
Opening Extract from...

Silent Nights

Christmas Mysteries

Edited and introduced by
Martin Edwards

Published by The British Library

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INTRODUCTION

Christmas may be when we dream of peace on earth, and entertain feelings of goodwill to all men (and women), but there are limits. It is a mysterious, as well as magical, time of year. Strange things can happen, and this helps to explain the hallowed tradition of telling ghost stories around the fireside as the year draws to a close. Christmas tales of crime and detection have a similar appeal. When television becomes tiresome, and party games pall, the prospect of curling up in the warm with a good mystery is enticing – and much better for the digestion than yet another helping of plum pudding.

Crime writers are just as susceptible as readers to the countless attractions of Christmas. Over the years, distinguished practitioners ranging from Agatha Christie to Mary Higgins Clark have given one or more of their stories a Yuletide setting. There is nothing new about this. Influenced by his friend Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins wrote an early novella, *Mr Wray's Cash-Box* (also known as *The Stolen Mask*), which had a rather sentimental Christmas theme. Later, Arthur Conan Doyle set one of his first Sherlock Holmes short stories at Christmas; superior to Collins' effort, it remains a pleasure to read, and despite its familiarity, its inclusion here is deserved. By contrast, "The Raffles Relics", a story about "the amateur cracksman" A.J. Raffles written by Conan Doyle's brother-in-law, E.W. Hornung, lacks a particularly strong seasonal flavour, and is much less well known. This illustrates the point that the most memorable Christmas mysteries blend a lively storyline with an atmospheric evocation of the festive season. Getting the mixture right is much harder than it looks.

The British Library's series of Crime Classics concentrates on stories associated with "the Golden Age of murder", during which the formation of the Detection Club marked a valiant attempt to

raise the standards of crime writing. Membership of the Club was by election, and confined to those authors whose work was regarded by their peers as exemplary. Edgar Wallace was among those not deemed eligible to join, because of his focus on writing thrillers rather than carefully plotted whodunnits. In terms of literary merit, his work was often slapdash, but neither Wallace nor his stories were ever lacking in energy or exuberance, and he is represented here by a tale written with his characteristic verve.

G.K. Chesterton was the first President of the Detection Club (the honour was offered to Conan Doyle, but he was too frail to accept), and owed this distinction mainly to his creation of Father Brown, a priest and gifted amateur detective. Father Brown has gained a new following in recent years thanks to his reincarnation on television in the person of Mark Williams; the screenplays bear little resemblance to the original stories, but the popularity of the show has helped to revive interest in Chesterton's crime fiction. "The Flying Stars", written when Chesterton was at the peak of his powers, is one of the best-loved stories featuring Father Brown.

Agatha Christie, a founder member of the Detection Club, adored Christmas, but her finest Yuletide whodunnit was a novel, rather than a short story. *Hercule Poirot's Christmas* is a classic country house murder mystery with a "least likely person" culprit revealed by the brilliant little Belgian. Christie's friend and Detection Club colleague Dorothy L. Sayers created in Lord Peter Wimsey another of fiction's "great detectives", and a Christmastime investigation featuring Wimsey, also set in a country house, appears here. Sayers admired the writing of J. Jefferson Farjeon, two of whose mystery novels have been reprinted recently by the British Library; an early example of his detective fiction is included in this volume.

H.C. Bailey, now almost forgotten, but in his day regarded as one of the finest practitioners of the form, was unusual among the

group of detective writers who emerged after the First World War in that most of his best work was done in the short story form. Pungent and powerfully written, Reggie Fortune's recorded cases suffer from a dated literary style, but remain worth reading. Bailey too was a founder member of the Detection Club. Two more writers of quality represented here, Margery Allingham and Nicholas Blake (the pen-name of Cecil Day-Lewis), joined the Club's ranks during the Thirties. Allingham's Albert Campion was brought to the TV screens in 1989, with Peter Davison playing Campion. In contrast, Blake's regular detective, Nigel Strangeways, has never quite managed a television series of his own, although one Strangeways story, *The Beast Must Die*, was adapted for the legendary BBC series *Detective* in 1968. Edmund Crispin, elected to the Detection Club in 1947, created another likeable sleuth in the Oxford don Gervase Fen. The Fen story which appears here is taken from *Beware of the Trains*, a late – and highly enjoyable – example of a short story collection featuring a detective firmly in the Golden Age tradition.

Of the remaining contributors to this volume, Marjorie Bowen and Joseph Shearing were both pen-names used by the same woman. Like Bowen/Shearing, Leo Bruce (another alias) was a popular writer of considerable distinction. "Beef for Christmas" is, however, a rare story which has never, as far as I know, appeared in an anthology before. The same is, I believe, true of "Parlour Tricks". The author, Ralph Plummer, was a man of mystery in more ways than one, and it has proved impossible to find out anything about him. A little sleuthing has, however, unearthed biographical information about the little-known Raymund Allen, as well as background detail concerning the gifted but reclusive and publicity-hating Ethel Lina White.

This book, like other short story collections in the British Library's Crime Classics series, aims to introduce a new generation

of readers to some of the finest detective story writers of the past. Once again, I have striven to track down one or two stories which are unlikely to be familiar even to diehard mystery fans. The result, I hope, is crime fiction to savour, whatever the season.

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THE BLUE CARBUNCLE

Arthur Conan Doyle

Arthur Conan Doyle (1859–1930) achieved literary immortality through his creation of Sherlock Holmes. The first two long stories about the great consulting detective, *A Study in Scarlet* and *The Sign of Four*, did not make a big splash, but once Conan Doyle began to contribute short stories featuring Sherlock's cases to the *Strand Magazine*, readers fell in love with the brilliant eccentric. Today, he remains as popular as ever.

"The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle" was first published in January 1892, long before Conan Doyle's enthusiasm for writing about Holmes began to wane. The deductions that Holmes makes from the seedy and disreputable old felt hat are bravura flourishes, while in keeping with the spirit of Christmas, he is not presented in this story as merely a cold and ruthless reasoning machine. "I suppose I am commuting a felony," he says at the end, "but it is just possible that I am saving a soul."

* * * * *

I had called upon my friend Sherlock Holmes upon the second morning after Christmas, with the intention of wishing him the compliments of the season. He was lounging upon the sofa in a purple dressing-gown, a pipe-rack within his reach upon the right, and a pile of crumpled morning papers, evidently newly studied, near at hand. Beside the couch was a wooden chair, and on the angle of the back hung a very seedy and disreputable hard felt hat, much the worse for wear, and cracked in several places. A lens and a forceps lying upon the seat of the chair suggested that the hat had been suspended in this manner for the purpose of examination.

"You are engaged," said I; "perhaps I interrupt you."

"Not at all. I am glad to have a friend with whom I can discuss my results. The matter is a perfectly trivial one" (he jerked his thumb in the direction of the old hat), "but there are points in connection with it which are not entirely devoid of interest, and even of instruction."

I seated myself in his armchair, and warmed my hands before his crackling fire, for a sharp frost had set in, and the windows were thick with the ice crystals. "I suppose," I remarked, "that, homely as it looks, this thing has some deadly story linked on to it—that it is the clue which will guide you in the solution of some mystery, and the punishment of some crime."

"No, no. No crime," said Sherlock Holmes, laughing. "Only one of those whimsical little incidents which will happen when you have four million human beings all jostling each other within the space of a few square miles. Amid the action and reaction of so dense a swarm of humanity, every possible combination of events may be expected to take place, and many a little problem will be presented which may be striking and bizarre without being criminal. We have already had experience of such."

"So much so," I remarked, "that, of the last six cases which I have added to my notes, three have been entirely free of any legal crime."

"Precisely. You allude to my attempt to recover the Irene Adler papers, to the singular case of Miss Mary Sutherland, and to the adventure of the man with the twisted lip. Well, I have no doubt that this small matter will fall into the same innocent category. You know Peterson, the commissionaire?"

"Yes."

"It is to him that this trophy belongs."

"It is his hat."

"No, no; he found it. Its owner is unknown. I beg that you will look upon it, not as a battered billycock, but as an intellectual problem. And, first as to how it came here. It arrived upon Christmas morning, in company with a good fat goose, which is, I have no doubt, roasting at this moment in front of Peterson's fire. The facts are these. About four o'clock on Christmas morning, Peterson, who, as you know, is a very honest fellow, was returning from some small jollification, and was making his way homewards down Tottenham Court Road. In front of him he saw, in the gaslight, a tallish man, walking with a slight stagger, and carrying a white goose slung over his shoulder. As he reached the corner of Goodge Street a row broke out between this stranger and a little knot of roughs. One of the latter knocked off the man's hat, on which he raised his stick to defend himself, and, swinging it over his head, smashed the shop window behind him. Peterson had rushed forward to protect the stranger from his assailants, but the man, shocked at having broken the window and seeing an official-looking person in uniform rushing towards him, dropped his goose, took to his heels, and vanished amid the labyrinth of small streets which lie at the back of Tottenham Court Road. The roughs had also fled at the appearance of Peterson, so that he was left in possession of the field of battle, and also of the spoils of victory in the shape of this battered hat and a most unimpeachable Christmas goose."

"Which surely he restored to their owner?"

"My dear fellow, there lies the problem. It is true that 'For Mrs Henry Baker' was printed upon a small card which was tied to the bird's left leg, and it is also true that the initials 'H.B.' are legible upon the lining of this hat; but, as there are some thousands of Bakers, and some hundreds of Henry Bakers in this city of ours, it is not easy to restore lost property to any one of them."

"What, then, did Peterson do?"

"He brought round both hat and goose to me on Christmas morning, knowing that even the smallest problems are of interest to me. The goose we retained until this morning, when there were signs that, in spite of the slight frost, it would be well that it should be eaten without unnecessary delay. Its finder has carried it off therefore to fulfil the ultimate destiny of a goose, while I continue to retain the hat of the unknown gentleman who lost his Christmas dinner."

"Did he not advertise?"

"No."

"Then, what clue could you have as to his identity?"

"Only as much as we can deduce."

"From his hat?"

"Precisely."

"But you are joking. What can you gather from this old battered felt?"

"Here is my lens. You know my methods. What can you gather yourself as to the individuality of the man who has worn this article?"

I took the tattered object in my hands, and turned it over rather ruefully. It was a very ordinary black hat of the usual round shape, hard and much the worse for wear. The lining had been of red silk, but was a good deal discoloured. There was no maker's name; but, as Holmes had remarked, the initials "H.B." were scrawled upon one side. It was pierced in the brim for a hat-securer, but the elastic was missing. For the rest, it was cracked, exceedingly dusty, and spotted in several places, although there seemed to have been some attempt to hide the discoloured patches by smearing them with ink.

"I can see nothing," said I, handing it back to my friend.

"On the contrary, Watson, you can see everything. You fail, however, to reason from what you see. You are too timid in drawing your inferences."

"Then, pray tell me what it is that you can infer from this hat?"

He picked it up, and gazed at it in the peculiar introspective fashion which was characteristic of him. "It is perhaps less suggestive than it might have been," he remarked, "and yet there are a few inferences which are very distinct, and a few others which represent at least a strong balance of probability. That the man was highly intellectual is of course obvious upon the face of it, and also that he was fairly well-to-do within the last three years, although he has now fallen upon evil days. He had foresight, but has less now than formerly, pointing to a moral retrogression, which, when taken with the decline of his fortunes, seems to indicate some evil influence, probably drink, at work upon him. This may account also for the obvious fact that his wife has ceased to love him."

"My dear Holmes!"

"He has, however, retained some degree of self-respect," he continued, disregarding my remonstrance. "He is a man who leads a sedentary life, goes out little, is out of training entirely, is middle-aged, has grizzled hair which he has had cut within the last few days, and which he anoints with lime-cream. These are the more patent facts which are to be deduced from his hat. Also, by the way, that it is extremely improbable that he has gas laid on in his house."

"You are certainly joking, Holmes."

"Not in the least. Is it possible that even now when I give you these results you are unable to see how they are attained?"

"I have no doubt that I am very stupid; but I must confess that I am unable to follow you. For example, how did you deduce that this man was intellectual?"

For answer Holmes clapped the hat upon his head. It came right over the forehead and settled upon the bridge of his nose. "It is a question of cubic capacity," said he: "a man with so large a brain must have something in it."