

AN OUTLINE OF MYSTERY

By Gilbert Seldes

SINCE I last reported on detective fiction for THE BOOKMAN, a number of interesting things have happened and have duly been chronicled here by more expert hands. The comparatively recent events which seem important to me are the somewhat undignified retreat of Philo Vance getting out from under his high hat of Latin and bad English and the consequent improvement of S. S. Van Dine's series: *The Greene Murder* mystery is better than the other two; next, the appearance of an almost perfect mystery, written with wit and delicacy, absorbing and satisfying in every respect—*The Bellamy Trial*, which does in fiction what "The Trial of Mary Dugan" does on the stage and does it better. Except that the trial is one day too long, Mrs. Hart's work is irreproachable. The new Chan story, *Behind That Curtain*, is, as nearly everyone by this time knows, excellent. In both of these the mystification is entirely fair to the reader and the conclusion satisfactory. The single fault with the Greene story is that the wrong person is guilty—not wrong because you guess the other, but wrong because the other seems morally and artistically right, and merely to outguess the reader is hardly worth doing.

Between them (or should I say between him?) S. S. Van Dine and Willard Huntington Wright are subjecting the detective story to a lot of excellent criticism. (No one has yet accused him or them or me or Mr. T. S. Eliot of "discovering" this type of fiction, so—although I hardly dare breathe it—perhaps that tedious form of sneering has really had its day.) One or the other has given out a list of fifteen requirements for a good mystery story, of which I have seen only two—maybe they were issued serially and I missed the others. The first is that a murder is absolutely essential (which is nonsense) and the other that there should be no love interest (which is not). There should be no love

interest and no philological and no political and no ethical interest and no intellectual or emotional interest of any kind which distracts the reader from the swift coursing of the story. One of the distinctions of "The Bellamy Trial" is that it is, in one way, a love story. The girl reporter and the hard-boiled crime expert carry on a sort of flirtation; there is a real love story at the center of the crime. Oliver Onions's remarkable mystery stories are all tangles of passions; turn the set-screw a little and even Ford Madox Ford's "Marsden Case" would be, what it seems by its name to be, a mystery story with the richness of texture of "No More Parades". I like my detective stories pretty plain—a mystery, its solution, and its development; and lean rather toward Mr. Eliot's strict canonical ban on mystery stories which depend on other elements. But I am convinced that a writer who knew how could involve anything from sexual passion to a passion for higher mathematics in the folds of the story itself—and so long as the story held its own way, there would be no room for protest.

As for the other requirement, a murder, I think of George Santayana's remark about Bergson, which is something to the effect that Bergson seems to think that all previous philosophy flows into his, which is hardly necessary, and that all future philosophy must flow out of his, which is hardly true. Murder is not an essential element in "The Hound of the Baskervilles", nor in "The Purloined Letter", nor in "The Green Eye of Goona", nor in half a dozen Oppenheims. Theft and abduction and blackmail and political intrigue are almost as good as murder and make very good stories.

I don't at the moment recall a single American detective story which dealt with the abduction of the President (imagine Mr. Coolidge put to such uses!) or the loss of state papers or even the intrigues of the Bolshe-

viks. The political sense in us is, apparently, not so highly developed as it is with the English. And that indicates that any event is good enough as the basis of a mystery story if the elements in it seem of sufficient importance to the reader. Murder simply happens to be sure-fire. It is, incidentally, interesting to observe that while most authors pay much attention to the method of murdering, few of them seem to have the faintest idea of how people act when a murder is discovered. One of the stories I have read in the past three weeks has several murders which are turned into sources of positive entertainment by the assembled characters, and the Greene household (a queer lot at best) seems to think that a murder is just the time for snapping out with a few epigrams.

In their effort to get away from stock, writers have a choice of methods: a new setting, a new kind of detective, a new trick for murdering, a new stunt in discovery. It seems to me that the best way to get out of the rut of detective stories—and it is a deep rut nowadays—is simply to be more intelligent and more honest, to write straight, to complicate the plot deftly and reasonably—in short to do a better job than most. Some of the books noted below have done this.

One of the real mysteries of the season is the Crime Club, which has put out some of the best and some of the worst of the season's detective fiction—all of them, by a strange coincidence, published by Doubleday, Doran.

The best of the Crime Club's stories is that unhappily named *The Desert Moon Mystery*, after the ranch on which it takes place. Here you have the elements dearly loved by the mystery fan—the murderer in plain sight, with all the evidence pointing directly, yet you are blocked by the apparent impossibility—not of your guess, because you don't guess—but of the whole situation. I prefer that narrators of mystery tales tell their stories in plain English—i. e., do not speak in character; but the housekeeper who tells all in this case is not offensive. The Scot in *At the House of Dree* (by Gordon Gardiner) annoys me more; but his story of thuggee is good, especially at the end. *The*

House Across the Way is also told in character, but the events seem to have got rather mixed in the mind of the little sempstress. Another small-town mystery is *The Monk of Hambleton*, which leads you, rather like "The Greene Murder" to two equally probable culprits—in this case to two confessions of guilt for the same crime. The way the actual criminal is disclosed in a single sentence on the last page is remarkable.

There came to me, too late for review last year, a book called "Green Sandals" by Cecil Champain Howis. This year the same writer offers *The Desert Bungalow*. Both are hardly to be classified as straight mystery stories; they are entanglements in such outposts of civilization as Conrad used for his locales and they have both clarity and emotion, with some of the quality of the calmer scenes in Maugham's "The Letter".

About the boldest thing a writer can do is to attempt to rival Conan Doyle on his own ground. Bertram Atkey (who writes amusing stories of other types) has not only tried this, but has chosen "The Hound of the Baskervilles" for a model and has (wisely) omitted Holmes. *The Midnight Mystery*, with a headlong rider on a wild horse in the dead night of New Forest, nevertheless manages to come off; you don't get the thrill of the phosphorescent hound, but there is a feeling of strangeness with which the solution of the mystery conforms. The humor is, also, funny in spots. It is not quite so good in *The Dawson Pedigree*, which has other points: a gentle spinster secretary aiding the amateur detective and a well-articulated, perhaps too complex, plot. *The Marloe Mansions Mystery* has a fine lot of disappearing bodies (alive and dead); *The Death of a Diplomat* has fights and chases; *Shadows by the Sea* has them on a boat stranded on a reef; *The Tick of the Clock* starts like the Elwell case (i. e., the Benson mystery in the Van Dine series), brings in a few Chinese, and has a general round-up of suspects who sit through a third-degree with a good punch at the end. The other clock title—*The Clock Strikes Two*—is a little obvious, and the author seems to think that he has made his mystery deeper by proving—after it's all over—that

nearly all of the suspicious circumstances are the result of the most innocent intentions on the part of nearly everybody.

The Queen of Clubs is tabloid detective fiction except for one thing—one man strikes another and leaves the unconscious victim in the room; a few minutes later the man is found dead. Someone else, of course, did it—as in the movie of Donald Westhoff and in—if I remember—"The Mystery of the Dunes", where the ingenious idea was that the victim had already taken poison and died knowing that his enemy would be blamed for his death. *Green Fire* is pseudo-scientific semi-mysterious trifling laid in the future; *The Golden Spur* is J. S. Fletcher on a romantic holiday—rather tarsome, as Mr. Benson's priceless Georgie says. (And I hope this allusion will send a few hundred thousand readers to the two Lucia stories—"Queen Lucia" and "Lucia in London"—which are not mystery stories at all and have nothing to do with the matter in hand and would not even have been mentioned here except for my suspicion that readers of crime stories either have taste enough to read other types of fiction at times or get tired of mysteries and have to change their diet.)

The chief interest in *The Old Dark House* was the system of selling it. The last hundred pages or so were sealed and if you brought the book back with the seal unbroken—that is, if you could stop reading at that point—you could have your money back. Review copies came out with the seal already broken, so I hadn't much choice. It is not strictly a detective story; rather a romantic yarn with a strange house and a dumb servant and madness and a brooding sense of evil and all that sort of rot—but it is well written. You break the seal, I am sure. *The Smiling Death* is a neat job, but its murders are the work of a totally unmotivated professional criminal. *Tracks in the Snow* is by the distinguished biographer of Lincoln, Lord Charnwood, and is marked by the development of characters (with bearing on the mystery) as well as by an unusual turn of the story after the criminal is caught and

begins to confess. *The Silent House* is made of the same material as the play—perhaps it's good on the stage. In reading of men who are stabbed and asphyxiated and otherwise irritated and who manage to turn up none the worse after a ten minute interval one begins by saying no and ends by saying no. *The Green Shadow* holds off the negative response for a time.

Finally I recommend, with some heartiness, *The Black Cap*, a collection of superior short stories in this manner, made by Cynthia Asquith—remarkable in every way—and Vincent Starrett's collection of old detective stories made for The Modern Library.

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Books mentioned in this article: *At the House of Dree*, by Gordon Gardiner; Houghton Mifflin. *The Death of a Diplomat*, by Peter Oldfield; Washburn. *Shadows by the Sea*, by J. Jefferson Farjeon; Dial. *The Monk of Hambleton*, by Armstrong Livingston; Henkle. *The Silent House*, by John G. Brandon; Dial. *The District Bungalow*, by C. C. Howis; Doubleday, Doran. *The Tick of the Clock*, by Herbert Asbury; Macy-Masius. *The Midnight Mystery*, by Bertram Atkey; Appleton. *Tracks in the Snow*, by Lord Charnwood; Dial. *The Old Dark House*, by J. B. Priestley; Harpers. *The Smiling Death*, by Francis D. Grierson; Clode. *Green Fire*, by John Taine; Dutton. *The Marloe Mansions Mystery*, by Adam Gordon MacLeod; Dial. *The Dawson Pedigree*, by Dorothy L. Sayers; Dial. *The Black Cap*, edited by Cynthia Asquith; Scribners. *The Queen of Clubs*, by Hulbert Footner; Doubleday, Doran-Crime Club. *The Clock Strikes Two*, by H. K. Webster; Bobbs-Merrill. *The Green Shadow*, by Herman Landon; Dial. *The Desert Moon Mystery*, by Kay Cleaver Strahan; Doubleday, Doran-Crime Club. *The Bellamy Trial*, by Frances Noyes Hart; Doubleday, Doran. *Behind That Curtain*, by Earl Derr Biggers; Bobbs-Merrill. *The Greene Murder*, by S. S. Van Dine; Scribners. All \$2.00.

Fourteen Great Detective Stories, edited by Vincent Starrett; Modern Library. \$.95.

THE BOOKMAN'S MONTHLY SCORE

Compiled by Frank Parker Stockbridge, life member of the American Library Association,
in co-operation with the Public Libraries of America.

Whenever Mary Roberts Rinehart brings out a new novel it jumps automatically into the Monthly Score. Ludwig Lewisohn's previous books gained a surprising popularity in the circulation departments of the libraries. In view of the previous record of this author, however, there is nothing surprising in the suddenness with which his latest work has caught the public fancy.
—F. P. S.

FICTION

1. The Bridge of San Luis Rey	Thornton Wilder	A. & C. BONI
2. Wintersmoon	Hugh Walpole	DOUBLEDAY
3. The Greene Murder Case	S. S. Van Dine	SCRIBNER
4. Kitty	Warwick Deeping	KNOPF
5. Beauty and the Beast	Kathleen Norris.	DOUBLEDAY
6. Giants in the Earth	O. E. Rolvaag	HARPER
7. Death Comes for the Archbishop	Willa Cather	KNOPF
8. Red Rust	Cornelia James Cannon	LITTLE
9. The Island Within *	Ludwig Lewisohn	HARPER
10. Jalna	Mazo de la Roche	LITTLE
11. Two Flights Up *	Mary Roberts Rinehart	DOUBLEDAY
12. Claire Ambler	Booth Tarkington	DOUBLEDAY

GENERAL

1. Mother India	Katherine Mayo	HARCOURT
2. Trader Horn	Alfred Aloysius Horn and Ethelreda Lewis	SIMON
3. Napoleon	Emil Ludwig	LIVERIGHT
4. Strange Interlude	Eugene O'Neill	LIVERIGHT
5. Disraeli	André Maurois	APPLETON
6. Safari	Martin Johnson	PUTNAM
7. Skyward	Richard Byrd	PUTNAM
8. The Royal Road to Romance	Richard Halliburton	BOBBS
9. My Life	Isadora Duncan	LIVERIGHT
10. Bismarck	Emil Ludwig	LITTLE
11. The Story of Philosophy	Will Durant	SIMON
12. "We"	Charles Lindbergh	PUTNAM

* This title has not previously appeared in the Monthly Score.