shot Mickledore they must have had an accomplice. They couldn't have known where to find the cracker. And they couldn't have gotten in unless the door was opened for them."

"The back door was unbolted, sir, while Caldwell and Miss Makepiece checked the lights. That was at about ten past one."

"But the murderer couldn't have depended on that. There was no difficulty in getting into Mickledore's bedroom, of course. I respect his refusal to lock his door. And the obvious time for the murder was while he was delivering the presents. They all knew that his room would be empty. The murderer sneaks in, takes the gun and hides—where?"

"There's a large clothes closet, sir."

"Very convenient. And so was this game of hunt the hare. It gave the murderer the chance to steal the cracker, check on the gun, select a knife. He could safely be seen anywhere, even in another person's bedroom. Silly kind of game, though, for grown men. Who suggested it?"

"Mickledore. It's part of his ritual family Christmas."

“Then the murderer could rely on its being played. All he had to do was conceal the knife and cracker on his person until he could hide them in his room.”

“Not easy for Miss Belsize, sir. She was wearing a slinky evening dress. And somehow I can’t picture her scampering about in the kitchen.”

“Don’t exclude her, John. If that will you found in the study still stands, she inherits £20,000. And so does Miss Makepiece. And Poole gets £10,000 you said. Men, and women, have killed for far less. Ah well, you’d better get back to it, I suppose. We must find that gun.”

We were to find it all right. But more surprisingly and dramatically than either of us could have dreamed.

3

There are more agreeable ways of spending Christmas day than being interrogated by the police, particularly by Inspector Pottinger with his dogged, impassive persistence, his accusing eyes. With the impulsive chivalry of the young, I had decided to protect Mrs. Turville. I lied about seeing her and her husband in the night. I was deliberately vague when I described the visit of Santa Claus. I wasn’t sure how far I managed to deceive Pottinger, but lying takes practice. I was to get better at it by the end of the case.

The questioning was ceaseless. Henry was even summoned to the study in the middle of Christmas dinner. It was an uncomfortable meal. Mrs. Banting had already put the huge turkey in the oven when the murder was discovered and there was a general feeling that, having been cooked, it might as well be eaten. But Henry said firmly that the combination of Christmas pudding and violent death would be intolerably indigestible; the pudding would keep until next year. So we ate mince pies instead. I had the healthy appetite of youth and was embarrassingly aware that I was eating with undisguised enjoyment while the adults toyed with their lukewarm turkey and shredded Brussels sprouts.

Afterwards Poole served coffee in the hall and we listened in silence to the three o'clock King's broadcast. Nineteen thirty-nine was the occasion on which he finished with the quotation about the man standing at the gate of the year and asking for a light to guide him into the unknown. I have heard it many times since, but it has never sounded so poignant as it did spoken in the King's slow and careful voice on that Christmas of 1939.

It was a relief to us all when, at four-thirty, Inspector Pottinger left the Manor, leaving his sergeant to continue the search for the gun. Poole, bringing in the tea, told us that the Inspector had gone to report to the Chief Constable; Poole had his own mysterious ways of discovering what the police were up to.

But we were not left in peace for long. Just before seven he returned. His imperious knock on the front door, clearly heard in the hall, was like the knock of doom. Poole showed him in with his usual insolent formality and I watched the eyes of my companions turn to him with a mixture of apprehension and inquiry. The drinks tray had been brought in early and Gloria was noisily mixing cocktails for herself and Henry. But she must have been drinking earlier; even my inexperienced eyes could see that she was half-drunk. Before the Inspector could say more than a stolid "Good evening" she swayed up to him glass in hand.

"Here comes our village Poirot with his little gray cells clicking away. But no handcuffs. Haven't you come to arrest poor little Gloria?"

Henry went quietly up to her. I heard him whisper urgently. But she laughed and advanced to the Christmas tree. Suddenly she began pulling off the decorations and throwing them wildly over him. A strand of tinsel caught on the Turville Grace, but Mrs. Turville seemed not to care. Gloria began chanting.

"Time for pressies, everyone. We always have pressies off the tree at seven. Mustn't break with tradition. Victor wouldn't like it. One for you, Poole, and one for Mrs. Banting. Catch!"

She tore the parcels from the tree and tossed them to Poole. He said an expressionless, "Thank you, Miss," and placed them on a

side table. Henry moved forward and caught hold of her arm. But she wrenched herself free and seized another present from the tree.

"It's for you, darling. Henry, written in Victor's own hand."

Henry's voice was like ice. I had never heard him speak in that tone before.

"Leave it. This isn't the time for presents. I'll take it home with me."

"Don't be a spoilsport, darling! You want to see your pressie. Let Gloria open it for you."

There was one of those moments of absolute silence which seem in retrospect so portentous. Perhaps I only now imagine, forty-four years later, that the whole room froze and watched breathless as she tore off the gaudy Christmas paper. Inside was a further wrapping of red-and-yellow crepe; surely the paper from the Christmas cracker? This was wrapped round a couple of large linen handkerchiefs. But that wasn't all. Gloria unfolded them, gasped and let out a shrill scream. Her shaking hands parted. And the revolver, found at last, fell with a dull thud at Pottinger's feet.

4

After the discovery of the gun, the atmosphere subtly changed. Before then we had comforted ourselves with the theory, which we all strenuously promoted, that a stranger had gained access to the Manor by the unbolted side door while Henry and Miss Makepiece were checking the windows. He had discovered the cracker while searching the study and had stabbed the message to the body as a bizarre gesture of contempt.

Now it was less easy to believe that the killer came from outside. We stopped discussing the murder, afraid of what we might say or suggest, wary of one another's eyes. Mrs. Turville, who looked suddenly like a very old woman, tried to reassure and comfort me. Relishing my shameful excitement in the face of murder, which has never left me, I was glad she didn't know how little I needed or deserved her kindness. The police questioning went on, more

rigorous, more insistent. By the time Inspector Pottinger left we were all exhausted and glad of an excuse to seek an early bed.

It was ten o'clock when I heard a knock at my door. My heart thudded, I slipped out of bed and whispered "Who is it?" There was a second more insistent knock. Cautiously I opened the door. Gloria sidled in, trembling with fear and with cold.

"Charles, darling, could you bear to sleep in my room? There's a big armchair, and you could bring your eiderdown. I'm too terrified to be alone."

"Can't you lock the door?"

"There isn't a lock. And I daren't take my sleeping pill in case he comes when I'm unconscious."

"Who comes?"

"The murderer, of course."

What sixteen-year-old could resist that appeal to chivalry? Flattered to be asked, and not sorry to have company, I pattered along the corridor behind her. We pushed the heavy armchair against the door and I settled down in reasonable comfort. It was curiously cozy in her bedroom with the pool of light from the bedside lamp shining on her fair hair. We spoke in whispers like conspirators.

"They think Victor was doped with my sleeping pills and then shot while he slept. Pottinger keeps on asking me if any are missing. How can I tell? My Mayfair doctor lets me have what I ask. I've got a whole bottle here in my bedside drawer. Anyone could have helped himself. I don't count them."

I said:

"But wouldn't he taste the pills?"

"Not in his whisky. I never can."

She propped herself on her elbow and leaned towards me.

"Have you thought about Poole? Poole could have done it. He knows that Victor killed the Saunders child. He lied about the Daimler never leaving the garage. He had to. Victor had something on him."

"Had what on him?"

“He’s been in prison for assaulting small girls. He wouldn’t last long in the village if that came out. And it’s very convenient for him that Victor died when he died. He was thinking of changing his will. That’s why you’re here. If he liked you, he was thinking of making you his heir and cutting the rest of us out.”

It had been convenient for her, too, I thought, that my uncle had died when he had. I whispered:

“How do you know about the will?”

“Victor told me. He liked tormenting me. He could be terribly cruel. People say that he drove his wife to suicide.”

Gloria had swallowed her sleeping pill by now and her voice was becoming blurred. I had to strain to hear her.

“And then there’s the Turvilles.”

“What about the Turvilles?”

I realized that my voice had betrayed me. She laughed sleepily.

“You like her, don’t you? Everyone does. The perfect lady. Not like little Gloria. Must protect the dear Turvilles. But they’re up to something. Their door was ajar. The deaf don’t realize how loudly they whisper. He was saying ‘We have to go through with it, darling. We’ve spent the money and we’ve planned it so carefully. . .So carefully.’” Gloria’s voice faded into silence.

Spent what money and for what? I wondered as I lay there listening to Gloria’s low guttural breathing. Wakeful, I relived all the events of that extraordinary Christmas. My arrival at Marston station, the silent drive through the darkening village, the school with the Christmas chains of colored paper gleaming against the windows. The first sight of my uncle’s dark judgmental face. The carol singers creeping out under the blackout curtain. The game of hunt the hare. The silent figure of Santa Claus at the foot of my bed. Myself, standing by Victor’s bed and noting every detail of that grotesquely clad, unreal corpse. Doctor McKay leaving Mrs. Turville’s room with his old-fashioned Gladstone bag. The strand of tinsel thrown by Gloria over the Turville Grace. The gun thudding at Porringer’s feet.

The varied images flashed upon my inner eye like camera shots. And suddenly, the confused medley of sights and sounds fused into a

coherent picture. Before I fell asleep I knew what I must do. Tomorrow I would first speak to Inspector Porringer. And then I would confront the murderer.

I saw Inspector Pottinger first and told him what I had to tell. Then I sought out Henry. He was in the great hall with the Turvilles and I asked if I might speak to him alone. Tactful as ever they got up and silently left. I said:

"I know it was you."

That sixteen-year-old boy is a stranger to me now and memory is self-deluding. I couldn't, surely, have been so confident, so self-assured as I seem to recall. But there is no doubt about what I had to say. And I remember perfectly—how could I ever forget?—how he looked and the words he spoke to me.

He looked down at me calmly, unfrightened, a little sadly.

"Suppose you tell me how."

"When Santa Claus slipped your present into my stocking he was wearing a white glove. The murderer would have needed to wear gloves to avoid fingerprints. But the hands of the corpse were bare and I could see no gloves by the bed."

"And you kept this vital piece of evidence from the police?"

"I wanted to protect the Turvilles. I saw them creeping about suspiciously in the night. He was carrying a rolled towel. I thought it concealed the gun."

"And how did you imagine they got rid of it? Pottinger searched our rooms."

"Mrs. Turville feigned illness. I thought she gave the gun to Dr. McKay after he'd seen her. He could have taken it away in his Gladstone bag."

"But when the gun was found, you realized that your theory was wrong. The Turvilles were innocent."

"And last night I guessed the truth. Dr. McKay did take something away in his bag: the Turville Grace. That's what they were doing—substituting a fake statue for the one they believe will protect their son. They were desperate to regain it now that he's gone to war."

“So now you pick on me as suspect number one. Am I also supposed to have fabricated and planted the cracker?”

“No. You and I stood together during the carol singing. You were never near the door. I think you used it to complicate the crime—that’s why you suggested keeping it—but it was Mrs. Saunders who made it. She could have taken some of the crepe paper her school children were provided with to make their Christmas decorations. I noticed, too, that the verse was written by someone who punctuated correctly as if by instinct. And it didn’t threaten death. All they wanted was to harass Victor, to spoil his Christmas. It was a small, pathetic revenge for the death of their daughter.”

“Well, go on. So far it’s remarkably convincing.”

“You took the cracker and the kitchen knife and stole some of Gloria’s sleeping pills while we were playing hunt the hare. The game is traditional at the Manor. You could rely on its being played. And it was you who asked for a change of room. You wanted to be close to my uncle and to have me farther away in case I heard the shot. The Turvilles are deaf and Gloria takes sleeping pills. My young ears were the danger. But even I couldn’t hear a shot in that heavily curtained bed. You can’t really be claustrophobic, can you? The RAF wouldn’t have accepted you if you were.”

He looked down on me, his pale handsome face still calm, still unfrightened. And I realized again that he must have been Santa Claus. No one else in the house could match my uncle’s height.

When he spoke, his voice was ironic, almost amused.

“Don’t stop now. Aren’t you getting to the exciting part?”

“You slipped the sleeping pills in Victor’s whisky while you were drinking together or, perhaps, later while he was in the bathroom. Then you took his gun and shot him while he lay drugged and undressed on his bed, probably between twelve-fifteen and twelve-thirty. Promptly at one o’clock you took the part of Santa Claus, being careful to leave your present in my stocking. Then you dressed the corpse in the robes and drove in the knife through the menacing cracker rhyme. It was you who pulled aside that curtain in the bathroom, knowing that it would bring an immediate call. If Miss Makepiece hadn’t woken you—but you were the natural choice

—you would have pretended to hear her prowling about outside. There was no difficulty in persuading her to play chess with you and thus innocently provide you with that vital alibi for the hours after one o'clock."

He said calmly:

"Congratulations. You should write detective stories. Is there anything you don't know?"

"Yes. What you did with the white gloves and the death's head charm from the cracker."

He looked at me with a half smile, then bent and rummaged among the cotton wool snowballs round the foot of the Christmas tree. He brought one out, a rolled white ball with strands of cotton wool and tinsel still adhering to it. Deliberately he threw it into the fire. The flames licked at it, then blazed high.

"I've been waiting for the chance to do that. The fire had died by midnight and ever since it was relit this room has been occupied."

"And the charm?"

"Someone will break a tooth on it next Christmas. I took the cloth and greaseproof paper off the Christmas pudding and pressed it in among the sixpenny pieces. Even if it's found next year it will be too late to help Pottinger."

"And, immediately after the shooting, you wrapped the gun in the crepe paper and hid it in the Christmas tree present bearing your name. You would have taken it away with you when you left the Manor if Gloria hadn't found it so dramatically. No wonder you tried to restrain her."

He said:

"There's no witness to this conversation. I'm trusting you, but not perhaps as much as you suppose."

I looked at him full in the face.

"I'm trusting you, too. Five minutes ago I asked to see Inspector Pottinger and told him that I'd remembered something vital. I said that when Santa Claus slipped your present into my stocking I distinctly saw the gold of his signet ring. Your fingers are much thicker than Victor's. You couldn't have forced on that ring. If I stick to my lie—and I shall—they won't dare arrest you."

He didn’t thank me. I didn’t say anything. I cried out:

“But why? And why now, this Christmas?”

“Because he murdered my mother. Oh, not in any way I can prove. But she killed herself after only two years of marriage to him. I always meant to destroy him, but the years pass and the will atrophies. And then came the war. This phony war won’t last much longer and there will be nothing phony about the killing once it begins in earnest. I’ll be shooting down young pilots, decent ordinary Germans with whom I’ve no quarrel. It has to be done. They’ll do it to me if they can. But it will be more tolerable now that I’ve killed the one man who did deserve it. I’ve kept faith with her. If I have to go, I’ll go more easily.”

I picture that blazing Spitfire spiraling into the Channel and I wonder if he did.

5

I’ve posted my account of the Marston Turville murder to Charles Mickledore, but God knows why he wanted it. It was hardly my most successful case; I never made an arrest and the mystery remains to this day. Once the boy recalled seeing that ring on his uncle’s finger my case against Caldwell collapsed. The medical evidence showed that Mickledore was dead before three o’clock, when Caldwell and Miss Makepiece finished their game of chess. Caldwell couldn’t have shot him and done all that was necessary in those few minutes between the delivery of the presents and the warden’s telephone call.

His alibi held.

The Turvilles were killed by a V2 rocket while on a day trip to London. Well, that’s how they would have wanted to go, quickly and together. But there are Turvilles still at the Manor. Their son survived the war and bought back his ancestral home. I wonder if his grandchildren frighten themselves on Christmas Eve with tales of the murder of Santa Claus.

Neither Poole nor Miss Belsize benefitted long from their legacies. She bought herself a Bentley and killed herself in it, driving while drunk. He purchased a house in the village and played the gentleman. But within a year he was up to his old tricks with small girls. I was actually on my way to arrest him when he hanged himself in his garage, choked to death on the end of a washing line. The public hangman would have made a neater job of it.

I sometimes wonder if young Charles Mickledore lied about seeing that ring. Now that we're in touch, I'm tempted to ask him. But it was over forty years ago—an old crime, an old story. And if Henry Caldwell did owe a debt to society, he paid it at last and in full.