

# A House of Mystery and a Room of Horror

By GRANT M. OVERTON.

IT must have been with a chuckle of satisfaction that George H. Doran and his generalissimo, Eugene F. Saxton, signed contracts to publish *The Mystery of Hartley House* and *The Room With the Tassels*, by Clifford S. Raymond and Carolyn Wells respectively. For publishers are always glad to get good mystery stories and there is no doubt whatever as to the excellence of these. Mr. Raymond's story had serial publication, but *The Room With the Tassels* seems not to have had. This must be simply a happenstance. Unlike as the yarns are, both teem with thrills. But perhaps the serial publication of Carolyn Wells's story would have been physically injurious to more than one reader. Where there is so much horror the suspense of instalments would be almost insupportable.

Both books are exciting and both should be read; but Mr. Raymond's had better be read first. It can be absorbed in several sittings. *The Room With the Tassels* is a book for a single sitting, or midnight seance. Better read it aloud, or at least have some one around.

## Haunted Lives.

In *The Mystery of Hartley House* it is not the house that is haunted, but the lives of the people in it. There is, indeed, as the publisher's note suggests, some tyranny from the past which hangs like an inky cloud over the three or four people of the story. In *Hartley House* lives Mr. Homer Sidney, an old, old man of the most wonderful benignancy and agreeable companionship. To exercise a watchful care over him young Dr. Michelson comes to live there. The other persons of the household are Mrs. Sidney, Miss Sidney, the daughter, and a servant of long standing, Jed Arliss.

Near the house is a haunted pool, the scene of the murder of one brother by another brother years before. These Dobson brothers were the sons of the family to whom Hartley House had belonged for generations. Not far from the house is the penitentiary in which the murderer, now a feeble and childish old man, is confined.

The first part of the book is purely episodic. Dr. Michelson tells the story and has for a while nothing more to relate than a disjointed series of puzzling occurrences, some alarming and suggestive of personal danger, some hinting at the family secret.

## An Intricate Revelation.

Mr. Raymond does indeed introduce into his narrative a considerable false clue which will throw the reader effectively off the scent in four cases out of five. He is absolutely justified in this expedient since the apparent clue is a casual story told to Dr. Michelson (just the sort of thing that would happen in reality), and since the young doctor makes the mistake which nearly every one would make of trying to fit this explanation to the facts he has instead of seeing whether the facts he has would admit of such an explanation.

The real story—involved, connected, lucid and very naturally and beautifully unfolding—begins about two-fifths of the way through the book. It begins with certain incidents which lead directly into a series of events, of culminating excitement.

ment, which can have only one outcome, the disclosure of Homer Sidney's secret. This disclosure is managed with great skill and with a plausibility and a dramatic quality in the highest sense satisfactory to the reader. But we should not do Mr. Raymond justice if we did not mention and praise the remarkable character he has drawn in the servant Jed Arliss. The man is engrossing, quite without respect to the action of the story in which he plays so important a part. Dr. Michelson is also well drawn; especially good is the attitude of Jed toward the young doctor's moral ideas. There is a love story, but Mr. Raymond appreciates the impossibility of making it compete in interest with the main mystery. He uses it cleverly to end the story on a pleasant note. The portrait of the blackmailing Morgan and the account of how Dr. Michelson's severe morality cost the Sidney family heavily in dollars (a tremendous vindication of the unmoral Jed) are most capably done.

## "The Room With the Tassels."

Coming to Carolyn Wells's story from *The Mystery of Hartley House* the reader may find the opening chapter almost insipid. It is a chaffing conversation among a number of persons who believe or disbelieve, variously, in ghosts. The humor isn't entirely convincing either. The upshot of a general dispute is an agreement to get hold of a house warranted haunted and spend a month in it. The month is apparently to be a serious test of the existence of spooks—on the part of most of the party—and an enjoyable vacation to boot.

The house is found, a magnificent old

mansion called Black Aspens, standing in the Green Mountain region of Vermont. The ghost of this house is derived from the murder of a little bit of a man by his great big Hessian of a wife, a murder due to the administration of prussic acid. The house is haunted equally by a ghost with a skull's head and the odor of prussic acid which, as the reader will recall, is the odor of bitter almonds.

But this story which started so flippantly develops swiftly into a narrative of the most blood curdling character with a horrifying climax in the foretold and simultaneous deaths of two members of the spook hunting party. For the moment sensation can go no further; the reader has been quite stupefied with it and his blood is nearly as congealed as that of the survivors of the tragedy. The mind turns instinctively to the mystery of these two deaths, which were unquestionably murders, but whether murders by a supernatural being or by a flesh and blood criminal it seems impossible to find out.

Carolyn Wells never showed more skill than in the way she exploits the distracting, the maddening enigma of these deaths which seem so unmistakably to have proceeded from the room with the tassels, though they did not take place there. And she shows quite equal skill in the way she portrays the ineffectual efforts of coroner and ordinary detective to solve the mystery. But for real inventiveness the prize must be awarded to her creation of Zizi. Of Zizi we shall say nothing—readers have a right not to have surprises spoiled for them. Zizi is a novelty as well as a surprise. And the solution of the two deaths brings with it the solution of the house's secret, which is not

the same. For one solution is human and the other is mechanical, and one is made possible by the existence of the other.

The real test of construction lies less in the mysteries of the story and the ingenuity with which they are explained than in the simplicity and naturalism and probability of their exposure. That is to say: A solution may be really far-fetched, but if it is arrived at by an eminently simple and probable observation or deduction the reader will be completely satisfied nine times out of ten. It was the great defect of the Sherlock Holmes stories, captivating as they were, that however likely the explanations the means by which Holmes reached them were frequently the unlikeliest in the world. His observations and deductions were too often those that no detective on earth would make. Consequently the reader had always to grant to Holmes the most extraordinary personal attributes. Of course this can always be done—but it is a perpetual strain.

Here *The Room With the Tassels* scores heavily—or rather its author does. We do not say that her explanation of the secret of the house is particularly ingenious or particularly probable, for obviously it is neither; but about the probability of the way in which Zizi and Penny Wise, the detective, got on the right track there can be no two opinions. It was through the simplest and most natural bit of observation imaginable; and so the story is a triumph.

THE MYSTERY OF HARTLEY HOUSE. BY CLIFFORD S. RAYMOND. George H. Doran Company. \$1.50.  
THE ROOM WITH THE TASSELS. BY CAROLYN WELLS. George H. Doran Company. \$1.40.

## A Magnificent Villain! But "Thieves' Wit" Could Not Save Him

By EDWARD N. TEALL.

B. ENDERBY, coming into a small legacy, tore himself away from his job in a railroad freight office and set himself up as a Confidential Investigator. Irma Hamerton, a most lovely actress, took a shine to him and gave him the job of tracing her stolen pearls and their abductor. It developed into a hum-dinger of a case!

B. Enderby waded into it like a hippopotamus going into the Nile for his Saturday night ablutions, submerged like a U-boat and came up in the midst of a fleet of detektuff destroyers and ended by sweeping clean the seas of Crime.

If *Thieves' Wit* were a story of Character it might be discussed quite intimately without invasion of the author's right to the undivided attention of his proper audience. But being a recital of events, it cannot decently be subjected to the process of specific analysis. Its events are, however, so ramified and reticulated, so radiculose and repulchrate in their functioning as clues for the hireling unraveller of mysteries that we can give our word that a swift resume of the plot may be made without pillaging the wealth of counterplot wherewith the willing reader is to be temporarily obfuscated.

If the writer of mystery or detective

stories invents his tale backwards the reader insists on being plumped right into the middle of it and carried—oh, no, not straight ahead to the solution or detection, but led by ingeniously devious courses to a swift and satisfactory denouement. The skein must be progressively snarled and, most defiant of the unraveller just before—lo, with a deft motion, the prestidigitator brings order out of chaos. Mr. Footner, we think, juggles mighty smoothly.

There must be several possibilities for the final fixation of guilt; he supplies at least three. We must be permitted to guess and then, craftily rejecting the first guess, to guess again; and the truth must be kept one guess ahead of us. Sometimes it is the author's best trick to lead us on to one guess after another and then give us the desired and required jolt by proving the first and discarded guess to have been the right one. What does Mr. Footner do? We leave you to guess. Was it the leading man in the lovely lady's troupe? They were in love and doubt and difficulties. Or was it the other actor man—dark and saturnine enough to disarm suspicion in this world of unfaith in appearance? Or—

We could dichotomize this story: Sherlock Holmes is one part, Nick Carter is the other; that is to say, some pleasing bugger-muggery of mystification and some rough and tumble which suits well the deep American esteem of good melodrama with relieving intervals of burlesque. Such a mixture can be crudely made and often is. Not so often is it compounded with artistic skill; but in *Thieves' Wit*, we say, it is. Remember, Mr. Footner writes honestly, not to edify, instruct, or anything else solemn; but to please and tease, to amuse and bemuse—to drive dull care away. Any such undertaking requires some surrender, an agreement to abide by the rules of the game. Detective stories score nine-tenths of their failures by the author's dereliction from duty and failure to fulfil his part of the contract. We find no such default in Mr. Footner. But we do not find him proving such right as a superhuman genius might enforce to exemption from the requirement of cooperation rendered ungrudgingly by the reader. It takes team work to put these stories across!

So there you are. You don't know, from anything in this article, how this particular game of Fox and Geese is played. But if its frankly confessed purpose has been achieved and if you like this particular kind of literature, you do at least understand that Mr. Footner's is

the right shop to go to. Better read it before the movie man gets his hooks into it!

And so, passing blithely over the love story and the startling adventures and the tensely dramatic situations, there remains this one observation to be made: That if B. Enderby comports himself like this in his first case it is positively dumfounding to try to estimate the possibilities of his future professional career!

The publishers tell us that this is a perfectly great time for "serious" books and we have no intention of uttering a word against that sort of reading for this ultra-serious time. But we do maintain, "without fear of successful contradiction," that—right now—such books as *Thieves' Wit* have more right to existence than ever before in our time.

THIEVES' WIT. BY HULBERT FOOTNER. George H. Doran Company. \$1.50.

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