

A Room with a Clue:

John Dickson Carr's Locked-Room Lecture Revisited

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The Reader Is Warned: this entire article is a gigantic SPOILER, with the solutions given to many pre-1935 locked room mysteries.

Introduction

2010 marks the 75th anniversary of John Dickson Carr's **The Hollow Man (The Three Coffins)**, widely regarded as the greatest locked-room novel ever written (or is it? ... more of that later). It also contained the first locked-room lecture, given by the great Dr. Fell; its objective was ostensibly "to outline roughly some of the various means of committing murders in locked rooms, under separate classifications," in order to shed light on two apparently impossible crimes that had occurred earlier in the same book.

During the course of the lecture, the good doctor — in addition to proving a "legitimate classification" — alluded to dozens of murder methods that had been described in the literature up to that time, but identified only a handful of the novels and short stories by name. This article is an attempt to trace as many of those titles as possible and provide at least a thumbnail sketch of each author. Some were celebrated at the time, and



John Dickson Carr

some languished in obscurity from the start, but all surely deserve recognition for their creative spark. Where another author's work preceded that chosen by Fell, it is included as well. Methods not mentioned in the lecture are noted in passing, but are mostly not identified.

Some of Fell's passing observations about locked rooms are analysed, with results that may surprise the reader.

Fell's Classification

At the outset, the good doctor defined the scope of the exercise: "here is your box with one door, one window, and solid walls," and explicitly ruled out secret passages.

Space does not permit anything more than a tabular summary (Table 1) of Fell's classification, which consisted of two major subdivisions:

A. No Murderer was in Room.

Dr. Fell's actual words were: "There is the crime committed in a hermetically sealed room which really is hermetically sealed, and from which no murderer has escaped because no murderer was actually in the room." There are seven headings in this subdivision, the sixth of which was explained thus: "It is a murder which, although committed by somebody outside the room at the time, nevertheless seems to have been committed by somebody who must have been inside." Under this heading, abbreviated to "murder made to appear as if committed while murderer was in room", were a further six sub-headings.

B. Murderer was in Room.

Fell spoke of "the other classification: the various means of hocking doors and windows so that they can be locked on the inside." He declared tampering with the door to be far more popular than with the window (four headings versus one) and included the possibility of illusion.

Table 1: Summary of Dr. Fell’s 1935 “Legitimate Classification”

A. No Murderer was in the Room

A1	Accident, looking like murder
A2	Victim impelled to kill self or crash into accidental death
A3	Murder by mechanical device already planted in room
A4	Suicide, intended to look like murder
A5	Illusion and impersonation: Victim dead; misdirection made him appear alive later
A6	Murder made to appear as if committed while murderer was in room
	a) Unusual use of weapon or choice of projectile
	b) Murderer exploited unobvious aperture
	c) Victim, mortally wounded elsewhere, entered room then died
	d) Victim killed while momentarily sticking head out of window
	e) Death from poisonous snakes or insects previously placed in room
f) Natural forces penetrated the room, triggering lethal action	
A7	Victim was alive, misdirection made him appear dead. Killed by first-in

B. Murderer was in the Room

B1	Murderer tampered with the door key
B2	Murderer tampered with the door hinge
B3	Murderer tampered with the bolt
B4	Murderer tampered with the latch or bar
B5	Illusion: murderer locked door from the outside; then used misdirection
B6	Murderer tampered with the window

Authors and Titles

A1: Accident, looking like murder

After a passing reference to Arthur Conan Doyle's “The Adventure of the Crooked Man” which furnished the first example of the murderous fender, Fell cited Gaston Leroux’s **Le Mystere de la Chambre Jaune (The Mystery of the Yellow Room, 1908)** — which he described as “the best detective tale ever written” — in which, although the victim was subject to more than one brutal attack, it was actually an accident that caused the trauma suffered after she had locked herself in her room. Ten years earlier, in Weatherby Chesney’s “The Horror of the Folding Bed” (1898), an apparently sinister disappearance from a locked room turned out to be an accident: an inventor was trapped and killed inside his own experimental folding bed. The story is not strictly “locked-room” by Carr’s definition (q.v.). Weatherby Chesney was the pseudonym of C. J. Cutcliffe Hyne, the British author of **The Lost Continent: The Story of Atlantis (1900)**.

A2: Victim impelled to kill self or crash into accidental death

Apparently poisonous gasses could cause victims to behave in fatally bizarre ways. In **The Green God (1911)**, by the American author and silent screen writer Frederic Arnold Kummer, the victim was impelled to leap and impale his head on the spike of a chandelier, and in British spy-story writer Sydney Horler’s “The Death of Allan Mandeville” (1933), he was driven to strangle himself — no easy task.

A3: Murder by mechanical device already planted in room

The prolific British journalist, novelist, and playwright Edgar Wallace — the most-filmed story-teller of all time, and creator and screen-writer of King Kong — wrote 16 locked room mysteries, including **The Terrible People (1925)**, in which a gun mechanism was hidden in a telephone receiver. The method was listed by Fell among a host of ingenious deaths from mechanical

devices, of which that and five others have been identified so far:

The weight that swung down from the ceiling featured in Anna Katherine Green's **The Filigree Ball** (1903). The American poet, novelist, and anti-suffragist is credited with creating one of the first series detectives, one Ebenezer Gryce; in three novels he is assisted by a nosy society spinster, Amelia Butterworth, said to be the prototype for Miss Marple.

Robert McNair Wilson was a practicing British physician who found the time to write 22 locked room mysteries under the pseudonym of Anthony Wynne. The weight that crashed skulls from the high back of an Italian chair occurred in his **The Loving Cup** (US as **Death out of the Night**) (1933).

Agatha Christie's "A Chess Problem" (1924), featuring an electrified chessboard, was first published in *The Sketch* in 1924 and subsequently incorporated into **The Big Four** (1927).

Her friend, early mentor, and fellow Devonite Eden Phillpotts — a Dartmoor conservationist — was the inventor of the bed that exhaled a deadly gas when warmed, in **The Grey Room** (1921).

But the first recorded case of any type of mechanical device was that of a bed canopy ratcheting down and suffocating the occupant: "A Terribly Strange Bed" (1852) written by the Victorian writer Wilkie Collins, author of the first psycho-pharmacological thriller, **The Moonstone** (1868), and close friend of Charles Dickens.

(At this point, Fell observed that puzzles involving mechanical devices were rather "in the sphere of the general 'impossible situation' than the narrower run of the locked room.")

A4: Suicide, intended to look like murder

Carolyn Wells, a wealthy New York socialite, initially wrote children's books before moving on to mystery stories, 27 of which were locked room. (A.A. Milne, on the other hand, went in the opposite direction, first writing **The Red House Mystery** (1922), then the Winnie-the-Pooh stories.) In Wells's **Anybody but Anne** (1914) — featuring "the admirable Fleming Stone," to quote Dr. Fell — one of the witnesses at an inquest postulates that a small round puncture in the victim's body could have been caused by an icicle used as a suicide weapon, something he thought he had read about somewhere. Whether the literature contains such a case prior to 1914 or not, it is a fact that, eight years later, the same author used the very same method in **The Mystery Girl** (1922).

The use of a gun with elastic attached so it would vanish up a chimney was the brainchild of British mystery writer James Ronald, in "Too Many Motives" (1930), no doubt inspired by Sir

Arthur Conan Doyle's earlier "The Problem of Thor Bridge" (1922) where the weapon — in this case tied to a weight — vanished into water.

Sherlock Holmes was not, however, the first to describe such a case. In S.S. Van Dine's **The Greene Murder Case** (1928), the cerebral dilettante Philo Vance — of whom Ogden Nash once wrote: "Philo Vance/Needs a Kick in the Pance" — quoted Dr. Hans Gross's **Handbook for Examining Magistrates, Police Officials, and Military Policemen, etc.** (1893), which he had apparently committed to memory in the original German; the description of the real life death of one "A.M.", a grain merchant, on pages 834–836 of volume II, matched the Thor Bridge situation exactly, pre-dating it by nearly thirty years.

S.S. Van Dine was the pseudonym of Virginia-born art and literary critic Willard Huntington Wright, who was said to have digested some 2,000 detective novels while in convalescence, to emerge having plotted the trilogy of the Benson, "Canary," and Greene Murder Cases. In **The Greene Murder Case**, the murderess did not actually commit suicide but wounded herself to create a red herring, before letting the revolver be yanked into a snowdrift outside her bedroom window.

(Fell was at pains to point out that Doyle's tale and Van Dine's were "not locked-room affairs.")

A5: Illusion and impersonation: Victim dead; misdirection made him appear alive later

Fell described the murderer impersonating his victim, entering the room where the latter already lay dead, then shedding the disguise and exiting as himself, thus creating the illusion the victim was still alive and in the room. Carr's own **It Walks by Night** (1930) is similar, in that an accomplice impersonated the already-dead victim going into the room, but he then exited unseen through a different door. In any case, there is a simpler way to achieve the same illusion by merely impersonating the victim's voice. In 1927, in British horror and science fiction author Walter Masterman's **The Curse of the Reckavilles**, a gramophone record of the deceased victim's voice was played and later removed by the first person into the room. In the same year, a rather more sophisticated, interactive, version of the same method was used in **The "Canary" Murder Case** (see B3 below).

A6 Murder made to appear as if committed while the murderer was in the room

Fell dubbed this class the "Long-Distance or Icicle Crime," although strictly speaking only subclasses A6a and A6f qualify for this epithet.

A6a: Unusual use of weapon or choice of projectile

The ice bullet was chosen as an example of an unusual projectile and credit was given to Anna Katherine Green and her 1911 novel **Initials Only**. Reference was also made to shooting an icicle shaft from a crossbow, the invention of Brooklyn-born Thomas M. Hanshew — whose Cleek stories were said to be some of the young Carr’s favourite reading, along with G.K. Chesterton’s Father Brown tales — in **Cleek of Scotland Yard** (1914). Rock-salt bullets were also mentioned, as used in Carter Dickson’s own **The Plague Court Murders** (1934). As to unusual use of a weapon: in 1909, R. Austin Freeman’s murderer fired a dagger from an air-gun into the open window of an otherwise inaccessible upper-storey room in “The Aluminium Dagger”. Freeman, who started his working life as an apothecary in London, introduced medical jurisprudence into detective fiction.

A6b: Murderer exploited unobvious aperture

Fell also pointed out that it was possible to kill from the outside by taking advantage of what might be termed unobvious apertures, such as the gaps between the twinings of a rattan summer-house, as in G.K. Chesterton’s “The Oracle of the Dog” (1926). Two years earlier, the British writer F. Addington Symonds, author of several Sexton Blake Library novels, exploited a knot-hole in “The Riddle of the Locked Door” (1922) by removing and then replacing the knot.

A6c: Victim, mortally wounded elsewhere, entered room then died

In 1898, on the jetty at Lake Geneva, a passing anarchist stabbed Elizabeth, Empress of Austria, in the back, piercing her heart. The weapon had the sort of thin blade described by Fell, and her corset constricted the flow of blood, so she was able to board ship and reach her state-room, unaware that she had been fatally wounded. (She thoughtlessly neglected to lock her door, otherwise it would have been a real-life locked room crime.) Once her corset was loosened, she died within minutes. The circumstances of her death are said to have inspired Gaston Leroux’s classic (see A1) although the weapon in that case had no blade.

It was Maurice Leblanc, the creator of Arsène Lupin, gentleman thief — a figure that attained Holmes-like popularity in the Francophone world — that wrote the first fictional homicide of this kind. In “Thérèse et Germaine” (“Thérèse and Germaine”) (1922), the victim was seen to walk to a bathing hut where he was later found stabbed to death; as an additional complication, his were the

only footprints found on the sand. However, since Fell explicitly stated that the victim was unaware of his condition, the reference must have been to S.S. Van Dine’s **The Kennel Murder Case** (1933)

A6d: Victim killed while momentarily sticking head out of window

The example cited by Fell — victim bludgeoned with a block of ice from above while looking out of an inaccessible upper-storey window — is to be found in a novel written in 1931 by Anthony Wynne: **Murder of a Lady** (US as **The Silver Scale Mystery**). In the same book, a shard of icicle broke off and stabbed the victim below, who fell back into the room. Could this be the “thrown icicle” that Fell referred to in A6a? A6d is the only class in which it is the victim rather than the killer that breaches the perimeter formed by the door(s), the window(s), and the walls.

A6e: Death from poisonous snakes or insects previously placed in room

Poisonous snakes were introduced by Arthur Conan Doyle in “The Adventure of the Speckled Band” (1892), but in that instance the actual cause of death was fright. The first death by snake-bite in a locked room occurred in “The Mystery of the Steel Room” (1910) by Thomas M. Hanshew. Hanshew, like Carr, was born in the USA but elected to spend many of his literary years in England. Between them, Hanshew and his wife Mary wrote 27 locked room mysteries.

A6f: Natural forces penetrated the room, triggering lethal action

Fell heaped lavish praise on Melville Davisson Post’s “The Doomedorf Mystery” (1918) in which the sun’s rays, focused through a magnifying glass, triggered a flintlock pistol. In point of fact, the death was accidental and should therefore be classified under A1. Nor was it even the first death exploiting the sun’s rays, this honour going to Matthias McDonnell Bodkin’s “Murder by Proxy” (1898). Bodkin, a judge and Irish nationalist Member of Parliament, wrote a number of ingenious locked room stories.

A7: Victim was alive, misdirection made him appear dead. Killed by first-in

Fell’s description of this class spoke for itself: “The murderer starts a foul-play scare; forces the door; gets in ahead and kills by stabbing or throat-cutting, while suggesting to other watchers that they have seen something they have not seen. The honour of inventing this device belonged to Israel Zangwill, and it has since been used in many

forms.” Fell prefaced the description by pointing out that class A7 depended on an effect the reverse of that of A5, i.e. the victim was presumed dead long before he actually was. While that was true, the “first-to-body” solution is only one of many in which the victim died later than assumed and the full potential of this class, which includes some of the cleverest puzzles ever written, was perhaps not fully explored by the learned doctor.

(Enquiring minds will want to know at this juncture why, given that, during the execution of methods A5 and A7, the murderer must inevitably have been in the room at some point, both are listed under “No Murderer was in the Room.” One can only postulate that Fell meant nobody could have been in the room at the *assumed* time of the crime. Thus “hypothetically sealed room” might have been a better choice of words than “hermetically.”)

Fell also referred to Zangwill’s device being used in the open air (presumably such cases would no more be “locked-room affairs” than those ruled out in A4). The first instance was in Edgar Wallace’s **A King by Night** (1925), where the victim, standing outside his own door, fell into the killer’s arms. The first to fulfil Fell’s additional qualification that the victim first stumble and stun himself was Agatha Christie’s “The Idol House of Astarte” (1932).

B1: Murderer tampered with the door key

Dr. Fell covered two methods: twisting the end of the key with pliers, first introduced by Fitz James O’Brien, Irish-born New York science fiction writer in “The Diamond Lens” (1858); and organizing complicated systems involving pins, holes, strings, knitting-needles, thumb-tacks, etc. so as to turn the lock from the inside and pull the evidence out under the door. “The Strange Case of Mr. Challoner”, one of the stories in **Malcolm Sage, Detective** (1921), by British author Herbert Jenkins, described the first use of such a system. For the benefit of the less literate, author Herbert Jenkins, in his role as publisher, thoughtfully provided a colour illustration of the method on the dust jacket. The relatively straightforward method of a self-locking door, such as a Yale lock (invented in 1860) was not described.

B2: Murderer tampered with the door hinge

Tampering with the hinge, which basically involved removing it and putting it back, was introduced in **Off the Track** (1895) by Jacques Aanrooy, published by J.C.Juta. Aanrooy was the pseudonym of Sir Henry Hubert Juta, South African judge and politician — and son of the publisher — who also wrote under his own name.

B3: Murderer tampered with the bolt

The earliest examples of trickery with bolts used a similar system of pins and strings as for keys, with a thin hole drilled through the door (and later covered with putty) when there was no keyhole. The first instance was attributable to one Hermann Goedsche, writing in German under the rather startling pseudonym of “Sir John Retchcliffe,” in **Nena Sahib** (1858); it inspired a real-life copy-cat crime that was, alas for the killer, unsuccessful. Fell, however, selected S.S. Van Dine’s **The “Canary” Murder Case** (1927) as the supreme example of the method. The novel could equally well have been cited under A5; its use of a recording to dupe witnesses about the time of death was more sophisticated than Masterman’s. (Trivia question: why was it necessary to fake the time of the crime when a locking-the-door-from-the-inside method had already been used in the same apartment? The answer can be found at the end of the article.)

Fell also eulogised Ellery Queen’s **The Chinese Orange Mystery** (1934), wherein the weight of the body itself was used to shoot the bolt. “Ellery Queen” was a pen-name twice removed: it was used by Brooklyn-born cousins “Frederic Dannay” and “Manfred B. Lee” whose actual birth names were Daniel Nathan and Manford Lepofsky. Surprisingly, the good doctor made no reference to methods of moving a bolt by magnetic means, another suggestion from **The Big Bow Mystery**.

B4: Murderer tampered with the latch or bar

According to Dr. Fell, the best method by far of rigging a falling bar or latch is to place a block of ice underneath, yet strangely this method is hard to find in the literature other than as a footnote in chapter 13 of S.S. Van Dine’s **The Kennel Murder Case** (1933), to the effect that ice was superior to the ductile candle used by the ever-inventive Edgar Wallace in **The Clue of the Twisted Candle** (1918) — the earliest example of a latch trick. On occasion, merely slamming a door or French window was enough to cause the latch to fall, and such was the method used in **The Layton Court Mystery** (1925) by Anthony Berkeley Cox, the founder of The Detection Club in London — to which Carr belonged — who wrote as Anthony Berkeley and Francis Iles.

B5: Illusion: murderer locked door from the outside; then used misdirection

In mysteries in this class, the door was either locked from the outside or not locked at all and misdirection could occur at the time of re-entry in the form of breaking a door-panel and surreptitiously inserting the key into the inside

lock, in order to convince witnesses of a locked room situation. The British writer Cecil Hayter, one of 177 authors contracted to write Sexton Blake stories, pioneered this technique in “The Mystery of the Locked Door” (1918). Fell also discussed another form of misdirection: returning the key to the room by means of a taut string, a method first penned by the American author L. Frank Baum in “The Suicide of Kiaros” in 1894, 6 years before writing **The Wonderful Wizard of Oz** (definitely not a locked-room affair). No reference was made to simply sliding the key back under the door, space permitting.

B6: Miscellaneous methods of tampering with windows

There was an interchange between Fell and Superintendent Hadley regarding the feasibility of tampering with windows. Dummy nail heads were the reason the giant orang-outang was able to lift the window out of its frame in Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841); and the ubiquitous Zangwill was, once again, the first to propose smashing and replacing panes of glass, although the method was not used in the actual plot of **The Big Bow Mystery**.

Table 2: Authors and Titles by Classification

The novels, short stories, and authors supplying the foregoing methods are listed in the table below. Entries are sorted chronologically by heading. To save space, K means killer and V means victim. In the final column: (1) indicates that Carr mentions the book or story by name; (2) indicates that this example pre-dates the example that Carr gave; otherwise Carr did not name an example in this category. Titles in brackets indicate the method of murder but don’t actually use it.

A. No Murderer was in the Room

A1	Accident, looking like murder: fell and hit head	1893	Arthur Conan Doyle	“The Adventure of the Crooked Man”	(1)
	Accident, looking like murder: fell and hit head	1908	Gaston Leroux.	The Mystery of the Yellow Room	(1)
	Accident, looking like murder: sun rays activated flintlock	1918	Melville Davisson Post.	“The Doomdorf Mystery”	(1)
A2	V. impelled to kill himself: impaled on chandelier	1911	Frederic Arnold Kummer	The Green God	
	V. impelled to kill himself - self-strangulation	1933	Sydney Horler	“The Death of Allan Mandeville”	
A3	Murder by mechanical device – suffocating bed canopy	1852	Wilkie Collins	“A Terribly Strange Bed”	(2)
	Murder by mechanical device – weight hidden in ceiling	1903	Anna Katherine Green	The Filigree Ball	
	Murder by mechanical device – bed emits poison gas if warm	1921	Eden Phillpotts	The Grey Room	
	Murder by mechanical device – electrified chessboard	1924	Agatha Christie	“A Chess Problem”	
	Murder by mechanical device - booby-trapped phone	1925	Edgar Wallace	The Terrible People	
	Murder by mechanical device – weight hidden in chair	1933	Anthony Wynne	The Loving Cup	
A4	Suicide, intended to look like murder – gun yanked into water	1893	True Crime	A.M., grain merchant	(2)
	Suicide, intended to look like murder – stabbed self with icicle	1914	Carolyn Wells	[Anybody but Anne]	
	Suicide, intended to look like murder – stabbed self with icicle	1922	Carolyn Wells	The Mystery Girl	
	Suicide, intended to look like murder – gun yanked into water	1922	Arthur Conan Doyle	“The Problem of Thor Bridge”	
	Suicide, intended to look like murder [*]–gun yanked into snow	1928	S.S. Van Dine	The Greene Murder Case	
	Suicide, intended to look like murder – gun yanked up chimney	1930	James Ronald	“Too Many Motives”	
A5	V. was dead, appeared alive – recording of V.’s voice played	1927	Walter Masterman	The Curse of the Reckavilles	(2)
	V. was dead, appeared alive – accomplice impersonated V.	1930	John Dickson Carr	It Walks by Night	

A6	Murder made to appear as if committed while M. in room				
A6a	Unusual use of weapon – dagger fired from air-gun	1909	R. Austin Freeman	“The Aluminium Dagger”	(2)
	Unusual choice of projectile – ice bullet	1911	Anna Katherine Green	Initials Only	(1)
	Unusual choice of projectile - icicle fired from crossbow	1914	Thomas M. Hanshew	Cleek of Scotland Yard	
	Unusual choice of projectile - rock-salt bullet	1934	Carter Dickson	The Plague Court Murders	
A6b	K. exploited unobvious aperture – knot-hole in door	1922	F. Addington Symonds	“The Riddle of the Locked Door”	(2)
	K. exploited unobvious aperture – gap between rattan twinings	1926	G. K. Chesterton.	“The Oracle of the Dog”	
A6c	V. wounded, entered room and died – stabbed earlier	1898	True Crime	Empress of Austria Assassination	
	V. wounded, entered room and died – stabbed earlier	1933	S.S. Van Dine	The Kennel Murder Case	
A6d	V. killed while head momentarily out of window – ice block	1931	Anthony Wynne	Murder of a Lady	
A6e	Poisonous snake previously placed on site – death by fright	1892	Arthur Conan Doyle	“The Adventure of the Speckled Band”	
	Poisonous snake previously placed on site - snakebite	1910	Thomas M. Hanshew	“The Mystery of the Steel Room”	
A6f	Natural forces penetrated room – sun’s rays activated flintlock	1898	M. McDonnell Bodkin	“Murder by Proxy”	(2)
A7	V. alive, presumed dead, killed by first-to-body	1892	Israel Zangwill	The Big Bow Mystery	(1)
	V. alive in open air, presumed dead – killed by first-to-body	1925	Edgar Wallace	A King By Night	(2)
	V. alive in open air, presumed dead – killed by first-to-body	1932	Agatha Christie	“The Idol House of Astarte”	

[*] actually self-wounding, intended to look like murder

B. Murderer was in the Room

B1	K. tampered with key – pliers used to turn tip of key	1858	Fitz-James O'Brien	“The Diamond Lens”	
	K. tampered with key – “pins and strings”	1921	Herbert Jenkins	“The Strange Case of Mr. Challoner”	
B2	K. tampered with hinge – hinge removed and put back	1895	Jacques Aanrooy	Off the Track	
B3	K. tampered with bolt – “pins and strings”	1858	Hermann Goedsche.	Nena Sahib	(2)
	K. tampered with bolt – “pins and strings”	1927	S.S. Van Dine	The “Canary” Murder Case	(1)
	K. tampered with bolt – weight of body moved bolt	1934	Ellery Queen	The Chinese Orange Mystery	(1)
B4	K. tampered with bar or latch – ductile candle under latch melted	1918	Edgar Wallace.	The Clue of the Twisted Candle	(2)
	K. tampered with bar or latch – ice under latch melted	1933	S.S. Van Dine	[The Kennel Murder Case]	
	K. tampered with bar or latch – sharp blow dropped latch	1925	Anthony Berkeley	The Layton Court Mystery	
B5	K. locked door from outside – slid key back inside on string	1894	Frank Baum	“The Suicide of Kiaros”	
	K locked door from outside – broke door, placed key inside	1918	Cecil Hayter	“The Mystery of the Locked Door”	
B6	K. tampered with window – dummy nail heads allowed removal	1841	Edgar Allan Poe	“The Murders in the Rue Morgue”	
	K. tampered with window - smashed then replaced pane	1892	Israel Zangwill	[The Big Bow Mystery]	

The Ultimate Mystery: Carr's definition of a locked room

From comments made by Dr. Fell at various points in his lecture, it seems evident that Carr had a very clear idea in his own mind of the distinction between a locked room puzzle and an impossible crime. Unfortunately, it is not as clear in the minds of those of us who, like Winnie-the-Pooh, qualify as "bear with a very small brain."

According to Fell, a gun disappearing up a chimney qualifies as a "locked-room affair" but one disappearing out of the room into a snowdrift doesn't, presumably because the room is not completely locked due to the open window. So then why does shooting an icicle from a gun or a crossbow qualify? The window of the room is obviously open in both cases. Is it only "locked room" if the room appears to be sealed after the murder?

Why do stories involving planted mechanical devices belong "rather in the sphere of the general 'impossible crime situation' than the narrower one of the locked room"? Do they not qualify because there is no action involving the perimeter of the room (the line formed by the door(s), the window(s), and the walls)? In that case, presumably planted poisonous creatures don't qualify either.

At the outset the great detective talked about events taking place within "your box with one door, one window and solid walls." But what happens if that box were to roll along a railway track or slide up and down a lift shaft? Would that be a locked room or an impossible crime? One can infer the latter, because no such cases were included in the classification.

A case where sun's rays activated a killing machine was included, but incidents involving gas entering a room were not, even though tales about the latter were already far more numerous in the literature. Does that mean that gas passing through a pipe does not qualify as a locked room method, whereas sunlight passing through a window does?

Is it possible that the murderer remaining behind in the room was not included (as Clayton Rawson pointed out in **Death from a Top Hat** (1938)) because Carr didn't see it as a locked room situation? (In point of fact, the killer in A7 did stay behind in the room.)

Mysteries taking place outdoors cannot be described as locked room, by definition, and there were no "no footprints" situations in the lecture, despite the fact that many such had already been featured in the literature. The second crime in **The Hollow Man** clearly was not a locked room murder according to Carr's own definition. With only one of the murders qualifying, is it then still right to declare **The Hollow Man** the best locked room mystery ever? Be that as it may, it is still

incontestably the greatest impossible crime novel ever written. To be fair, Fell gave the lecture to gain insight into the first of the two crimes (in which a figure is seen to enter a room from which it then vanishes, leaving behind a corpse), having already solved the second (a man is shot at close range in the middle of an empty, snow-covered street where his are the only footprints visible.)

The one irrefutable conclusion one can draw from all the foregoing is: that it is a great pity that John Dickson Carr never wrote an "impossible crime" lecture.

Appeal for Papers

The primary source for locating the specific stories behind the methods cited by Dr. Fell is Robert Adey's **Locked Room Murders** (1991). Bob Adey, Doug Greene, Mike Grost, Roland Lacourbe, and Tony Medawar graciously reviewed the article and provided valuable suggestions. There were also many fruitful discussions with Brian Skupin, co-publisher of *Mystery Scene* magazine, with whom the author is planning an international anthology of impossible crime short stories.

The original sources of the following methods have so far proven elusive:

- ◆poison gas impelling the victim to knife himself or hang himself on a loop of wire;
- ◆the pistol with a string attached to the trigger, which is pulled by the expansion of water as it freezes;
- ◆the clock that fires a bullet when you wind it;
- ◆the grandfather clock with the hideously clanging bell on its top so that when you reach up to shut off the din your own touch releases a blade that slashes open your stomach;
- ◆the electrified cord in front of a row of pictures;
- ◆the electrified glove;
- ◆suicide by icicle (before 1914);
- ◆the thrown icicle;
- ◆bullets made of frozen blood;
- ◆various ways of concealing snakes;
- ◆a scorpion impersonating a pipe stem;
- ◆the suicide whose gun is jerked out of a window into a snowdrift (the case cited in A4 involved a self-wounding, not an actual suicide);
- ◆the precise impersonation method described in A5;
- ◆the first-to-the-body on a ship;
- ◆the same in a ruined castle;
- ◆the same again in a conservatory;
- ◆hocus-pocus with steel shutters.

It is, of course, possible that some of the above were simply the fruit of Carr's own fertile imagination. Yet the fact that one of the most outrageous of all — impaling oneself on the spike of an overhead chandelier — found its way into

print seems to argue against that theory. Surely the sources are more likely to have been the books and periodicals Carr read in his youth.

Any reader with a suggestion as to the source of any of the above methods should feel free to email: pugmire1@yahoo.com. Obviously, only stories written in or before 1935 count.

Similarly, any observations about John Dickson Carr's locked room definitions would also be most welcome.

Answer to trivia question (see page 7)

A terror-stricken witness used the door-locking technique to let himself out through a rear door during the killer's rampage. The killer himself, unaware of the other's presence, then activated the recorded message before exiting through the front door.

Sources for Short Stories Mentioned in the Article

L. Frank Baum: "The Suicide of Kiaros" in *The White Elephant* (1897)

Matthias McDonnell Bodkin: "Murder by Proxy" in **Paul Beck, Rule of Thumb Detective** (Pearson, 1898)

Weatherby Chesney: "The Horror of the Folding Bed" in **The Adventures of an Engineer** (Bowden, 1898)

G.K. Chesterton: "The Oracle of the Dog" in **The Incredulity of Father Brown** (Cassell, 1926)

Agatha Christie: "A Chess Problem" in *The Sketch* (1924) and subsequently incorporated into **The Big Four** (Collins, 1927)

Agatha Christie: "The Idol House of Astarte" in **The Thirteen Problems** (Collins, 1932)

Wilkie Collins: "A Terribly Strange Bed" in *Household Words* (1852) and in **After Dark** (Smith, Elder, 1856)

Arthur Conan Doyle: "The Adventure of the Speckled Band" in *The Strand Magazine* (1892) and in **The Adventures of Sherlock Homes** (Newnes, 1892)

Arthur Conan Doyle: "The Adventure of the Crooked Man" in *The Strand Magazine* (1893) and in **The Memoirs of Sherlock Homes** (Newnes, 1893)

Arthur Conan Doyle: "The Problem of Thor Bridge" in *The Strand Magazine* (1922) and in **The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes** (Murray, 1927)

R. Austin Freeman: "The Aluminium Dagger" in **John Thorndyke's Cases** (Chatto, 1909)

Thomas M. Hanshew: "The Mystery of the Steel Room" in **The Man of the Forty Faces** (Cassell, 1910)

Cecil Hayter "The Mystery of the Locked Door" in *The Penny Pictorial Magazine* (1918)

Sydney Horler: "The Death of Allan Mandeville" in **The Man Who Shook the Earth** (Hutchinson, 1933)

Herbert Jenkins: "The Strange Case of Mr. Challoner" in **Malcolm Sage, Detective** (Jenkins, 1921)

Maurice Leblanc: "Thérèse and Germaine" in **The Eight Strokes of the Clock** (Cassell, 1922)

Fitz James O'Brien: "The Diamond Lens" in *The Atlantic Monthly* (1858) and in **The Diamond Lens and Other Stories** (Ward and Downey, 1887)

Edgar Allan Poe: "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" in *Graham's Magazine* (1841) and in **Tales** (Wiley, 1845)

Melville Davison Post: "The Doomed Mystery" in **Uncle Abner** (US: Appleton, 1918; UK: Tom Stacey, 1972))

James Ronald: "Too Many Motives" in *20 Story Magazine* (1930)

F. Addington Symonds: "The Riddle of the Locked Door" *The Penny Pictorial Magazine* (1922)

The Best Of The Blurbs

Liz Gilbey

The essence of plot, in words not a lot,
Verbosity curb — and you've got a blurb!

John Dickson Carr: **The Hollow Man**

Two murders were committed in such way that the murderer must not only have been invisible, but lighter than air.

Carter Dickson: **He Wouldn't Kill Patience**

"What the goddamholyblazes is goin' on here?" roared the great Sir Henry Merrivale when he saw

the tropical American lizard (*ameiva ameiva*) two feet long, with yellow stripes, and in a bad temper, coming at him at full speed down the Reptile House. A young man (a professional magician) furiously angry with a young woman, (also a professional magician) had hurled the keeper, since he dared not hurl the young woman, through the glass of the tropical American lizard's cage.

More blurbs can be found on pages 33 and 58