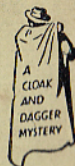


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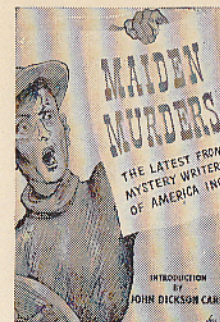
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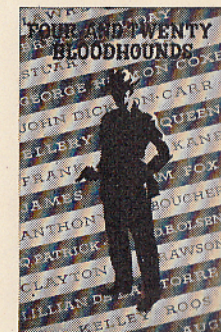
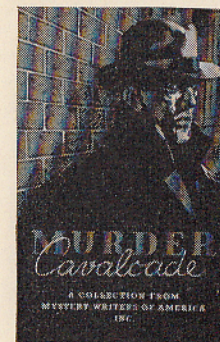
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Mystery Fiction

Theory and Technique

by

MARIE F. RODELL

Introduction by

MAURICE RICHARDSON

LONDON

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To

Those Whose Manuscripts Have Taught Me
What I Know about Mystery Fiction:

LAWRENCE G. BLOCHMAN
ALLAN R. BOSWORTH
CARTER DICKSON
ERLE STANLEY GARDNER
EATON K. GOLDTHWAITE
ELISABETH SANXAY HOLDING
H. H. HOLMES
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GEORGE WORTHING YATES

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INTRODUCTION

BY MAURICE RICHARDSON

JUDGING by the number of detective stories and thrillers published each year, to say nothing of the unpublished MSS., a quite appreciable proportion of the population must spend part of its time committing violent fantasies to paper. This may not be a healthy sociological symptom but it should ensure a steady sale for Mrs. Rodell's book.

This, so far as I know, is the only book that sets out to teach you how to write crime fiction. I can recommend it as an extremely useful job, full of sound sense and helpful tips. It will not, of course, enable you to write a successful crime story if you lack the necessary literary talent, but then, if we are to go by the standard of what gets published, the necessary minimum of talent required is not very great. Many a published crime novel could have been enormously improved by a course of Mrs. Rodell. Many an unpublished MS. might have made the grade if its inexperienced author had had the benefit of her coaching.

Mrs. Rodell, who is herself a capable writer of American mystery stories of what I call the drawing-room school in which extreme toughness is at a discount, begins from the standpoint that crime fiction is essentially commercial fiction, written for a definite market with specific requirements which she set out to study and analyse. This is a rational approach. Indeed,

it is probably the only approach from which you could start out to write a successful manual of crime fiction at all.

My own attitude to the matter is rather different from that of the business-like Mrs. Rodell. As a professional critic of crime fiction, I am a sort of people's opium-taster and I have to take special measures to protect myself from the effects of chronic intoxication. I make it a rule to try to forget as quickly as possible the crime stories I read—even the good ones—as soon as I have dealt with them. Even so, I find my brain is apt to become cluttered up with the stuff. I catch myself repeating odd sentences, mostly very grotesque ones, remembered from the cruder oaf-thrillers. (The one that occurs to me at this moment is spoken by a certain popular hero to the head waiter at the Savoy: 'Jules, bring me a bottle of my special brand of Moussec which you keep for me and nobody else.') I try, therefore, not to take the flood of crime fiction which passes in front of my eyes too seriously. I am probably the last person in the world for a would-be crime writer to come to for advice; but I am certain that I am putting him on to a good thing in recommending Mrs. Rodell.

Mrs. Rodell treats every variety of crime story, from the don's delight type of whodunit which is so popular in Senior Common Rooms, to the horror thriller, with the complete seriousness which is essential for her didactic purpose. She eschews any trace of that flippancy which you sometimes find in detective story writers and detective story fans, especially if they are intellectuals. Jokes about Watson's marriages and Holmes' drug-taking, speculations as to what extent the characters of Raffles and Bunny might have been foun-

ded on Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas can be fun for fans but they would be right out of place in any manual of instruction. The average reader requires the suspension of unbelief and to this the flippant approach and the pseudo-scholarly pastiche that often goes with it is nearly always fatal. With Mrs. Rodell the serious business of story-telling and construction comes first and last all the time; with her you are in safe hands.

During the last fifteen years or so, ever since the end of the thirties, there have been signs that the forms established in crime fiction have been undergoing a process of disintegration. The whodunit, with the closed circle of suspects, which used to be the classic pattern of the detective story, has been becoming a bit faded. The trend, influenced by the successes of the American tough school, has been in the direction of the realistic thriller. Nevertheless, the fundamental pattern of any crime story is always: Who is doing, or has done, or is going to do, What to Whom, and How? As Mrs. Rodell puts it, 'Crime, detection, and retribution provide of themselves a beginning, middle and end. . . .' It is the presence of this elementary skeleton in any mystery which makes her think it may not be so difficult to teach you to write crime fiction as you may suppose.

Certainly faulty construction is one of the commonest defects of crime stories by otherwise promising writers, especially beginners. And Mrs. Rodell is particularly sound on the subject of construction. She goes into it very thoroughly, displaying a strikingly didactic gift. She takes a sample plot, starting correctly from a real life situation, in this case a snippet from an agony column, and shows you how to build up a story on it, and how to maintain suspense by judicious raising and

lowering of the tension until the final climax. She shows you how to avoid the diffusion of narrative interest, which is so often fatal, and how to exercise your imagination along definite lines and threads that help your story along. It really is a most impressive demonstration and it succeeds in giving you the feeling that you could do the same thing yourself.

What else does she give you? A detailed analysis of the different types and forms of crime story in which she distinguishes carefully between such important and neglected categories as, for instance, the kind of clues that may be used in the detective story proper but not in the mystery adventure story. A list of musts and taboos. Many of the latter refer to sex. Crime fans, according to Mrs. Rodell, are 'straightlaced in matters of sexual morality' and it is only the readers of tough stories who will 'countenance sexual transgression'. Whether or not this is an unduly drawing-room school point of view I am not by any means certain, but Mrs. Rodell is never hopelessly rigid about her little conventions and freely admits that all taboos can be broken successfully.

These are only some of the aspects which she covers. Open her book anywhere and you will find common-sense practical instruction. Some of it may seem obvious enough, but then most of the mistakes—or at any rate the more egregious ones—that crime writers make are due to the neglect, sometimes it takes the form of direct flouting, of the obvious. And if Mrs. Rodell is at times inclined to be very cautious and given to a lot of classifying and departmentalizing this is no doubt because she is keeping the beginner firmly in mind. She shows here and there that she is fully aware of the modern

tendency to mix the forms and realizes that the crime story which approaches most closely to literature will probably be the one that is unclassifiable, belongs to no specific genre and obeys no fixed set of rules.

There is one aspect about which Mrs. Rodell is inclined to be a little cagey and that is imitation. The detective story has been defined, I think by C. Day Lewis, as the modern folk myth. There is a good deal to be said for this definition from a sociological point of view. Sociology apart, there is no doubt that crime writers borrow from and imitate each other as freely as the anonymous folk bards. If I were in a particularly anti-detective story writer mood, at the end of a hard day's reading, I should be tempted to offer the beginner the following advice: 'make up your mind with which successful crime writer you are most in sympathy and imitate him until all is blue.' Imitation as flagrant as this has been done, and once or twice with remarkably successful results. Mrs. Rodell, wise and sensible, contents herself with a balanced paragraph in which she sums up: 'I am not suggesting that you plagiarize the works of the masters or presume to rewrite the classics. I am suggesting that it is entirely permissible to use them as springboards for your own work.'

I hope that Mrs. Rodell's book will have the success that it deserves. It is too much to hope that it will have any immediately noticeable effect in raising the standard of crime fiction, which is at present irritatingly uneven, but it cannot fail to do good. Writers, publishers, reviewers, and the huge public of crime-fiction addicts should welcome its appearance.

A NOTE TO THE READER

THE aim of this book is to provide a guide to the principles of mystery novel writing—in which category are included detective stories proper as well as ‘advanced mysteries’ and ‘horror mysteries’. It is not concerned, except incidentally, with literary values in the ordinary sense of the words. Its emphasis is on the particulars of craftsmanship.

Any one who has been concerned with the selling, publication or reviewing of detective and mystery stories knows how many authors and would-be authors have gone astray in this field simply through failure to grasp certain definite principles. Principles which are not arbitrary literary forms invented by pundits, but which have grown up organically with the development of the mystery story as a result of the demands of the reading public.

This is not to say that there are hard and fast rules which anyone capable of writing understandable English has only to follow in order to produce a successful mystery story. That is nonsense: no one simply by reading a book can, for instance, develop vivid and coherent powers of imagination. But it remains true that the writer who embarks on a mystery as if it were the first of the kind ever to be written—as if indeed he himself had invented the genre—is wasting his time, energy and talent. The principles of mystery story writing are not rigid. As is to be expected in a still developing medium they are subject to constant change

and growth. They may be, and constantly are, altered and developed, they may even be circumvented; but they can never simply be ignored.

This book has been written with that writer especially in mind who is preparing to enter this particular field of fiction. It makes no claim to profound literary scholarship, its purpose is severely practical. The author is a mystery story writer who has also had extensive experience of the business aspects of authorship and publication. If this book serves to clarify some of the haze which hangs over this field, and which leads every day to the rejection or commercial failure of numerous books, some of genuine promise, its object will have been fulfilled and its publication justified.

The section on Equipment in chapters 21 and all of chapter 22 were prepared by the Publishers in co-operation with an English writer and an English lawyer respectively.

The original edition of this book appeared in the United States in 1943, and a revised edition in 1952. This present edition has been very thoroughly revised for the British audience, and all legal procedures, police practices, and publishing standards have been Anglicized. The British author wishing to write a mystery set in America (which he is strongly advised *not* to do) should consult the American edition.

The author wishes to express her thanks to those who have made this Anglicization possible: to Mr. Kellow Chesney for his thorough-going and more than competent editorial revision; and to Mr. Maurice Richardson for his flattering introduction.

M. F. R.

NEW YORK
August, 1953.

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CHAPTER ONE

Who Writes Mystery Fiction?

AUTHORS of mystery fiction write primarily in order to sell their works: they write for money. If they are interested in enduring fame, in writing as literature, or in getting across a message, they will choose some other field. Mystery fiction is frankly commercial.

This does not mean that mystery fiction need be hack work; nor that the authors of it must 'talk down' to their audiences; nor that the books they write cannot have wit, intelligence, and literary merit. Standards of craftsmanship—continually higher standards—do exist; and by and large, the audience for mystery fiction is an intelligent and well-educated one.

But writing commercial fiction does mean that the tastes of the audience must always be taken into consideration. A book which is neither art nor a seller is nothing at all. Certain exceptionally talented writers have succeeded in achieving very considerable literary merit within the field of mystery fiction; they are the great exceptions. The effort often involves the shattering of much of the standard mystery formula. Usually experimental mystery novels are attempted only after an author has already established an audience; an experimental or non-formula 'first' mystery must be written with extraordinary power and skill to find a

market. Established writers in other fields sometimes produce such 'first' mysteries. The beginner had better wait and test his mettle before attempting it.

And yet, curiously enough, although mystery fiction is commercial fiction, it seldom makes very much money for its author. Its virtue lies in its comparative lack of risk, once the author's saleability has been established. It is the easiest form of fiction for which to find a publisher if it is well done (and too often, even if it is only indifferently well done); it is the hardest type of fiction for a publisher to lose money on. Mystery fiction supplies the bread and butter of many publishers' lists and bookshops' inventories. Translated into the author's terms, this means that the writer of mystery fiction must be able to produce steadily and not too slowly if he is to depend on that writing for his bread and butter.

What, then, are the necessary qualifications for a potentially successful mystery writer?

1. He must enjoy reading mystery fiction. For if it makes no appeal to him, he will be unable to put into his work the elements which make for enjoyment in reading. And if he does not know what his contemporaries are writing, he may duplicate tricks already used, without knowing it.

2. He must have a fairly logical mind. The writer who leans heavily on atmosphere and style, to the virtual exclusion of plot, will not do for mystery fiction. Mysteries have retained a more rigid form than almost any other form of fiction (with the possible exception of the Western story); and *what happens* in a mystery is always to be considered before *how it happens*. One half of the work is carpentry.

3. He must be able to write with enough facility to complete at least two full-length novels in a year, if his mystery writing is to contribute any substantial part of his income.

4. Unless he is that *rara avis*, a writer with a book-length mind only, he should have first proved to himself that he can write, in the commercial sense, by attempting some short stories for the magazine market. Although there are important differences in technique between this form and the mystery novel; there are certain qualifications, fundamental for any writer, which can be tested in this way. His ability to handle exposition, action, and dialogue, to say what he wants to say clearly and readably, will show in the one as in the other.

Incidentally an author to whom characterization, dialogue, and style present no especial problems, but who has difficulty in the construction and manipulation of plots can learn much from the writing of mysteries. Indeed, the carpentry of construction is the one thing that can be learned; the other elements of writing can only be improved.

The writer who wants to write exactly as he pleases, with no restraints on subject matter or expression, had better stay away from mystery fiction. The taboos are not many, but they are strict; and the specialized audience which has grown up for mystery fiction is knowing and serious in its tastes. It expects certain things in mystery fiction; and the writer who fails to give them to it is doomed to languish unopened on the shelves.

CHAPTER TWO

Who Reads Mystery Fiction?

FRANKLIN DELANO ROOSEVELT's well-known penchant for mystery stories is shared by many famous politicians, scientists, doctors, journalists, authors, professors, and business men. It is also shared by thousands of everyday people, in all walks of life and of all degrees of education and culture. Mrs. O'Grady and the Colonel's lady may not patronize the same lending library, but they are apt to hire the same books even if, within the limits of mystery fiction, their preferences may differ.

Indeed, it is a curious fact that the majority of mystery fans are women. At first glance, mystery fiction would seem to be primarily to a man's taste. But women readers in any field, fiction or non-fiction, outnumber men (except of course in special cases—technical books, for example) because, even in this age of career and business women, more women than men have time to read.

What makes all these people enjoy mystery fiction, in preference to some other form?

Mysteries belong to the vast category of escape fiction. Westerns, 'romances', historical novels, and fantasies (other than satires) all belong in the same category.

Escape fiction is so called because it offers the reader

WHO READS MYSTERY FICTION?

an escape from the realities about him or within him which distress him. For as long as it takes him to read the book, he leaves behind him the real world in which he has troubles, and enters a world of make believe in which, if troubles exist, they are someone else's, and where there is always a happy ending.

Games and sports can divert our interest, make us forget our problems; escape fiction can do that and more. It offers us a world in which we are no longer frustrated, in which we are all heroes and heroines, successful in love, in careers, and in fortune. It can do so because we are eager to identify ourselves with the glamorous creatures of whom we read, and to take part in the exciting adventures they encounter, which are so far removed from the ordinary, humdrum, and frustrating routine of our own lives.

What makes people choose mystery fiction in particular, rather than any of the other types of escape fiction?

There are two reasons, and each is dependent on the other. Mystery fiction is a more sophisticated type of reading than Western stories or she-married-her-boss romances and appeals to readers who require a little more subtlety than these can offer. And as a story of the present day, and a picture of a world related to our own, it offers a more plausible opportunity for the reader to identify himself with the characters than does a story of a world gone by. The Western and the cheap romance offer a crude dream world; the historical novel one which the reader can have no hope of ever entering in real life.

But the mystery novel, in addition to action and romance, has an intellectual attraction; it offers not

only the vicarious pleasure of being brave, beautiful, and beloved, but that of being clever as well. And because it deals with people more or less like the reader, living in a world more or less like his, at least so far as its modes and customs go, it offers him the hope that he, too, may some day meet with adventure such as this. And these vicarious pleasures, in the bulk of mystery novels, are offered him in the form of characters and events sufficiently plausible, sufficiently far from unreal perfection; so that he can regard the hero of the tale as a better edition of himself rather than a totally different person. This difference is important; it indicates not a failure of imagination, but a higher degree of maturity and realization of reality.

But more than all this, the mystery novel offers its readers a very specific form of escape and satisfaction. The impulse to hurt or destroy what we do not like, or which frustrates us, is common to all of us in childhood; it goes underground as we grow up. We are conscious of it in the irritations and dislikes we experience toward some people and their actions; all of us know the impulse to destroy the inanimate object which has just barked a shin or tripped a foot. Swearing is a form of relief for this aggression; instead of actually hurting the person or thing which has aroused our anger, we promise it that someone more potent than we will take care of it by eternal damnation.

Of the complete ruthlessness of childhood we are very seldom, if ever, conscious if we have grown up to be normal adults. Our consciences have taken over the job which parents and teachers started, in curbing our asocial acts. But the fact that these impulses have been forced down into unconsciousness does not mean they

have been destroyed. The desire to hurt those who thwart us or anger us is still there; and we cannot always offer it even the partial relief of swearing or vilification.

This buried aggressiveness is usually thwarted by the curbs which society has imposed upon us in its interest and our own. We do not go about hitting those we dislike. The impulse is held down and produces an emotional explosive which seeks release.

Many people have an impulse to murder which never finds expression in the act. In the words of Plato, 'The good are those who are content to dream of that which others actually do.' Many people have no impulse to murder at all. But as Cecil Day Lewis, the celebrated poet who writes mysteries as 'Nicholas Blake', puts it, mysteries are 'a harmless release of an innate spring of cruelty present in every one'. By the vicarious pleasure of the man hunt which brings an offender to justice, much more than by the act of murder itself, we are able to give vent to the buried aggressiveness in us, and find a legitimate excuse for it. The fact that justice is served in the end legitimizes the release of the impulse and satisfies the censor within us—the conscience. Moreover, we take a double pleasure in punishing the transgressor who has failed to curb his aggression, by a feeling of pride in ourselves who have succeeded.

We may conclude, therefore, that the mystery reader wants to find in mystery fiction: 1, the vicarious thrill of the man hunt (which can be carried on intellectually—in the cleverness of detective and reader—as well as physically); 2, the satisfaction of seeing the transgressor punished; 3, a sense of identification with the people and events in the story which will make him feel more

heroic himself—as brave as the hero, as beautiful as the heroine, as clever as the detective; 4, a sense of conviction about the reality of the story which will make him feel such adventures are a future possibility for him in his own world.

The mystery which fails to satisfy these demands, without offering competent substitutes (i.e. the sympathetic murderer may mete out his own punishment: the punishment still exists but is palliated, because in the case of a 'justified' murder we allow ourselves a certain amount of identification with the murderer) will be an unsuccessful mystery. Whatever techniques of writing may be discussed further on in this book will be no more than suggested ways of arriving at these results. A book admirably constructed as to logic and plausibility which does not take into account the emotional expectations of its readers is, as escape fiction, a failure.

CHAPTER THREE

Types of Mystery Fiction

THE word 'mystery' covers a number of varying types of fiction. In its largest sense it means any story in which one or more elements are hidden or disguised until the end of the story. As such, it is one of the oldest and most popular devices of fiction. The romantic novels of Dumas and the realistic novels of Dickens both employed the mystery technique.

But we use the word here to denote certain types of modern escape fiction which are known to the book trade as mysteries, and which may conveniently be catalogued under four subheadings: The Detective Story, the Horror Story, the Adventure-Mystery and the Mystery Novel *per se*, sometimes called the Character or Literary Mystery. Almost any combination of these types is possible, and frequent; indeed, the vast majority of mysteries published do not fall exclusively into any one of these categories, but share attributes of two or more of them. However, one type almost always predominates over the other or others with which it is used, and this allows us a rough classification for study purposes which will serve well enough. A fifth category, the so-called experimental or non-formula mystery, is gaining in popularity. It is outside the scope of this book, for while it must conform to the general rules

laid down in the preceding chapter, it is by definition exempt from the standard techniques for achieving them.

The detective story—which is the name by which many people erroneously call any mystery—is the mystery mainly concerned with the puzzle presented to the detective or detective-substitute by the situation created by murder. Its colloquial name—*whodunit*—indicates the commonest and most universal feature of the puzzle: the hidden identity of the murderer. The word *whodunit* is only properly applied to a detective story.

The detective story as we know it today, as a type distinct from more general forms of mysteries, has grown up with the great advances made in the last forty years by the science of detection. Sherlock Holmes had a vast fund of miscellaneous knowledge and a lot of intuition with which to solve his cases; the modern detective has at his command the specialized services of scores of technicians, their test tubes, solvents, and microscopes.

It is the detection, then, which is of prime importance in a detective story: the unravelling of the puzzle. In its purest form, the appeal of the detective story will be the most intellectual and least emotional of all types of mystery fiction. In extreme cases cerebration will take the place of action almost entirely; such books fail to satisfy readers who cannot find complete substitute satisfaction in mental activity and aggression.

The horror story is the direct opposite of the detective story, within the mystery classification. Its primary appeal is an emotional one; its aim is to arouse in the reader a variety of kinesthetic feelings of an intense nature: to chill the spine, raise the hair, produce goose-

flesh. It trades upon fear, apprehension, and the masochistic enjoyment of them, in its readers. Detection in the horror story is more apt to be of the unofficial than the official variety; and its purpose is not only to solve the puzzle presented by the manifestations producing horror, but to furnish a means of bringing the horror to a close. The pure detective story is an aggressive one; the hero gives chase: the pure horror story is a passive one; the hero is chased. The act of murder is the premise of a detective story; in a horror story, it is more apt to serve as the horrid example of what will happen to the hero or heroine if *The Thing* catches up with him or her. The detective story assumes the sanctity of human life and the desire of the reader to punish the murderer; the horror story seeks to aggravate that desire by creating a crime even more horrible than murder. By inflicting upon the reader himself fear, apprehension, and terror, it increases his desire to punish their source.

The adventure-mystery, of which the spy novel is the commonest form, combines the appeals of the horror and detective novels. It is more positive and aggressive than the horror story; less intellectual and deductive than the detective story. Like the horror story, its chief appeal lies in the personal danger of the central character and the reader's identification of himself with that threatened character; like the detective story, the means to be achieved by a solution of the puzzle serve a larger end than mere personal safety. Instead of abstract justice, the adventure-mystery poses as the stake some important mission. In form, it may use the pursuit technique of the detective novel, usually translated into more strongly physical expression; or the

trap technique of the horror story, in which the central character is pursued.

The character or literary mystery novel is the least rigid and most variable of the forms. Its chief emphasis is in the portrayal of human beings under acute emotional stress; the analysis of their motives and reactions and comment upon their attitudes or ways of life. Whether the author is more interested in the psychological aspects of his characters, or in the habits of the society in which they live, it is *people* who interest him primarily rather than the solution of the puzzle, or the extreme emotional reaction of the reader. His novel is apt to be the closest to real life in its choice of situation and characters, and the nearest approach to the 'straight' novel. It is this form which offers the greatest opportunity for literary talent, and which produces borderline novels which are read and enjoyed by people who do not care for detective, horror or adventure stories.

In its worst and lowest manifestations, the mystery novel includes the egregious Had-I-But-Known mystery, the worst of the weekend party mysteries, the heroines who will wander alone in sinister attics, and the like. At its best, it furnishes the real literary merit and pungent human commentary of the best writers in the field.

CHAPTER FOUR

Victim and Motive

WE have said that mystery fiction is ideally suited to the author who has trouble with his plots, or to the beginner, because the carpentry of its construction has certain required elements. Crime, detection, and retribution, provide of themselves a beginning, middle, and end for the book.

But more factors than these are predetermined by the nature of the form, and ringing the changes upon them constitutes the chief source of originality and variety within it.

That the crime is almost always murder is a convention with sound reason. Murder is the most irrevocable and final of all crimes: it cannot be undone. Unlike theft, treason, and rape, it springs from an infinite variety of motives and is committed by an infinite variety of human beings. There have been notable exceptions to the universality of murder in mystery fiction* but the beginner should certainly not attempt to dispense with it or he will be handicapping himself at the start.

The factor of murder itself is subject to variation. It may take one of three forms: the murder which does

* i.e. *The Moonstone* by Wilkie Collins; *Gaudy Night* by Dorothy L. Sayers.

not seek to disguise the fact of murder; the murder which seeks to disguise the fact that there has been a death at all; the murder which seeks to disguise itself as suicide or accident.

When the murderer's purpose is to conceal the fact of death, the disposition of the body is the single most difficult problem he faces, in real life as in fiction. He may wish to conceal the fact of death for one or more of several reasons. Without a body, the prosecution has no case. (*Corpus delicti*, often misused in this connection, does not mean the corpse; it means the body of the case, of which the corpse is one essential point in evidence.) Or his concealment may be for a certain length of time only, during which he may leave the country, perfect an alibi, or change his identity; and in which the actual circumstances surrounding the commission of the crime will grow dim and confused, the actual time at which the crime was committed becomes impossible to discover, and the identity of the corpse obscured.

Fictionally speaking such efforts must be doomed to ultimate failure, or there would be no story. The search for the body, if evidence exists which indicates one, may form a part of the detection in the story.

The murderer who seeks to conceal not the fact of death, but merely the fact of murder, will try to have the death look like suicide or accident.

The faked suicide becomes more and more difficult to plan as the science of detection advances. The marks of strangulation differ from the marks left by hanging; the angle at which a knife enters the body must be calculated with extreme care, and fingerprints in the proper place and of the proper strength of impression

must be left on gun or knife; the victim must have a motive for suicide.

The murder designed to look like accident is a further extension of this, and is even more limited. Unlike the faked suicide, however, it is difficult to detect, if the execution is simple. Tampering with the gears or wheels of a car leaves its trace; the incendiary origin of a fire can often be detected; the supposedly accidental discharge of a gun must be carefully manipulated for proper angles and prints. If the accident requires that the victim first be stunned or drugged, traces of both stunning and drugging can be found. But a simple shove down a flight of stairs or a cliff, or a push over the rail of a ship, can only be proven by an eye witness.

Both of these variations lend themselves to ingenious double twists: murders made to look like fake suicides that are deliberately unsuccessful fakes; murders made to look at first glance like murder and only at second glance like suicide in order to dispose immediately and for good of the suspicion of murder; murders clumsily faked as accidents, in order that the manner of accident or type of faking may be made to point in a particular direction. But these require fairly elaborate setups, and are therefore dangerous.

The fact of murder presupposes: a corpse, a murderer, a motive; means and opportunity; a place.

The factor of detection presupposes: a detective, the things on which he must work—clues, alibis, suspects; and the tools with which he detects—scientific techniques and mental ones.

Authors have rung the changes on all of these factors. It is in varying them, not in discarding them, that

variety and originality are found. The detective novel requires all of them, and puts the emphasis on the second grouping; the other three types of mystery may subtract a large part of the second group, and put the emphasis on the murderer, on the suspects or on the actions of the central figure, rather than on detection.

Let us take up each of these factors one by one, and see what changes may be rung on them.

Two things about a murder victim may be important: his identity, and when he was killed. Why he was killed will be considered as a factor of the murderer's motive. How he was killed will be discussed under means and opportunity.

Concealing or disguising the identity of the corpse is adding to the mystification: the question of *who was killed* is added to the question of *who killed him*. From the murderer's point of view, concealing or disguising the identity of the corpse is designed to conceal the motive, when the murderer must be the obvious suspect if the identity of the corpse is known.

Thus, we have bankers lured into disguise and a doss house, and then killed there. We have corpses whose clothes have been removed to prevent identification that way; we have corpses without fingers, so the fingerprints may not betray them; without teeth, so the dental charts may not identify them; corpses mutilated in some fashion or other to hide or disguise an unusual mark of identification. We have headless corpses, and corpses disfigured with acid, and corpses immersed in water so long they are no longer recognizable. Any of these methods is still open to use, provided some other element in the story provides freshness; but the more bizarre among them should not be used twice. Thus, in

Ellery Queen's *The Chinese Orange Mystery*, the corpse is found with all its clothes on backwards. It was essential to the murderer's plans that no one recognize the corpse as a clergyman; to remove his clerical collar would only call attention to the fact that something was out of the ordinary about the collar. Consequently, the murderer undressed the corpse, and put all its clothes on backwards, leaving the clerical collar as it was. This is an amusing and brilliant tour de force, and all praise to Ellery Queen for thinking of it. But now that it has been done once, it cannot be done again.

The only way to avoid repeating something of this sort is to read the works of your predecessors and competitors in the field.

Concealing *when the victim met his death* is a second possible factor of mystification. From the murderer's point of view, the object of concealing or confusing the time of death is either to make discovery come so long after the crime was committed that no exact picture can any longer be built up of the facts; or to provide himself with an alibi for the apparent time of death. From the watch set to the wrong hour and then smashed, to the most elaborate contraptions (with a bow to Dorothy Sayers for her brilliant trick in *Have His Carcase*) the variations on this theme are manifold. The more elaborate they are, the less convincing they are apt to be, for the greater chance they offer of something going wrong to upset the murderer's plans. The tub of warm water or the extra heat to delay rigor mortis are fairly simple; the gun which is wired to shoot half an hour after the corpse has been killed, while the murderer is getting himself an alibi, and when convenient witnesses will hear it and so fix the time of

death incorrectly, verges on the too-complex. It is always possible, of course, for the author to introduce factors outside the murderer's plans, which complicate the question of time beyond the murderer's intention; such accidental factors are perfectly permissible provided the success of the crime—success in baffling the detective—does not depend on them alone.

We come next to the murderer himself. The chief point of mystification, as we have already seen, is usually *who is the murderer*. The three classic factors in determining this are motive, means, and opportunity.

Motive is double-headed: it implies *motive to kill a specific person*, and *temperamental ability to kill*. One of the suspects in a given mystery may have ample motive for killing the victim, but he may be psychologically incapable of murder *for that motive*. I make that distinction, because to this extent all of us are potential murderers: in actual, acute, and physical danger of our lives, with the weapon at hand we should all defend ourselves, by killing if necessary. If we are attacked, we fight back if we are able. By psychological or temperamental ability to kill, then, we mean here to kill other than in immediate and unpremeditated self-defence.

The character mystery will put more emphasis on this psychological aspect of motive than will the other forms, and can afford to go into reasons and causes more fully. The other three types are apt to put greater emphasis on *motive to kill a specific person*.

Any consideration of motives will of necessity bring up some psychological analysis; the detective novel will usually employ a motive common to so many people that the author can assume its acceptance by readers, and so avoid the need to go into more than superficial

explanations. The horror story may add to such common motives certain twists or perversions of the human mind. The character or psychological mystery will attempt the more complex and less obvious motivations.

The basic motives for murder arise from either or both of the two basic instincts: the desire for self-preservation, and the desire to preserve the race.

Under the desire for self-preservation come the murders for financial gain, for self-protection, to preserve prestige or status important to the murderer, the murders motivated by fear. Under the second category come the so-called 'sympathetic' murders to protect a child or loved one, a country or a principle. Revenge motives may come under either classification, or may come under both; revenge may be the only way in which the murderer can redeem his own self-esteem or that of others, or preserve his own balance; it may be retribution for harm done a loved one, which the law is powerless to punish.

The essential thing to remember about motive is that the fear of punishment and of condemnation is a strong fear, and that if the motive is to be believable it must be stronger than these. The consequences of failing to murder must seem legitimately as dreadful to the murderer as capital punishment and/or eternal damnation, if his choice of murder is to appear plausible to the reader. This does not mean that the reader would, in the same situation, make the same choice; it does mean that the reader is convinced that the character would make that choice.

This may seem a proposition so obvious as to need no comment; but unfortunately too many authors take

it for granted that any given character will murder for financial gain or revenge. The casualness about murder which so many authors exhibit, both in the choice of motive and in the handling of the behaviour of characters after the murder, is a self-destructive tendency. If the act of murder becomes so unimportant, and men commit it with so little prompting, how is the reader to be impressed with the necessity of catching and punishing the criminal?

The factor here, of course, which swings the balance between fear of the consequences if he does not murder, and fear of the consequences if he does, is the murderer's conviction that he can evade the consequences of murder by his cleverness. Without that conviction, there would be many fewer premeditated murders, and almost no mystery fiction. If the character in the story is presented as a cautious person, the consequences of failing to murder will have to be more immediate and more inevitable than if the character is shown as a gambler by nature, or as a person entirely convinced of his own mental superiority over all other people. (All murderers have some of this quality, of course, or they would not attempt to get away with murder.)

The motives of gain, revenge, and fear are too common and too easily understood to require analysis here. But certain less commonly used motives which have great fictional potentialities should be considered briefly.

These are the motives of extended self-preservation—the preservation of the murderer's psychic self. These are seen in the murders to protect prestige—the murders which aim at stopping a harmful or disastrous revelation about the murderer. They are often

joined with one of the commoner motives: fear of disclosure is fear not only of prestige destroyed, but of what that will bring with it—loss of a position, of a fiancée, of money.

The reverse of the prestige-protection murder is the murder to satisfy a desire for power. The drive to power is one of the most potent of human impulses, and like all other instincts, can be a force for good or evil, and can exist in varying degrees of intensity. Almost always a compensation for some humiliation or sense of inferiority sustained in childhood or youth, the intensity of its full maturity need not bear any direct relation to the size of its cause. The degree to which such a sense of inferiority or traumatic experience can stimulate the drive to power will depend on the individual makeup. There must have been many German boys who grew up, as Hitler did, in the misery of post-war Germany, who were illegitimate, who thought they had artistic talents which the world refused to recognize. But only one of them grew up to be Hitler. Some of the others grew up to be his followers, little Hitlers, and undoubtedly there are some who grew up without a destructive drive to power at all.

The murder for financial gain may be a manifestation of the drive to power; for great wealth, past the point at which it provides for human necessities completely and even luxuriously, is primarily an implement of power. The revenge motive may be an expression of the drive to power, for the avenger, by taking the law into his own hands and destroying a human life for reasons which he finds sufficient, is playing at being God.

The sex motives for murder, which play a large part

in the cases of actual murder, are less easy to use in fiction. The *crime passionnel*, the crime of jealousy committed on the spur of the moment, makes poor material; for only the premeditated crime leaves enough traces to make for good detection which is not dependent on chance for its success. In real life, the police can solve an unpremeditated crime by the use of stool pigeons and 'information received'; in fiction, the detective must actively seek out the solution, not let it come to him.

But sex can be used as the motive for a premeditated crime in fiction when the victim stands in the way of sexual happiness of the murderer. The unwanted husband, the disapproving father whose consent is essential, the informer from the past who will betray to the loved one something which will drive out love—these are potential murder victims.

But the crimes arising from sexual perversions are used only in the most lurid thrillers. The crimes committed by the insane are taboo, except in horror fiction. The reasons for these taboos will be discussed in a later chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE

Means and Opportunity

WE have seen that the three things about the murderer which must be taken into account are motive, means, and opportunity.

By means is meant the method of murder, the weapon used, and, in the process of detection, the availability of that method and weapon to the murderer.

Various and wonderful have been the murder methods devised by ingenious authors. From obscure and untraceable arrow poisons through the elaborate setup used by S. S. Van Dine in *The Dragon Murder Case*, authors have tried to give freshness and originality to their books by the use of novel murder methods.

This is the most restricted field of all for variety, and the one in which ingenuity is most dangerous. The more complicated the method of murder, the greater the chances against its successful completion, the greater the number of details in it which may go wrong. Mechanical ingenuity alone is necessary to the conception of a novel murder method; and while if you happen upon one that has not been used, it may well add to the merits of the story, novelty alone is not enough. The method must be plausible, possible, and as nearly foolproof as fictional murder can be. The trouble to which an elaborate murder method can put an

author is seldom worth it. Moreover, as in the case of the schemes for concealing the identity of the corpse or the time of death, a novelty once used is a novelty no longer, and the greater its ingenuity the less can it bear repeating. The good old blunt instrument, gun, carving knife, or rat poison will still do yeoman service; originality can better be expended on other elements in the story.

Nevertheless, mystification as to the means by which the murder was committed is a legitimate factor.

The most difficult and ingenious method is to make it seem impossible for the crime to have been committed at all: to this category belong the locked-room puzzles. They are by nature complicated devices, and are best left to experienced authors who can handle them convincingly. John Dickson Carr and Carter Dickson, (who are one and the same) are the acknowledged masters in this field; and Carr has obligingly provided a comprehensive analysis of the variation on the locked-room puzzle in *The Three Coffins*.

A second source of mystification about the means of murder may be effected by the disappearance or disguise of the weapon. The wound indicates clearly that a sharp knife was used; but no sharp knife can be found available to the murderer or near the corpse. A blunt instrument was used, but no such instrument fitting the wound can be found. Such devices are apt to employ the Purloined Letter technique: the weapon is in full view, but its function as something else is so evident that it is not suspected of having been used. Thus, the murderer who managed to borrow the club of a visiting policeman, and return it after committing the murder, to its proper place on the policeman's belt, would be using this technique, if he had managed it so

that the policeman did not realize his club had been missing. No effort is made to conceal the club or to destroy it; its normal function is used as a disguise.

A third method of concealing or disguising the weapon might be said to be the use of no weapon at all. A blow with a fist, a shove down the stairs, or the use of shock on a person with an admittedly weak heart would all come under this category. The result would be a death which might appear accidental whether or not the murderer intended it to seem so.

When a bizarre and unusual method is used, care must be taken that the method is not alien to the story itself. Dorothy Sayers's method of murder in *The Nine Tailors*, ingenious and strange as it is, is perfectly in harmony with the story; story and method spring from one and the same thing, as do the setting and the characters. That same method of murder, intruded on a situation and cast of characters who had little or nothing to do with bell-ringing, would only seem outré and far-fetched.

The murderer's opportunity is construed as meaning his access to the weapon, his access to the victim, and his inability to prove he was elsewhere when the crime was committed. A frail woman would not be accounted as having the opportunity to kill a man with a heavy meat cleaver, because she would be unable to wield the weapon; a bed-ridden invalid would be considered lacking the opportunity to kill a man thrown from a cliff a mile away, for he would be unable to reach the place at which the crime was committed; a man in jail for some other offence at the time the murder was committed would not have the opportunity—he would have a perfect alibi.

Of these three, it is the last which has received most attention from mystery writers. The 'unbreakable' alibi, the trademark of the guilty person in all of Freeman Wills Crofts's detective novels, is the delight of those who love to play with time tables and juggle calendars. The 'unbreakable' alibi has, in fact, been used so often that its very appearance is now suspect; readers know that 'unbreakable' alibis are made to be broken. The man who can account for every moment of the significant time is the man they will watch. This being so, the author can now offer a suspect with an 'unbreakable' alibi which really is unbreakable, and the suspect innocent, as a valuable red herring. This sort of trading on the reader's conditioning, an inversion or double-take on the twists of yesterday's mystery, can be used to excellent advantage. It will be discussed at further length in a later chapter.

CHAPTER SIX

Setting and Suspects

THE setting of a mystery novel might appear at first glance to be a rather superficial detail to be decided upon at the last moment. And it may appear at first glance to have very little to do with the subject with which it is here bracketed: suspects.

But setting and the characters in the book other than victim, murderer, and detective—in other words, the other suspects—constitute the world in which the mystery is laid, and the economical mystery writer, which is to say the good mystery writer, will not have even the pictorial backdrop of his story irrelevant to the events which take place before it.

To set a story in a boiler factory, and then to have none of the special attributes of a boiler factory play any part in the story, would be both pointless and wasteful. If the setting is the genesis of the mystery idea—if a boiler factory occurs to you because the noise it creates, and the machinery it uses, and its place in industry are all elements you can use in your story—then it is not necessary to point out how intrinsic a part of the story it is. But if the first idea for the story is laid against no specific backdrop, and one must be chosen; if the method of murder or the trick of alibi or the disposal of the body is the first idea, and the char-

acters are to be built around it; then care must be taken that both setting and characters contribute to, and are related to, the trick on which the story is to be built.

I have already spoken of *The Nine Tailors* and the use of setting, occupation, and character there in relation to the means of murder. Ellery Queen's *Spanish Cape Mystery* is another example in point; the chief mystery element in the story—the fact that the corpse is naked except for a cape—necessitates a house on the edge of water. The all-too-familiar houseparty murders work on this same principle, where the segregation of a little world (it is usually cut off from contact with the rest of the world, by one means or another) provides a satisfactory way of logically narrowing the cast of suspects—of people with means and opportunity.

But there are many mysteries in which specific geographic location is of no great importance; they must be laid in a city, but any city will do; or they must be laid in the mountains, but any mountain will do. In such cases, usually some specific detail of the setting influences the manner of murder or the course of detection; but more importantly, it determines the type of society in which the murder takes place.

Motive, means, and opportunity will vary for all suspects as they are rural or city-bred people, for the way of life and therefore the ambitions of these people differ. The degree of wealth will make a difference, and the degree of culture. If the story concerns a group of gangsters in a city, it will not be the same sort of story as if it concerned a group of farm people in the country, and both will differ from a story dealing with night life on the Riviera. Setting and the character of a society will determine in part the nature of the crime,

the motive which prompts it, and the way it is carried out. Gangster and farmer, for different reasons, have easier access to guns than ordinary city-dwellers; people living in small communities have more to fear from gossip than those living in the comparative anonymity of a big city; country people know more about the histories and habits of their neighbours, than do flat dwellers; and so on.

What freshness an unusual setting can contribute to a mystery is welcome; but to lay the story in Timbuctoo for the sake of originality, and then construct a story and a cast of characters which might just as well occur in Wigan or Tooting Bec is to nullify all the benefits that might be gained. A fine example of a mystery which uses the physical peculiarities of an exotic story as a very notable feature of the action can be found in John W. Vandercook's *Murder in Trinidad*, in which a tortuous route through a swamp, over mangrove roots which form the only sure footing, makes an exciting incident important to the story as a whole.

Variations on setting, then, will depend on the author's own knowledge of the setting, and the way in which it can contribute to the development of the plot.

The innocent suspects in a mystery fulfill two functions: an expository and a red herring function. Through their efforts to clear themselves of suspicion, they give to the detective and the reader valuable insight into the motives and habits of victim and murderer; and where the innocent suspects have something other than murder to hide, or unable to prove their lack of motive, means, or opportunity, they furnish valuable distractions to conceal the identity of the true murderer.

The average mystery provides anywhere from two to seven or eight such innocent suspects. The more there are, the more baffling the case, but also the more confusing. That a mystery may have ample suspense with only two suspects to choose from—one must be guilty, the other not—has been proven by Henry Wade's quiet and finely constructed *The Hanging Captain*. This book is well worth study for the soundness of its construction and the simplicity of the problem posed.

It is in the handling of the suspects that many otherwise competent mystery novels fall down. Here, almost more than in any other phase of the genre, the reader's conditioning must be taken into account. A suspect who appears late in the story, after the bulk of the other characters has been presented, will not be seriously considered as the murderer, for the reader expects the writer to introduce him or her at the very start. Thus the late introduction of the murderer is to be considered cheating, except under very special circumstances. This is especially true of the detective story proper.

Nor will the reader seriously consider guilty either or both of the partners in a sympathetic romance, unless a potential and acceptable rival is on hand to furnish a happy ending.

Incidental characters, thrown in merely to confuse the reader, and without any contribution to offer to the development of plot or character, are also frowned upon. The mystery should be the most economical of all fiction forms: nothing in it should fail to contribute to development. A character whose only function is to distract the reader's attention, while playing no necessary part in the story himself, is a sign of poor planning and wasteful writing.

The experienced mystery fans—which means the vast majority of them—have become used to assaying the possible guilt of any given character as much by the author's attitude toward that character as by any specific clues or alibis. Guilt is betrayed by an 'unbreakable' alibi too eagerly offered by suspect and author alike, or by careful lack of emphasis on the 'least likely person'. Innocence is established too early when the happy ending of a sympathetic romance depends on the suspect, or when the author insists too much on the character's unpleasant traits, or when motive, means, and opportunity are too obvious.

Thus, in a mystery in which the suspects number a pretty and sweet young girl of nineteen, a boy in love with her, a sinister Japanese houseboy, a man with motive, means and opportunity, plain to all, and a sweet and gentle spinster aunt of the girl's, without apparent motive, means, or opportunity, the aunt is the only possible suspect to the astute reader. The boy and girl are out, for if one of them is guilty, the romance goes glimmering; the sinister Jap is out, because he is too obviously characterized as a potential murderer; the man with motive, means, and opportunity is too clearly indicated as the murderer.

Nevertheless, apparent guilt cast on a character who the reader knows will not be guilty can serve a useful purpose. If the reader is anxious for the two young people to find a happy ending, serious suspicion cast on either of them will create greater suspense, because the reader will have an additional reason for wanting the real murderer discovered. An obvious suspect, who practically asks to be arrested, can be valuable because the police must regard him as the chief suspect, must

even arrest him, thereby influencing the murderer's course of action thereafter, or changing the nature of the investigation.

For such purposes, then, suspicion cast on innocent characters of this type can be used effectively; but it must be remembered that the suspicion is entertained only by other characters in the book and *not by the reader*, who must be given other suspects to choose from.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Clues

CLUES are the traces of guilt which the murderer leaves behind him. Whether they are tangible things, like a button torn off at the scene of the crime; or personal traces like footprints or fingerprints; or whether they are intangible habit patterns or character traits, they are the signposts leading detective and reader in the right—or sometimes wrong—direction.

A clue is seldom in itself a proof of guilt. It is the deductions which the detective makes from it which are significant; it is because of these deductions that that button eventually proves the murderer's undoing.

A good clue, then, is one which does in fact point in the right direction, but which seems at first to point in the wrong direction, to mean something other than it does, or to point nowhere at all.

The material clues are those actual objects the forgetful murderer leaves behind him, and any other things which can be detected by the senses. The scent of a particular perfume, a tune whistled at a significant moment, a strange taste to a bit of food, or something odd about the texture of a cloth or leather—these may all be clues. Only one thing is required of them: that they be such that they can adequately be described in words. The reader sees, hears, tastes, smells, or feels these clues

only as they are described to him. An odour must be characterized if it is to mean anything to the reader, who cannot smell it from the page: it may be pungent, or sickeningly sweet; it may be rose or jasmine or carnation; or, more subtly, it may evoke certain reactions in the detective, which are always the same whenever he smells that particular scent. In that case, the reader recognizes the recurrence of the clue by the way in which it affects the detective, not by the aroma of the clue itself.

A bit of music can of course be represented in the form of musical notation, and most people, even if they cannot read it, will recognize the familiarity of the pattern on the page. But unless one of the characters in the book has a definite reason for putting the notes on paper, this is an unsatisfactory method. Music, like perfume, can be characterized either by its qualities—its tempo, pitch, key, mood—or by the effect it has on the character hearing it.

In either case, of course, if the clue is not to be elusive in itself, a definite label can be attached. The perfume is recognized as Chanel Number 5, or the tune as an old French folk song.

Something more may be deduced from such clues, however. Perfume is a personal thing; the same woman does not wear light, flower-bouquet scents, and perfumes heavy with chypre or musk. A man with a basso profundo cannot convincingly sing an air written for a soprano.

So too with the clues depending on taste and touch. The actual qualities may be described—salty, sweet, bitter, sour, burnt; or rough, smooth, silky, uneven, bristly—or the reaction to taste and touch may be given.

If the tangible clue is to be used as a factor of mystification in itself—if it is to be a clue whose function is not immediately apparent—great care must be given the description of it. A bit of metal, a splinter of wood, a scrap of cloth, a sliver of glass, or a fragment of stone must be accurately described to the reader, as the detective sees and feels it; its colour, shape, weight, condition of wear and, when possible, the way in which it has become a fragment—by breaking, cutting, burning, tearing, etc. If the detective does not know what the function of the scrap may be, the reader then has as great an opportunity to deduce it for himself as has the detective. It goes without saying, however, that no important clue of this nature must have a function so obscure or unusual that the average reader knows little more about it after it is explained than before. If the function of the scrap is unusual, then ample provision must be made for a description of that function under some other guise, so that the reader may spot it.

Thus, if the sliver of glass is from a shattered light bulb, if the bit of metal is the tip of a carving knife, if the splinter of wood comes from an umbrella shaft, and the fragment of stone from a statuette, the reader may be expected to have sufficient knowledge to deduce the function of the scrap for himself. But if the metal is the screw from a highly technical machine, the reader cannot be expected to recognize it—unless the machine is elsewhere in the book described to the reader. In the same way, if the music clue had been presented in notes, and its significance lay in the fact that it came from a Mozart sonata, the average reader would not be able to deduce the significant factor for himself.

The clues which the murderer leaves behind him in

the nature of fingerprints, footprints, blood stains, sweat or saliva stains, indications of height or weight, bits of hair or skin or nail, are, on the contrary, clues whose significance the reader cannot be expected to deduce for himself. Such clues are subject to analysis and classification in the police laboratory, and it is the findings which the technician makes, and which of course must be reported to the reader, on which reader and detective will base their conclusion. The over-elaborate use of such clues is apt to turn the mystery into a spectator sport; the ultra-scientific detective has his reader at such a great disadvantage that the reader can only wonder and admire, without participating, for a large part of the story.

All such tangible clues may be significant in still another way, however. Their absence or their displacement may be more significant than their character. The classic expression of this is, of course, in the famous words of Sherlock Holmes:

'I would call your attention to the curious incident of the dog in the night-time.'

'The dog did nothing in the night-time.'

'That was the curious incident.'

Thus, to transpose this into other terms, the lack of footprints in an area of soft ground around the victim who had met his death by stabbing would be as important a clue as footprints would be, and much more baffling. If the footprints were there, they would be a clue to the identity of the murderer; if the footprints were not there, they would be a clue to the method by which the crime was committed, and therefore, by extension, to the character of the murderer and his identity.

We have already spoken of the reversed clothing in *The Chinese Orange Mystery*, which is an example of a clue by misplacement or disarrangement. A commonplace object might become a clue if it were out of place; a thimble in the breadbox or a loaf of bread in the clothes basket might constitute a clue, not because either thimble or bread had been used as an active means of murder, but because their displacement indicated something out of the ordinary.

Anything may serve as a clue which suits the purpose of the author, provided, as we have said, that its description and function can be made plain to the reader. But certain clues have been used so often and have grown so commonplace that the reader will greet them with a groan. The cigarette butt and handkerchief are the two prime offenders here. But if a new and fresh way can be found of treating them, they are still permissible. Lawrence G. Blochman has shown, for instance, in *See You At The Morgue*, how the trite handkerchief can be given a new function. It is neither the ownership of the handkerchief nor the fingerprints on it which constitute the decisive nature of the clue, but the traces of sweat from the murderer's hands. Mr. Blochman, keeping abreast of the times, used here one of the newer discoveries of the scientific laboratory: that sweat and saliva follow the same groupings as blood. It is by an analysis of the sweat on the handkerchief, and not by the handkerchief itself, that the criminal is caught.

The bizzare clue, the exact opposite of the trite clue, is a potential source of delight and bafflement to the reader, but it must be handled with care. Erle Stanley Gardner is perhaps the greatest master of this tech-

nique; he has used even so apparently unpromising a thing as the length of a canary's claws (*The Case of The Lane Canary*); but the neophyte along this path must be careful to follow Mr. Gardner's footsteps not only in the oddness of his clues, but also in the careful logic which explains them and gives them a function in the solution as important as their oddness warrants.

If such bizarre clues come to an author easily, he should by all means use them, and should capitalize on their oddity by making them extremely important to the course of the story. A truly bizarre and baffling clue used only incidentally in a story is wasteful both of material and effect. The author whose mind does not run to this sort of thing should not spend his time straining after it; the bizarre clue is one potential element of originality and mystification, but it is far from being the only one; and time and effort spent seeking it had better be applied to more basic elements of the story.

From the writer's point of view, the physical clue grows less and less effective as science progresses, for if the laboratory unaided can deduce from a man's pockets where he has lived and what work he has done, too little is left to exercise the deductive capacities of both fictional detective and reader.

Consequently, the intangible or character clue gains in importance. Such clues may be divided roughly into two classifications: those revealing basic character traits, and those having to do with behaviour patterns.

Clues to the basic character traits are clues to motive—to the temperamental likelihood or tendency to kill, and to the specific motive involved in the killing. Thus, a detective observing a man kick a dog, slap a child,

and beat his wife, may deduce that the man has definite sadistic tendencies, and that murder might well be possible to him; while a character who faints at the sight of blood is not apt to have bashed in grandma's head with a blunt instrument. These clues lead from suspect to crime, while the tangible clues lead in general from crime to suspect (though a bloodstain on the coat of a suspect would certainly be a physical clue leading from suspect to crime).

Such broad general traits as sadism or squeamishness do not present any very subtle problem either to detective or author. But the character clues which indicate the suspect's probable attitude toward the victim can be more complex. A man who is jealous of his wife will be more apt to kill her lover than a man indifferent to his wife's behaviour; a man who tries to arrange other people's lives for them is more likely to kill out of a rationalized conviction that he is doing good, than one who minds his own business. It is from the actions and words of such suspects, and their behaviour toward other characters in the story, that the detective and the reader deduce the probability of motive in the suspect.

The behaviour pattern clues can be fun to work with, but they are tricky to present convincingly to a reader. Not so long ago, the New York police included in their description of a man wanted for bank robbery two facts: that he habitually tilted his hat to the right (he preferred his left profile) and that in moments of abstraction he always took the coins from his pocket and jingled them in his hands. Careful observation of the criminal had shown the police that the man was unable to stop either of these habits, although he knew that he

had them. He could not always remember to put his hat on straight, nor to leave the coins in his pocket alone.

Such behaviour patterns are difficult to present in mystery fiction, for they put the author in danger of giving the reader a sense of let-down. The reader expects that the criminal will commit as nearly perfect a crime as possible, and that his behaviour thereafter will be always purposefully and alertly on guard against observation. If the criminal is caught in the end because he forgets at some moment to be alert, credit for the solution of the mystery cannot fairly go to detective or reader: the solution has depended on a weakness of the murderer's, not on a talent of the detective's.

But such clues can be used to advantage. In the non-formula mystery, particularly the mystery written from the murderer's point of view, such an unconscious behaviour pattern can be a very effective means of suspense; reader and murderer struggle through the book to subdue the habit, but a sense of doom hangs over the effort: sooner or later habit will reassert itself.

The effective use of such clues in the regular mystery will depend on their absence or the substitutes for them which the murderer provides. He knows that he must stop tilting his hat to the right; that means that every time he puts it on, he must stop and think for an infinitesimal second—and the reader and the detective can note that hesitation. Or perhaps he will make doubly sure and go without a hat altogether, though the weather and the occasion demand it. The absence of hat, in that case, might be significant. He is too long accustomed to doing something inconsequential with his hands when he is thinking to be able to hold them still; perhaps he substitutes fiddling with a watch-chain.

Perhaps he is careful always to put his coins in a purse, so they will not be available if his fingers go after them unconsciously; in this case, his hands will go automatically to his pockets before he can remember. Perhaps, more elaborately, he invents a little trap for himself; puts a pin just inside the pocket, which will prick his hand and remind him the habit is dangerous. If the detective observes him prick his finger in such fashion once, he may think nothing of it; but if he sees him do it two or three times he may wonder why the man does not simply remove the pin.

A great variety of such behaviour patterns are available to the mystery author, and present a field for novelty which has been little explored. The woman who always gets her lipstick on her teeth might be forced to go without to stop the habit; the man who habitually pulls on the lobe of his ear might have to invent an apparently plausible and temporary reason for touching it—a shaving cut which requires a bandage, which he may logically feel from time to time, to see if it is in place, and which will remind him not to pull on the ear. The man who always twirls his moustache will shave it off, but he will probably find himself plucking at his upper lip. There are as many variations possible as there are habits.

But the writer's chief problem with clues is apt to lie less in their nature than in the manner of their presentation. If a clue leads directly and unequivocally to the suspect, there is no room left for mystification.

We have already included in this chapter two ways of concealing the significance of a clue: concealing its function, or nature; and distorting or misplacing it. But these are devices of the murderer, not of the author.

The author's devices for concealing the significance of a clue are three. He may use the old conjuring technique, and immediately after presentation of the clue introduce a bit of action so exciting and important that the reader forgets all about the casual mention of the clue that went just before. The author is, in other words, distracting the reader's attention at the important moment, as the pretty girl on the other side of the stage distracts the audience's attention from the magician's hands.

Secondly, the author may bury the clue among a number of equally casual things which have no great significance. The inventories of the victim's pockets often hide clues in this fashion: something in a pocket which belongs in a pocket, with the change purse and handkerchief and wallet and keys, is actually significant where these are not. This specific example of hiding is not a very good one, because it has been used too often: readers are accustomed to scanning the inventory with an eagle eye for the significant clue. The same is true of the contents of a purse which spills open accidentally, or of the bottles and jars in a medicine chest, or the papers in a desk. Just the description of a room may do it: among the couches, chairs, tables, bric-a-brac, and pictures there may be one small item of importance. Perhaps it is only a small picture of a cat, and the inhabitant of the room has a phobia against cats; perhaps it is a bit of dust under the bed where the inhabitant is a fanatical housekeeper.

This type of concealment is most effective if used in conjunction with the third method, which is concealment by timing. In this method, the clue and its application are separated by fifty or a hundred pages; put

together, the two are significant, but if the reader has forgotten the first one, the second one will mean nothing to him. Thus, in the example given above, if the bit of dust is observed on page five, and the character's passion for cleanliness is shown on pages forty and seventy, what has gone between may make the reader forget that there ever was a bit of dust. Carter Dickson has used this method brilliantly in *The White Priory Murders* with the murder weapon itself.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Double Pattern of Conflict

ALL fiction is based on conflict. Without conflict, there is no story, no drama. Any piece of fiction is the description of a conflict or conflicts between two or more forces, and the tracing of the culmination and outcome of that conflict. On the most superficial level, such conflict is actual physical combat: the fist fight between Hero and Villain in a comic, or the conflict between man and nature—a snowstorm, tornado, landslide, etc. One step from this is the struggle between man and man not in direct physical conflict but as rivals in business or for the hand of a girl. The third level of conflict is the internal one: the contention within one person of two or more opposing forces—love against greed, ambition against honesty, fear against hunger, and so on.

Mystery fiction uses all these levels of conflict. There is obvious conflict between the criminal and the forces of law and order; there is the conflict between victim and murderer which resulted in murder; and there are various minor conflicts throughout the story, as the characters, major and minor, are faced with decisions they must make: to tell the police or not to tell what they have seen; to run away or stay and face the music, and so on.

But more uniquely, mystery fiction is based on a double pattern of major conflicts. In the background of the story, occurring mainly before the actual storytelling begins, is the conflict between murderer and victim culminating in murder. Murder is the symptom of the existence of a conflict, of which the murder is intended to be the solution. But the conflict has been not only an external one, between murderer and victim, but also an internal one: the impulse to murder against the fear of punishment.

No sooner have these conflicts been resolved by the act of murder, than the second major conflict is begun, engendered by the act itself: the fight between the criminal and the forces of law and order. This struggle is mainly an external one, one man against society as personified by the detective and his assistants; but it may also be paralleled by one or more internal conflicts springing from an urge to flight or confession.

The simplest form of the double pattern is that in which the first conflict actually terminates in the murder with which the second conflict begins. But patterns are possible in which the two overlap.

John Smith has hated William Jones for years. Jones has stolen his wife, ruined him in business, and is about to close a deal which will likewise ruin Smith's son. A conflict between the two men has existed over a period of years. Smith kills Jones to prevent his closing the deal and also to take revenge upon him for all the other wrongs he has suffered at his hands. That conflict is finished. John Smith and William Jones will never compete again.

But at the moment that he kills Jones, Smith's conflict with society begins. The moment he becomes a mur-

derer, society, whether or not it has yet recognized the fact, becomes his enemy. From now on, the conflict will be between Smith and the forces of law and order. They will attempt to catch and punish him for his crime; he will attempt to evade them.

This, then, is a pattern in which the first conflict ceases at the moment the second begins. But the two may be made to overlap. Either the conflict with society may exist before the conflict between future murderer and future victim has even begun: or else it may arise out of the murder-victim conflict before that conflict has been resolved by the victim's death.

In the first case, our hypothetical John Smith would have to be a criminal before he commits murder. Jones, instead of being about to ruin John Smith's son by a business deal, is about to reveal to the young man that his father is wanted by the police for robbery. Smith's murder of Jones then becomes a part of Smith's conflict with society, which has been going on ever since he committed the robbery, and intensifies it.

In order to twist this setup into the alternate pattern, we shall have to suppose that John Smith is not wanted by the police for anything, his motives for killing Jones being as stated in the original premise. But as he knows that Jones's proposed deal will ruin not only his son, but a number of other people as well, he feels that more suspicion can be cast on these others than on himself. At the same time, however, he is aware that if the police discover that Jones had once taken his wife from him, the case against him would be so strong as to be almost certain. Only one person is still alive who knows about Smith's wife: her sister. Smith therefore must kill the sister as well as Jones. He kills the sister first and

at that moment the conflict with society begins. But the original conflict is not yet resolved—not until he kills Jones too. If Smith did it the other way around—if he killed Jones first, and then killed the sister because she would betray him to the police, the murder of the sister would be part of the conflict between Smith and society, not part of the original conflict with Jones.

All of this seems elementary; but a clear understanding of it can be of immeasurable help in the plotting of a mystery. For it must always be borne in mind that the plotting of the story itself involves first the plotting of the basic conflict. Until the conflict which leads to murder is definitely established, the events of the second conflict cannot be fully outlined.

The actual telling of a mystery is the description of the second conflict, which includes the uncovering of the facts of the first conflict. In tracking down the motive for murder, the detective is uncovering the specific conflict which existed between victim and murderer; in uncovering the method by which the crime was committed, the detective is recreating the culmination of that conflict, the act of murder.

This consideration makes somewhat more complicated than at first appeared the fixed quality of the beginning of a mystery.

In a detective story the emphasis is on the second conflict, that between the murderer and society; and therefore in its classic form the detective novel starts near to that conflict's normal inception: the murder. Exposition is given as briefly as possible; detective and assistants appear on the scene almost immediately, and the reader sees the first conflict only as it is uncovered by them.

But the other types of mystery may begin well in advance of this moment. The reader may be permitted to watch for himself not only the actual conflict which is about to end in murder, but various subsidiary conflicts which will cast suspicion on characters other than the murderer. How much of this the reader will be shown, and how long it will take to show it him, depends upon the emphasis the author wishes to give to character and motivation; upon the complexity of the situation chosen; and upon the value, for this specific story, of the imminence of murder as a factor in increasing suspense.

One of the most frequent questions asked by beginners is, how soon must the murder occur? There is no categorical answer; no arbitrary rule can be applied. If the murder is deferred beyond page fifty because the author is clumsy and long-winded, and cannot present the facts in his case economically, then certainly the murder occurs too late. What precedes the murder must be interesting in itself, and must have suspense. In *The Nine Tailors*, the murder does not occur until well after the hundredth page. All those pages were needed to introduce to the reader a very special setting and occupation; but they also built up, by deferring the expected act of murder, an almost intolerable suspense: I have never heard of anyone who skipped through them in his impatience to reach the murder.

It is hardly necessary to warn the beginner against leaning too heavily on this example; for the great majority of 'first' mysteries err in the opposite direction. The corpse in all its gore is presented so quickly that the reader has not had time to find out whether he cares

or not, and is incapable of judging the behaviour of the suspects, since he has not seen them behaving normally before murder was done. Only the mystery which depends for its greatest effect on the bizarre nature of the crime or its clues can hope to get away with such speed. If the method of murder or of disposing of the corpse, or the condition of the corpse, or the place in which it is found, are so strange and so puzzling that the reader's interest will be aroused on that score alone, the murder may safely take place on page one. But the interest thus aroused will be an intellectual one; the story from then on will have to be brilliantly planned and executed with dexterity and swiftness; and the solution will have to be ingenious and plausible above the ordinary. No beginner should presume that he has these qualities; much better to leave such techniques until he has proven his worth.

The author who gives himself time to present his characters to the reader before the murder is committed is accomplishing one or more important purposes. He is engaging the reader's sympathy for certain of the characters, his antipathy toward others, and thereby planting the seeds of partisanship which will make the reader want to know the outcome of the story. He is employing an extra device for the creation of suspense, in relation to the questions: who will be murdered and when and how will it happen? If the victim is presented as a sympathetic character, the author will be preparing an indignation on the reader's part which will make him eager to see the murderer brought to justice. Above all, by giving him a chance to observe the normal behaviour of the various suspects, the author is presenting the reader with a chance to

assess properly character clues which may be essential to the final solution.

The double pattern of conflict, then, is subject to variation both in choice of material and in manner of presentation. Judging to what extent variation in presentation is permissible must be based, like everything else, on the effect produced on the reader. Exposition plain and simple will bore him; exposition which is in itself composed of conflict, action, and suspense, may form an integral and valuable part of the story.

CHAPTER NINE

Suspense

SUSPENSE is the art of making the reader care what happens next. The word 'mystery' itself indicates the specific form of teasing which is supposed to be the primary factor in creating suspense in this type of book. But mystery alone—merely something hidden or disguised—will not induce suspense unless the reader is made to care about finding out the truth. If he is indifferent as to whether X or Y is guilty, whether the deceased died of a broken neck or strangulation, no number of puzzling situations can make him care.

We have discussed elsewhere the reasons why people read mystery fiction, and have found that two appeals exist: the emotional and the intellectual. No matter how purely classical a detective novel may be, some emotional appeal must be present if the book is to succeed; no matter how emotional a horror story may be, some intellectual puzzle must be present to test the reader's wits.

The primary factor in creating suspense is the creation of a bond of identification or sympathy between reader and story. In a detective story identification will be with the detective; in the horror and adventure types it will probably be with the threatened character, in the mystery novel, with either. The building of the

viewpoint or hero character is therefore an extremely important part of suspense.

The crudest form of escape fiction will present Hero and Heroine as beautiful, courageous, clever, resourceful, strong, honest, loyal, and successful. The more sophisticated the audience, the further the author can depart from such superhuman and idealized portraits.

A distinction must be made here, at the start of this discussion, between viewpoint character and hero. Very often they are one and the same; but often, and particularly in mystery fiction, they are two different people. Sherlock Holmes and Watson, Dupin and his chronicler, set the fashion long ago. When such a split is used, it means that the reader gets his sense of participation in the action through the viewpoint character, but retains a sense of identification with the heroic character. Like everything else, this is subject to variations and gradations, as we shall see.

The original model—Edgar Allan Poe's Chevalier Dupin and the 'I' of his adventures—provides an eccentric hero and a spineless narrator whose chief function is to serve as a pane of glass. Watson is more individual, makes more of an attempt to assert himself; but neither of these gentlemen can be called very intelligent. They are narrator and chorus in one, serving to draw the attention of the reader to the superior talents of the hero. Also, by being stupid, they ask all the obvious questions which must be got out of the way before the master mind can take over and stun you with his brilliance.

But although mystery writers ever since have used the technique of splitting viewpoint character and hero,

the fashion in Watsons has changed. And with the change in fashion has come change in function.

In Rex Stout's mysteries, the hero is an ageing, obese, eccentric and sensual gentleman with remarkable powers of deduction—Nero Wolfe. The viewpoint character is a young, rather handsome, strong, brave, and less clever assistant—Archie. In this case, not only are viewpoint and hero split in two, but the identification figure is likewise split. The reader is as clever as Nero Wolfe, and as above the ordinary; but he is also as strong and brave and well set up as Archie. He can discard the characteristics of each which he does not find pleasing and accept those that he does.

And what of the eccentricity? Do readers like to identify themselves with dope-fiends like Holmes, egg heads like Poirot, fat men like Wolfe? No. But here again there is a split, between identification—between desire to be like—and something else.

The eccentricities of these gentlemen set them apart from the common herd. There is something rather daring in taking dope; rather comfortable in allowing oneself to become fat, if you happen to be so minded. If you do not happen to be so minded—and no one, for any reason whatsoever, could wish to have a head like Poirot's—these characteristics offer another type of satisfaction. Nero Wolfe has a great brain—surely greater than the reader's. The part of the reader's conscious mind that insists he is not really as clever as Nero Wolfe finds compensation in the thought that after all, he is a good deal thinner. If Nero Wolfe's mental superiority makes the reader feel inferior, he can make up for it by feeling superior to him on the physical plane.

The eccentricities of a character like Philo Vance, on the other hand, are all more or less enviable. His superior erudition, his expensive cigarettes, are qualities not only outside the ordinary run, but above them.

But the fashion for eccentric heroes is fading. More and more, readers demand that the heroic characters in a mystery be more like themselves—more ordinary people. This is true not only of the chief figure, but of all the leading figures in the story. For no author can arbitrarily state in advance which character in the book will be an identification character for all his readers. Lady fans are not apt to identify themselves with tough and foul-mouthed private detectives, nor men with shrinking, violet-eyed heroines.

It is here that the factor of sympathy comes in. If the women in the audience will not identify themselves with the private detective, they must at least like him—perhaps even fall in love with him a bit. They may do this by identifying themselves with the heroine in the story, or they may even, in a kind of psychological double-take, substitute themselves for the heroine.

As the heroic character must meet the demand of a public which insists on his growing ever closer to the norm, greater subtlety is demanded of the author in the delineation of such characters. No book audience will any longer tolerate the stereotyped and super-human characters of the penny dreadful. Yet the character must be sufficiently heroic to make the reader feel better about himself when identifying himself with that character.

This calls for a very careful selection of traits. From the idealized portrait of the hero drawn above, what elements may be safely abstracted?

His good looks are the safest. He should not, needless to say, be monstrously ugly; but he can be pleasantly homely, or fascinatingly ugly, or just plain. Most of the men reading the novel will not be handsome; identification for them will be easier if the hero isn't either. Most of the women reading the story will not care very much; good looks have never been as important in a man as in a woman. Today's matinee idols of the screen would probably not have been called handsome fifty years ago, anyway.

Dare we take away the hero's courage and make him a coward? No. A pseudo-coward, or a semi-coward or a jesting coward, whose courage always arises at the proper moment, yes. But an arrant, out-and-out coward, no. For bravery is one of the traits essential to any idealized picture of a male, no matter how toned down.

It is harder to take good looks away from the heroine. Women are supposed to be beautiful. On the other hand they need not be brave. A timid woman calls forth the protective instinct in the male, and makes her seem more feminine. Needless to say, however, in any conflict between the heroine's timidity and her love for the hero, for her aged father, or her country, timidity must lose. None of us like to think that we could not rise to an emergency. Short of that, even female readers, who don't particularly care how appealing the heroine may be, can enjoy a timid heroine. If they themselves are timid, they will gain comfort from her; if they are Amazons, they will feel satisfactorily superior.

By and large, however, the safest faults in which a mystery author may indulge himself in portraying his heroic characters are those to which the reader's eye

may lend an aura of virtue. These faults are not basic character faults like dishonesty or complete selfishness, but are mainly transgressions against custom—transgressions many readers would like to indulge in if they dared. Thus the Casanova hero, or the hero who treats the ladies rudely, or the one who shows his lack of manners by always speaking his mind, may be indulging the impulses the reader shares but to which he dares not give expression.

The more sophisticated the audience, then, the further the author dare go from the idealized hero-type. But how far may he go?

If the purpose of escape fiction is to persuade the reader for the space of a few hours that he is a nobler creature than he knew, even the most sophisticated mystery must grant some glamour to the identification character. If the heroine is timid, she must be beautiful; if she is plain, she must be brave and intelligent; if the hero drinks to excess and seduces innocent maidens, he must be able to show his willingness to do and die for the principles of justice or his own integrity.

Thus the novel which will offer the fullest measure of escape to its readers is one in which the characters are enough like the reader to make identification possible, the world near enough his own for him to believe its events may some day happen to him, but on the whole sufficiently glamorous or exciting to offer a reasonable exchange for his own humdrum existence. It is within the bounds of possibility that the average reader may some day find himself whirling in a high-powered car from Monte Carlo to Cap d'Antibes on the trail of an exotically beautiful *femme fatale*, if only he gets enough money to do so; it is less likely that he will ever find

himself lost in the jungles of South America, pursued by a dope-smuggler, and depending only on his uncanny wood lore to get him out. And it is easy to see by the number of people who read magazines and papers which glorify 'society', that the ambition to share the life of the rich is more popular than jungle exploration. Let me hasten to add that I am not advocating that every mystery be laid among the glittering haunts of international society. All I am trying to imply is that the nearer the ideal picture approaches the possible picture for the average reader, the greater the possible measure of identification, and consequently the greater the suspense.

Other factors exist for the creation of suspense. The bizarre situation which makes an instant appeal to the intellect is one; if the problem is very difficult and paradoxical, the reader is more apt to find himself in competition with the detective than identifying himself with him. Erle Stanley Gardner's mysteries are among the most successful of this type. His puzzles are provocative, unusual, and complex; they compensate for characterization so superficial that little reader identification is possible; and they make up in puzzle-brilliance and speed what they lack in plausibility or emotional appeal. In point of fact the bulk of run-of-the-mill English detective stories belong in some degree to this same category; though they are written at a slower tempo, and often with greater care than those of the American virtuoso.

So far we have considered only the initial factors which will create suspense in a story. But by what devices may suspense be continued through the book? Will such initial provision suffice?

It will not. The most sympathetic characters in the world, if they do nothing but sit around talking, will soon cease to produce suspense.

The development of a mystery has often been compared to the unravelling of a knotted strand of thread. The mystery with dwindling suspense is the one in which the unravelling process grows easier and easier the further you go. The well-developed mystery is the one in which, as each little knot is undone, another bigger knot appears to take its place, until, just before the end, when no solution seems possible, one more small unknottling causes the whole tangle to fall apart.

In other words, suspense must be progressive. There may be, and should be, breathing spaces in the course of the story, but the development as a whole requires that the problem grow more complex and difficult of solution, the danger more menacing, the nearer the end of the book. Thus, the successful identification of a clue, or the disposal of some minor threat to the hero must be followed by a problem offering even greater difficulties than those just settled, or a situation more menacing to the hero. This is a delicate problem in writing, for it means that as the situation in actual fact unfolds, it must seem to grow more obscure. It is most easily managed in the adventure-mystery, where one element can substitute for another: the discovery of the true nature of a significant clue, while helping the hero to see where he is going, may involve him, because of his knowledge, in greater peril than before.

Thus, if the hero is menaced from two sides—on the one hand by gangsters, and on the other by the police, who believe him guilty of the crime—and he makes successful peace with the police, one half his danger has

been removed. Suspense will drop unless the fact that he has made his peace with the police places him in so much greater danger from the gangsters that he is worse off than before. Conversely, if he starts out in danger from the gangsters only, and subsequently draws the suspicion of the police upon himself, his danger is potentially doubled, even though the enmity of the police may temporarily put him in the good graces of the gangsters.

The progressive nature of the building of suspense is easiest to perceive in the horror story. Since the horror story is by its very nature a 'trap' story, suspense increases as the trap closes in. The time factor is an important one here; inevitable doom is more horrible if it is set to arrive at a particular moment. (Edgar Allan Poe's *The Pit* and *The Pendulum* is perhaps the finest and clearest example of the use of the time factor for suspense.)

It is possible, then, for an author to judge to a certain extent the effectiveness of suspense in his own manuscript. He will find it much more difficult to know how adequately he has drawn the characters for identification or sympathy, although he can certainly tell if all the necessary factors are there. But the developing nature of the action, the progression from suspense to greater suspense, he will most certainly see if it be present in his work and miss if it be lacking; most easily of all if it depends on danger to a central character.

One ancient and time-honoured device should be mentioned here: the one the old movie serials always employed. Pauline was left hanging by her fingernails to the edge of a fearful abyss as the lights went up and the serial was over. The book counterpart of this

device is to close a chapter with a climactic scene in which the villain has at last cornered the heroine in a deserted house and has her at his mercy, and to leave her there through one or more chapters while you follow the actions of other characters in the book. Eventually, the two points of view begin to merge in the scenes identifiable to every cinema-goer with the sheriff's posse thundering to the rescue.

This device should not be necessary. It is the easiest way out. Subtler forms of it are more permissible: the heroine manages to call the hero on the telephone; the reader, seeing the whole story only over the hero's shoulder, hears her agonized plea for help—and then a shot and silence. What has happened? Neither hero nor reader can tell until the hero manages to find out where the heroine is, and get there. This method has at least the grace to provide a reasonable excuse, other than a mere whim of the author, for breaking off in the midst of the heroine's danger.

In the detective novel, the counterpart of this technique may not at first glance be recognizable for what it is. The significant bit of cloth goes to the laboratory for analysis, the technician has to finish another job first—and we are left hanging in space until he can get down to it. Much more innocently and plausibly, the tests to which the cloth must be submitted take not less than thirty-six hours to complete; important and startling action occurs during those thirty-six hours which must be reported by the author, and occurs as it does precisely because the tests have not yet been made.

This specific form of teasing is often and, to my mind, most regrettably used by those amateur detectives who 'know' who the murderer is, but refuse to tell police or

reader because they are not sure. Often this modest taciturnity results in one or more further murders, or the near escape of the criminal: no one in the book, but not perhaps the reader, seems to think the less of the detective for this. Much more permissible is the denouement scene in which the case is built up against X, and X not mentioned by name until the very end. This is the reader's last chance to guess before he is told, and if it is difficult to picture a detective in real life presenting his case in that fashion, it is a literary convention with much to recommend it.

CHAPTER TEN

Concealing the Murderer

IT is a curious paradox that on occasion the best-written mysteries are those in which the murderer is most easily apparent. Notice that I have not said 'the best mysteries', but 'the best-written'. The reason is not difficult to discover: if the author has presented his characters completely and convincingly; if his murderer has a plausible and properly presented motive; if the author has played fair and presented all the clues—he has made it extremely difficult for himself to keep the identity of the murderer hidden from his astute readers. Greater ingenuity is required for this—mechanical ingenuity—for the author with some writing talent than for the author whose characterization and style are less convincing.

Suspense may still be present, even if the reader spots the murderer, if some other element is carefully concealed: the means by which the murderer managed the job, or what his exact motive was. In fact in mysteries other than those in which the detective story motif is dominant the development of the plot may involve the reader's knowledge of the murderer's identity: but in such cases the suspense can never be so great, other things being equal, as where the killer remains unknown till the end.

CONCEALING THE MURDERER

Let us take, by way of illustration, two mysteries, both urbanely and pleasantly written, both with characterization and dialogue above the ordinary. One is *Two On the Aisle* by Frances and Richard Lockridge, the other is Georgette Heyer's *Envious Casca*.

I am afraid that I must, for purposes of analysis, commit the sin of revealing the murderer; I trust the authors will forgive me.

In *Two On the Aisle*, a famous surgeon is murdered while watching the rehearsal of a play which he is backing. He has been connected with the theatre for many years and has treated many members of the profession; his specialty, mentioned almost immediately, is sinus.

Among the characters first introduced to us is a middle-aged woman with terribly protruding eyes. She is the costume designer for the production. The other suspects are the members of the cast, and the rest of the production staff.

The minute the costume designer's eyes were singled out for attention I decided she was the murderess. There were two reasons for this decision.

In the first place, such a distortion must have some significance in the story, or it would not be mentioned so prominently and immediately, if at all. A person with such a physical defect, particularly in a profession in which good looks surround her, is apt to be a person with a resentment. Physical defects do not always result in warped psyches—but very often they do. Here then was a woman out of the ordinary, apt to have a grievance.

We had already been told that the victim's specialty was the treatment of sinus trouble. I did not know that a sinus operation gone wrong could result in protruding

eyes; I did not know that the woman did not have ophthalmic goitre. But I did know that the sinuses are very close to the eyes, and that a sinus operation is a delicate one: there was no reason I knew of why the operation might not have produced the eye distortion.

The chief clue at the scene of the crime was a piece of orange silk clutched in the corpse's hand. The authors made determined efforts to have the piece of silk cast suspicion on the actress whose dress was to be made of such silk. But the chief function of an actress is to act; that of a costume designer to design costumes; the piece of silk pointed first to the designer.

This was indeed so obvious that the authors then tried to divert suspicion from the designer by making it seemingly impossible for her to have committed the crime. She is seen entering the theatre after the crime was committed, and by no less a witness than a mounted policeman outside.

She had, then, an apparently unbreakable alibi—instantly suspicious on its own account. But on top of that, she claimed a second witness inside the lobby of the theatre—the doorman. He cannot immediately be found. When at last he is discovered, he is unconscious and left for dead in the basement of the theatre. The policeman is still a solid witness; but the designer's claim to have seen the doorman at that moment obviously confuses the time of the attack upon him—and we are more suspicious than ever. But if anything further were needed, along comes another character in the book, an actress, and confesses the designer has asked her not to tell the police that the actress is the designer's niece.

Aha. Something to hide. Something connected with

motive. The dead doctor is said to have been chasing the niece. And to have been treating her. Long before we learn that the doctor had indeed (years gone by) ruined the designer's looks by an unsuccessful operation, long before we learn that he was about to perform the same operation on the niece, we have seen enough to convince us beyond doubt that the designer is the murderer. The authors themselves were probably aware of this, for at the end, they found it necessary to inject one of those incidents in which a heroine, convinced, although wrongly, that she knows who the murderer is, allows herself to be driven off to a nice quiet spot for a little thuggery.

To sum up, then, the authors have betrayed the murderer to us by furnishing us almost from the start with a character clue (the eyes), a physical clue (the piece of silk), a behaviour clue (withholding the aunt-niece relationship) and an apparently unimpeachable alibi. Against this, they offer us other suspects with possible motives and some with possible opportunities, and, as the story progresses, really unbreakable alibis. It isn't enough.

Georgette Heyer's story tells of a Christmas house-party in an English country house, arranged against the wishes of the irascible and wealthy owner by his brother, a retired character actor.

The brother, Joe by name, is an elderly gentleman all sweetness and light, particularly by contrast with his surly brother. The people he invites for Christmas are a niece and nephew who are at odds with his brother; and he urges them to bring with them the points of friction with the old man: the nephew's fiancée, a most repulsive young girl; and the play-

wright whose work the niece wants her uncle to back. One other character is invited, a young woman who has no axe to grind and who cannot benefit by the old man's death. She is the viewpoint character through the most important sections of the book, and the character obviously selected as on the side of the angels without question.

Tension in the Christmas party runs high; brother Joe's efforts to help his niece and nephew along do not seem to help; neither do his hints to the nephew that the bulk of the old man's estate is destined for the nephew. The old man finally loses his temper completely and leaves the assembled company to go up to his room; brother Joe follows him halfway up the stairs, still trying to placate him and then, after clapping his brother on the back, comes back downstairs.

An hour or so later, the old man is found stabbed to death in his locked room. Brother Joe and the nephew break down the door when they cannot get an answer from him.

Now the astute reader has long since picked on brother Joe as the candidate for hanging. His sweetness is too sweet; his good intentions too often end in disaster; and the whole idea of the houseparty was his. The problem to be solved for such a reader will be that of how the murder was managed. Suspense continues in this story, as it did not in the previous one discussed, because the method still remains obscure, and because the characters are so well drawn that the reader is interested in finding out what will happen to them.

The other characters cannot seriously be suspected (with one exception) because the nephew is made to appear, through Joe's eyes, so unpleasant that the

finger of suspicion points too unsubtly at him; while on the other hand, the sympathetic young woman is obviously in love with him, so he must be all right. The unpleasant fiancée is much too stupid to have managed the trick, although the hope that she will get some sort of well-merited black eye almost makes one wish she were not. The niece is too impetuous to take any such roundabout means; the playwright too diffident and unsure of himself. Only brother Joe's wife, a rather enigmatic woman who wanders through the book looking for a copy of the life of Maria Theresa (not irrelevantly) is sufficiently strong a suspect to stand up against Joe.

But to top it all off, Joe has a peach of an alibi. The murderer can't be any one else.

Miss Heyer has betrayed the murderer to us, then, by character clues (Joe's excessive sweetness, which cannot but be hypocritical), and by her attitude toward, and presentation of, the other characters. There is one very tangible clue (that copy of the life of Maria Theresa) but it is a very obscure one: only a student of history or a medical man could be expected to deduce from it, and from one significant bit of business, how the locked-room murder was effected. (This is not cheating here because the other clues are ample to establish Joe's guilt.)

Throughout this chapter, as well as previous ones, we have had occasion to speak of the effect of the author's attitude toward his characters, and the conditioning of the reader's mind. We shall consider in greater detail in the next chapter just what this conditioning implies.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Taboos and Musts

MANY if not most mystery readers are experts. They have read so many mysteries that they have come to demand certain things as their due, have outlawed certain others; and will be pleasantly mystified or puzzled by variations made on yet others.

The things they have outlawed are of two sorts: things definitely tabooed, and elements they have met so often that they are bored with them.

The taboos are not many. They have been broken by more than one author, and sometimes with success. But the beginner will do well to observe them with respect until he has reached a point in his career in which the demand for his books exceeds his capacity to write them—in other words, until he has the whip hand over his readers, instead of vice versa.

Chief among the taboos are those relating to the handling of sex.

The true mystery fan—as opposed to the reader of ‘tough’ adventure novels—is strait-laced in matters of sexual morality. This is not the place to explore the possible reasons for this distinction in the mystery fan’s mind; but booksellers and librarians will tell you it is especially true of the feminine majority of mystery addicts.

Sexual perversions, other than sadism, are definitely taboo. And sadism must be presented in its least sexual form. Homosexuality may be hinted at, but never used as an explicit and important factor in the story. An author may, in other words, get away with describing a character in such a fashion that the reader may conclude that he is homosexual, but he should not so label him. All other perversions are absolutely beyond the pale.

Even references to normal sex relationships must be carefully watched. Except in the ‘tough’ school, unmarried heroines are expected to be virgins, and sympathetic wives to be faithful to their husbands. (A tearful and truly repentant Magdalene is sometimes possible.) A certain amount of sexual joking between married characters is permissible, so long as it is not crude, does not use Anglo-Saxon monosyllables, and does not refer too directly to the sexual act. And of course the entire list of possible clues, motives, and methods dependent on the natural functions or the sexual act are out of the question. Abortion, however, is considered legitimate mystery material if it is handled carefully and condemned.

There can be no question but that these taboos do limit the field of potential material for murder fiction; but it is easy to see that outraging an audience in this fashion will not help to shock them in the way the mystery writer intends.

The second most important taboo is the use of highly controversial material. As escape literature, the mystery is not designed to preach a message, correct an evil, or advocate Utopia. Controversies on questions such as these are among the things the reader is trying to escape

from. Moreover, since mystery fiction is frankly commercial fiction, it would be folly to alienate a section of the potential audience by advocating something it does not believe in; or condemning something it does. There have been exceptions to this, but they are books in which the story was of paramount importance, the controversial nature of the material of subsidiary importance. Kurt Steel's *Judas, Inc.* is an excellent example. Set in a one-industry town at a moment of great tension between employer and employees, murder is inevitably connected with that tension. Many other mysteries have been set in similar situations, and more often than not the sympathetic characters have been on the side of the employers, the employees being regarded as potential thugs and murderers. Kurt Steel has merely presented the employees as likable people with something to be said for their side. He has not preached about labour and capital, he has not made the error of painting all the employees white and all the employers black; he has merely told an exciting and well-built story without concealing his sympathy for labour. I doubt if the most rabid anti-unionist could seriously be offended by it, or would put the book down unread because of it.

One's own convictions about issues and people may be presented in the attitude one takes toward the people in the story; it is when the case is carefully weighted one way or the other and character-drawing gives way to propaganda, that the message becomes more important than the story, overrides it, and defeats its purpose.

If you have a message, if you want to write fiction with a purpose, try some other form. Mystery fiction will not serve.

Care must be taken not to tread upon reader's toes in another fashion. To make all the good people in the story of one specific sort, all the bad people of another specific sort, is to alienate those of your readers who belong to the second category. With no intention of expressing or promoting prejudice, it is possible to lay oneself open to the charge through carelessness. If only one character in the book is an Irishman, or a unionist, or a Jew, or a Catholic, or a Negro, and that character unpleasant or vicious, the author may seem to be saying that all Irishmen, or all union members, or all Jews or Catholics or Negroes, are unpleasant or vicious. If it is necessary to the plot that such a character be of a specific sort, that character should be balanced in the book by the portrayal of at least one other character of the same sort who is pleasant and sympathetic.

There is only one other specific taboo: the insane murderer is taboo in the Detective, Mystery-Adventure and Mystery Novel classifications. He is permissible in the Horror Story, since an insane adversary can create more horror than a sane one; and he is rich material for the non-formula, experimental type.

The reasons for this taboo are fairly obvious. In so far as the rules of the game are concerned, an insane murderer represents cheating on the author's part, because the average reader cannot be expected to figure out for himself the murderer's mental processes. And in the field of emotional appeal, the reader can extract little pleasure from hunting down an unfortunate who is not responsible for what he has done. The fixing of responsibility upon the murderer, and making him pay, is one of the chief pleasures to be derived from mystery fiction. It satisfies at one and the same time our desire

for the thrill of the manhunt, our longing for an ideal world in which justice is always done, and our sense of superiority over another human being, rather like ourselves, who has yielded to temptation as we should not. There is moreover, for most people, an unpleasant aura about insanity; it is distasteful to them to contemplate or read about, in a way that does not apply to good clean gore.

And from the author's point of view it must be remembered that the study and portrayal of insanity is a specialized field. The days are long past in which an author could bestow upon an insane character any eccentricities or vices that occurred to him. Modern psychology knows much about insanity, and the average book reader has absorbed a certain amount of it, so that faking will not do. Unless abnormal psychology is of particular interest to an author, and he has made a study of it, he had much better avoid the whole question.

We come next to those things which are taboo by reason of their staleness and lack of plausibility.

The trite elements include, as we have already seen, such well-worn clues as the cigarette butt and the dropped handkerchief. Elements both trite and too melodramatic to be plausible are the mad scientist, the secret staircase that suddenly explains all, the identical twin who makes his appearance at the end of the story, the stage disguise which fools everyone in broad daylight on the street, the heroine who messes up the entire story by insisting on accompanying the hero into danger (contemporary usage now permits him to bop her on the head and lock her in the cupboard if she insists) and the solution dependent on a conversation accidentally overheard.

Conversely, certain very original and bizarre tricks are also taboo—once they have been used. Tricks of this sort, if too arresting (and that usually means complicated as well) can only have merit once. It would be folly to attempt to use again the extremely complicated and unusual (and to this reader unbelievable) method of murder in S. S. Van Dine's *The Dragon Murder Case*; any of the locked-room devices already used by John Dickson Carr or Carter Dickson and many others. Curare has lost its magic; so have the blow-gun, the boomerang and the sleeve-gun. There is only one way to avoid innocent duplication of this sort, and that is to read fairly extensively the best of the mysteries published currently and within the past twenty years. A judicious reading of the reviews will also help; some reviewers often indicate in their reviews if a novel method or trick has been used.

Other trite techniques are currently enjoying a great vogue of disfavour. Chief among them is the technique known as the Had-I-But-Known, in which the narrator, usually female, keeps moaning that she would have done it all differently had she but known what was to follow. This technique by its constant forewarnings of terror or disaster to come inevitably prepares for anticlimax. A close runner-up, though a comparative newcomer, is the character in a book who refers to the way in which characters in a book would behave. Characters who withhold information from the police without good and sufficient reason (other than the author's desire to spin the tale out longer) are frequent offenders. Authors who get their heroes into impossible situations and then rescue them by accidental means should have their typewriters confiscated. Ingenuity and enthusiasm

should never carry an author into placing his hero in such a spot that no logical way can be found to get him out, without a *deus ex machina*. Katherine Roberts spoiled a good book by this fault in *The Centre Of the Web*. Her hero was surely doomed in the last chapter, and about to be shot, when a lucky hit from a falling bomb put the menace out of commission. A more subtle and less venal example can be found in Nevil Shute's *Pied Piper* (an adventure story but not a mystery).

Closely allied to this device is the unforeseeable and accidental last-minute clue which rescues the detective from his intellectual, as opposed to his physical, predicament. While in some degree permissible in the horror and mystery-adventure categories this is regarded by detective and pure mystery novel readers as fraudulent, unless sufficient evidence of the murderer's identity has already been produced—in which case it is presumably superfluous.

Next to be considered are those things which a mystery reader expects to find, and will be angry at not finding. These are certain conventions of mystery technique which have grown up of themselves.

Chief among them is the assumption that the author is playing fair with the reader, and allowing him to see all the facts on which the detective bases his assumptions. This is a necessity in all types of mystery fiction if the books are to have any pretension to merit. (Always excluding the non-formula mystery.) We have already seen that the murderer's sanity is an important part of this code. So too is the early appearance of the murderer in the story (generally no later than the first chapter, if any suspects are introduced in that chapter at all); and the continued appearance of the murderer

throughout the story. It will not do to present him in chapter one and never let him be seen again until he is haled to justice. The detective novel calls for greater scrupulousness here than do the horror or adventure mysteries.

Deliberate lying by the author is the second most important taboo here. The reader expects that what the author tells him in his own words—in narrative portions of the book—will be the truth. Characters in the book may lie, and the viewpoint character may be mistaken, but any categorical statement by the author must be true.

Whether or not the reader may also accept as gospel whatever the author's mouthpiece says is another question, and one which has raised much controversy, in particular in discussions of Agatha Christie's *The Murder Of Roger Ackroyd* and E. C. Bentley's *Trent's Last Case*. The only possible answer to critics of these two works seems to me to be Howard Haycraft's dictum: 'It is the reader's business to suspect *every one*.'

But lying need not be a statement of an untruth; an author can lie just as surely in his choice of words. To describe a character in the book as having an *unpleasant* face, a *bad-tempered* mouth and *mean* eyes, if the description is offered by the author himself, not by one of the other characters, is to offer that character as in fact unpleasant, bad-tempered, and mean. If he should subsequently turn out to be the soul of gentleness, generosity, and kindness, the reader may justly complain that the author has cheated.

If, therefore, the author wishes to give the reader a false impression of the character without cheating, he will have to let the reader see that character only

through the eyes and speech of another character in the book, or he will have to choose descriptive adjectives which suggest without editorializing. He may describe the eyes as small and close-set, the mouth as thin and drawn down at the corners. These are purely physical descriptions, but they manage to suggest some of the qualities described in the first example. For the reader is conditioned to the belief that small, close-set eyes and thin mouths indicate meanness and bad temper; it is a popular belief that a frank and open countenance is the mark of a frank and open nature. That this does not happen to be true is grist for the author's mill.

We have already referred to the fact that clues so esoteric in character that only an expert can analyse them properly are cheating unless other, plainer clues are also offered.

Doubt about the fairness of any given point or situation can best be solved by answering the question: does the use of this point or situation make it impossible for the average reader to solve the puzzle himself? If the answer is yes, then cheating it is.

But beyond the actual cheating for the rules of the game, is another type of cheating which is equally important: emotional cheating. And this involves us in a discussion of other factors in a mystery which the reader expects and will be disappointed at not finding.

As we have already seen, the reader of mystery fiction expects certain satisfactions from his reading. The eventual unmasking and punishment of the murderer is the most apparent one. But it is only part of the larger picture of the ideal world, a world in which not only justice triumphs, but good, and love, and virtue as well.

That means that if the end of the story finds the murderer punished, but the hero bereft of everything he loves, the emotional satisfaction for the reader is not great enough. If the story builds up an expectation of a successful romance, and then fails to complete it, the reader will be cheated of a satisfaction he has been led to expect.

This same principle applies to the actual writing of the mystery. If any one situation is built toward a climax, and the climax fails to come off, the reader will feel cheated. If menace is portended and fails to materialize, the reader has a legitimate grievance (except of course in the farcical mystery). This is one reason why the wise author abstains from prophecies of doom and terror; he will not run the risk of anticlimax.

But above and beyond all this, the basic thing the reader expects is a maximum struggle between superior criminal and superior detective. There is no fun in hunting down a murderer who is stupid or careless. The game is not worth the candle. It is like fishing for salmon and bringing up, after a terrific struggle, a minnow.

Almost as importantly, the reader expects that responsibility will be fastened on one character. One of the pleasures of mystery fiction is this opportunity it affords to pin all evil on one person. Menace is greater if it is concentrated in this fashion, and none of us has quite outgrown the childish impulse to personalize good and evil. In the fairy tale, there is a wicked witch and a good fairy; each may have her minions, but the ultimate struggle is between these two; and once the wicked witch is dead, her minor imps and demons flee in confusion. The author who plots a story with two or more murderers, each responsible for a different murder, is

courting trouble. The greater the number of people responsible, the more diffused and weakened the reader's pleasure. Two people joined in a conspiracy to murder are less satisfactory than one by himself; three still less than two, and so on. And a logical as well as emotional case can be made out for this. The greater the number of people involved, the less the certainty can be that one of them will not confess or blunder or turn stool pigeon. If one of them does so, the fun may be spoiled. The case must be solved by the active skill of the detective; he may take advantage of minor errors committed by the criminal (if there were none, the case would never be solved) but he cannot sit passively and let the errors come to him. He must ferret them out for himself, and make the proper deductions from them. The unforeseen last-minute clue, mentioned above, is simply a special, and heinous, example of failure to keep this rule.

The counterpart of the single responsibility in the criminal is the single responsibility of the detective. He too may have assistants and invariably does; but he himself must be the prime factor in the solution of the case. The more equally two or more detectives share in the solution of the case, the more the reader's sense of identification is diffused, and the weaker the emotional appeal of the story.

But certain things the reader has learned to expect may be denied him, and the mystification will be legitimately enhanced thereby. Certain conditionings of the reader's mind can be played with. Through long experience, he has learned that the attack that fails, half way through the book, is usually faked by the murderer against himself, to throw suspicion from him. Anthony

Boucher has done a brilliant job of twisting that expectation to his own needs in *The Case Of the Seven Sneezes*. There is another example of this sort of legitimate and subtle trickery in the book as well.

The reader has also come to expect, as we have seen, that boy will get girl, and will be disappointed if he does not. But it is perfectly legitimate and possible to provide the happy ending by having boy get a different girl, or a different boy get the girl.

The best way to decide whether deviation from the reader's expectations will produce good results or bad is to ask: will this deviation produce a feeling of disappointment in the reader? Or will it offer him a substitute and at least equal satisfaction?

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Truth is No Alibi

MANY readers may have been objecting, in the course of the last chapter, that in real life most cases are solved by stool pigeons, two or more detectives do divide a job between them and that many murders are the joint responsibility of a gang. This is true but, for our purposes, irrelevant.

The truth is no alibi for fiction. Fiction is not the copy of real life, but a simplified and somewhat distorted reflection of it; fiction does not parrot life, it selects from it what is best suited to its purposes. Fictional truth and real life truth are two different things.

Many an editor, finding something in a manuscript implausible, has been met by the author's: 'But I saw it happen', or 'It was an actual case'. Such authors—usually beginners—are bewildered and indignant that this answer does not satisfy the editor.

But a moment's reflection on what we have been saying about the functions of escape literature, and of mystery fiction in particular, should furnish a basis for understanding this apparent paradox: that something be implausible in fiction when it has actually happened in real life.

A great many things do happen, particularly in the realm of crime, which seem without logic to the average

person. In real life men will batter an old woman to death for seven and six from a sweetshop till; kill their wives for revoking at bridge; commit murders they hope to get away with and then run to the police and confess. They do these things out of a logic of their own, but it is not everyone's logic; as the behaviour of a madman may make sense to himself but not to those around him.

To make such acts understandable to the average reader a careful psychological analysis is required which is beyond the scope of the mystery, except where a non-formula murder story sets out indeed to do just that. Moreover the use in mystery fiction of a crime far removed from anything that the reader himself might do, under no matter what provocation, robs him of the sense of satisfaction which comes from the reflection: 'There but for the grace of God go I'. He cannot picture himself risking the gallows for three half-crowns. If he reads of it in a newspaper he will shake his head and accept it; if he finds it in a novel he will throw down the book in disgust.

On the other hand, the reader will accept quite willingly certain methods of murder which would almost certainly not be used in real life, as he will accept the fictional picture of the way in which a crime is solved, even if he knows it is not a real life picture. He will accept outré methods if they are presented as the product of the murderer's special training and intelligence; but the more outré the method—the further it departs from possible real life methods—the less his sense of conviction will be and the author will have to offer other potent inducements to hold his interest.

In life coincidences occur all the time, and important matters often hang on them. In fiction, no part of the

solution should hinge on coincidence, no important development of the plot be laid to it. Here the reader's sense of plausibility tells him not that such a coincidence might well happen in real life, but that if the coincidence had not happened the hero would be sunk. He sees in the use of the coincidence the manipulation of the author; and that reminds him that this is fiction that he is reading, not life he is living. Furthermore, if coincidence solves the puzzle for the detective, where is his glory? If coincidence conceals the crime for the murderer, where is his cleverness? The crime must be planned to succeed without the intervention of fate, and the solution of it must proceed in the same manner. Coincidence may be used to make still more baffling a crime which was baffling to begin with; but it may not be used as the sole source of bafflement. Thus in H. H. Holmes's *Nine Times Nine* the locked-room nature of the puzzle is a coincidence, which makes the detective's case much more difficult. But the murderer's plans did include provision against detection which would have made the case difficult of solution without coincidence. In other words, the murderer does not depend upon the coincidence to conceal his guilt.

One apparent exception to this rule about coincidence is no exception in fact. This is the coincidence which starts the story, which is the reason for all that follows after. There have been a number of adventure-mysteries in which an extraordinary resemblance between an Axis spy and an Allied Intelligence man is the basis for the entire plot.* The Allied Intelligence man does not start out on his mission, and halfway

**The Imposter* by Kurt Steel; *Assignment in Brittany* by Helen MacInnes; *The Centre of the Web* by Catherine Roberts.

through the book discover that, by coincidence, he looks exactly like an Axis spy. He starts on his mission in the first place because of the resemblance. Yet in real life, doubles do exist, and people come across them at critical moments in their lives.

Many of the everyday acts and habits of our lives do not play any part in fiction, because they are irrelevant to its purposes. Many a mystery has taken place in the span of a few hours during which the reader seems to be following the course of events minute by minute. But a moment's reflection will show that this is not true. The author does not report every nose-blowing, tie-fiddling, hair-combing, face-washing and trip to the bathroom. If he did, the story proper would be lost under the mass of detail. It takes as long to write and read: 'He took out a handkerchief and blew his nose,' as 'He pulled out his automatic and shot the butler,' yet of the two, the latter is certainly more important to the mystery plot. Nor would deliberate lengthening of the second sentence necessarily be any solution. Pulling out an automatic and shooting at someone is an action which takes less than a minute in actual time; to take a paragraph to describe it would rob it of all sense of speed and make it seem unreal.

A certain amount of the 'business' of real life is of course included; it is necessary to give the reader a vivid mental picture of the scene and the people in it, and is often important as an aid in characterization or a means of planting clues. But fiction must select from real life the details as well as the important events which will create a sense of reality in the reader, and must present them in such a way that the effect aimed at is actually produced.

For the technique of representation is also a process of selection. Impressions received from a book are gained through the eyes. What carries conviction to the ear is not always the same as that which carries conviction to the eye.

The use and presentation of dialect can best illustrate this. The successful use of dialect is difficult precisely because the impression of sound is received through the eyes. A literal transcription of dialect looks vastly more alien to ordinary written speech than the sound differs from ordinary spoken speech. Ours is not entirely a phonetic language but a literal transcription of dialect must be made phonetically. To the reader accustomed to the conventions of our spelling, this is doubly upsetting. The dialect will stand out on the page, out of all proportion to its relative importance, and the reader will be forced to pronounce to himself as he goes on, thus destroying the tempo of what he is reading. The successful rendering of dialect is not the phonetic transcription of it, but a change in emphasis and inflection with changes in spelling consistent with our normal reading habits.

Even ordinary speech cannot always be literally transcribed. Dialogue which carries conviction on a printed page is not always dialogue which can be spoken. Any actor or playwright will tell you that many a line of dialogue that looked well on the page had to be changed in rehearsal, because it could not be effectively or properly spoken aloud. It is extremely difficult for a novelist to judge the merits of his own dialogue in this respect, but there is one precaution that can be taken. If, when the dialogue is first set down on paper, the novelist actually hears it in his mind—is speaking

it mentally—then he must force himself, on re-reading, to eliminate this silent voice and read it with his eyes alone.

The same process of selection and presentation must be taken into account in the presentation of character. People in fiction must be plausible—they must convince the reader that they can and do exist—but this does not mean that the author sets them down in all their real-life complexity. In escape fiction in particular, those characteristics must be carefully chosen which will produce in the reader exactly the reaction the author desires. The nineteenth-century novelists of the naturalist school shocked their audiences by showing the unpleasant as well as pleasant behaviour patterns and characteristics of their characters (an elementary assortment compared to James Joyce and other moderns). The naturalist school followed a romantic period, in which women were beautiful, men were brave, and so forth. Modern escape fiction is romantic fiction modified by the general fictional tendency to realism; its characters are not supermen and women, but the faults they possess must be selected by the author with care.

In real life a woman may be beautiful, intelligent and charming, and still snore when she sleeps; if the author's desire is to present her to his readers as charming and beautiful he will not tell the reader that she snores. The effect at which the author was aiming would be entirely destroyed by this, and the woman would be ludicrous instead of desirable. He could show her as greedy, or given to fibs, or cowardly, without destroying his effect; these traits do not detract from her desirability as a woman. The fact that in real life a woman may snore and still seem desirable is irrelevant. By mentioning

the snoring the author would give it such emphasis that it would nullify the other characteristics.

We can conclude then, that fictional people, their speech, their motives and their acts, no matter how carefully studied and characterized, must, for escape fiction especially, be simplified versions of real life. To this we can add that the closer these people come to the appearance, speech, motivations, and actions of the average person, the greater their reality will seem to the reader; though for escape fiction the sympathetic characters must resemble not the reader as he is but the reader as he would like to see himself.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Characterization

WE have been discussing ways and means of presenting characters to the reader and have seen what the author of escape fiction must *not* do. It is time to discuss what he should do.

Everyone is familiar with the truism that in order to portray convincing characters, one must first know them intimately. It is the degree of intimacy and the means of achieving it, that require more careful thought.

An author who sees his characters vividly in the flesh, and presents them in that way to the reader, is seeing and presenting a physical picture alone. It is an essential picture, but it is not the only one.

The next step might be described as the cocktail acquaintanceship; author and reader know as much about the characters as if they had met them once at a cocktail party, and spoken to them and observed them for perhaps half an hour. Physical appearance, common mannerisms, tricks of speech, and a few character traits are apparent: shyness or arrogance; malice or kindness; wit or dullness. The great majority of light fiction writers get this far with their characters—and no further.

Every writer bases the characters in his story on actual people. By this I do not mean that he copies

faithfully the specific people he sees around him—though there are occasions when certain writers do do just that. But what any author knows about people he learns from observation of real people around him. He may not put his Aunt Minnie bodily between the covers of his book, but one of his characters may look like her, talk like his next-door neighbour, think like his sister, and share the ambitions of his wife. The resulting combination is none of these people, but a new character.

But this piecemeal sharing of characteristics will be a result, not a method of procedure. One cannot arbitrarily decide to build a character out of component elements chosen at random from several people. Human beings are not made up of unrelated scraps; everything about them bears a definite relationship to everything else.

Fictional characters do not start in a vacuum. The exigencies of the plot—whether related to motive, method or setting—provide an initial premise on which to build. If the basic idea for the novel requires a character who is a miser, the dominant trait for the character is fixed, and it is from that trait that the whole character must be built. Let us start with that trait and see how complete a character we can build on it. All that the plot requirements indicate is that the miser is an elderly man with a considerable fortune.

We must first ask ourselves what makes a man a miser. What is the specific nature of miserliness?

Miserliness is the love of money as money, the desire to acquire and keep money for its own sake, not for the things that money can buy. Our own observation of human nature and the findings of modern psychiatry can help us to discover what makes a man a miser.

The love of money as money is attributed by psychiatry to people whose emotional lives are immature. It has been found that miserliness is a symptom of a retarded emotional growth; the money a substitute for more normally mature means of emotional satisfaction.

Our own observation has taught us something of the environmental factors which can produce an obsession like miserliness. We know that, by and large, people desire the things they cannot have, that what we have not got usually seems more tempting and desirable than what we have. We have seen people to whom certain things were terribly important because once they suffered from a lack of them.

We might therefore choose this type of environmental causation for our miser. If we do, we know immediately something more about him: we know that in his youth, he had no money, and suffered from the lack of it.

(This is not the only possible environmental cause; a man who inherited money and felt himself inferior to the father who had amassed it might become a miser in his effort to keep the fortune intact since he could not add to it, and because his own inability to increase it would make him feel guilty about spending it. But throughout the process of building up the character, we must make choices of direction; there are as many possible misers to characterize as there are choices to be made. We shall not attempt to track them all down here; it would take several volumes to do so. We shall be content with building one possible and plausible miser.)

In order to make the desire for money as strong as possible, we will intensify the early lack of it. We will

assume that the future miser was brought up in extreme poverty, that he often went hungry and saw his mother go hungry, and grew up with a perpetual sense of insecurity hanging over him, never knowing where his next meal might come from. He saw other children enjoying the things he could never have and taking for granted the necessities so often denied him. He grew up feeling that the lack of money was the root of all misery; and determined that he himself would have money.

We know that many children do grow up in such unhappy circumstances without becoming misers in later life. The environmental factor alone is not enough to explain them. It is here that the psychological explanation fills the gap: it explains the characteristic in the man which will produce miserliness as a reaction to extreme poverty in youth.

Has this picture of the child's early years indicated any further facts about him? What may we imply from the fact that he was brought up with insufficient money, and that money later became extremely important to him?

We may imply the child's possible attitude toward his father. If money is the child's supreme god, what must be his feelings toward a man who has so signally failed to make any? He may well be contemptuous of him, and may hate him for the misery the father's incompetence has inflicted on his wife and child. (This is another cross-roads; the child may adore his father and put the blame on something else: on the 'system', on his father's employer, on God, on his mother. We choose arbitrarily the first alternative.) Children, like many adults, must lay to a specific door the responsi-

bility for the unpleasant things which happen to them.

If the boy hates his father and is contemptuous of him, what are his feelings apt to be toward his mother? He is apt to see in her another victim of his father's incompetence; he sees her working to make the house livable and the food elastic, he sees her unhappy and hungry; he is apt to regard her as a helpless victim like himself, and to feel protective toward her. (Another cross-roads, of course.) If we intensify his mother's plight and his father's failure by making the father a drunkard, we can add still another trait of the boy's: he will grow up hating liquor and all those who have anything to do with it, and will assign to it, next to lack of money, an important place on his list of evil things.

By now, we know quite a bit about our miser. We know he hated his father and grew up determined to be as unlike him as possible which meant never drinking or countenancing drinking, and acquiring and keeping money. If he marries, we know that the woman he chooses will be as like his mother as possible, since his miserliness teaches us that he follows infantile emotional patterns. He looks upon the money which he has acquired as a bulwark between himself and insecurity, not as a means to pleasure or luxury; and he will enjoy actually fingering his money because the tangible presence of the coin itself is a reassurance of its actuality.

Can we deduce anything about his physical appearance from what we now know?

Malnutrition in youth can produce a thin and twisted frame; it can also upset the glandular balance in the body and lead to excess and unhealthy fat. We must choose again. A thin and twisted frame would be the

conventional body for a miser, suggesting that he does not even spend money enough to feed himself properly; but a fat miser would be more unusual and for purposes of mystery fiction, better material. The average reader thinks of fat people as jolly, open-handed, and kindly; perhaps we can do a little trading on his conditioning.

We have a fat miser, then. His clothes will always be fastidiously chosen and cared for, selected with an eye toward long wear; his grooming will be impeccable; for he wishes to get as far as possible from the painful memory of the years in which his clothes were patched or ragged. His teeth will be one reminder he cannot escape; malnutrition and lack of early care will have left them discoloured, irregular, and in bad shape. They will probably continue in bad shape, for dental care is costly, and no one can look inside his mouth to see the lack of it.

Appearances, then, are important to him. Part of the suffering of his youth was the sense of inferiority he felt with other, more fortunate, children. It will not be enough for him now to know that he can afford the niceties of life; he will feel obliged to prove it to the world. He will therefore not be parsimonious about entertaining (though of course he will serve no liquor) or about the furnishings of his home. Everything he spends for such purposes will provide him at once with pleasure and with pain; pleasure that he can show people what he can afford; pain at having to spend the money to do so.

What do we know of the man's relations to the people with whom he lives and works? We have seen that he will marry a woman as like his mother as possible, and his attitude toward her will be protective, as was his

attitude toward his mother. He will be more indulgent in the spending of money where she is concerned than anywhere else; for by providing her with comforts and pleasures, he is making up to his mother for the things she never had. He will lean over backwards to shield her from any of the unpleasant realities of life; and he will be particularly incensed and outraged if she is approached or spoken to by a man who has been drinking.

Toward his children his attitude will be more complex. There is no room in him for any real fatherly affection. He will see to it that the children are properly clothed and fed and educated; but he will continually remind them that they are enjoying benefits he never had; he will, in fact, really be jealous of them, in part because they have more than he has had, in part because by taking up some of the time and affection of his wife, they are robbing him of the complete time and affection he was accustomed to receive from his mother.

As an employer, he will be suspicious and grasping; he will pay the lowest wages he can and extract the greatest amount of time and effort in return. He will not feel that what he pays his employees can reflect on his social status, so there will be no check upon his miserliness here.

He will judge all men by the amount of money which they have acquired; he will respect those who have more than he, be contemptuous of those who have less.

As a member of his community he will be as important as he can manage without having to pay for it. He will be at once flattered and terrified if asked to head a charity drive, and will spend long hours wondering how little money he can give and still retain his prestige.

There is no charity in him. The Poor, to him, are un-numbered editions of his drunken and shiftless father; he himself has managed to make a fortune from nothing, why should they not go and do likewise?

As a citizen, he will take his rights and duties seriously; feeling that in paying his taxes he has paid for the right to vote, he will not let anything interfere with the performance of that duty; and he will always, of course, vote for the candidate who best promises to protect his investments and his money.

So there is our miser. We know him well enough now to know what he would do in any given situation. We do not, needless to say, put all of this into the book. But because we know it all the miser in the book will be unable to do anything without revealing his character. The way he walks, talks, dresses; the people whom he associates with and the causes he espouses, will all form a cohesive and integrated picture. He will not be able to bow to a lady, eat a chop, or board a tram without doing so in character. The reader may never see, as does the author, the picture of a small child cowering in a threadbare room as a drunken figure staggers in to abuse a pale and worried woman. But because the author sees it, the reader will see a rounded, three-dimensional character.

Where to stop with this sort of character build-up—at what point enough has been done—is not so difficult a problem as it might seem. A simple schematization will serve to remind the author of the essential things he must know; nothing more complicated than a list of the character's basic functions and relationships. The author should know what kind of person his character is:

As child	As parent
As husband	As lover
As friend	As enemy
As employee	As employer
As a member of his profession, his community, his church, and his country.	

When the author can determine the character's attitude in each of these relationships, and the inter-relationship between them, he knows his character well enough to start on the task of transferring him to paper.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Detective Novel—Basic Ideas

WE have seen that the emphasis in a detective novel is on the detection. The first or basic idea for a detective novel, therefore, is apt to be one of *method*—the way in which the crime was committed, the way in which the murderer fakes an alibi, the way in which the crime is solved. A means or opportunity of murder, a clue or alibi, a process of deduction, will be the 'inspiration' from which the story unfolds.

But there is no need to wait for inspiration. The professional writer is one who does not wait for a flash of light; he has learned to substitute observation and ingenuity. Careful observation of the things that go on around him, of what he sees in the street, reads in the papers and hears from his friends will furnish him with the basic ideas from which his novels are developed. A message or absent-minded note scribbled on a menu; the report of a new scientific discovery in the papers; a random item in the Encyclopedia—any of these may give him what he needs.

For the beginner the newspapers are apt to be the most fruitful source of ideas, because one process of selection has already been made by the editor of the paper from the vast mass of daily occurrences. Not every issue of every paper will yield a wonderful idea;

THE DETECTIVE NOVEL—BASIC IDEAS

any issue of any paper will yield at least one possible idea.

This chapter is being written in the United States, in Philadelphia, and I have at hand a copy of today's Philadelphia *Record*, as yet unopened. Let us go quickly over the headlines, and see what possible detective material can be found.

There are seven items in all which might prove useful.

NERVE SPECIALIST HELD IN
MURDER OF SUNDAY GUEST
FRIEND SHOT AND STABBED WITH
FORK—QUARREL OVER PEAS HINTED

NEW VARICOSE VEINS SURGERY
PUTS PATIENT ON FEET IN DAY

VICTIM BEATEN, TRUSSED
TO BUSH WITH OWN BELT—
SALESMAN ADMITS THAT FIRST
STORY OF ATTACK WAS HOAX

GAS FUMES CAUSE DEATH
OF TWO AGED BROTHERS
FIRE USED FOR HEATING BE-
LIEVED BLOWN OUT AS MEN SLEPT

From a column of advice to readers, the following letters:

Q. I have been engaged to a boy in service. He has been sending me money to save to get married after the war, but I just found out he is going out with other girls and am on the verge of breaking our engagement. Must I give him the money back? He said in writing that the money belongs to me as well as him.

PAULINE.

Q. I am 18 years old and have kept house for my brother and sisters. My mother has married again. My stepfather beats and abuses her. He gave me a black eye when he was drunk lately when I tried to protect my mother. Could I leave them and get a job, for I can't stand this life any more. Could they do anything if I left?

HELPLESS.

And in the Help Wanted columns, the following advertisement:

CARETAKER & TUTOR for children, strong, sober, educated man, take charge of group of crippled & special children in a sm. inst.; wages \$150 mo. & full maintenance; give exp., refs. & phone; perm; no maimed considered. C 557 Record.

Can any of these items be made to serve?

The nerve specialist, the article goes on to say, killed his best friend in the presence of two witnesses; and the only apparent motive was an argument over which of them should shell the peas for dinner. This motive is obviously too abnormal—too insane—to be of any use; and there is no suggestion of the murderer's attempting to evade the consequences of his act. The only unusual item that might be of some use is the weapon—a fork.

If it can be made to serve it has the virtue, in a planned murder, of being an unusual instrument for the purpose, easily available, and one which, put back in the drawer with the rest, might by its very obviousness be overlooked. In itself it is too small a detail on which to build an entire novel; we can file it away for future use.

The second item tells of a new cure for patients bed-ridden with varicose veins, which has them on their feet within twenty-four hours. This suggests two possible uses: an alibi dependent on illness, when in fact the illness has been cured; or a means of getting rescue to a character caught in a helpless situation, if the patient is the only one who can effect the rescue. The first of these is not too promising, for the doctor who performed the operation could testify to his patient's cure. The second is better; it involves a medical hero and a good conflict: shall he risk all on an operation he has never performed before and which may make the patient worse; or shall he let the heroine languish in the villain's clutches? It's usable, but not particularly appealing. We'll file that away, too.

Item three tells of the confession of a salesman who beat his friend to death for the sum of \$76.28, and who at first told the police they had both been attacked by a third person.

The motive here certainly cannot be used; the sum is too small to be fictionally convincing. There is nothing particularly new about an imaginary third person who is blamed for the crime. The only detail which the story gives us is that the victim was tied up with his own belt. Can the belt be made a significant clue whereby the detective is able to break down the murderer's story of a third person?

It could be so used, if there were something very special about the belt, something which the murderer, as a friend of the victim, would know; and which a stranger would not know. Perhaps the belt is made of a new plastic, and is one of the goods which the two men are selling. In appearance it is very fragile, actually it is much stronger than leather. A stranger, seeing it, would think it could never hold the man, and might use his tie, perhaps, instead. This is pretty thin; until and unless we run across something about belts or plastics which will make a better case of it, we had better drop it.

Item four is a familiar story: accidental death by asphyxiation from a faulty gas heater. An author with special knowledge of gas heaters and how they work might be tempted to do something with this. The fact that the victims are brothers, and old, suggests a possible inheritance motive.

The letter from Pauline suggests a motive for withholding information from the police, but not a plausible motive for murder. But it should not be discarded because of that; good motives for withholding information from the police are rare and should be treasured. We can imagine a situation in which Pauline, if she tells what she knows, will also be forced to reveal that she has not returned to her former fiancé the money that was his, and this revelation will shame her in the eyes of her new fiancé and his mother, perhaps break off the engagement on which she is very set. With a certain amount of intensification, this can be made to serve. But it is a minor factor in a story; it is no use as a basic idea for the whole book.

The Want Ad indicates an unusual setting and occu-

pation, one fraught with pathos and emotion. Danger to a child is more horrible than danger to an adult; and a crippled child is triply helpless. An institution of this sort suggests money in the background: the poor keep their handicapped children at home. And if, in the best mystery tradition, we look for the worst in human nature, we can remember that private institutions, if they are run by unscrupulous people, may be more interested in keeping their patients than in curing them. Setting, characters, and motive are all three suggested here; this item will be worth developing.

The letter from 'Helpless' gives us a quick picture of a household. The first thing it suggests is a potential motive—for the murder of the stepfather. But this is obvious and in no way unusual. Can the thing be twisted around to better purpose? The impression the letter creates in actuality is one of pathos and sympathy for 'Helpless', of indignation against her stepfather. Suppose that impression was deliberately aimed at. With that premise we can turn the whole picture upside down. We can assume that the letter was written, not for help in a desperate situation, but to create a definite impression on the reader. What would the motive for that be? And why should it be necessary to create that impression?

The answer to the second question is obvious: it could only be necessary if the facts were at variance with the report of them in the letter. And the motive might be to set up a false picture of both 'Helpless' and her stepfather, in preparation, since we are dealing with mystery fiction, for murder. The letter would then imply that someone is about to be murdered, and that 'Helpless' wishes to throw the blame on the step-

father; by presenting a picture of him which is heartless and cruel she is preparing public opinion to believe the worst of him when murder occurs. This clipping then, can be used as the basis for a method of throwing suspicion from the murderer to an innocent suspect.

Even when the daily paper does not yield anything really potentially good, the beginner can exercise his ingenuity and his ability to develop plot by forcing himself to do what he can with the material presented. An arbitrary decision to plot one story from an item on each of the sports, editorial, society, obituary and general news pages, before the paper has been examined, may not lead, on any one particular day, to a usable or workable plot. But the more exercise in learning to extract usable material and to recognize it, the greater the incidence of workable items will grow.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Horror Novel—Basic Ideas

THE horror story is the most imaginative of all the types of mystery fiction, and therefore the hardest to pin down. Perhaps more than any other type it depends on so-called inspiration. Yet, like any other, it is largely a matter of being receptive to suggestions, and then exercising ingenuity and elbow grease in developing them further.

Before the search for material can begin, we must know how the effect of horror is produced, what sort of material lends itself to it.

One of the few people writing pure horror stories today is Ethel Lina White. In *The Wheel Spins* (known as *The Lady Vanishes* on the screen) she has used a time-honoured device which is always new and fresh in the hands of a skilful writer; it might be described as the Am-I-Losing-My-Mind technique. The heroine of the story finds reality deserting her rapidly. Things which she knows have happened seem not to have happened at all; present facts are at variance with past facts; and as the discrepancy between the two grows, the horror mounts.

Carter Dickson, who combines horror with detection for superior entertainment, uses another classic formula: the situation which has no apparent explanation other

than a supernatural one, but which is always logically and naturally explained at the end.

(The supernatural story without logical explanation—the ghost story, vampire or werewolf story—is called a mystery for reasons other than those we have been considering. It is the supernatural itself which is the mystery in such tales; and the mystery is therefore never unravelled, but merely presented. The fear of the supernatural is the source of the horror, the desire to have its menace removed from the central character is the factor making for suspense; but there is no puzzle to be solved.

This whole category of supernatural horror goes half-way to meet another field: the fantasy mystery, which may sometimes more closely approach the type of mystery we have been discussing, even though no natural explanation is offered at the end. Cora Jarrett's beautifully written and genuinely chilling *Strange Houses* is an example of this type.)

The classic example of the seemingly supernatural detective-horror story with logical explanation is, of course, Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. Full use is made of the apparently supernatural nature of the menace, with a flashback to past history to explain the genesis of the ghost, and a logical explanation at the end. The story is, in fact, the model on which almost all such novels have since been written. Carter Dickson's excellent series of horror-detective novels* using apparently supernatural forces as the means of horror, with historical flashbacks to motivate them, follow this pattern.

**The Plague Court Murders, The White Priory Murders, The Red Widow Murders, etc.*

But horror need not depend on the seemingly supernatural for its effect. We have already seen that the Am-I-Losing-My-Mind technique can be very effective. In another of her books (*Wax*) Ethel Lina White has used one facet of a two-sided technique: horror results from the presence of something which should not be there; or from the absence of something that should be there. The story is laid in a waxworks at night; the figures are lifelike and sinister in the gloom—and one figure moves. . . . Or does it only seem to move?

Inversely, to a man accustomed to the creaking of an old house at night, a night when the house did not creak, though the trees outside were bent in the wind, would be horrifying—because of the inexplicable absence of something which should be there.

We have spoken elsewhere of the trap nature of the horror technique. Good horror material is material which lends itself to an intensification, a new twist, or a new progression of the trap technique. Poe's short horror stories are admirable examples of the form in its shortest and most intense expression; needless to say, the length of the novel prevents any horror novel from being so intense or so markedly progressive. Such a pitch of horror cannot be sustained for more than a few pages at a time.

Where, then, do the suggestions come from which can set a writer's mind to working on a horror story? The newspapers will not be much help here; our own everyday experiences will. Things often happen to us for which we can first find no explanation; disregarding the real explanation when it comes to us, and intensifying the experience itself, will give us the start of a horror situation.

For instance: Nannine Joseph, the literary agent, tells me that one night, about an hour after her guests had left, she remembered some accounts she should have gone over before going to bed. Returning to the living-room, she sat down on a chair by her desk. The windows had been open and the room was almost cold—yet the chair was warm.

She was alone in the flat. The doors had been bolted after her guests. No one had sat in this chair for an hour. All the other chairs were cool.

Turning up the cushion, she found a cigarette butt smouldering in the springs.

Take away that cigarette butt, and the situation is a good tantalizing beginning for a horror story. (Basic principle: something—the warmth—was there that should not have been there.)

For instance: how many times have you mislaid your glasses, and then found them in some place you could have sworn you had not put them? Eventually you remember that the phone rang just as you were going out, and you put the glasses down to answer it.

But suppose you could prove to yourself that you had done no such thing? Suppose you had just come in from the garden, glasses in hand, and your shoes were muddy, leaving a track behind you as you walked? Yet, when at last you caught the gleam of the glasses across the room, there was no mud on the floor between? How did the glasses get there?

A second source of horror inspiration can be found in setting. A deserted house, a ruined tower, an empty apartment, a bleak moor—these are the classic settings of horror. Their atmospheric attributes alone, when encountered in the flesh, may not be enough to suggest

a plot; but the way a door is set, the angle of a window or the quality of light in one corner may suggest something further.

But it is not enough to keep one's eyes open in such peculiarly suitable places. The most commonplace of settings may provide horror, may intensify it because of the contrast between the ordinary quality of the setting and the extraordinary nature of the events happening in it. Trying to trace back the origin of a few such stories—popular legends—may help to illustrate.

Everyone has heard the story of the man in the underground who sat and stared at the two women opposite him. For mile upon mile, in a carriage empty of anyone else, his unblinking eyes were fixed upon them. It was late at night, the other cars were even emptier. When at last the train reached the terminal, the women got up to go in relief—but the man still sat there. The guard coming to tell him to get out found the man was dead.

That story, which is always told as having happened to the best friend of the person who told it to your informant, is a fine example of the human mind at work upon an ordinary situation. One day, undoubtedly, a man did sit and stare at two women in the underground, and so persistently, that one of them finally remarked: 'I wish he'd stop doing that. It gives me the creeps. You'd think he'd died sitting there.' And the story was born.

A less innocent tale—one whose circulation was probably prompted by malice or a grudge—was widely heard a few years ago. It concerned a large women's-wear shop in America where clothes might be exchanged within five days, no questions asked, provided the sales

tags had not been removed. The story went that a woman bought a dress in that store, wore it once or twice, and came down with a strange disease. Her husband decided to investigate. Backtracking the dress, he discovered that it had been bought before and returned—bought for a burial dress, and returned by thrifty relatives after the coffin was closed. The woman in the coffin had died of leprosy.

How might such a story begin? If you were standing in a queue in such a shop, waiting to return a dress, you might hear the woman ahead of you tearfully explaining to the assistant that the dress had been bought for a sister, who had died before she could wear it. If the assistant seemed doubtful that the dress had not been worn; if you wondered idly what the woman had died of in so short a time; if a woman ahead of you had an unpleasant and disfiguring skin ailment—the story would be born.

Other such popular legends, however, are of a different nature and not suited to our purpose. One such is the horrible story of a girl in a department store, hurrying to enter a lift from which her mother was leaning to beckon to her—and finding herself standing before the closed doors with her mother's head at her feet.

Now horrible as this story is (and doubtless as apocryphal as the one before it) it is horrible in another sense. It horrifies us because it is bloody, because the accident happened in the presence of the woman's daughter, because entering a lift is something most of us do every day of our lives. Its genesis is easy to see. But there is no suspense in it, no apprehension about what will happen next. Like the other examples given

it is an anecdote, not a story; unlike the others, it is incapable of expansion into a horror story or novel.

For a good horror story is one which chills the spine, not one which upsets the stomach. The material used in the so-called 'horror pulps', which is apt to belong to this second category, makes a direct and dangerous appeal to the sadistic impulses, with unquestionably bad results in subnormal or psychopathic readers. Gore alone, for the normal reader, can produce only revulsion; the most refined tortures, accurately described, raise the gorge; but the element of fear—not alone the fear of pain, but the fear of the unknown—is needed for a true horror story.

For it is the unknown which is most feared by man; adding mystery to horror intensifies the horror. Man by nature fears what he does not understand; suspense consists in not knowing what comes next. You cannot write a horror story about a man about to be executed by the state for murder: no unknown, other than the unknown of death itself, confronts him. He is certainly going to die; a description of his last moments may evoke pity, contempt, distaste, or exultation; but there is no suspense involved (assuming it is too late for a pardon!) and no horror story can survive without that essential ingredient.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Mystery-Adventure Novel— Basic Ideas

we have elsewhere classified the basic techniques of the mystery-adventure into trap and pursuit patterns, and noted that the horror story is always based on the trap pattern. What is the difference between a trap pattern used for horror, and one used for mystery-adventure?

The horror story is apt to observe the unities of time and place pretty carefully; particularly the unity of place. Much of the atmosphere of horror is dependent on the setting; once that setting is established, how wasteful and perhaps even ineffectual to move to a second or third! And since part of the horror in a horror story consists in the increasing imminence of danger, it is difficult to spread the story over a very great period of time.

But the mystery-adventure novel can, and usually does, range over considerable space and require considerable time. The necessity for this in the pursuit technique is obvious; but even in the trap technique, which in the adventure story can most clearly be seen as the inverse of pursuit (flight), time and space are used to greater advantage.

There is always a deadline established, so that as the

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course of the story brings us closer and closer to the end of the book, the potential danger comes nearer and nearer and suspense grows more and more intense. In addition to the major deadline, there are often minor deadlines along the way. To illustrate: an English spy must deliver the enemy's plans to the government within three weeks, when a major offensive is scheduled to begin. The end of the three weeks constitutes the major deadline. But it will take him one week to return to London, after he has stolen the plans; consequently, he has a two-week deadline to meet within the major three-week one.

To the deadlines in time may be added one or more goals in space. In order to steal the plans, the spy must get to a specific town in Bavaria, and within that town, to a specific house. It is the combination of deadline in time and goal in space which make for suspense.

Space-time is equally important in the trap or flight pattern. The spy in possession of valuable information must escape by a certain time, or he will not escape at all; and he must escape to a definite place where he will be safe.

Trap and pursuit patterns may be combined in one story; indeed, the illustration used above is such a combination. Up to the moment in which the hero gets his hands on the plans, the technique has been pursuit—of the plans themselves, of the man who had them; once the plans are stolen, and the problem becomes that of safe delivery, the trap or flight pattern is present. The theft has been discovered or will be discovered shortly; the spy's problem is now successful evasion.

Multiplicity or responsibility—two or more important 'villains'—is more permissible in the mystery-

adventure novel than anywhere else; sometimes indeed, in an espionage story, verisimilitude demands it. Since the emphasis is laid on successful completion of the hero's mission, the identity of the villain becomes important only as a factor in that success—the hero will never be safe until he has defeated the man who is trying to thwart him. Nevertheless, the reader's emotional satisfaction will be greater if the enemy can be personified in one chief protagonist, and if good can triumph over evil in one climactic scene of personal conflict between hero and villain.

The idea for the mystery-adventure novel may start with the nature of the trap, the nature of the pursuit, the nature of the objective, or some special quality of setting or circumstance. The crop of adventure novels involving a resemblance between two men, already referred to, probably started with that resemblance as the basic or primary idea. In the case of Helen MacInnes's *Assignment in Brittany*, I would guess that one of the settings—Mont St. Michel—was also part of the initial idea. The trap nature of the Mount itself, surrounded by quicksands and a swift and tricky tide, connected with the mainland by only one narrow causeway; and the narrow streets, deep-dug dungeons and medieval atmosphere of the place, make it ideally suited to fiction of this kind.

In Manning Coles's *Pray Silence*, the idea probably began with the problem of a man who, through amnesia, has lived for years as a German, only to discover, when Germany and England are once more at sword's point, that he is really English. Jean Giradoux used this same situation as the basis for one of the most famous novels and plays to come out of World War I:

Siegfried; but where Giradoux used it as the springboard for a thesis to disprove the 'hereditary' nature of the enmity between France and Germany, Manning Coles has employed it as a perfect spy situation.

Espionage and intrigue need not be the only subject matter for mystery-adventure fiction, however. Any situation which lends itself to the principles already formulated will do: the central character must be dependent on himself alone to attain his goal and extricate himself and other sympathetic characters from danger; his goal will usually be something larger than mere personal safety; both he and his antagonists will usually be representatives of organizations larger than themselves. Yet these two last points are not always necessary in a non-espionage adventure tale. A man whose child has been kidnapped, and who has been warned not to approach the police would, if he embarked upon the task of recapturing her by himself, be subject matter for a pursuit pattern of mystery-adventure in which he would be dependent on himself alone: he would be after something more than personal safety, but represent no one but himself, and very possibly pursue no one but a single kidnapper. A trouble-shooter for a business firm which could not afford the scandal a police investigation might bring, has often been used as the hero of a mystery-adventure novel; in such a non-espionage case, all the factors enumerated above would come into play.

It must be obvious, however, that a secret on which hangs the fate of a nation must be more significant and exciting than one on which the fate of only one or two individuals depends; and the most dangerous (and therefore suspenseful) situation in which a man may

find himself is as a spy in enemy territory. Thus espionage provides an almost ideal theme for the tale of adventure, though spy stories written during times of war or tense crisis are apt to prove over-melodramatic for the general reader when the international scene is more peaceful. But John Buchan's classic, *The 39 Steps*, dealing with World War I is as good reading today as when it was written and was moreover made into a successful film some twenty years after its original publication.

There is, however, a very palpable danger that the public may turn its face away from such reminders of the age we live in. This means that the author attempting to start an espionage story now must exercise more ingenuity than ever before and should look for a really new twist in situation, or use the espionage motif as a secondary one to enhance danger and suspense of a more personal sort.

The basic idea for the mystery-adventure story, whether it comes in the form of situation (the most probable origin), characters or setting, may be derived from the same sources as basic ideas for other types of fiction; and requires, as they do, a mind receptive to suggestion. Ways in which a spy might disguise or betray himself, for instance, may be suggested by occurrences of every day.

For instance: During World War II a woman I know, travelling one day in a crowded bus, found herself straphanging next to five men in American officer's uniforms. The bus gave a sudden lurch, the man next to her stumbled and almost fell—and she heard him swear in German.

The chances are that that is all that actually hap-

pened. There could be many legitimate reasons why a United States officer should swear in German: there were plenty of loyal citizens of German descent in the American Army, as well as a considerable number of German-speaking refugees. But the story goes that, on the chance the swearing might mean something more, my friend followed the men from the bus and into an office building, noted the floor at which they left the lift, and called the FBI. One hour later security agents entered an office on that floor, arrested five Nazi spies, and confiscated a large stock of uniforms for every branch of the Armed Forces.

Whether or not that story ever actually took place, the genesis for it—the German swearing—is what interests us here. It is a means whereby a spy might be uncovered, and as such usable and workable material.

Another instance: A World War II spy got himself a job as bus driver; every morning and every night he carried to and from their work the workers in a large defence plant—who talked as they rode.

A third instance: We were sitting talking one night, in the top floor flat of a remodelled town house, when we heard from somewhere below a frantic and repeated cry for help. We dashed out on to the landing; tenants were popping from every door but one. In answer to a knock on that door, from which no further sounds had issued, a woman's voice asked, 'Who's there?' When told, her answer was, 'I'll call you I if need you'. We retired in some indignation—what else had she been doing when she cried for help?—and returned to our flat. Probably a domestic quarrel, we decided, and resumed our talk.

But five minutes later a truly disquieting thought

brought me to my feet again. 'How do we know,' I asked, 'that the woman who cried for help, and the woman who answered the knock, were one and the same?'

If we assume that they were not, we have a workable basic twist and a given situation for a mystery-adventure. Let us see how it could be developed into the beginning of a plot.

Let us assume the converted house in a quiet square contains six flats, one vacant—vacant premises always come in handy. Let us assume on the top floor a woman in hiding—not for criminal, but personal reasons: she is to be the central character. Perhaps she is trying to hide from a dreadful husband; perhaps she has even kidnapped her own child from him for the child's own good. We can come back and motivate this logically and sympathetically later on. But the situation will do; if by legal right she must return the child to its father if she is discovered, she has good reason to avoid the police. This isolates her in the approved and necessary fashion, and makes her dependent on her own resources, to get out of any trouble which may develop; it also provides her with a reason greater than her own personal safety for combating a menace: she must protect the child.

It is this woman—let us give her a name for expedience; we will call her Alice—who hears one night the call for help from another floor. She rushes out to the landing, as do most of the other tenants. One of the men knocks on the door from which the scream came, and the door is opened by a woman Alice has seen before, but whom she has never spoken to. This woman assures the man who knocked that nothing is wrong,

that she tripped over a rug, perhaps, and cried out in fear before righting herself. Satisfied, the other neighbours, who have recognized the woman as the proper inhabitant of the flat, go back to their own homes. Alice, going up the stairs with the man who knocked, and who lives across the landing from her, makes some casual comment on something she saw when the woman opened the door. It is something which does not seem to Alice to have any significance; it is something apparently unimportant but out of place or strange which caught her eye. Perhaps all it was was a bright red hat, and that seemed odd because the woman who opened the door had bright red hair—and would never have worn a hat that colour. Perhaps all Alice says out loud is, 'How funny she should have a red hat, with that hair'. But the damage is done.

For the presence of the red hat actually shows that another woman was in the apartment, and it was she who screamed. Sooner or later this may occur to Alice. Her remark is heard not only by the man she is talking to, but by two or three other people still on the stairs or landing—one of them an accomplice of the red-headed woman.

We need not here go any further with this hypothetical development: what needs doing is obvious. The potential danger of Alice's observation must be intensified, probably by a second observation equally trivial on the face of it, but which, added to the first, means discovery for the criminals. What their secret may be, and why they have found it necessary to murder a woman in so precarious a fashion, will also have to be worked out. But the basic pattern is obvious; Alice is in a trap without even knowing, at first, that it exists.

The thing to remember as the mystery-adventure story is developed, is that the detective rules of detective fiction do not apply. There must be clues leading to the criminals and the nature of their crime; but the significant ones should, like the red hat, be subject to interpretation by the layman and not require the services of an expert or technician. Alice will have no way of identifying fingerprints or analysing stains; at the end of the story, when she can at last come out into the open and turn over her findings to the police, such fingerprints or stains may clinch the official case against the murderers; but Alice must work before that with only her own common sense. She cannot cross examine suspects or investigate alibis very thoroughly; she will be able to do only what the author or reader themselves could do in like circumstances. For the factor of primary importance about Alice is that she is not an unusual person, but, except for the kidnapping of her child, rather like most of the people reading the story. Much of the tension of the book will depend on the fact that the trap closes about Alice in so usual and apparently harmless a place.

This means that the physical clues that Alice will have to work with will depend for their effectiveness on their ordinary attributes, their functions, or their placing. Not the fingerprints on the red hat make it a clue for Alice, but the fact that it is red. A stain on the floor of the empty apartment might be blood and might be something else; to Alice, who has no test tubes at her disposal, the significant thing is that the stain is there at all—in an apartment presumably unused for some time.

The accidental factor which precipitates an ordinary

and innocent individual into a mystery-adventure situation, like the one above, has a special appeal for most readers. It makes their sense of identification and participation stronger; it adds a spice of thrill and potential excitement to all the ordinary and humdrum activities of their lives. Ringing the wrong doorbell; getting someone else's mail; picking up a handbag belonging to someone else at the end of a party—all these possible and fairly common little errors of everyday life are potential starting points for adventure plots.

A double portion of mystification is always possible with this type of story, if it is written in the third person. There may be elements about the central character himself which are only gradually revealed to the reader, and which further complicate the situation. Thus, in an espionage trap story, it may not be revealed to the reader until the story is well under way that the quarry is not merely a thief who has stolen the Countess's jewels, but a spy who has stolen the Count's state papers. Paul Gallico used this technique in some of his entertaining Hiram Halliday stories, and Dorothy Hughes has used it in *The So Blue Marble*, *The Cross-Eyed Bear* and *The Fallen Sparrow*. But there is a price to be paid for this double mystification; to use it, an author must sacrifice the chance for extra terror and danger which ensues when the quarry has no idea why he is being chased, and so is doubly unable to defend himself.

A classic and frequent means of intensifying mystification and suspense in the adventure novel is to employ the 'faceless' antagonist. Mr. X may be Mr. Y or Mr. Z or even Madame Q; the central character is more gravely menaced, for any one of several people

surrounding him may actually be the man who is chasing him or whom he is chasing. All this is, of course, the adaptation to the mystery-adventure novel of the basic mystification-technique of the detective novel.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Mystery Novel—Basic Ideas

THE loose category of Character or Literary Mystery covers a great variety of types and talents. Mary Roberts Rhinchart was a pioneer and is still a *grande dame* in the field; *The Door* is still one of the best mystery novels ever written.

The bulk of present-day mystery writing is of this type; and it is in this field that the future of the entire class of mystery fiction lies. There are a finite number of variations to be played upon the static elements of the puzzle: who killed whom with what and what for; there is a finite audience for horror stories and it can absorb only a limited quantity of horror at a time; but there is no limit to the possible variations on human nature.

The mystery novel is primarily concerned with people; with the conflict of characters and the way in which people react to moments of crisis or emergency; it is an analysis of human motives and behaviour, or a study of the habits and customs of human society. There are plenty of bad novels in the category, in whom this concern is hardly visible, and which must nevertheless be classed as mystery novels *per se* since they conform to no other. But many of the most widely read and often the most literate, mysteries belong in this classification:

the novels of Leslie Ford, Ngaio Marsh, Dorothy Sayers, Mabel Seeley, Margery Allingham, Mignon Eberhart, Percival Wilde, Michael Innes—to name but a few. They differ widely in literary value, subject matter, and treatment; many of them are ordinarily classified as detective novels; but in all of them the characters and their behaviour are more important—to reader and almost surely to author—than the puzzle elements. It is necessary to be somewhat arbitrary in such classification, and it is perfectly possible that the authors themselves might disagree with this one; but, taking the field as a whole, their works lie further to the character mystery than they do to the pure detective story.

One significant fact about this partial listing leaps to the eye: most of these authors are women. The fact is not, I think, without logical cause.

By and large, men are more interested in abstract problems of logic than are women: by and large, women are more interested in the modes and manners of society and the inner workings of the people in it. This does not mean that men cannot successfully write in this field, nor women in the other; too many excellent examples have proved that neither dictum is true. But it does mean that there is a larger potential audience for this type of fiction among women, as there is a larger potential male audience for the detective novel; and that more women are drawn to the writing of the mystery novel than are men. The author's sex need not determine what type of mystery fiction he will write; but his audience's sex will certainly influence the sale of his works.

The mystery situation—the murder situation—is

ideally suited to the presentation and study of human beings under stress, for murder and danger of death give rise to the most intense emotions. The commercial restrictions on mystery fiction limit the depth and extent of this study in many ways; but even within those limitations, the best mystery novels often come very close to being significant literature. There are few contemporary novelists with the eye for human weakness, the ear for human speech, and the capacity for lean and sharply edged commentary of Dashiell Hammett. That this tendency for the mystery novel to merge with the 'straight' novel can have regrettable results is to be seen in the pretentiousness and falling-off in quality in the later novels of Dorothy Sayers and in some of Michael Innes's work. It is better to write a very good mystery than a second-rate novel.

The basic idea for a mystery novel usually starts not with a trick of situation or method, but with a conflict of characters, or conflict within a character. Of all the types of mystery fiction, the mystery novel least requires 'inspiration'. The material is constantly presenting itself to the author in the thoughts, emotions, ambitions, and behaviour of his friends and neighbours.

Two useful tricks for starting a beginner on the track of a mystery novel situation are not only useful but entertaining. One is to determine how many potential murderers you number among your friends and acquaintances; and what their motives and methods might be. You will have to intensify the characteristics which might lead to murder, but you ought to be able to conceive of one situation which would drive each of them, so modified, to the point of doing it. For the greater number of your friends, only extreme and

immediate physical threat of death would make them kill, and in self-defence. Any of us might kill in that fashion; self-preservation is the strongest impulse in us. But if you know a woman whose entire life and ambition is centred in an only child; a man to whom a way of life is a necessity; a man or woman dedicated to a principle—you know of three things these people might preserve or protect by murder. If you know a man with one consuming ambition; a woman determined to get one specific man; a person eager for power—you know of three things that such people may try to attain by killing. From the people about you, you can observe the things which make life important to them, and use those things, intensified to a life-and-death degree, as the starting point for your plot.

Or you may take it the other way round, and see how many potential victims you number among your acquaintances. A woman whose possessiveness is ruining the life of her son; a woman who will not divorce her husband, though he wants to marry someone else; a man whose life stands between someone else and money or happiness—these people generate possible motives for murdering them.

But if you are squeamish about regarding your friends in such a light, there is a third method, comfortably impersonal. Take any of the classics of fiction or drama and see how the basic situation and character conflict may be reset in modern terms and twisted into murderous intensity. Becky Sharpe is a perfect mystery character; the sort of woman who drives other people to murder. Hamlet has been used in this fashion, Macbeth and his wife lend themselves ideally; so do the characters and situation of the first part of *Pendennis*; and of

course in *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens has almost written a murder mystery as it stands.

I am not suggesting that you plagiarize the works of the masters or presume to rewrite the classics. I am suggesting that it is entirely permissible to use them as a springboard for your own work, and excellent practice to see how often it can be done. The practice may lead you to a sound and workable structure which can be developed into a saleable book—and the chances are that when the book is written, no one, including the author, will be able to find any resemblance to the work from which the idea first came.

The mystery novel *per se* will need no more than this to set it going; the mixed types will require, and probably have, a double primary idea from which to start. Some twist of method or detection may combine with the character conflict to set the novel going in the direction of a detective-mystery novel; it is more likely to do that than go in any of the other directions. Good characterization in a horror or adventure story is apt to result after the basic twist has occurred to the author and a character trait is seldom the springboard from which an adventure story starts.

Having decided upon the character and its function—murderer or victim—the sort of careful analysis described in the chapter on characterization will yield a panel of possible and plausible victims or murderers to choose from. If the character on whom the story is to be based is destined to be the victim, it will be a special character trait which will invite murder: if the initial character is to be the murderer, then the nature of what the murderer hopes to gain will determine the character of the human obstacle in his way.

Thus, the miser whom we dissected in the chapter on characterization might murder to protect his gold, but is a much more likely candidate for victim. He underpays his employees, is strict with his children, extracts the last ounce of service from his servants, and is moved to public and scathing denunciations of the evil of intoxicating drinks. His standing in the community is such that this aversion to liquor and everything to do with it might well prove an insuperable obstacle to a man wanting to open a distillery or public house in the town. On the other hand, his impassioned feelings about liquor offer one other possible murder motive for him; if he felt that his wife or children were threatened because of liquor or by a drunkard, he might be driven to murder.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Plotting the Basic Conflict

ONCE the right starting point has been found, the writer's most intensive work begins. It is impossible to formulate any hard and fast rules about procedure from here on; what happens next depends on the nature of the initial idea, and on the temperament and working habits of the author.

But it may prove useful to set down one expansion from starting idea to plot skeleton. Let us take the clipping on page 98, signed 'Helpless', as the starting point for a novel, and see what happens next.

We have reversed the original meaning of the clipping, and have decided that 'Helpless' is laying the ground work for a plot which will end in her stepfather's arrest and conviction for murder. From the clipping itself we know that 'Helpless' is eighteen, has a brother, sisters, and a mother, and has to spend all her time taking care of the children.

It is obvious, in the original clipping, that 'Helpless' is a girl; we are under no obligation to keep her that. Can anything be gained by making her a boy? If her plan is to seem the defenceless victim of her stepfather, leaving her a girl will be better; it is much easier for a girl to play this game.

We have presupposed a murder, and the fact that

the stepfather will in fact be innocent. Then who is the murderer? It might be that 'Helpless' is sure that her mother or her brother is going to kill someone, and is trying in advance to protect them; but it is much more likely, and much sharper, if 'Helpless' herself is to be the murderer.

That is the only way she can be sure there will be a murder; moreover, it gives us a chance to do a neat bit of deceit—perfectly legitimate—in character drawing. If 'Helpless' is blackening her stepfather's name to protect someone else, she is possibly almost as sympathetic as she seems in the clipping; if she is doing it to protect herself against a charge of murder of which she will be guilty, the clipping's picture of her is entirely false.

Who is the victim to be? Obviously, 'Helpless' cannot murder just anyone for the sole purpose of sending her stepfather to the gallows; that is too roundabout a method to be convincing in a sane person. If her only purpose were to get rid of him, she might just as well make him her corpse and have done with it.

'Helpless'—let us give her a name: Helen—Helen's plan, in so far as her stepfather is concerned, is double-barrelled: he is to take the blame for her crime, so she may go free; and he is to be got out of the way by the very act which disposes of her other victim.

In the cast of characters given in the clipping, there is a mother, a brother, and unnumbered sisters. Might one of these be the prospective victim? Matricide or fratricide is even uglier than ordinary murder, and always involves very special psychological circumstances. The prospective victim will be one of these only if we decide that the novel is to be primarily a psychological study of an abnormal person. Few of us

have the requisite knowledge for such a task; we shall have to find our victim elsewhere.

Searching for a victim involves a simultaneous search for a motive. Helen's troubles are obviously the result of not enough money: if the family could afford servants and a nursemaid for the children, Helen would not have to take care of them. So a plausible motive might be a money motive: by killing someone, she hopes to get enough money to take her away from her laborious and dull life.

Presumably, if murder is to be financially profitable, the victim will have to be a relative who has money, and who has declared his intention of leaving it to her. But if there is a relative with money, why has he not helped the household along? If he is fond enough of Helen, why can't she go to him and ask him for money?

If the stepfather does not make much money, and is a surly and unpleasant man, it may very well be that a relative of the mother's, disapproving of the marriage, and having warned the mother against it, would refuse to help her out when his warning had been disregarded. This is an attitude which a father or older brother might assume: let us say the future victim is Helen's uncle, her mother's only, and older, brother. He is unmarried and childless; he has no one to leave his money to except his sister, whether he disapproves of her marriage or not.

But if this brother disapproves so strongly that he never sees his sister or her family, where will Helen find an opportunity for murdering him? There must be some occasion on which the mother's brother does see his relatives. Christmas seems a logical choice; on that one day in the year he comes to visit them.

We now have setting (the house in which Helen and her family live), time (Christmas), victim (the uncle), motive (money), murderer (Helen) and goat (the stepfather). We also have the thing with which we started—a method of avoiding detection and punishment by preparing public opinion for the stepfather's guilt.

At this point, we must consider that method more closely, and elaborate on it. Just one letter to a newspaper columnist will obviously not be enough. If Helen lives in a big city, there is little chance of people seeing it who know her; but the whole scheme seems predicated on a small town, where gossip spreads easily and everyone knows everyone else. Such an item in a local paper would attract much more attention, and set many tongues wagging.

Still, that is not enough. By what other means might Helen create the desired picture of her stepfather's character?

The clipping itself offers us one clue: she will be able to demonstrate the marks of physical violence inflicted on her by her stepfather (she will, of course, fake them herself). A black eye will be too obvious and startling, and may arouse people to action before she is ready for it; a bad bruise on the arm, where a sleeve might just fail to cover it, would be more subtle. And of course Helen will not volunteer the information that the bruise is the result of her stepfather's brutality; she will allow it to be dragged from her in seeming reluctance and confusion.

After that, nothing could be simpler than a storm of girlish tears and an incoherent outpouring of misery: her mother is beaten; the children mishandled; life in the household a perfect hell.

Helen will be careful, however, to choose her audience for such scenes. If she is young and pretty, elderly gentlemen will be filled with indignation, ready to believe her, and cautious enough not to try to interfere. A young man might insist on rushing to the house and having it out with the stepfather. Helen will pick one or two other people predisposed to believe her and to do nothing about it, but who will spread the story, and embellish it as they do so: an old maid, perhaps, who loves to hear that men are beasts, for it consoles her for her lack of one; a widow whose own husband used to beat her, so that she is predisposed to believe that all husbands are like hers. Both of these will be notorious gossips.

There are some people, on the other hand, to whom Helen will carefully not tell her story. These will be the people who will be involved in the investigation of the murder in their official capacities: the local police, the coroner, perhaps a journalist who works in the district. If they get the story, after the fact, from other people, it will be more telling than if Helen has told it to them herself.

What makes Helen believe that the story will be accepted as true? Her mother will certainly deny it, when she is taxed with it after the murder; but that is what everyone will expect her to do. If her husband is accused of her brother's death, she will not admit that her husband is violent or that there has been any bad feeling between them. Before the murder occurs the gossips will not dare to repeat the story to her; the people involved in rumours of this sort are always the last to hear them.

But more than this, there must be something about

the stepfather himself which makes Helen's picture of him plausible. The townspeople must be willing to believe the worst of him. This means that he is an unpopular figure; perhaps he is rather surly and taciturn; perhaps he actually has a rather bad temper, even if it never shows itself in beating his wife and children. This is not enough, however; we need one more trait which will make the elderly female gossips dislike him and disapprove of him; we had better make him a drinking man.

The other children will have to be young enough, so that no one will take their testimony very seriously; if, in addition, we make them the stepfather's children, Helen's half-brother and sisters, they will be considered prejudiced.

But Helen cannot rest her case entirely on her false character drawing of her stepfather; she will have to supply him with a motive as well. Since there has always been bad blood between uncle and stepfather, she will have no trouble in arranging a quarrel or two at Christmas, in the presence of witnesses; and if the uncle's will leaves the money largely to his sister, with only a smaller bequest to Helen, the stepfather will seem to have an excellent motive, and one much more convincing than Helen's.

But if her bequest is a small one, will she risk murder for it? We shall have to intensify her desire to get away from home to make this possible; and if we make the bequest to the mother three thousand pounds, and that to Helen nine hundred, the contrast will be sufficiently great, while the sum will enable Helen to get away.

What, then, is the situation from which she wishes to escape? She must spend her time taking care of the

younger children and doing a considerable share of the housework; she is eighteen and would like gaiety and fun. What, in this situation, makes her hate her stepfather so? The children she must take care of are his; before her mother married him, there were only the two of them; and before her mother started having so many children she was stronger and better able to look after the house herself.

But this is still not enough. The stepfather must be a strong and personal obstacle to Helen's desire to have fun, and her ambition to lead a colourful, leisurely and exciting life. This means that an opportunity must have existed which the stepfather thwarted.

The opportunity is most likely to have taken the shape of a young man: a young man with money who was attracted to Helen. Let us make him the catch of the town, a local manufacturer's son; just twenty-one, still at university, handsome and rather reckless—the sort of figure who would seem glamorous to Helen. They have known each other, casually, for years, though they move in rather different sets and he has hitherto taken little notice of her; but when he returns from school for the last summer holidays before going up to the university, he finds that Helen has suddenly grown up—and grown beautiful. All those holidays, whenever she can get away, Helen goes out with him. She will never let him call for her at home; and her opportunities for seeing him are limited. During the day, she must take care of the children; at night, her stepfather expects her to be home. Perhaps he allows her out one night a week, and insists she must be back by eleven.

The end of summer comes; the young man is about to

go away again; there is to be dance at a country club, to which he has invited Helen. This is her chance to make a favourable impression on his family, and, in a new dress, to sweep him off his feet and into a proposal.

And the stepfather refuses her the money for the dress, and refuses her permission to go to the dance. The young man goes off without seeing her again; she gets one postcard from him, and then silence. She reflects with bitterness that he has now a wider choice of friends than a small provincial town provides and has probably already found plenty of other girls.

This episode increases her distaste for her life—for a while she had a glimpse of and a chance at a better one—and her hate for her stepfather. The more she broods about it, the more she becomes convinced that that dance would have been the turning point, that she would have succeeded in getting a proposal from the young man. To a person convinced he can get away with murder, that is not too much self-confidence.

We can strengthen the motive still further by adding an element which makes the future seem even more dismal: her mother is about to have another baby. More work for Helen, more to tie her down to this life she hates. With a little money she could run away, take a secretarial course, or perhaps go to dramatic school, and prepare herself for a career.

So she begins her blackening of her stepfather's character. Probably she does not admit the whole plan even to herself at this point; she is taking revenge; and she is preparing public opinion not to think too harshly of her when she goes away and leaves her mother in the lurch. Even though she hates this town and the people in it, because she has been miserable and has fancied

that the more fortunate people look down on her, she still is unwilling to sacrifice public opinion. Part of her desire to get away and make something of herself is to show those other people, who had new dresses and could go to the dance, that she is better than they are. So there must be an excuse for her heartless conduct toward her mother.

But the idea of murder is in the back of her mind all the time, and as her plot develops and finds expression, that idea comes closer and closer to the surface.

And then comes the news that the manufacturer's son has written to a local friend to tell him that he has become engaged.

That provides the final touch. Even if this youthful romance comes to nothing she knows that she has lost her one legitimate hope of escape. All her hopes for this town are dead; and murder seems to her the only way out. She has from now to Christmas to perfect her plans.

She has provided for her stepfather a motive for murder and the apparent psychological aptitude for it. She must now see that means and opportunity can also be ascribed to him.

The weapon must be something belonging to her stepfather, preferably something which he uses fairly often, which people will recognize as his, and which will carry his fingerprints. This involves the stepfather's occupation. If he is keen on carpentry or gardening he will have a number of tools which might be used.

Helen will not plan on poison, because opportunity is too hard to determine with the administering of poison; besides, she hopes that her stepfather will be drunk when the crime is committed—she will arrange it

if possible—and poison is a cold-blooded weapon. A gun is hard to come by, a knife apt to be messy—there must be no tell-tale traces on Helen's clothes. A blunt instrument seems the best. It must be something which Helen can wield without trouble—something rather small but potentially deadly. A hammer will do. Let us say the stepfather is something of a handyman and keeps a set of carpenter's tools.

The time of the murder is fixed for some time during the uncle's Christmas visit. It will not take place immediately after his arrival, for at least one quarrel will have to take place between uncle and stepfather first, and people outside the family must be present to hear it. Assuming the uncle arrives the afternoon before Christmas, by late Christmas afternoon, when callers will have come to see the uncle and wish the family Merry Christmas, the situation should be ripe. And to make doubly sure, if callers do not materialize, or not at the right moment, Helen will see to it that the children eat enough at Christmas dinner for a plausible stomach-ache to materialize, and require the presence of the doctor. Helen has no telephone; she will go across to the neighbour's (one of her sympathetic audience) to telephone for the doctor; the neighbour will need no invitation to hurry over to see for herself what is happening; and so at least two witnesses will be provided.

Opportunity will have to be left more or less to the spur of the moment. At some time after the quarrel, especially if it is heated, the stepfather will undoubtedly fling himself from the house to go down to the pub for a drink, and Helen will manage to isolate the uncle.

So much for Helen's plans. The uncle arrives, Helen manages a small disturbance on Christmas Eve. The

children are stuffed at the midday dinner table; and callers arrive at about three in the afternoon. Helen manoeuvres the second quarrel, much more serious. The stepfather is goaded into leaving for the pub; Helen suggests to her uncle that he take a walk outside to cool off. (In a house containing several children and a visiting uncle, in a family with little money, there is not apt to be a spot in the house in which Helen can be sure of no interruption while she is dispatching uncle.)

The mother is naturally very much upset. After a few moments, Helen promises her to go after the uncle and calm him down. She goes out, picks up the hammer on the way (having remembered her gloves) and starts after her victim.

It is late afternoon on Christmas Day, we can assume it is almost dark. A certain amount of isolation is necessary; the house is near the edge of the little town and there are few people about on such a day, perhaps there is a little copse nearby. Helen follows her uncle into it, finds him sitting on a stone or fallen log, smoking his pipe; calls his attention to a non-existent something on his other side, stuns him with a good, swift blow, and then finishes the job at her leisure.

We have forgotten two things. We have forgotten that footsteps from the house to the body might be traced; and we have forgotten that a blow or blows from a hammer can be almost as messy as a thrust with a knife. But we cannot afford to let Helen forget these things, or her guilt will be too easily established.

If it has been snowing, the footprints will be very easy to trace. It will be best if the climate is mild for the season and snow most improbable; this will also make it more plausible for the uncle to take a walk, or sit in the

wood. It may also mean that the earth will be muddy, though pine needles and dead leaves under the trees will blur footprints. The classic trick for Helen here is to wear her stepfather's shoes. If the tracks are not very distinct, it will be difficult to determine whether or not the stepfather actually wore the shoes, and even whether they are the same shoes as those he is wearing. If the weather has been dry, the earth will be hard and the tracks faint.

To protect herself against possible bloodstains, she will put on her stepfather's coat when she goes out. Coat, shoes, gloves, and hammer are hidden in advance outside the house, so no one will see Helen leave with them; outside, it is dark enough so that she need not fear detection.

She leaves the house, therefore, picks up gloves, hammer, and coat from their hiding place (but not the shoes) and goes after her uncle. Her stepfather's shoes might cause comment from the uncle; the coat need not—in the country people often pick up the first coat handy when going out. Moreover, there must be a legitimate track of her own feet going and coming; she will not make any attempt to conceal the fact that she has seen her uncle. It is after the murder is accomplished and the hammer left beside the body and the overcoat hung on the hook in the hall that she will put on the shoes and leave the false trail. Then she will return to the house, slip out of the shoes, go inside, and announce that she has spoken to uncle, but he is still angry and wants to stay out longer.

The false trail has been laid from the body to the edge of the road; the stepfather on his return will come in by the front door, not the back; the trail must match

this. Helen has only to wait now for her stepfather's return; if he is long in coming, it will seem he committed the murder before going to the pub; if he comes home shortly, that he did it on the way back.

At this point the plotting of the basic conflict is completed. The conflict between Helen and her uncle is finished (although that between her and her stepfather is not) and, with the act of murder, the conflict with society has begun.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Plotting the Second Conflict

BEFORE we can begin to plot the second conflict or the actual story-telling, we must stop and determine what type of mystery this is.

We ruled out at the start a mystery with strong emphasis on psychological aspects. We do not seem to have any horror elements or adventure elements here; there is neither trap nor pursuit. The starting point was method, which indicates that most of the emphasis will be on detection; but the method is a character method, revealing both the girl's true character and that of her stepfather—that is, the proper detection of it will reveal those true characters—and an important element in the success of the plan, as well as its inception, is the fact that Helen lives in a small town, and leads a certain kind of life. We can conclude, therefore, that the mystery will be a cross between a detective story and a mystery novel of character and social habits.

This in turn dictates the tone of the story. Obviously, it will not be rough and tough. The fact that the chief character is a girl might tend to push the mystery toward a feminine school of story-telling; but there is little opportunity here for the chattery type of novel—if we wanted to write one—and if we can slant the story so that both male and female readers will enjoy it, we

enlarge our potential audience. Moreover, we have a large number of rather unattractive female characters: Helen, at least two important female gossips, and a mother who is rather a weak, sickly, and spineless creature.

From what viewpoint, then, is the story to be told? Since the emphasis is largely on the detection, the viewpoint character must be someone official, or someone with access to official knowledge and what is going on. But since the method to be detected is a character method, not a technical one, the official should be someone with a knowledge of human nature. The local doctor who is also coroner, would be a good choice. As a doctor, he knows a lot about people; as a coroner, he has an official part to play in the beginning of the detection and a plausible reason for being interested in its outcome, with, at the same time, an excuse for non-official or semi-official contacts with the family. Moreover, he has the virtue of being a man, which means that masculine readers will have a suitable identification figure. We need a sympathetic character friendly to Helen, who believes her stories, and we need a possible female-identification figure; they can be one and the same. A schoolmate of Helen's will do it. She will unfortunately seem a rather pale and colourless creature next to Helen, but she can be charming and loyal; we can provide her with a romance or not as the development seems to require it.

Whether to tell the story in the first person or the third will depend first on the sex of the author. Few women can write convincingly as men, and vice versa. If narration in the first person seems easier and more natural, a woman author will have to pick the school-

mate as the viewpoint character, and use the coroner as the detective-hero. Let us strike the middle ground here, and say that we will use third-person narrative over the shoulder of the doctor; and that we will confine ourselves to the single viewpoint throughout. This may have to be changed as the story develops, but we will aim at it.

The next question which comes up is where to start the narration of the story—at which point in time. We might start with the discovery of the murder, at the point at which the police and doctor are called in. If we do that, we shall have to get the effect of Helen's stories by hearsay and flashback, after the murder is committed, at which point the reader is suspicious of everyone, including Helen. If Helen's trick is to deceive the reader as it deceives the townspeople, we shall have to start before that.

If we go all the way back to the end of summer and the dance Helen was not allowed to attend, we shall be putting too much emphasis on a part of Helen's motive; and we shall be extending the time span of the story over too much space. We might begin a week or so before Christmas and the uncle's arrival, when the stories are spreading merrily (although Helen has artistically let them die down a bit before the immediate event) or we might begin on Christmas Eve with the uncle's arrival.

Of the two, the week before Christmas seems the best. We shall do little violence to unity of time while still allowing ourselves exposition in action, instead of in recollection.

It is very tempting, at this point, to consider showing the reader his first glimpse of the stories through the

eyes of the sympathetic schoolmate, rather than through those of the doctor. The doctor is less apt to be taken in, even when the stories are third hand by the time they reach him; and the schoolmate is less able to do anything active and aggressive about the supposed situation. Perhaps we can combine the best features of both by having the schoolmate come to the doctor with a repetition of Helen's tale. The schoolmate thinks something should be done, and appeals to the doctor to do it. He makes discreet inquiries among the other neighbours, and hears similar tales; one of them shows him the clipping from the paper and assures him that 'Helpless' must be Helen. He goes to Helen's house, but when he questions her she bursts into tears and refuses to say a word. Baffled but busy, the doctor goes away. He has no time the following week to do anything further, and is inclined to view the whole thing as somewhat exaggerated. And then comes the murder.

How much space we need spend on this pre-murder exposition cannot yet be determined exactly. We will assume that one chapter will do it. The second chapter might concern itself with the events of Christmas Day, leading up to the murder. Then comes the first routine of questioning, investigating the scene of the crime, tabulating the evidence on hand. A coroner's jury will meet in the next day or so. They will determine that deceased has met his death by being struck on the head with the hammer found near him, they will determine the approximate time of the murder—and what will their verdict be about the murderer?

We are faced with a choice here. If they determine that deceased met his death at the hands of his brother-in-law, the stepfather will be carted off to jail imme-

diately, and the course of the detection will be the strengthening and tightening of the case against him. If the jury cannot agree on the guilty party, they may adjourn until further evidence is uncovered; and the stepfather will probably not be jailed. Room for reasonable doubt will exist in the question of what time the stepfather left the house, arrived at the pub, left the pub and returned to the house again. There will be some question as to whether the coat he wore in the pub was the same as the coat on which bloodstains have been found. (Or perhaps they have not yet been found.) Examination of the hammer will show his prints, but they will be blurred; there will be the question of whether or not the stepfather was seen wearing gloves that evening—Helen was not as bright as she might have been, leaving the prints obviously on the hammer. We shall have to go back and revise this portion of the forward planning. She wiped the prints from the hammer, but was careful not to wipe too carefully around the end; there are a few partial prints there. But of course, the ownership of the hammer is beyond question.

The evidence of the footprints is also none too clear. The men who saw the stepfather in the pub are divided in their opinions: some think he was so drunk he could have committed the murder, others think he was too drunk to have done so. All in all, the case looks bad, but more evidence is needed; let's say the coroner's court is adjourned until further notice, meanwhile the police look for further evidence to support a charge before the magistrates.

Now Helen's plan begins to take effect. Public opinion puts the stepfather on trial, while the investigation is examining the physical evidence. Helen, anxious that

no arrest has yet been made, makes her first blunder. Instead of letting well enough alone, she adds another little false story about her stepfather.

Meanwhile, the County C.I.D. are of course seeing if any case can be made against anyone other than the stepfather. A possible motive is uncovered for the woman next door: she had once been jilted by the uncle. One of the elderly gentlemen to whom Helen had confided her imaginary troubles, and who was a caller on Christmas afternoon, is a business competitor of the uncle's, and was about to lose a big contract because it was being awarded to the uncle. The mother's motive—the three thousand pounds—is discovered, but it bolsters the case against the stepfather; the mother seems too weak and sickly to have managed the murder. (This will make some of our readers sure she is guilty.) Helen's motive is considered; but the picture of herself she has built up is strong; her claim to have seen her uncle alive before her father's return is not yet openly questioned—there is as yet no reason to question it—and nine hundred pounds doesn't seem adequate in the circumstances. There is no sense considering the children—none of our readers will believe a case against them, particularly since they are very young (young enough to require Helen's care).

Time passes while the question of an outsider is considered and rejected (no signs of a struggle) and while the past relations between uncle and stepfather are examined.

Are there any elements in the story which we have failed to use up to this point? We haven't used the children at all.

Their testimony is apt to be disregarded; children

have no sense of time, adults say; they make things up; they get confused. One of the children, who should have been in bed at the time, was looking out of the window when Helen made her return from the woods; he noticed something. Perhaps that she was 'walking funny'—the shoes were clumsy and she was simulating the weaving track of a drunk—but in what way funny the child cannot define, nor is anyone particularly interested.

The reader, of course, is not going to believe in the stepfather's guilt by now; he is too obviously suspected. We must throw the apparent burden of guilt rather carefully on someone else; the elderly gentleman to whom Helen confided the ground-bait about her stepfather's brutality will be a good candidate. At this point, it is discovered that he wears the same size and type of shoes as the stepfather; the tracks might have been his. He left the house before the stepfather did and did not return to his own until much later; he has no alibi. But we must suggest all this without too much emphasis, sneak it in, so that the reader will think we are trying to conceal it from him.

Things are moving much too slowly for Helen. In despair, she sees the officials going about their task methodically, being diverted by evidence against the neighbour; the will cannot be probated before the case is settled; she must get her money and get away before the spring term starts at the dramatic school she has picked out for herself. And the tension is telling on her; she is nervous and afraid. She makes her second blunder. In a hysterical scene whose hysteria is only partly faked, she 'confesses' to the officials that her uncle was not alive when she saw him in the woods, but

dead; and that she saw her stepfather running away from him. She has concealed the knowledge all this time because of her mother.

On this testimony of a direct witness, the police have no alternative but to arrest the stepfather. His denials of Helen's story are of course discounted; but her accusation has opened his eyes, and Helen realizes it. She is now in acute danger.

One of the chief difficulties of the stepfather's defence has been his inability to remember exactly what he did or whom he saw the fatal evening, because he was so drunk. He has not had anything to drink since then; being gravely suspected of murder has sobered him and scared him. Helen has encouraged this sobriety, because she is afraid that if he gets drunk again, he may be able to remember.

The stepfather is led off to jail. As he is taken in he encounters a disreputable crony just being released, who has been locked up for a few days for drunk and disorderly conduct. The sight of this man recalls the stepfather's alibi to him. He claims that the man can alibi him—but the crony's recollections of the evening are as vague as the stepfather's had been. The stepfather begs for a chance to revive the witness's memory; the Chief Constable who is a fair-minded, sporting sort of man allows him the chance, though it is highly irregular. The stepfather will be brought back to his house under guard (perhaps under some such excuse as demonstrating to the police where he kept his carpentry tools) and allowed to have a drink with his discreditable acquaintance—already primed with whisky. Probably it is the doctor, a close personal friend, who talks the Chief Constable into allowing this; he thinks it may work.

By this manœuvre we get the stepfather back within Helen's reach. She is still, to everyone in the town with the exception of the doctor, a put-upon martyr; no one else is suspicious of her. She will have little difficulty therefore in getting her stepfather upstairs for a moment, alone—though the house is guarded. He and his companion are sufficiently in their cups to manage an accident. The stepfather, maudlin and uncertain, can be pushed from the window or down the back stairs; crony is in a stupor.

And so, for a little while, the case seems either closed or at a dead end. But the doctor is not satisfied. He waits impatiently for the drunken witness to sober up once more. When he does, he remembers—and the stepfather's alibi is established; too late to do him any good—but the case is definitely open again.

Means and opportunity this time point straight to Helen—if the 'accident' is considered a second murder. Only her motive needs to be established. The doctor gathers the children, the mother, the schoolmate and the police together, and reviews from the start the case against the stepfather. Inescapably, Helen's manœuvres come to light; and the quarry is trapped.

The general plot outlines for the story are now established. Before going further, three things must be done: the characters must be firmly established in the author's mind (see the chapter on characterization); all the elements in the story must be checked to make sure they fulfil all possible functions, and that there are no irrelevancies; and then the story must be graphed for tempo.

We will assume the first two processes, which have been discussed elsewhere. Graphing the tempo is a very simple procedure: it consists in making a skeleton out-

line, chapter by chapter, and marking the climaxes. The story of Helen would look like this:

Chapter I. Exposition—introduction of chief characters: Helen, the doctor, the schoolmate, the mother, the stepfather, the gossiping neighbours who are later to be suspects; and introduction at the same time of Helen's method.

Chapter II. Christmas Day, culminating in fight between uncle and stepfather. *Climax #1—minor.*

Chapter III. Exposition of past relations between uncle and others present in discussion of him after fight. Culminating in discovery of body. *Climax #2—major.*

Chapter IV. Investigation of scene of crime, questioning of suspects; attack for robbery ruled out; possible suspects narrowed pretty much to people in house at time. Return of stepfather, very drunk. *Climax #3—major.*

Chapter V. Coroner's inquest, general survey of facts known; pros and cons of stepfather's guilt; verdict—inquest adjourned.

Chapter VI. Further detective work at scene of crime—examination and analysis of weapon, terrain, footprints, time schedules, and alibis. Child's testimony. Motive, means, and opportunity established for one innocent suspect. Police Inspector seems to take that case seriously. Helen 'confesses' seeing stepfather at scene of crime. *Climax #4—major.*

Chapter VII. Rehash of case against stepfather, reconstruction of crime as he would have committed it; culminating in his arrest. *Climax #5—minor.*

Chapter VIII. Encounter between stepfather and crony; plan suggested by doctor and okayed by police; return of stepfather and crony to house; culminating in death of stepfather. *Climax #6—major.*

Chapter IX. Stalemate. Waiting for crony to sober up, doctor presents reasons for believing stepfather innocent, someone else guilty. Culminating in crony's final alibi of stepfather. *Climax #7—minor.*

Chapter X. Dénouement; case against Helen; accusation and proof. *Climax #8—major.*

This resumé shows us many things. It shows us first how disproportionately small a place the detection seems to play in the story. We have not got as much of a detective story as we had first thought. We see secondly that this skeleton does not indicate a very long book; its possibilities for expansion all seem to lie more in the greater delineation of character through action than in the addition of further sub-plots or more complicated mechanical factors. We see further that unless this is to be changed to a book chiefly of character study, some entirely new element is needed to deflect the course of the action and tighten the suspense; we have not worked out in detail just how the 'accidental' death of the stepfather is to be managed—perhaps our needed additional factor can be found there, and the death need not point so quickly and surely to Helen.

But one factor in the basic story we have not used at all in our actual plotting: the young man Helen had set her cap for. He, too, is apt to be home for the Christmas holidays; perhaps his engagement has been broken off by parental intervention. Injecting him into the picture after the murder has been committed can throw Helen off the track, emphasize a part of her immediate motivation, and give us a chance for romance between the schoolmate and the boy. If we are to continue with this story, if we intend to carry it through to a completed book, we shall have to reconsider the whole action line in the light of this possibility.

We shall not go into it here. Enough of the mechanics of plotting has been shown.

The third function of the graph—what it shows us of the tempo of the story—can be considered now in the

light of all these things. We see that we have a kind of pattern, which might be schematized this way:

no climax	
	minor climax
	major climax
	major climax
no climax	
	major climax
minor climax	
	major climax
minor climax	
	major climax

We seem to have two major climaxes occurring in sequence in chapters three and four. Are they of equal intensity? The discovery of the body is more of a climax for the people involved in the story than it is for the reader, who is expecting murder; the identity of the corpse will probably be no surprise to the reader either, since he has been conditioned to expect that the stepfather may commit murder, and the quarrel has been between stepfather and uncle. On the other hand the stepfather's homecoming, very drunk, can be made as much a climax for reader as for characters by adding to it a touch of the grotesque, some confusion, and the opening gun in the case against the stepfather—his inability to remember exactly where he has been or what he has been doing. In a sense, these two major climaxes are simply two parts of the same climax; and there is no way of further delaying the second half without slowing down suspense.

These two major climaxes are followed very properly by a section of no climax, and the following chapter, VI, may very well in the writing extend to two chapters,

giving us a flat space of some length before reaching the next climax, which is a very major one—much bigger, for both reader and the characters in the story, than any which has gone before.

The following climax is marked minor, because it is only the materialization of something foreseen by the reader for some time. The death of the stepfather, however, which marks the next major climax, and which completely upsets the case against him, constitutes an even greater climax than Helen's 'confession' that she had seen her stepfather at the scene of the crime. The alibi for the stepfather, finally disposing of the case against him, which occurs next, is a minor climax because we have of course ceased to consider him as a serious suspect. The solution represents the greatest climax of all.

We can see, then, that as the story progresses the climaxes increase in frequency as well as in intensity, which will give us the necessary tightening of suspense in the finished story. Our tempo pattern will do as a working chart; the new elements which we inject into the plot must not upset its accelerating rate; and the expansion of any one section, in the replotting or writing, must not throw the elements of the pattern out of proportion with each other.

The author is now ready to set the story down on paper. Before we go on to a consideration of the problems there involved, however, it may be as well to say that the plot outlined just here is not offered as a startling or original one. At least two elements—the trail of false footprints left by Helen's wearing of her stepfather's shoes; and Helen's luring of the guard away from her stepfather—would need freshening to make

the novel really good. The effort here has been to show a technique for building a plot from an initial idea; the result could be made into a saleable mystery novel, but not, as it is now outlined, a distinguished one. To go into every detail of replotting necessary to make this an outstanding mystery novel would take as much space as to write it.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Writing the Novel

S. S. VAN DINE's posthumously published *Winter Murder Case* was an illuminating example of the way in which a very successful mystery writer worked. For the draft which was published—not the finished manuscript—was only forty thousand words long. It contained all the essential elements of the story; all the clues were in place, all the dialogues suggested, all the characters set, all the action outlined. The finished version would probably have been twice as long; description, dialogue, and action would have been amplified; but no new story elements would have been added.

This is an extremely economical and efficient way to write—for those who can do it. It is easier to catch and correct gross errors of construction or tempo in a short script than in a long one.

Not everyone can write that way. A great many people will insist, in fact, that they cannot even plot carefully and in detail as we have been doing. Such people get a basic idea, an opening situation, sit down to the typewriter and let come what may.

For those who honestly cannot write any other way—and have tried—this method will have to do. It has certain merits: sometimes an author who tries to plot carefully in advance, and finds himself stuck, will get

unstuck by beginning to put things down on paper. Characters come alive and start doing things on their own initiative; action develops logically from action, in a way not foreseen in outline. Many mystery writers, some of them successful, work on the catch-as-catch-can method.

But the author who can train himself to be methodical about his work will save himself a great deal of time and energy and can devote to new work at least half the time otherwise required to revise work already done. Careful plotting and planning eliminates the impossibilities, stalemates, dead spots, and errors in plot consistency which can be so painful to revise once the entire story is written. To rip apart the fabric of a seventy thousand word script because there is a basic error in the construction is to spend almost as much time and energy as is needed to write a new story from scratch. If the original plot outline shows such an error, it can be adjusted—or the story thrown away if necessary—before very much time has been wasted. If the error is not caught there, but is found in a first skeletal draft, it is still easier to manipulate and revise thirty or forty thousand words than seventy or eighty thousand. Careful planning will not eliminate revision entirely; it will leave only surface revision to be done.

The question of time saved is not irrelevant. The average professional mystery writer must turn out from two to five books a year if his income from his writing is to be satisfactory. Inefficiency in the allocation of the year's time is money lost as well as time and energy.

Many writers employ mechanical devices to help them along in the actual writing of the story. These devices are curious and diverse, and very personal.

Probably no one person's device will exactly suit another; but for what they may suggest, here are a few.

A large chart, listing all clues, the page on which they are first discovered, and followed by blank columns for pages on which they are mentioned again, is hung over the working desk. The clues are checked off as the writing progresses, and crossed through when finally disposed of in the text. In that way, the author cannot find himself on the last page with the sad discovery that he has forgotten to explain one or more clues.

Two sorts of time schedules can be helpful: a general time schedule of the events in the story; and a separate time chart for each of the important characters. These charts are prepared in advance, compared to make sure they agree, and then used as reference during writing. And of course, if any change is made while the story is being written, its notation on the time schedule will avoid errors further on.

If the mystery depends on complications in space—that is, if a map or houseplan is needed—it is well to have it at one's elbow while writing. No matter how clearly the house, for instance, is visualized, if the plan is at all complicated, there is always the possibility of allowing someone to go through a door where none exists, or something equally fatal. By and large, no mystery should be dependent on a drawn plan to such an extent that it is unintelligible without it. Maps can be used as reader aids, they should not be a necessity.

The tempo graph, copied on a large sheet of paper with plenty of room in margins and between lines, can be filled in by notes of any additional material which creeps in as the writing progresses; so that when the manuscript is finished it can be studied not as a plan

of what should have happened, but as a picture of what did happen.

Some authors use running-line pictographs of plot and sub-plots, in various coloured pencils, with arrows or curves to indicate crises and points at which plot and sub-plot convene. This is more useful in the catch-as-catch-can method than in the one here outlined: it shows the author who isn't sure what's happening next whether or not his direction is right, or whether he is allowing matters of secondary interest to occupy too much of the stage.

Needless to say, charts to remind the author of the colour of his heroine's eyes or his hero's hair should not be necessary. If the characters are so nebulous to the author as to require that sort of aid, the story is certainly not ready to be written.

The actual setting-down on paper of the first draft is perhaps the most individual problem of all. Some writers charge ahead full steam, ignoring typographical errors, uncompleted sentences and repetitions, until the entire first draft is completed. Others do one chapter that way, then go back and do some polishing before they proceed. Still others cannot put a sentence on paper until it has been carefully and thoroughly worked out in their minds.

If no short draft has been used between plotting and writing, the full-steam-ahead method is probably the most practical. The story is blocked in as a whole quickly and errors in construction corrected before polishing begins. The use of the short draft as a catch basin for all basic errors should mean that the professional can then write from that a fairly finished draft, taking his time and going slowly.

Even the most detailed and careful planning, however, will not be a guarantee against surprises. Things become clues which the author never intended as such; characters, talking in character, say things which suddenly become significant and change the emphasis or angle of the plot. Such 'spirit writing' is to be welcomed; it usually indicates that the author knows his characters and situation so well that significant details arise almost automatically from that knowledge; and the book as a whole is enriched.

Once the first draft has been completed, the next step will depend on the procedure followed up to that time—and the amount of time the author can allow himself before completing the book. If the first draft is sketchy, full of cryptic and hurried notes to the author whose significance he may forget in a few days' time, then the business of revision should be attended to immediately. If the first draft is rather careful and complete, it should be set aside, unread, for as long as possible. Two weeks will help, a month is better and two or three months is better still. The longer the delay, the greater the objectivity with which the author can read his own work. This is again a matter of individual temperament; some people can be objective about their own work immediately; others never.

Whenever revision is begun it should first, of course, be concerned with structural changes, if they are needed. There is no use polishing a phrase, and then finding the whole paragraph must be cut out. Any working charts or tables that have been used should be checked against the written story, to make sure that no errors in mechanical details have been made. The first reading of the completed first draft should be done at

one gulp, quickly; matters to be revised can be checked in the margin or a note made of them; they should not be attended to right away. That first quick reading should be done to get a picture of the book as a whole. After that reading is completed a new tempo graph should be made of the story as written, without reference to the advance tempo graph; and notes made of places where action needs tightening, discussion needs shortening, or suspense needs heightening. There must be a balance between action and deduction: too long a stretch of deduction will put the reader to sleep, no matter how witty the conversation; too much violent action, without breathing spaces in between, will stun the reader into complete insensitivity and leave him impervious to shock.

When all necessary changes in construction and tempo have been attended to, revision of style can begin.

At this point it may be advisable to say something of a rather thorny problem: the use of Americanisms.

A spoken language is a living, growing thing, and the use of new words and idioms, from any source, is not to be barred just from dull conservatism. On the other hand the use of American expressions, not generally current here, by a native British author, either in exposition or in the mouths of non-American characters, is a specious affectation: and it can be a costly one. An English writer of mystery adventure novels, who had great success elsewhere, failed to reach the United States market simply because he employed innumerable pseudo-Americanisms whose falseness was instantly noticed and rejected by American readers.

In general the safest and best course for the beginner

is to think of style as an end-product only. To the writer at work it has no existence. His effort will be to say everything in the most economical, exact and effective manner possible. He will try to suit the rhythm of his sentences and the choice of his words to the subject matter. If he is writing an action scene, he will not use polysyllabic words and multiple adjectives: these do not convey a sense of action. He will use verbs, active adverbs, and a quickened tempo of sentence structure. If he is writing a dialogue between two people who are being relaxed and casual, he will not write it in jerky sentences with constant interruptions, but will suit the flow of sentences and the choice of words to casual conversation. He will test what he has written with an eye to the exactness of meaning conveyed, the effect on the reader, and the tempo of the words on the page.

He will use punctuation as a means of indicating that tempo; and he will be careful to see that it never intrudes, never shows up on the page as punctuation. He will in general use few exclamation marks, underlined words and dashes; these are marks for a certain violence to eye and ear, and can overdo the effect at which he is aiming.

He will go over his descriptive passages with a determined blue pencil, cutting out irrelevant adjectives and redundant phrases. He will try to judge description by its functional effectiveness, and will cut out ruthlessly every phrase, no matter how charming, which does not serve to set a mood, plant a clue, point a character or otherwise contribute to the development of the story.

He will read and re-read his expository passages for clarity. Exposition usually tries to tell much in little;

the effect is sometimes incomprehensible to someone who does not know the full background. If it is narrative exposition, not exposition offered in scenes in action, it will be cut to the bone, made as brief as clarity permits.

He will examine his transitions. He will make sure that when a lapse of time is indicated, the reader will know what that time is, and will have a convincing sense of time passing. He will not be afraid of such direct methods as saying clearly: 'Two nights later, on the back porch . . .' or, 'That afternoon, after a restless and unsatisfactory siesta, Miss Blanche started off for town.'

And when he has finished—when narrative, description, dialogue, action and exposition have all been checked for clarity, economy, exactness of meaning and effectiveness—the author will have achieved his style. He may not—probably will not be conscious of it himself: to him it is the only way of saying what he has to say. But no two people will ever have the same 'only way', and the style will be there.

The final draft will go quickly or slowly, depending on how carefully the preparation for it has been made. It in turn should be checked for typographical errors, spelling (few writers can spell!) and legibility. Needless to say, the final draft should be typewritten, even if the first drafts were in longhand. The page should be double-spaced, with enough margin at the left for editorial comment; and the pages should be numbered consecutively from first to last, not starting a new one for each chapter. The manuscript should be typed on paper heavy enough for the page underneath not to show through; and if for some valid reason the original cannot be sent out, then only a first carbon, and that

only if very clear, should be sent. Editors dislike ruining eye and temper on indistinct third carbons done on transparent onion-skin paper, which slithers to the floor at a touch. The author's name and address, and instructions for return, should be clearly indicated on the first page.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Some Odds and Ends

EQUIPMENT

CERTAIN works of reference are indispensable to the author. First, of course, is a good standard dictionary. The Shorter Oxford is excellent, but it is bulky, and even at second-hand often costly. Of the one volume dictionaries Chambers' is as serviceable as any. An American dictionary no matter how good (i.e. short editions of Webster's International Dictionary—often found here) will not do if you are writing for the British market.

A thesaurus comes next in importance. But it must be used with care. It is not meant to be a happy hunting ground for obsolete expressions, tortured adjectives and obscure nouns. It should never be used to substitute 'fancy' words for everyday ones. What it can and should do is help the author choose from two or more synonyms the one which renders best his exact shade of meaning, or trap the elusive word hovering on the edge of memory.

Third, a copy of Fowler's *Modern English Usage*. For matters of style, spelling, and punctuation it can be invaluable. Written with wit, and at times impassioned prejudice, it is good as well as informative reading: and

the discussions of such topics as Genteelism and Generic Names can be extremely useful.

Ralph Partridge's *Usage and Abuse* is another useful reference book, entertaining, stimulating and often serviceable. It is a lighter work than Fowler's, to which it sometimes serves as a corrective. It, too, is not free from prejudice.

(For those who venture on the slippery slopes of American dialogue, Mencken's *American Language* is an invaluable aid, particularly on matters of divergent usage.)

The first three at least of these pieces of equipment—Dictionary, Thesaurus and *English Usage*—are essential to the prospective writer. Certain other books may prove useful enough to make owning them worthwhile.

Whitaker's Almanac is an excellent tool for checking dates, figures, times, etc.; while to the writer who cannot afford the luxury of the Encyclopedia Britannica there are several short encyclopedias, one or other of which is almost a necessity. For the writer whose plots demand particular settings and distances—an atlas or motoring map dealing with the areas in question (whether Siberia or Rutland) is important. The Ordnance Survey maps of Great Britain show contours, woods, churches, pubs, rivers, canals, marshes, railway tunnels, cuttings and embankments, and a great deal of other potentially useful information. Large scale maps should, however, only be used as a basis for an imaginary district or to reinforce memory. To rely purely on a map when describing a specific setting is to court disaster.

The public libraries will provide most of the more

technical reference works the mystery writer is likely to need, and in most the librarians will prove helpful and informative. If a book is not held in a county or borough library, it can generally be obtained through the inter-library loan system; but for the writer who does not have easy access to a library, some of the following works may be added to the list of purchases: *Medical Jurisprudence and Toxicology* by John Glaister, which gives an appalling panorama of the whole field of violent crime as well as dealing exhaustively with fingerprints, etc.; J. D. Mann's *Forensic Medicine and Toxicology*; *The P. J. Poisons Guide* published by the Pharmaceutical Press; and *Murrell's What To Do in Cases of Poisoning*, an invaluable short study dealing with symptoms and antidotes by a London coroner. Police work is concisely but fully dealt with in *Police Procedure and Administration* by Cecil Moriarty. This is a book which every mystery writer whose story is laid in this country would be wise to read; while *Whitehall 1212* by Richardson Harrison, a non-technical work, may also prove of assistance to beginners.

Fortunately, Howard Haycraft's *Murder for Pleasure* and *The Art of the Mystery Story* have been published in Great Britain, and copies are to be found in lending libraries as well as in book shops. Any opportunity that may present itself to study these classics on his trade should be seized by the aspiring mystery writer.

NAMING THE CHARACTERS

Some characters suggest their own names, usually because certain names have definite associations in

the author's mind. But many a full-blown character appears before his creator's eyes without a tag. The use of descriptive cognomens—Smart, Busty, Dusty, Tremble, Tight, etc.—is outmoded and should be avoided.

In general fairly common-sounding names are best, unless the characters to whom they are ascribed are themselves meant to be exotic. But names of real people, personally known to the author should, of course, not be used, and it can be dangerous to give too usual a name to a criminal or other character shown in a highly unfavourable light. Indeed when a scene in a mystery is laid in some real, specific locality it is a wise precaution to check from reference books (i.e. telephone directories or street registers) to see that no one of the same name as a villainous or grossly incompetent character in the story actually inhabits the area in question. Obviously there are limitations to this rule: a wicked Mr. Smith, resident somewhere in greater London, is scarcely an identifiable character. But if the reader learns for instance that Mr. Smith has a Christian name, and then later that he lives in some particular part of some identifiable district, and then finally that he is a hairdresser by occupation, the case is altogether altered. The troublesome question of libel is dealt with a little more fully under that heading in the next chapter: but it is at best a highly involved subject, and, so far as the names of fictional characters are concerned the golden rule for authors remains 'better safe than sorry'.

Names should not resemble each other too closely on the printed page. Two characters in the same story named Wood and Good, or Benson and Boston, or

Clara and Clarice, are going to confuse the reader. It is best not to let the names of any two *important* characters start with the same letter of the alphabet, or finish with the same syllable (Westinghouse and Morehouse; Thompson and Johnson; Redding and Britling) or contain the same important vowel sound. Kurt Steel said that he wrote the alphabet down before naming his characters, crossing out each letter as it was used.

LENGTH

There was a time when the average mystery often ran to only 60,000 words. Today the average is over 75,000, and a 60,000-word novel is considered short.

There are two factors to be considered in the question of length; one of craftsmanship and one of economics.

The length of the novel should, ideally, be suited to the number of words needed to tell the story most effectively. If it can be done in 50,000 words, adding more words will only spoil it. It is hard to believe that it could ever be more effective in 120,000 words than in 80,000.

But—booksellers and customers demand not only quality for their money, but quantity as well. A very short mystery runs a serious commercial hazard: booksellers don't want to stock it.

On the other hand, safety does not lie in the other extreme. It costs more to print 100,000 words than it does to print 70,000; and few first mysteries do more than pay their costs. Obviously the publisher cannot afford a rise in cost which will produce a loss on the sale of the book.

Of the two, the more distressing evil is that of the floor under the number of words, not of the ceiling over them. Too often it is responsible for needless padding which obscures the flavour, impact and effectiveness of the book.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Copyright and Libel Under English Law

COPYRIGHT

THE rights of an author to his own work and so the extent to which one author may make use of the work of another largely depends on the provisions of the Copyright Act of 1911.

The thing to remember about copyright is that it only protects the *expression of thought* (no one is allowed a monopoly of subject matter); and then only if 'skill and labour' has been employed in that expression. For instance the title of a book is not copyright—unless it is so long that it constitutes a literary composition by the author!

However, it is in fact actionable to mislead the public about the authorship of a particular work by giving it a title similar to one *already identified with a book by another writer*. Thus a book called 'The Egg and Me' by Bettie McDonald, published in exactly the same format as Miss MacDonald's 'The Egg and I', might well lay those responsible open to legal action, but a work called 'On the Spot: an Introduction to the Theory and Practice of Dry Cleaning' in five quarto volumes at 25s. apiece would be unlikely to cause litigation with Edgar Wallace's literary executors.

Generally speaking the author of a work is the owner of the first copyright in it. But he can, of course, assign the copyright to another party—for example, to a publisher or literary agent. The assignment has to be in writing and must be signed by the author (or his duly authorized agent) but it does not have to be in any particular form of words and can, in fact, very well be contained in a simple letter. Copyrights can also, like other property, be left by the owner to his heirs.

A book published in almost any civilized country in the world is protected in Great Britain by British copyright laws, and books published in Great Britain are, reciprocally, protected by the Copyright Laws of other countries. Moreover the copyright of books written in any of Her Majesty's Dominions, or by a British subject anywhere, is protected in this country even though the works in question have not been published.

As a rule the copyright on a book lasts for fifty years from the death of the author. After that the work becomes, so to speak, public property. But twenty-five years after the death of an author a work can be reproduced without the consent of the owner of the copyright if certain statutory conditions, including the payment of a royalty to the owner, are complied with.

An important point for fiction writers (though not strictly relevant to the subject of this book) is that the law of copyright protects their work in other mediums besides the printed word. Thus a fiction writer has automatically the copyright of any film, theatre or broadcast version of his work—unless, naturally, he has assigned some or all of these rights to someone else.

LIBEL

A libel action is a means by which a party who feels wronged seeks to be 'repaired' for the damage he may have suffered by the publication of false and defamatory statements about him.

Contrary to what is often believed and repeated a statement to be libellous *must* be false. To show that what has been published is true is a full defence in a libel action, and is known as 'justification'. However, it is up to the supposed libeller to prove the truth of his statement; not to the plaintiff to show that it is false.

A statement is defamatory if it is 'calculated' to bring someone into hatred, contempt or ridicule, or to be damaging to his reputation in his business or calling.

The rule in all this from the point of view of the fiction writer, and particularly the mystery fiction writer—who is almost bound to have one or more discreditable characters to portray—lies in the word 'calculated'.

The law as it stands at the present day is that a statement may still have been 'calculated' to be defamatory even if the writer was quite innocent of any such intent at the time he made it. Thus a libel may be completely accidental, and a writer even unaware of the very existence of the party he is libelling. If someone can show that the words he complains of as libellous were: (1) defamatory; and (2) understood by other people as referring to him, then, unless a successful plea of 'justification' is raised, he will win his case.

Because of this curious law the prospective mystery writer will be well advised to exercise a good deal of caution in the choice of names and places in his story.

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FRANCES CRANE
(Smart, sophisticated detection)

Murder in Bright Red
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(Rugged, not too tough)

The Widow had a Gun
The Frightened Fiancée

GUY CULLINGFORD
(Unique themes; English settings)

Conjuror's Coffin
Post Mortem

ELIZABETH DALY
(Suave, smooth detection)

The Book of the Crime
Death and Letters

MANNING O'BRIEN
(In the Peter Cheyney tradition)

Deadly Interlude
Dodos Don't Duck

WILLIAM ARD
(Hard-headed, hard-boiled detection)

The Diary
The Perfect Frame

OWEN CAMERON
(Tops for suspense)

Catch a Tiger

VAN SILLER
(Smart setting, slick sleuthing)

The Last Resort
Paul's Apartment

MARGARET ERSKINE
(English settings. Tense, eerie atmosphere)

Dead by Now
Death of Our Dear One

ELIZABETH ANTILL
(Light, entertaining style)

Death on the Barrier Reef
Murder in Mid-Atlantic

Ask your bookseller or librarian about these

Basic Ideas

1. Diamond stealing around Orange River - See *World Wide* - 10/50
- 2 - An officer marries a Russian girl - an action - in de-mobbed & returns to England. One day his wife vanishes - he tries to find her.
- 3 - Suppose someone finds a wallet containing secret papers, for some quite logical reason cannot go to the police with it. Instead tracks down the owner. The owner immediately suspects the finder & tries to kill him without the finder being aware why.