The Blandy Papers

Maid for Murder

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The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles

Collected Mallard Papers, Series I: States of Grace

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1933: The Blandy Papers—A Book For The Next Century

By Our Literary Correspondent
(The New York Times Book Review)

It is a curious feature of our age that so many books are born large and die small. The publishers usher them in with silk and trumpets, only for the public to forget them before the ink is properly dry. Yet, among the crowded shelves and over-advertised sensations of our time, there occasionally emerges a work quiet in manner, precise in aim, and destined—one suspects—to outlast its own century of reception.

Such a work is The Blandy Papers, first published in Sydney in 1926, and now—thanks to a fortunate reissue—again in easy reach of American readers. Its author, Mr. Edgar Fenwick, an Australian of formidable lucidity and unhurried irony, has been hitherto mislabelled as a satirical crime novelist. Nothing could be further from the truth. He is no mere teller of mysteries but a master of subterfuge—an anatomist of civilisation disguised as an entertainer.

The book itself defies simple summary. Part social novel, part epistolary confession, part moral inquiry, The Blandy Papers follows a group of all too recognisable citizens—bankers, minor officials, divorcées, self-improving philosophers—as they record their reflections upon sanity and status in a society wobbling between public decorum and private delirium. The "papers" are fragments of letters, diary entries, reports of institutions and police, tied together by Fenwick's invisible hand. What results is not a plot so much as a revelation—the spectacle of rational men and women describing their own madness with utter conviction.

Fenwick's stroke of originality lies in his style: cool as carved glass, never ornamental, always precise. He writes as if grammar itself were a scalpel. Few authors have drawn so clean a line between social comedy and moral horror. What others approach as pathos he translates into wit; what they treat as farce he transcribes as evidence. There is no shrieking, no posturing, no sentimentality—only the unrelenting intelligence of a man who sees through respectable absurdities as sunlight passes through smoke.

Indeed, one may venture a bold statement: no living writer—British, American, or Continental—has matched Fenwick's combination of intellectual grace and psychological clarity. Not since the essays of Swift or the notebooks of Gogol (a comparison not lightly made) has satire worn so exact a face of truth.

Why, then, has The Blandy Papers been so shamefully neglected these seven years? Perhaps because it lacks the convenient consolations

of fashion. Its irony is too discerning to flatter the reader, its madness too recognisable to amuse the complacent. Booksellers prefer arteries of sensation; universities prefer systems. Fenwick offers neither. He gives us life observed without anaesthesia—peel back the age, and you see yourselves. One cannot be surprised that the public looked away.

Yet the times have changed, and with them our appetite for sincerity disguised as laughter. The post-war generation, so heavily medicated with optimism, is now sober enough to recognise genius that disturbs as it delights. Already a new edition of The Blandy Papers is being prepared for American distribution, and it would be shameful if this opportunity were wasted.

Every school of higher instruction that claims to study modern civilisation should place Fenwick beside the psychological novelists of Europe. Every college student, every would-be reformer, every reader who suspects that "sanity" is merely the majority's favourite madness, should have this volume at hand.

Books come and go, but a few remain as judges rather than witnesses. The Blandy Papers is one of these. When the clamorous productions of our present decade have crumbled into polite footnotes, Fenwick's book will still seem terribly, almost indecently, alive. It may even remind some future century that the sharpest criminal of all is the human mind at its most respectable.

1990: Viola Vorpel

Introduction

In the great duck pond of life, it is the early bird that swallows the worm. Does it not strike you, dear Reader, that this mysterious story is too fabulous, too inventive, too imaginative to be true? You're not alone there for Arthur and I have often pondered that very question. Whether or not her story is true, Euphemia Mallard was a most remarkable woman: the first to get the worm.

Thus opens the tale of my aunt, the enigmatic author known to the world for nearly half a century not by her own name but under the careful pseudonym of Mr. E. Fenwick. From 1890 until her quiet, though no less dramatic, disappearance in 1934, she wove her narratives in shadow—a shadow precise and deliberate—ensuring that the true nature of her sex remained an unspoken secret among publishers, critics, and readers alike. It was a time when the presence of a woman in the ranks of serious crime writers was considered an incongruity too troublesome for polite society or unscrupulous printers. She chose, therefore, to obscure herself behind masculine initials, a subterfuge that

only deepens the mystique surrounding her oeuvre and her very person.

This collection of papers, memoirs, and reflections seeks to illuminate the woman behind the mask—not through tedious exposition of her biography, which she guarded zealously, but through the intellectual and emotional fingerprints embedded in her writing and the lives she influenced. She was, after all, a craftsman of realities: one who dissected the peculiarities of human nature and societal hypocrisies with scalpel-like precision, all the while cloaking her acuity in a refreshing blend of wit and invective.

Euphemia Mallard, my aunt, was indeed the early bird, but her worm was no trivial prize; it was mastery over a literary terrain that married the grotesque impulses of crime with the subtle manners of civilisation. Within her pages, social order became a stage where the absurdity of pretension and the fragility of reputation were exposed with ruthless clarity, a clarity born of lived experience and intellectual independence rare among her contemporaries. Her novels did not merely narrate— they dissected, interrogated, and mocked the very structures that sought to contain women's ambitions and voices.

And yet, this bird ever eluded the cages society tried to build around her. Whether through the deliberate mystery of anonymity or the sheer complexity of her character, she remains a figure not wholly grasped by history, one whose legacy demands not mere admiration, but ongoing inquiry and, perhaps, a certain irreverence. This volume is a testament not only to her literary genius but to the restless spirit that made her a singular presence in the annals of crime fiction and beyond.

Dear reader, as you enter the folds of these pages, remember that some stories—like some birds—are too vivid, too unexpected, and too persistently elusive to be fully tamed by truth alone. The early bird, after all, catches the worm; but it is the telling of the tale that ensures the bird's place among legends.

1930: The Mallard Women

From the Introduction

Arthur Frederick Blandy, D.Phil. (Syd.), sometime Fellow in Genealogical Studies

It is with the greatest respect, albeit tinged with an unavoidable sense of astonishment, that I undertake to present a brief account of the three Mallard sisters: Euphemia, Elspeth and Hermione. Having served the family for many years, and having observed these ladies from the

privileged yet discreet vantage point of a long-time household servant, it seems a matter of simple inevitability that each was destined to carve a distinct and rather singular role within the grand tapestry of the Mallard line.

Miss Euphemia, the eldest, impressed all with her formidable intellect and a taste for the finer arts and extensive travel that would do credit to any member of the aristocracy. She chose a life unencumbered by matrimonial fetters, a position which—though admirable—did little to soften the sharp edge of her independence. Miss Elspeth, quieter yet no less fierce in her intellectual pursuits, directed her formidable powers toward the study of social control, religion, and politics—a scholarly path that no doubt intimidated many a less prepared gentleman. Lastly, Miss Hermione, whose intellect remains undoubted, grounds herself in the reality of rural life, managing her twenty thousand acres in Surrey with a practical acumen that is as impressive as it is rare among ladies of her standing.

In an amusing and somewhat unfortunate commonality, both Miss Elspeth and Miss Hermione chose to marry—each to gentlemen who, it would seem, were somewhat taken aback by the superior airs and intellects of their wives, faintly frightened, one might say, by such formidable partners. As for the present humble writer, ever mindful not to offend, I find that in attempting to capture their characters, I may indeed have done so to the dismay of every party concerned.

Thus, it begs the question: were these roles assigned by fate or design? And was there, perhaps, a touch of divine comedy in the manner by which these Mallard women navigated the expectations of their rank? Whatever the answer, their stories remain as compelling as any novel—if only because they are quite real.

This account, written with no small measure of exasperated admiration, is dedicated to those who value the complicating virtues of intellect and independence in women—an inconvenient but undeniably fascinating family trait.

1974: "The Blandy Delusion: Or, Notes on Three Decorative Brains and One Paternal Smirk"

by Cassandra Duvernay, B.A. (failed)

Let's all curtsy first, shall we, before the Reverend Doctor Blandy, that fragile custodian of the gentry's family furniture and female reputations. He approaches his subject—the "Mallard Women", mind you, a marvel of anthropological taxonomy—with such trembling awe it's a wonder the paper didn't wilt from the humidity of his reverence.

We are told he was a "servant", though one suspects it was the moral sort of servitude beloved of insecure male chroniclers: bound to the drawing room, not the mop.

What pricks me most is that adjective of his—"astonishment". He cannot quite believe, even in 1930, that women might think themselves into substance rather than faint prettily into fate. Astounded! The fool acts as though the Mallards were a natural phenomenon: three cerebral hurricanes passing through Surrey, threatening to tear the roof off the Anglican order of things. And of course, to a man whose idea of scholarship is "genealogical studies" (translation: counting who begat whom across the centuries of inbreeding), these ladies must have looked like dangerous modern art—terrifying and incomprehensible.

Euphemia is "unencumbered by matrimonial fetters". What a phrase! One imagines poor Blandy's pen quivering with moral restraint, tempted to add "tragically barren of issue". Elspeth, bold enough to study "social control, religion, and politics"—topics reserved for gentlemen smoking in committee rooms—is presented as an oddity, an intellectual sideshow attraction. And sweet Hermione! Capable, practical Hermione, whose twenty thousand acres he finds both "rare" and "amusing". I picture Blandy, wringing his soft clerical hands, trying to reconcile her capacity for estate management with his belief that the female brain overheats near numbers.

He calls his tone "exasperated admiration". How convenient. The learned man can neither condemn nor truly praise, so he disguises envy as amusement, respect as distance. The women, for him, are symbols. Decorative gargoyles perched upon the edifice of family history—monstrous enough to be fascinating, but never permitted the privilege of being human. He believes he has been fair-minded. He has, in truth, embalmed them.

This is how women die in print—slowly, under layers of genteel surprise.

As for me, a black Englishwoman in 1974, queer, Catholic, and terminally unastonished, I read this sort of paternal obituary with the same weariness I reserve for sermons on chastity and Empire. Blandy's type still stalks our universities, still publishes his mild ejaculations about "female autonomy" as if each were a revelation. He thinks faith means obedience, scholarship means custody, and admiration excuses appropriation.

What Blandy forgot, and what the Mallards might have whispered among themselves after tea, is that intellect was never his to grant or observe. It was theirs to live. The grand tapestry he pretends to see them woven into was, more likely, being unpicked by their own clever fingers.

And so, in memory of the Mallard sisters—and in contempt of every Arthur Frederick Blandy who ever called women "compelling curiosities"—let us fold away his trembling prose, drop it into the parish paper shredder, and send the remains to fertilise Hermione's fields. The soil, unlike Dr Blandy, can handle strong women.

1820: The Woman Without Continuance

From The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles

They said she had once lived in the house above the marsh—the long, low dwelling whose windows persisted in showing lights even when the candles were long burnt out. Yet no two mouths could agree upon her countenance. Some swore her hair was pale as winter dawn, others that it was raven-dark; to a few, she was radiant, the idol of lost youth; to others, only a dreadful absence, a distortion in the air where shape should have been.

Her name, when it was spoken at all, altered with each decade. The villagers' children called her Mistriss Veil, for she was glimpsed through vapour; their grandmothers, who recalled things written in the parish records, said she was Evelina Marsh, a daughter of that family who fell to ruin one storm century past. Each account, when compared, proved inconsistent, as if the woman herself had been stitched together from the language of recollection—never from the verities of flesh.

The house stood alone—its timbers warped, its chimneys green with mould and years—and yet it never wholly surrendered to decay. Even the crows that passed above it gave strange cries, like speech interrupted. In the spring of 1820, when the floods rose and reeds stank under the sudden weight of water, a newcomer took lodging at the village inn: a scholar from Edinburgh, one Mr Lucien Trevany, who came armed with notebooks and a small moral lamp to illuminate mysteries suited neither to man nor reason.

"I have heard", said he to the innkeeper, "that stories dwell here as mists dwell in hollows".

"They do, sir", replied the innkeeper gravely, "and one story walks on two feet".

Within a week, Trevany had gone to the marsh house.

From all accounts, Evelina Marsh had been remarkable chiefly for her vanishment. She had lived, briefly and in modest grace, as the youngest of three; she had written poetry for her own amusement; she had consented almost to marry a neighbour's son; and then, one dusk in November, she had ceased—in just that vague verb—as though translated into air.

Trevany recorded that first night in his journal:

"Saw, toward midnight, a reflection of light on the upper window—the right-hand one. Not a candle-flare nor lantern, but such serene phosphorescence as one sees on the tide when it breaks upon sand. Could hear nothing but the reeds' whisper, never ending".

He slept poorly at the inn, beset by dreams of a woman who spoke not in voice but in the echo of letters half-read, whose face rearranged itself with every thought he formed about it.

What sustained her, it seemed, were words. The curate, when pressed by Trevany, said: "She is nothing if we do not describe her; she flickers when silence falls". And so he and the villagers had made a habit of remembering her aloud—if only to keep the house from sinking. They recalled her laughter, her sorrow, the texture of her gown, the fragrance of her discarded gloves. Their stories contradicted one another violently, but the contradictions bred vitality, as though she drew nourishment not from truth but from the uncertainty of recollection.

Each retelling built another stratum of her, thin as frost over glass. One night, Trevany attempted to write her portrait by combining their testimonies—hair of gold, eyes grey, lips grave, spirit mild. When he lifted his eyes from the page, the curtains quivered and disclosed a figure standing at the windowpane, smiling faintly, as if aware that it was being created.

He burned that first description.

On the second fortnight, the mists thickened till the marsh resembled a sea with no shore. Trevany went out under a faint, red moon and heard a voice: neither echo nor hallucination, but language spoken by the air itself.

"You recall me poorly", the voice said. "Do you mean me fair or fearful to-night?"

"Who are you?" he asked.

"I am as you speak me".

He reached for her hand but found only the condensation of breath upon his fingers. Yet for one moment, he thought he saw her face clearly—a visage both perfectly known and entirely unmade, as if it had been his memory rather than his eyes that perceived her.

By midsummer he too had become uncertain. The landlord found his room vacant, the journals left in disorder, as though the ink itself had fled the page. A faint outline of a figure seemed drawn in damp upon the wall where a candle might once have cast its glow. In the marsh house, the upper window burned bright once more, but this time the light shifted shape—first like a woman's silhouette, then like a spectre stooping to write.

The people kept their habit of speech. When they mentioned Lucien Trevany, they described him as meticulous, melancholy, curious, tragic, or foolish. His age and hair changed with the seasons, his birthplace wandered north and south, and presently his image accompanied hers: she and he bound together, two phantoms sustained by the persistence of commentary, neither alive save in the telling.

By 1830, travellers swore that the marsh house no longer stood there at all. By 1840, the boundary had been ploughed into pasture. And still—when fog rises up from the river and sentences drift uncompleted in conversation—there remains, between word and silence, the faintest impression of a woman passing, fading, reforming, as if language itself refuses to let her rest.

1752: The Tryal of Miss Mary Blandy, Spinster, for the Murther of her late Father, Francis Blandy, Gent. at the Assizes held at Oxford, 29th February

Transcript of Interrogation before the Magistrate

Magistrate: Miss Blandy, thou art arraigned for the death of thy father, Francis Blandy. Wilt thou confess the truth unto this Court?

Mary Blandy: I do not deny my hand was involved, my Lord. God forgive me, yet it is so.

Magistrate: Pray, relate to the Court the manner of his death and thy intent therein.

Mary: It was neither my full design nor determination to rid the earth of my dear father. But the potion I administered—brought to me under guise of love's sweet elixir from one Captain Cranstoun—was potent beyond reckoning. I believed it to soften his heart against our union. Alas, the bitter draught wrought death.

Magistrate: Thou affirmest that this potion was arsenic, yet thought it but a philter of love?

Mary: Verily, my ignorance was great, and mine affection blind. The apothecary's poison I took for a cordial.

Magistrate: Witnesses testify that thou didst prepare many a meal and potion for thy father. Doth not that bear the stain of premeditation?

Mary: I did but follow the plea of a lover and the handmaiden's duty. My heart trembled oft, yet I never wilfully meant his death; alas, it hath come of my deeds.

Magistrate: What sayest thou to the claim that thou sought his demise for lack of paternal goodwill?

Mary: It troubles me sore. My father's wrath was fearsome, yet such dread doth not breed murder, but obedience.

Magistrate: We shall now hear observations of the Apothecary, Dr. Anthony Addington.

Forensic Evidence Submitted to Court

Potions and Calx: Analysis by Dr. Addington revealed the presence of arsenic in residue taken from victuals and liquids prepared by Mary Blandy for the deceased. The detection employed the Marsh test, a novel means for the detection of arsenic salts, which rendered a characteristic garlic-like odour and a metallic film upon decomposition.

- Symptoms of the Deceased: Witnesses attest that Mr. Blandy's last days were marked by violent sickness, vomiting, and cramping, all consistent with arsenic poisoning as understood. His eventual demise followed shortly upon these symptoms, without relief.
- Correspondence: Letters exchanged between Mary Blandy and Captain Cranstoun were presented, indicating knowledge of a devised plan involving the so-called love potion.
- Motive and Behaviour: The prosecution reflects on Mary's continued preparation and administration of the potion despite the worsening state of her father, suggesting either wilful intent or culpable negligence.
- Absence of Alternate Causes: A rigorous inquiry found no evidence of natural causes or accidental ingestion; the pattern of symptoms and the chemical presence of poison constitute a strong indictment.

In closing, the Court considers that Mary Blandy, despite her protestations of ignorance, did administer poison to her father that resulted in his death, deserving of the utmost penalty under God's law and the laws of the land.

1710:

From The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles

In a land far beyond the reach of sun and star, there was a tiny room suspended deep within the heart of a mighty, enchanted forest. This small chamber hung, like a bird in a cage, within a great glass box that drifted gently through the vastness of the sky. The box was light as a feather, free to fall wherever the wind might will it to go, over hills and rivers, across mountains and seas. No lock or latch barred the box's

walls, yet those within could not step beyond its frail crystal boundaries.

Inside the box lived a curious child, wise beyond her years, who often wondered about the mysterious world beyond her glass prison. She would study the trees waving their arms far beneath her, the clouds drifting lazily above, and the distant reaches where earth kissed the horizon. Yet try as she might, she found no secret whisper or shadow clue that told her she was falling, voyaging ever downward through some unseen force. To her senses, the world hung still and silent, as though she floated in a peaceful, endless sea of nothingness.

Sometimes she thought she might be the only one alive, serenely adrift in a realm where no gust could touch her and no burden weigh upon her. Other times, a flutter of hope stirred—that some hidden magic or silent guardian watched over her journey, invisible but real. Still, no gleam or tremor betrayed the hand that led her on this silent passage. It was as if she were both bound and freed by enchantment, locked forever in a beautiful cage she could neither escape nor fully understand.

Thus, the little girl learned that some mysteries are not to be solved at once, and that one may travel through wonders unseen yet not know of their presence. And so she waited, her heart a lantern in the endless dusk, until she might find the key to open the unseen door and step into the world that gently carried her along its secret path.

1752: Transcript of Police Interview: The Cook of the Blandy Household, February

Place: Oxfordshire Magistrates' Hall

Interrogator: Pray, woman, relate unto this Honourable Court all thou knowest concerning the late Mr. Francis Blandy's demise and the conduct of his daughter, Mary Blandy.

Cook: Ah! The dread of devils and the thin path of love, your Worship! I, Susan Pepperpot, servant in the kitchen and scourge of the scullery, have borne the everlasting heat of that cursed house. Where love curdled to venom and barren souls walked like ghosts.

Interrogator: Speak plainly, woman. What witnessed thou?

Cook: What have I not witnessed, poor thing? Pebbles that are not what they seem, sir! And that sweet master, a gentleman most courteous, yet struck down, as if by wicked spells or poison drawn from Hell's own cauldron.

Interrogator: Poison, sayest thou? Do speak more of this.

Cook: ‘Tis whispered that Mistress Mary did mix powders in his gruel and tea—disguised art they were, surely! For who but a barren woman driven by secret magics would plot against her own blood? I cannot rightly tell, for my scullery maid is a simple fool, oft knocking pots awry and saying nonsense, so I take her words with salt. Yet I have seen Mary close to the kitchen with a small vial and strange powder, more times than twelve, my lord.

Interrogator: Is it true that this powder was found to be arsenic?

Cook: Arsenic? The apothecary smelled something foul and bitter, like the sting of a serpent ’twixt teeth. The powder burned like fire, and several servants fell ill after tasting vittles from the household. It was not natural, I assure thee.

Interrogator: What thinkest thou of Mary Blandy herself?

Cook: A troubled bird trapped in a gilded cage! She flitted between smiling and sorrow, as if bewitched herself. I think she might have done strange things, for I saw her oft whispering with that Captain Cranstoun, a gay man yet tangled in webs of love and wickedness.

Interrogator: Hast thou any proof or witness beyond thy word?

Cook: ‘Tis my word, and the folly of my scullery maid, who once sought to burn letters and powder in the great kitchen hearth. I snatched them from the flame—foolish wench! She knows nothing, God bless her simple heart.

Interrogator: Was her relationship with her father strained?

Cook: The master was kind, a man of gentle spirit, full of good humour and charity—even when ill. But Mistress Mary, sweet as she seemed, bore burdens heavy as lead; I fear her soul was lost in dreams of devils and broken promises.

Interrogator: Anything else of note?

Cook: Only this: the plight of a cook in such a house is to see shadows where men see light. Beware the powder and potions, the love that quickens like flame but burns like hellfire. Mistress Mary did walk a crooked path, yet who’s to say if 'twas wicked witchcraft or sorrow’s sharp dagger?

1823: Espèce deCanard

Private papers

This day, amidst the solitude of my chamber and the quiet tick of the late hour, my thoughts return incessantly to the curious matter of the Lefame lineage, a subject long shrouded in mystery and steadfast denial by the Mallard Dukes. The existence of Lefame has ever been a matter of whispered conjecture, and yet the Mallards have vigorously

repudiated all such claims, denying any alliance or transaction involving their esteemed house and that name.

Yet, during my recent perusal of the ancient trunk housed within the ancestral chambers, a discovery of no small consequence has come to light. Among the yellowed parchments and brittle deeds, I unearthed a document bearing the unmistakable mark of my ancestor, the resolute and enterprising Cassandra Purslane. The record, though faint and fragmentary, chronicles a sale of a considerable tract of land situated in New England, dated in the year of our Lord 1715. Noteworthy is the fact that this grant was not conveyed by the Mallard Dukes themselves, but rather was authorised directly by Cassandra Purslane, acting in power and estate independently of their authority.

The details remain incomplete, yet it appears the land was subsequently divided or connected to two branches of the Lefame family—one migrating to the bustling settlement of Boston, the other to the burgeoning city of New York. Such a bifurcation of lineage and locale could readily explain the dispersion and the whispered separation of the Lefame name across these colonies.

Moreover, though no definitive confirmation can yet be expressed, it seems most probable and indeed inevitable that later generations of the Lefame would intertwine with the ducal line. I have reason to suspect that one lady of the family, a woman of great fortune amassed by her industrious father through mercantile and manufacturing enterprise, would have married a Mallard Duke, thus bringing her considerable wealth and renown into the ducal coffers. This union, while perhaps kept discreet or undocumented in the formal genealogies, would forge a bond tacitly acknowledged though never proclaimed in the halls of nobility.

I am compelled to pursue further inquiry into these connections, for the truth concealed in these dusty pages promises to rewrite the accepted history of our house and the shadowed legacy of Lefame. May Providence guide my search and reveal to me the full measure of this hidden inheritance.

1844: Duke of Mallard

Private papers

Let it be recorded herein, though none but the walls and shadows shall understand, that the rightful bearer of the Mallard crest is he who walks in the bloodline shadow of his elder brother—whose fate was sealed not by chance but by the craft of a discerning hand. Should any Blandy servant, in days yet to come, chance upon the buried truth

whispered in these pages, know that the legacy is theirs to take, no matter the cost.

But beware: those who unravel this tapestry of kinship's crimson thread shall meet the silence of the grave wrought by the hand of loyalty. Let none utter this secret in spoken word nor ink it in letter, lest swift justice claim the tongue and the pen. The Mallard name must endure unblemished, inheriting not only title but the fierce protection of the past, meted assuredly against those who would dare disturb its fragile peace.

Thus is the charge given: claim what is owed, but guard the secret of the dagger's dance well.

1882: a Blandy butler

Private papers
(Note to self: must remember to post that letter to His Grace—er, the former Duke, now reduced to these colonial climes—but where did I put the stamps? Ah, well, later.)

Oh, dash it all, as a Blandy myself—yes, the Blandys, you know, of Henley extraction, though one doesn't trumpet it here among these sunburnt shopkeepers—I've been pondering, in my superior way, this tiresome old tale of Cousin Mary, or whatever relation she was, hanged for poisoning poor old Francis back in '52. The moralists, those dreary parsons and penny-a-liners, would have it as a cautionary fablette—dutiful daughter seduced by some Scots fortune-hunter, Cranstoun or whatever his name was, into tipping arsenic into Papa's gruel. Ghastly business, quite the rage in the broadsheets, "The Henley Poisoning" and all that rot. But I say, I say—I, who served the Duke for nigh on forty years, polishing silver and overhearing real secrets in the withdrawing rooms—closer inspection reveals Mary wasn't the villainess at all, no indeed! Or was she? One forgets; the memory plays tricks after all these years Down Under, playing "uncle" to these lesser Mallards, bless their woolly hearts.

No, no, it was Francis himself, that provincial solicitor-chap—Blandy senior, mark you—who cooked his own goose, so to speak, with his puffed-up fibs about a £10,000 estate for little Mary. Common enough among attorneys in those days, peculation and sharp practice, bien sûr, but oh, how it ballooned! Attracted the eye of no less than William Henry, Prince of Wales—yes, royalty! Some whispers (which I've heard from unimpeachable sources, naturally) suggest the Prince thought of Mary for one of his household retainers, which explains

why Francis couldn't possibly recant his tall tale without admitting he'd gulled the Crown. Fatal silence, that—led straight to Cranstoun's pursuit, the desperate younger son with debts up to his sporran, assuming the fortune real. Francis bleats too late against the match; can't confess poverty without disgrace, can't approve without beggaring the girl. Tangled web, what? Though I suppose Mary did stir the powder in, poor lovesick fool—didn't she? One loses track; these colonial skies muddle the brain.

When Francis sickened—1751, wasn't it?—the coroner and the mob pounced on Mary like terriers on a rat: woman in the kitchen, witchery with powders, mad love for the Scot. Easy mark! But the deeper truth—and mind you, as a Blandy, I'm privy to depths others can't fathom—is Francis poisoned himself with his own whopping lie. Swallowed whole, couldn't digest it, eh? Noteworthy, too, how our line fizzled after: no male heir, no cousins piping up—extinguished by design, some say, to hush further prying into Francis's princely letters (in a ledger, since burned—I saw the ashes, or heard of them, at any rate). "The Blandy Inheritance", more like: silence, shame, erasure! Though really, was there a Prince at all? Memory's a fickle jade; perhaps I've conflated it with that tea-party at the Castle. No matter—servants like me knew the real story, bowing and scraping while the gentry blundered.

Still, one muses intellectually—superiorly, if I may say—on the irony: Mary swings, family vanishes, yet here I am, remnant of the line, lording it as "Uncle" over Sydney's second-raters. The Duke would approve, I fancy—or disapprove? Dash it, where's my pipe? Mustn't let these thoughts scatter; they're gold for a tale, if only I could recall the sequence properly.

Questura di Roma
Incident Report
File No. 042-BC/Investigative Division/Temporal Phenomenon

Reporting Officer: Decimus Valerius, Investigative Inspector
Date of Initial Observation: 17 March, 42 BC
Location: Via Collina, Trastevere Quarter, Adjacent to the residence of former Senator Pisanus Fraxi

Subject: Magnus Anatis, retired Senator, aged approximately sixty-five years at time of first report

Summary of Incident

At approximately the seventh hour after midday, witnesses observed Senator Magnus Anatis departing the residence of his associate Pisanus Fraxi following an evening meal. Conditions were clear; adequate daylight remained, and the subject was capable of walking unaided along the road leading to his villa. The Senator exchanged farewells and proceeded on foot in apparent good health.

Subsequent Sightings

- Four years later (38 BC): Witnesses, including household attendants of the late Fraxi, reported the figure of Magnus Anatis standing one pace beyond the doorway, identical in dress and appearance to that of four years prior.
- Forty years later (2 AD): Fraxi's grandson, Lucius Fraxi, reported seeing the same figure positioned two paces beyond the threshold. No signs of decay or ageing were noted.
- One hundred years later (58 AD): Anatis's figure had reached the outer gate of the property, posture unchanged, expression neutral. Several citizens corroborated the observation.
- Further centuries: Multiple confirmative reports placed the subject progressively nearer the street, advancing by minute increments over long intervals of time. Measurements indicate a consistent rate of approximately one pace per generation.

Physical Description

Subject remains clothed in an early Republican toga of senatorial rank, fabric intact beyond natural conservation expectancy. No odour, sound, or rhythmic motion consistent with respiration has been recorded. Attempts at contact have returned negative results; neither voice nor resistance is perceived upon approach. Solidity fluctuates between tactile resistance and complete transparency.

Investigative Notes

- No burial or evidence of mortal remains corresponding to Magnus Anatis has been recovered within Roman jurisdiction.
- The Senate archives record no official death notice.
- Priests of both augural and foreign cults have expressed differing opinions ranging from divine punishment to temporal displacement.
- Theories of suspended animation, mineralization of tissue, or divine enchantment are unsubstantiated.

Conclusion

The case of Magnus Anatis remains open. Phenomenon classified under “Unexplained Temporal Manifestations”. Recommended response is observational only. Per the Prefect’s directive: “Do nothing, disturb nothing, record each appearance and await change”.

Filed and sealed at the Questura di Roma, 17 March, in the 42nd year before the common reckoning.

1880: a Blandy maid

Her Ladyship writes to her cousin as if I were a bandbox or a length of muslin grown unfit for her wardrobe, asking her kin in England if one “may bequeath a maid-servant”. Bequeath! As though I were her late aunt’s brooch, to be passed along when the fashion changes. You would laugh, sister, if it did not cut so near the bone.

She calls me “dour”—a Blandy by name and nature, says she—and allows I have taken a husband here (poor Tom, steady as the Ganges but browned by it) and borne a little one, our Agnes, who lisps already in the Hindi tongue. Yet for all that, I am “hardly a maid any longer”, but still suited only to scrubbing and stitching, or so she thinks. India has not changed her, Eliza; it has shown her plain. She notes my wish to see you all again, to breathe English air and hear the church bells of Blandyford, but turns it to her convenience: “It has never suited me before”, writes she, “yet now as I too am leaving..”. As if my heart’s longing were a trunk to be packed with the rest of her goods.

And the end of it? She wonders if her cousin might “give her in service” to one of the young ladies, “when they are of an age to need one”. Need one! As if I were a pony to be broken or a sampler to be stitched. Tom says little, but his eyes flash when he hears it read aloud; Agnes clings to my skirts, unknowing. We have scraped a life here, with the heat and the fevers, but it is ours, not hers to bestow. Pray for us, Eliza—pray I find my own way home, not as chattel in her gift, but as Mary Blandy, wife and mother, with my head high.

1890: Euphemia Mallard

Private papers

Today I received a most precious gift from Elspeth, a slim volume bound in pale green cloth, inscribed in a delicate hand on the frontispiece: "To my dear granddaughter, for her fifteenth birthday." The book is authored by Grandmama herself, a lady of formidable

learning and quiet courage, whose voice seems both distant and immediate as I turn the fragile pages.

It is a treatise on laws and justice, composed in the year 1824—when she was nearly my age, though the world then was far grimmer and more rigid. How strange and wondrous that Elspeth chose this gift now, as if signalling that the legacy of thoughtful inquiry and concern for fairness is mine to embrace.

I find myself captivated not only by her mannered prose but by the courage that flows between her lines—a gentlewoman's courage to examine the faults of her society, to cast light on the shadows where injustice lingers. It is a call to arms, not of swords but of words; a summons to pick up the pen and tell stories that pierce the veil of respectability to reveal truth, no matter how uncomfortable.

I have long dreamt of writing mysteries—not mere puzzles for amusement, but narratives woven with the threads of legal struggle, moral quandaries, and the quiet battles fought in courts and parlours alike. Now, with Grandmama's words in my hands, I feel the stirrings of resolve deep within me.

May I be worthy of such a heritage. May I find the strength and wit to wield ink as an advocate wields speech, and perhaps shed light upon the dark corners where justice falters.

It is, I think, the best birthday I have ever known.

1895: The Viscount In Flight

Continental Correspondence by Our Own Moral Anchor
The Morning Trumpet

London society—having last week recovered sufficiently from the Duchess of Peckham's tableaux vivants and that unfortunate incident with the peacock feathers—now finds itself thrilling again, this time to reports from the Continent concerning our national prodigal, Viscount Anatis, heir to the Mallard dukedom and all its attendant shipyards, breweries, colonies, and incidental moral responsibilities.

The Viscount's latest escape from the rigorous attentions of civilisation appears to have been achieved by means of a yacht, six unregistered passports, and a private train disguised as a philanthropic excursion. His companion, as every Englishman has already guessed and no continental policeman can quite confirm, is none other than His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, travelling in a foreign incognito of such transparency that even hotel porters call him "Sir".

The pair were first observed in Brussels, where the Viscount—known affectionately below stairs as "His Imprudence"—amused the

diplomatic set by winning three races in succession on the same horse, losing each purse to charity, and compensating himself by purchasing the charity. The Prince, by contrast, confined his energies to the roulette tables, explaining (with exquisite taste) that a monarchy must occasionally test its luck.

From Belgium they passed to Paris, that hothouse of civilisation so convenient for English repentance. The city's moral guardians report that the Viscount and His Royal Highness dined nightly with a succession of poets, prima donnas, and persons who instruct the poets and prima donnas in proper behaviour. On one celebrated evening, they were seen leaving the Café de l'Obélisque accompanied by a troupe of Montmartre actresses carrying birdcages and top hats. One cage, it is rumoured, contained an actual duck, to which the Viscount raised his glass and toasted: "To Family!"

The French, being sentimental where scandal is concerned, applauded wildly and christened him le petit canard d'Albion—a sobriquet that will doubtless adorn a thousand postcards by next week.

Critics cry out that such conduct is unbecoming in the heir to an empire founded on industry, sobriety, and the correct folding of napkins. But it must be remembered that the Mallard family has always been aquatic by nature and migratory by instinct. One duke raided the Spanish coast apparently by accident while testing a new yacht; another married an heiress solely because she could row; and another was born during a regatta. The present Viscount is, therefore, merely fulfilling the hereditary tradition of turning respectability into an art form observable from a distance only.

It would be premature to judge harshly a youth whose chief offence is enthusiasm exercised abroad. Indeed, one might regard it as patriotic outreach by informal methods. The Continentahls, who usually encounter England only through lectures or landing parties, are now learning that our aristocracy can be charming, musical, and arrestably informal.

A cynic of my acquaintance (Mr. L——, whose cynicism is only exceeded by his accuracy) remarks that the Viscount is "entirely prepared for public life, having already exhausted private life". Yet those who know him best assure us that beneath his feathers beats a heart of gold—or at least of gilt well burnished. He has opened orphanages between seasons, presided at committees between scandals, and once composed a memorandum on naval funding reputed to have contained twelve sentences unencumbered by metaphor.

The Prince, we must suppose, enjoys in him a companion less censorious than chaplains and more decorative than ministers. Together

they form a sort of travelling Cabinet for the display of English charm under stress.

In the clubs, moral anxiety is at fever pitch. Elderly gentlemen declare the affair "sad—though quite tremendous fun". The Queen is reported not amused; the dowagers are reported smitten; and the clergy are drafting sermons faster than printers can manufacture guilt. The Stock Exchange remains solid—a tribute both to British stability and to the fact that very few of its members can afford the Continent this month.

Even Lord Anatis's mother, the formidable Dowager Duchess (known affectionately in Fleet Street as the Iron Brood-Hen), is said merely to have sighed, "At least he's abroad", and rung for luncheon.

This paper has always maintained that young men of distinguished lineage require two things: discipline and distance. The Viscount has elected distance; discipline may follow when Europe runs out of brandy. Meanwhile, let us not forget that the man who can make the Prince of Wales laugh in six languages is a national asset of some consequence.

The Trumpet therefore extends its forgiveness in advance, confident that when our errant waterfowl eventually returns home, dripping with experience and minor decorations, he will settle into his political destiny with all the serenity of a duck returning from migration—muddied but intact.

Until then, we merely beg the Continental authorities to keep him well-fed, the Prince amused, and the scandal picturesque.

1895: The Feathers Fly At The Ritz

A Flutter in High Circles: The Mallard Heir and His Royal Companion in Outrageous Masquerade

From Our Correspondent, The Morning Trumpet

London, which had quite exhausted itself pretending to be shocked by the artistic classes, has found fresh vigour by turning its moral telescope upon the peerage once more. The latest comet to streak—feathered and faintly powdered—across our social sky is none other than Viscount Anatis, the prospective Duke of Mallard: possessor of ten ancestral estates, a ship-building fortune as buoyant as his personality, and that combination of charm and irresponsibility which Britons mistake for genius.

The disturbance, alas, did not occur in private. We are reliably informed that during Thursday night's highly fashionable charity ball at

The Ritz, the Viscount and his constant ally, His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, appeared not in the expected military uniform or diplomatic attire, but rather in full—and flawlessly executed—female masquerade.

Witnesses describe two tall ladies of "surpassing" figure and "indescribable aplomb" stepping from a hired carriage shortly after eleven. One wore a gown of pale turquoise satin and carried a feather fan of such heroic dimension that the orchestra applauded spontaneously. The other—rumoured to be the Prince—favoured a gown of rose-coloured silk embroidered with peacock eyes, topped (in defiance of dynastic gravity) by a tiara belonging, it is whispered, to the late Marchioness of D——.

They entered arm-in-arm, giggling (that exact word appears in multiple accounts) and, when questioned by the bemused maître d'hôtel, announced themselves in high foreign accents as "the Countess of Misrule and her unmarried sister, Mademoiselle Disaster".

The assembled company, sensing they were either in the presence of extraordinary privilege or impending arrest, immediately decided to enjoy themselves.

What followed belongs, properly speaking, to the pages of mythology rather than society reportage.

The Viscount waltzed with a Russian ambassador's wife, who declared him "a triumph of feminine self-expression". The Prince, not to be outdone, led a quadrille composed entirely of poets later discovered to have been journalists in evening dress.

At midnight, the pair vanished, only to reappear moments later on the balcony serenading the moon with a duet from La Traviata. The police, prudently stationed outside for the protection of morals, mistook them for professional entertainers and clapped politely.

By dawn the news had spread: His Royal Highness and the Heir of Mallard appear as ladies! The gentlemen's clubs of St. James's erupted in horror so meticulously refined it resembled applause. Elderly members declared that such behaviour would have been unthinkable "in our day", which is precisely why it has become irresistible in theirs.

Even the Dowager Duchess of Mallard, an unshakeable pillar of Anglican granite, conceded (through clenched pearls) that "at least the gowns fitted".

The Archbishop, we are told, coughed meaningfully but refused to comment until provided with photographs. Meanwhile, the seamstresses of Mayfair have begun receiving urgent orders for "costumes of distinction"—a phrase now suspected to mean "clothes capable of confusing Paris".

Are we to censure the Viscount? Possibly.

Are we to admire him? Inevitably.

The British public, fond of both sin and apology, appears inclined to forgive everything short of boredom.

Some whisper that the escapade was merely an allegory—an act of aesthetic protest against the rigid tailoring of the age. Others claim it to be a philanthropic gesture, intended to draw attention to the plight of women confined by their corsets and their husbands. The more practical believe the Viscount had simply bet ten guineas that he could outshine the ladies. All positions seem equally credible.

As for His Royal Highness, we are assured that His Majesty takes the incident in good humour, remarking, "One must occasionally dress as one's subjects to understand them."

This line, though diplomatically phrased, will surely appear in all future textbooks under the heading "Constitutional Mischief".

The Viscount's friends at White's declare his performance "positively Shakespearean". His critics, meanwhile, declare that no heir to a global shipping empire should display quite so much interest in the drapery department.

Nonetheless, no one disputes that he managed what few statesmen ever have—he made the Prince of Wales blush and the Continent laugh, without declaring war.

By yesterday evening, the scandal had settled, like a faint dusting of talc, over every tea table in Belgravia. What had begun in outrage has dissolved into amusement, forgiveness, and faint admiration. "We cannot all be saints", sighs Lady Honoria Snell, "but at least they gave us an evening worth reading about".

The Morning Trumpet, therefore, in keeping with its tradition of fair if fluttering journalism, pronounces sentence thus:

Viscount Anatis—guilty of impeccable taste in millinery, excessive high spirits, and lending the monarchy a welcome touch of comic opera. His punishment shall be universal envy.

Let no man judge too harshly a noble who has given England the rarest gift of all—a scandal conducted in silk, not sin.

1897: Society's Sadder Spring

The Voluntary Exile of Viscount Anatis
The Morning Trumpet

London, lately so afflicted by the influenza of virtue, now suffers a more sentimental ailment—the retirement of Viscount Anatis, heir to the Mallard dukedom, the shipyards, the empire, the fortune, the

gossip, and arguably the entire atmosphere of amusement we have breathed these fifteen years past.

The announcement, delivered with customary vagueness ("for purposes of repose and reflection"), reached our office yesterday and has since convulsed every drawing-room capable of emotion. He has withdrawn from society! The newspapers gasp, the dowagers flutter their fans, and even the Prince of Wales has reportedly "felt a pang—a most inconvenient one—at breakfast".

It has been left to humble scribes such as this one to consider, with the delicacy born of affection, what London will become now that its chief experiment in civilisation has voluntarily absented himself.

From the moment the Viscount—then a promising undergraduate feared alike by dons and daughters—stepped into public curiosity, he exhibited that rare capacity to transform inconvenience into legend. He raced horses that no one owned, opened bazaars for causes no one understood, and invested in railways that could have circumnavigated the planet had they ever been built. At one point he was believed to be engaged simultaneously to three women and to an idea.

It is true there were episodes—continental disguises, musical evenings with improbable orchestras, and of course that regrettable (if inspired) evening at The Ritz, when the blending of genders was taken rather too literally. Yet society forgave him instantly, recognising that what he lacked in discretion he provided in donations.

One must remember that the lineage of Mallard has always preferred entertainment to decorum. The first duke was knighted for inventing champagne before it existed; the third was impeached for making the Suez Canal navigable to his creditors; and the fifth withdrew his attention from politics only when asleep. The Viscount, heir to all this romantic confusion, has merely carried forward the hereditary tradition of never boring anyone for long.

Let it be utterly clear: there is no disgrace attached. No duel, no debt, no duchess. The Viscount, in a gesture completely alien to his temperament, appears to have grown thoughtful. Those close to him speak of an "inner examination", which, knowing him, may involve mirrors.

He departs apparently for the south of France—of course—but only to rest "among the olives and the ancients". One hopes the ancients have a sense of humour. He carries with him a small retinue, a portable piano, three trunks of unread correspondence, and the sighs of every hostess from Belgravia to Biarritz.

The notion that he intends to look "within" has puzzled the medically inclined and delighted the philosophical. As one wit

observed, “The most curious journey of all is to a place where Viscount Anatis has never been seen”.

Already the social season feels amputated. Dinners proceed now without the faint danger he brought—no chance of the band being replaced by bagpipers, no likelihood that one’s pearls will be recruited for spontaneous philanthropy. At Lady Pondworth’s ball on Tuesday, several guests were overheard speaking warmly of him as one speaks of dear departed relatives—affectionately, and with enormous relief.

“I shall miss him terribly”, declared Lady Peckham, in precisely the tone used for servants who have died heroically saving the tea service. “There was always something one could disapprove of, yet never quite enough to act upon”.

The Viscount’s genius, if we may use so unfashionable a term, lay in having no ideology save exuberance. He believed—correctly—that England’s truest empire was the conversation carried on in drawing-rooms about the people who had misbehaved the night before. He gave us national purpose.

And so now he retires, rich as Croesus, eccentric as ever, having decided, with uncharacteristic timidity, to stop where others only fall. It will be whispered that the decision conceals some tragedy or conversion. Let us resist such meanness. To withdraw for “no negative reason” is perhaps the most heroic act a modern noble can perform—it denies the public that indispensable satisfaction of watching one’s betters misjudge the escarpment and tumble into history.

We therefore commend the Viscount to his solitude, if solitude will have him. May he enjoy the refreshment of silence, though it may perish on contact with him. When at length he reemerges—bronzed, reflective, and accompanied (inevitably) by a small orchestra disguised as pilgrims—we shall forgive him, as we always have, for being more interesting than the age deserved.

Until then, society must murmur to itself, as the Prince reportedly did while staring wistfully at an untasted glass of brandy:
“Without the Viscount, one must behave—and what, pray, is the point of that?”

1824: Espèce de Canard

From Laws for our Nation

1: The Guardians of Local Order—Justices of the Peace

In every county and parish throughout our realm, the dignified office of Justice of the Peace stands as a bulwark against disorder and

moral decay. These gentlemen, often drawn from the landed gentry, hold magistrates' courts wherein the statutes of the realm find swift application. Their authority extends to summary proceedings against misdemeanants and those deemed "suspected persons" by laws such as the Vagrancy Act of this very year. It is their duty to balance mercy and severity, suppress idle vagabonds who threaten the peace, and yet administer justice tempered by local knowledge and conscience.

The powers bestowed upon these Justices are vast, yet the burden grievous, for the line between upholding order and overreach is perilously thin. As observers of our social fabric, they wield influence over the lives of the poorest as well as the most respectable, their decisions echoing beyond mere punishment to impact reputations and livelihoods.

2: The Assizes and the Trial of Felonies

Each year the Assize judges traverse the shires, bringing the sovereign's justice to bear in circuit courts of great solemnity. Here, indictable felonies—grave offenses against persons and property—are heard with the participation of juries drawn from local men of standing. The nature of these trials, though designed for fairness, reveals a complicated dance between legal formality and the prejudices of class and knowledge.

Capital sentences still cast a long shadow over this august process, though modern reformers have begun to question the efficacy of the "Bloody Code", which consigns many offences to death or transportation. Within these halls, the tension between mercy and deterrence is ever palpable, emblematic of our society's struggle to reconcile justice with humanity.

3: Equity and the Court of Chancery

Beside the rigid forms of common law, resides the more flexible remedy of equity, administered by the Court of Chancery. This court attends chiefly to those grievances unmet by common judges—matters of trust, inheritance, and the fulfillment of pious intentions left unexpressed in the strict letter of law. For the gentlewoman concerned with the fate of family estates and the sanctity of testamentary directions, the Chancery offers solace.

Yet the slowness of its proceedings, and the complexity of its bills and answers, are oft a subject of lament among petitioners. Nevertheless, it remains a vital instrument for the protection of wives and daughters entangled in the web of primogeniture and coverture, a jurisdiction where justice is sought less by force than by conscience.

4: The Condition of Women Before the Law

A reflection upon justice in our age must consider the condition of the gentler sex under the law's dominion. The doctrine of coverture, which merges the legal existence of a married woman into that of her husband, denies her many rights deemed natural to men and to unmarried women alike. Property, savings, and even personal contracts fall under the control of husband or male guardian, limiting women's autonomy and voice.

Such legal constraints bear weight not only on individual liberty but also upon the inheritance of virtue and estate. For daughters, sisters, and widows, the law often provides only the barest protection, reliant upon trusts or the goodwill of male relatives. The gentlewoman of fortune and education must therefore remain vigilant lest her rights be eclipsed by fond tradition cloaked as legal necessity.

5: The Laws of Property and Inheritance

The law of inheritance in our time is bound tightly to the customs of primogeniture and entail, whereby estates descend undivided to eldest sons. This rigid framework secures the preservation of landed fortunes but imposes heavy burdens upon younger children and daughters denied equal claim. Disputes frequently arise over wills and trusts, often calling upon the equity court's intervention.

I find it essential to underscore the harsh consequences of this system. While it fosters familial continuity, it can also foster resentment and desperation, contributing to the very social unrest our magistrates seek to quell.

6: Punishment and the Gradations of Justice

The administration of punishment in our kingdom remains a subject both onerous and urgent. The "Bloody Code" prescribes death for some three hundred offenses, ranging from murder to petty theft, though recent sentiments have led to moderate reform, seeking transportation or incarceration rather than gallows.

Prison conditions are the focus of growing concern among reformers, with gentlemen and ladies alike advocating for the reform of gaols to temper justice with humanity. Transportation to far colonies, particularly Australia, continues as a preferred alternative to execution for many felons.

7: The Jury, the Witness, and the Course of Trials

No institution stands more emblematic of English liberty than the trial by jury. Yet, when one scrutinizes the composition and conduct of juries, their fairness may not be as assured as tradition avers. Social

standing, political influence, and community bias can lurk beneath the solemn oath.

Witness testimony, especially from women or servants, often carries diminished credibility before the courts, reflecting societal hierarchies that persist within the very procedure of justice. It is the gentle observer's role to ask whether all men truly stand equal before the law's bar.

8: Family, Morality, and the Pursuit of Justice

Justice for the family remains imperfect, for the law offers scant protections within the domestic sphere. Abuse and desertion are punished rarely and weakly; legitimate children inherit with priority, while illegitimate offspring face legal exclusion.

The intersection of parish relief, morality laws, and social expectation forms a complex tapestry wherein the state's hand is hesitant and sometimes inconsistent. Gentlewomen who contemplate these matters must advocate not only for law's refinement but also for its merciful application.

9: The Prevention of Crime and the Moral Duty of Society

Crime prevention is not solely the province of magistrates and constables, but a solemn charge upon every good subject. The recent enactments, such as the Vagrancy Act of 1824, reflect increasing anxiety about idleness and suspicion of those deemed "suspected persons". Yet, these laws raise profound questions about the proper balance between security and liberty, and about society's responsibility for the poor and indigent.

It is a gentlewoman's role to consider how charity, education, and upright example might address the root causes of crime, rather than relying exclusively upon constraint and punishment.

10: The Reform of Laws and the Call for Codification

Our legal corpus, a tangled labyrinth of statutes, customs, and precedents, cries out for reform and simplification. Inspired by the writings of Jeremy Bentham and the efforts of parliamentary select committees, many voices now urge the codification of criminal law and the repeal of obsolete provisions.

Such reforms promise a more intelligible, accessible justice for all subjects, and guard against the arbitrary application of the law. The learned gentlewoman must watch these movements with hope and caution, mindful of tradition as well as progress.

11: Prisons and Rehabilitation

The conditions of gaols and houses of correction have become matters of pressing concern. Efforts by philanthropists, most notably Mrs. Elizabeth Fry, have shone light upon the deplorable state of these institutions and begun to introduce measures of reform.

Correction, rehabilitation, and the moral improvement of offenders may, in time, supplant the earlier designs of mere punishment. The law must seek not only to guard society but also to redeem the erring.

12: The Role of Women in the Legal Order

Lastly, an earnest reflection upon the roles and rights of women within the frameworks of law and society must conclude this treatise. While the law constrains our autonomy and contracts our estates, women's influence through family, education, and moral authority remains potent.

The time draws near for gentler laws and greater recognition of women's capacity for reason and justice. Until then, ladies must prepare themselves to meet injustice with quiet fortitude and advocacy through every available channel.

1860: The Tale of the Mirror Twins and the Princess of Kalighat

(A Caution, or Possibly a Celebration)

From The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles

Once upon a time, when the hot winds of India blew in from the endless sands and the moon hung heavy as a silver shield above the palms, there lived two English twins, alike as two thoughts before guilt. They were called Peregrine and Aubrey Willoughby, and from their birth none could tell them apart—not even their mother, who died attempting to decide which was handsomer.

In youth they were sent into the East, which was the proper destination for those Englishmen too beautiful or too troublesome to remain at home. They thrived exceedingly, as handsome men sometimes do in warm countries, gaining rank, immunity, and the curious confidence of the native courts.

It was there, among dusty palaces and perfumed intrigue, that they met the Princess of Kalighat—an intelligent young monarch with eyes as black as philosophy. She adored them both, which was convenient, since they adored being adored far too much to quarrel over her. And so a polite arrangement took place: Peregrine married her formally,

while Aubrey remained spiritually indispensable. It shocked Calcutta, delighted the missionaries, and deeply amused the gods, who are notoriously difficult to entertain.

They built a palace of pale pink stone with verandahs vast enough to contain both conscience and laughter, and there they lived—one flesh of three souls, or possibly three fleshes of one soul—until time itself became uncertain which was which.

As months passed, the Princess learned the Willoughby manner. She began to ride astride, employ English profanity, and prefer whisky to sherbet. Her complexion paled; her voice grew ironic. In the same interval, the twins acquired a tendency to gesture with their wrists and wear jewels that clicked in rhythm when they walked. Guests whispered that it was impossible now to say which of the three possessed the original spirit and which were the reflections. The ayahs crossed themselves discreetly and said the moon had mixed their shadows together.

Yet the Princess was mortal, and England was jealous of its wandering sons. Letters came from home urging responsibilities of lineage, estates, and respectability. "Return swiftly", they read, "and bring the Princess if you must—you may civilise her."
This, understandably, offended everyone equally.

So the twins decided to visit the northern hills, where the air was thin enough to evaporate duty. The Princess joined them, dressed in men's clothes, laughing that they made the prettiest set of rascals ever to defy geography.

On the second night, beneath a blood-orange moon, they camped by a gorge where the rocks dropped sheer into screaming silence. What passed then no witness other than themselves could tell. But when the morning came, the servants ran shouting that the Princess had fallen.

Peregrine—or Aubrey, depending on which voice gave the orders—stood white and splendid, pointing to the edge. The other twin sat beside the tent, weeping—or laughing—behind his hands. They told a coherent tale: that one twin, distracted while guiding her horse, had stumbled and vanished, and that grief had made the survivor pale and trembling. None questioned it; their resemblance was still so perfect that to doubt one was to doubt both.

A body was found below, mangled and dark with blood, the face unrecognisable, the jewels intact. It was buried beneath a tree whose blossoms bloomed redder than before—a detail which poets later found illicitly useful.

Months later, when the surviving "twin" returned to England, he brought with him the veiled and grieving Princess of Kalighat. She was quieter now, paler too, spoke English with remarkable fluency, and

never ventured into bright sunlight. Society raved about her exotic dignity and curious resemblance to her husband.

The couple lived many prosperous years together, and their charity to widows and orphans was matched only by their unwillingness to be painted separately. On every anniversary of the Princess's first marriage, they held a dinner in her honour—inviting only mirrors.

Some said that, on moonlit nights, the servants heard laughter from two throats at once. Others swore that the princess's jewels rearranged themselves into the shape of a man's initials.

It is tempting to moralise, but which twin survived, and who wore whose skin, has never been known. Perhaps the Princess still lives among us, changing faces whenever life becomes inconvenient. Perhaps the twins remain together, as all true lovers must—one within the other, turning forever like a coin balanced on its edge.

And if this story disturbs your sleep, remember the words of the ayah who told it first: "The English take their ghosts with them, like umbrellas."

1895: Duke of Mallard

Address to the House of Lords

It is with considerable unease—though not, I hope, with undue agitation—that I rise to address the measure now before us. The bill proposes to abolish that ancient and venerable privilege by which a peer of this realm, if accused of a grave offence, is tried not by strangers of uncertain disposition, but by his equals.

I submit that this bill is nothing less than an attempt to unpick one of the constitutional threads that binds the fabric of England together.

The trial of peers by peers is not, as some of the more excitable gentlemen in the Commons would have it, a relic of ornamentation, a decorative bauble hung on the tree of our national life. It is an institution rooted in the essential distinction between the responsibilities of a peer and those of the common man. We live under a code—unwritten, yet binding—requiring conduct that those not bred to it cannot be expected to perceive, much less to judge.

A peer's actions must be evaluated in the light of his order: his obligations of estate, duty, representation, honour. These matters are not intelligible to those who have never borne them. To place a peer before a common jury is not equality; it is misapprehension elevated to procedure.

And let me say plainly: this bill has arisen in the wrong House. It concerns the rights of peers, and therefore should be championed,

debated, and—if necessary—repelled *here*, where those rights are lived. For the Commons to seek its abolition is to intrude upon an inheritance not theirs to meddle with. If respect for constitutional propriety still carries any weight, the bill ought to be struck out on that ground alone.

More broadly, my Lords, we find ourselves in an age strangely intoxicated with novelty. Every month brings some agitation to mend what is not broken, to alter what has served England well for centuries. Yet it is a principle as old as our peerage—and as sound—that restraint is the surest guard of liberty. By doing nothing rash, this country has avoided many disasters that other nations have eagerly invited.

Change, when it comes, should be the slow work of time, not the sudden enthusiasm of an afternoon sitting.

Therefore I urge this House to reject the bill, to hold steady, and to let this matter sink—as dangerous enthusiasms often do—beneath the calm surface of our national stillness.

For it is by doing nothing ill-considered that England has always done great things.

1895: Euphemia Mallard

From Draft Notes for "The Locked Door"

I had this notion first in the quiet of an early morning, when the fog seemed to have sealed every window of my rooms as though the outside world were not to be trusted. It came upon me then that true crime is not always the blow of a hand or the theft of a jewel, but that eerie weight one feels in the presence of a forbidden door. I wonder whether I shall make it a story of detection, or rather of slow discovery—the uncovering of something that all were forbidden to see. Perhaps it is the idea of knowing itself that forms the crime.

The tale must revolve round a house of uneven temper, half grand, half decayed, standing some miles outside a barely respectable village. The proprietor—call him Mr. Bertram Vale—will be of a courteous bent, yet too controlled to be altogether safe. No one, not even the housekeeper who has served him since her youth, is permitted to cross the threshold of the small oak door at the end of the west gallery. Behind it is, so Mr. Vale insists, nothing of interest whatever—merely a store room for papers of accounts too dry for any but himself. Such explanations are always fatal to curiosity.

Enter my heroine, Miss Alice Leighton—twenty-six, of modest means, sharpness of wit, and that species of courage born of boredom. She goes to Vale House as a temporary companion to Mr. Vale's niece, who is an invalid of the nervous kind and much inclined to imagine

presences in passages. There, Alice observes not the obvious but the pattern in what is left unsaid: the way the servants grow quiet when mentioning the west gallery; the peculiar scratching that sometimes issues from that region after midnight; the key, always in Mr. Vale's pocket, which he touches often but never uses.

It must not be gothic alone. There should be deduction—minute, careful, feminine deduction. I can imagine Alice recording trifles: the faint scent of furniture polish on a key that should never have been removed from its resting place; a copy of La Belle et la Bête in the library, too recently dusted; a worn carpet showing new treads leading toward the forbidden door. Her thoughts must oscillate between rational explanation and those deeper fears that logic refuses to still.

A difficulty arises here—ought the door, at length, to open? Bluebeard's wives die the moment they insist upon knowledge; Beauty redeems her Beast through the same insistence, gentler but no less determined. I am myself uncertain whether my heroine should be punished or rewarded for refusing to remain ignorant. Might the truer terror lie not in what the door conceals but in the recognition that one's curiosity has no end once invited in?

Perhaps there is a history of disappearance in the village: former maids who left for better houses, yet whose letters were never received; the missing sister of the invalid niece; the murmured inference that Mr. Vale had been married once but is so no longer. Or perhaps it is he who hides—not a victim's body, but his own past, locked away for fear that sentiment be treated as shame.

The final image comes persistently—a light seeping through the bottom crack of the door long after all other lamps have been extinguished. The housekeeper, old and deaf, crosses herself; Alice, sleepless, slips from her room; and in that corridor of ancient portraits she stands before the oak door, trembling not with fear but with the thrilling certainty that secrets, once felt, must eventually speak.

If the story be crime at all, it shall be a crime against silence. The murder perhaps already occurred—years before opening page—and every attempt at concealment is merely the body's ghost refusing rest. The detective, then, is no more than a woman who insists upon hearing what polite society commands her to ignore.

That may, after all, be the truest door that cannot be opened.

1895: Euphemia Mallard

Private letter to her sister Elspeth Mallard

I write to thank you most warmly on behalf of our Blandy maid—her thanks are as sincere as mine—for the careful selection of recipe books sent from the Mallard collection trunk. They have been a boon to her daily toil and a treasure beyond measure.

However, I must confess my puzzlement upon discovering among these volumes The Household Book of Recipes and Remedies, authored by Mary Blandy herself and published in 1749. Was its inclusion intentional? This book, quite apart from its culinary value, contains a most curious poem that, by its tone and phrasing, appears to have been passed down through the Blandy schoolroom for generations.

Beneath a crown by blood concealed,
The silent truth must ne'er be unsealed.
Should voice unveil the hidden crime,
Swift shadow falls to hush in time.

Such a relic carries with it a weight beyond recipes, suggesting a heritage of secret wisdom or perhaps a whispered admonition through time. Might you shed light on the significance you saw in choosing this particular book to accompany the others?

1900: Writer's Experimental Notes

Tentative Title: The Housekeeper's Keys; or,
Domestic Secrets Locked and Unlocked
A Study in Household Sin—private working draft, incomplete.

Preliminary Reflection

A novel of morality and upholstery. The English home is the greatest stage for crime: none so spacious, none so patient. Every door conceals indignity; every key passes between innocence and deceit. If men commit murder in clubs and alleys, women commit it in drawing rooms—with schedules, recipes, and servants' registers as their weapons.

The Housekeeper's Keys shall therefore concern not the lurid streets, but the respectable hallways that smell faintly of lavender and menace. It shall be a family saga disguised as a confession, tracking the

circulation of one set of keys—each new holder unlocking a secret for which the previous generation died, or should have.

(Note: "Keys" to serve both literal and metaphorical purposes—inheritance, desire, and access.)

Characters (provisional)

- Mrs. Temperance Webb, housekeeper at Halberton Grange for fifty years. Vast knowledge of vestry cupboards and human frailty. Hand trembles only when concealing evidence.
- Sir Peregrine Halberton, Baronet, collector of oriental ceramics and unregistered marriages.
- Lady Agatha, his wife by ceremony but not by devotion; interested chiefly in chloroform and her piano tuner.
- Miss Clara Halberton, illegitimate daughter, raised abroad "for her complexion".
- Mr. Douglas Webb, the housekeeper's son, employed as estate agent—demure in public, vicious in arithmetic.
- The Reverend Marmaduke Quorn, cousin and moral obstacle, fond of brandy and Greek quotations.
- A foreign governess, possibly Polish or Italian, depending on available scandal.
- A Trunk, large, mahogany, and intact at first. Contains either a corpse, a will, or something worse—sentiment.

(Author's note: the trunk must not open before Chapter XVII; curiosity sustains sales.)

The Tale (outline by sections)

I. "The Arrival of a New Key"

Scene to open in Halberton Grange amid a rainstorm; Mrs. Webb, sorting keys upon a tray: pantry, linen-press, cellar, attics, the trunk in the west room. Each key has a tag, and a history best forgotten.

(Sample narration draft:)

The habit of locking away the family's misfortunes had given Mrs. Webb her authority. She alone could admit or exclude disorder. The master, after thirty years of marriage, still required her permission to misbehave in comfort.

Through her care, we glimpse the Halberton family—genteel decay softened by etiquette and funded by colonial investments everyone pretends not to understand.

Sir Peregrine plans to rewrite his will; Lady Agatha plans to rewrite her reputation. Each demands the housekeeper's assistance in confidence, believing themselves the first to do so.

(Margin: contrast between those who keep doors and those who keep appearances.)

II. “The Locked Trunk”

The mysterious trunk in the west room belongs originally to the grandmother, Lady Honoria, who perished abroad under morally ambiguous circumstances. Ships, servants, and one sailor’s disappearance are mentioned. The trunk, once returned to England, was declared “never to be opened in this house again”.

Speculation among servants:

- It contains the missing grandfather’s bones.
- Or the missing governess’s wardrobe.
- Or the family’s conscience, preserved in camphor.

(Idea for comic chapter heading: “Wherein Everyone Pretends to Have Forgotten the Trunk.”)

III. “The Intruder from Abroad”

Miss Clara Halberton, child of the late Lady Honoria’s “companion”, returns from Trieste with a document she calls her mother’s “second marriage certificate”. The family find her accent more criminal than her claim.

The baronet, while denying paternity, offers her a small allowance “for silence and appropriate deportment”. Clara refuses both, remarking that she possesses “keys of remembrance”.

(Plot note: her key fits the trunk; coincidence never offended Victorian readers.)

IV. “Money and Morals”

The estate is failing. Mrs. Webb supervises the discreet sale of family silver, replacing it with plated imitations. Meanwhile, the reverend cousin encourages Lady Agatha in “spiritual reconciliations” that become more physical than anticipated.

Douglas Webb intercepts the letters, forges signatures on loan papers, and manages to sell parcels of land still morally unsold. The household economy becomes a web—the housekeeper’s legacy replicated by her son.

(Reflective aside: Inheritance is merely theft with witnesses.)

V. “The Murder in the Morning Room”

Sir Peregrine is found dead beside the fire, the poker bent, his hair slightly singed, his will unsigned. The lock of the desk has been forced with one of Mrs. Webb’s smaller keys. Suspicion glides like a well-trained cat between the women of the household; no one screams—it would be vulgar.

(Possible titles for chapter: “A Death in Order”, or “How to Murder with Grace.”)

VI. “Domestic Forensics”

The constable arrives: unimaginative, deferential. He is defeated by the multiplicity of keys and the absence of emotional temperature.
He seizes the trunk as evidence but cannot open it. The coroner, bored, adjourns; Lady Agatha faints with perfect precision.

Clara, pretending hysteria, escapes to London “for mourning attire”. Mrs. Webb alone remains calm, polishing door handles.

(Margin note: comic device—police baffled by correct behaviour; politeness prevents detection.)

VII. “Letters Posthumous”

A bundle of forged letters emerges, implicating everyone. One from Lady Agatha to the piano tuner: amorous. Another from the baronet to “My long-lost Clara”. Several from the reverend to himself, for moral record.

Mrs. Webb quietly deposits them into the trunk and locks it again, remarking, “There are certain melodies that no gentleman should play twice”.

VIII. “Unsealing the Past”

Twenty years later, Douglas Webb, now “estate manager and widower”, opens the trunk under the pretext of inventory. Inside:

- The real will, entitling Clara to everything.
- A bloodied music-score labelled “Chopin”.
- A locket containing two photographs—Lady Agatha and Mrs. Webb in youth, both wearing the same ribbon.
- A note in faded ink: “He was already dead when I married him”.

(Possible meaning: bigamy; possible satire: all inheritance ultimately forged.)

The discovery forces Douglas to blackmail Clara, now married to a foreign count with counting difficulties. Violence follows. He is struck by the falling trunk lid—an allegory too useful to omit.

IX. “Afterword: The Last Key”

An elderly servant narrates the coda: the trunk, auctioned by mistake, fetches a sovereign from an antique dealer, who never manages to open it. Mrs. Webb, long retired, receives a key in the post without address. She places it on her mantelpiece beside a photograph of Lady Agatha and murmurs, “We all kept the wrong doors locked”.

(Author's reflection: Crime without villains is the truest comedy; bourgeois sin depends upon good carpentry and bad faith.)

Proposed Themes for Preface

1 Domestic architecture as moral labyrinth. Houses remember what persons forget.
2 Keys as inheritance. Authority passes hand to hand, never through merit.
3 Satire of property. Families live off lies as others live off wages.
4 Mrs. Webb's aphorisms. E.g. "No crime is unforgivable when dusted regularly".

(Possible closing dedication: "To Every Housekeeper Who Has Ever Misplaced a Sin.")

1901: The Plaything of the Peerage: A Theatrical Scandal at the West End

From our London Correspondent

If any of our readers were wondering why the Right Honourable Viscount Anatis—darling of drawing rooms, wit of the West End, and self-proclaimed "gentleman dramatist"—has lately absconded from Society for the more rugged charms of the Antipodes, it may not, after all, be due to an excess of genius or a surfeit of laurels. No, dear reader: the talk of the clubs now whispers that the Viscount's "triumph" on the London stage was not entirely his own. In plain English, the play was stolen.

The play in question, The Last Masquerade, which dazzled audiences at the Adelphi last season and had critics swooning into their brandy, was, it now appears, plagiarised wholesale from the unpublished handiwork of one Mr. George Trindle, late a servant in the Viscount's Oxford household. Mr. Trindle, a humble fellow with an inconveniently literate mind, was in the habit—so he tells the Oxfordshire Gazette—of writing "little comedies" by candlelight between his duties polishing boots and fetching cigars. One such work, a biting moral piece about deceit and class pretension, he left behind in a drawer when dismissed by his lordship for "inattention to cutlery".

Some years later, the very same piece—revised, fortified with a few Latin tags, and set in the French court—resurfaced beneath a coronet on the playbills of the West End. The critics proclaimed it "too clever by half". They were not wrong.

London's theatrical world roars with laughter and indignation. There are those who declare this latest revelation "impossible", since a

Viscount's honour, like a bishop's virtue, is presumed by birth. Others, less sentimental, observe that the upper orders have long enjoyed the art of borrowing ideas from below stairs—crediting themselves with various domestic inventions, including postmen, puddings, and now plays.

Anatis, that "sunflower of the salon", was last seen boarding a steamer at Tilbury, bound, we are told, for the colonies. Officially, he "retires from public life to devote himself to quiet study in the South". One might ask what sort of study requires distance from extradition treaties. Australia, land of blazing suns and unblinking scrutiny, will now play host to the fallen dramatist. There, amongst the nouveau sheep and reformed pickpockets, he may yet find an audience less fussy about authorship.

Mr. Trindle, meanwhile, has become an unexpected lion. Reporters have descended upon his cottage near Abingdon, where he was discovered beating the rugs with admirable vigour. He expressed no bitterness—only mild surprise that a nobleman should have found anything worth stealing from a servant's drawer. "I am glad someone liked it", he told one journalist, "though I should have preferred my name upon it".

The affair has inspired several parodies already. Mr. Beerbohm Tree is said to be preparing a benefit evening entitled A Lord by Any Other Name. Punch has published a cartoon of a powdered peer being handed a play by a footman with the caption, "Your Lordship's Inspiration, Sir".

The greater question, of course, is this: if the servant writes and the master publishes, who, then, is the true dramatist of Society? If intellect is found as readily in the scullery as in the salon, what becomes of the decorative distinction upon which our polite world depends? Perhaps that is the real scandal—not that a Viscount stooped to theft, but that he found genius waiting there to be stolen.

As the steamer to Sydney vanishes over the horizon, one cannot help but admire the irony. The colonies were founded by thieves; it seems now they welcome their intellectual brethren.

1901: Hermione Mallard

Letter to Euphemia, in Sydney

I am quite at a loss what to think of the distressing report that has reached your shores regarding Edward. It has been in all the London papers these past weeks, dressed up in every variety of vulgar exaggeration. Now, to see that this absurdity has crossed the seas and

found new life in your colonial press quite oversets me. It seems a dreadful injustice that the idle talk of Fleet Street should pursue one across the globe.

Let us not lend our pen to any reply on his behalf. To answer such nonsense only serves to dignify it, and one cannot reason with gossip. These so-called “variety reporters” live upon the fumes of their own invention; to contradict them is to furnish them with a second course. Yet I confess, it is most aggravating to have one’s family honour bandied about so freely, as though our good name were a stage property to be hired by the week.

Poor Edward! Whatever misjudgments he may have made—as anyone might in youth—they scarcely warrant this storm of ridicule. You know how sensitive he has always been beneath all his brilliance. I am persuaded his present retirement was inspired by weariness, not guilt, though that is hardly a distinction the public will care to draw. Still, I trust that with time, the chatter will fade—as every season brings its new scandal.

I gather from your last letter that you have seen him in Sydney? Pray assure me he keeps in tolerable spirits. It comforts me to think there are those near him who can provide a measure of sense and sympathy beyond the reach of London’s fashionable cruelty.

1901: Bombay

From Rose to her niece

From the humid bustle of Bombay, where the Arabian Sea laps at the feet of grand colonial edifices, I dispatch this urgent missive recounting a scandal that unfolded mere months ago in the opulent chambers of the Gaekwar of Baroda's palace. It concerns one Mr. Reginald Thorpe, a scheming Imperial clerk in the Customs Office, whose illicit court intrigue nearly stripped the Crown Prince of his most treasured heirloom—a flawless pigeon-sized sapphire, the "Baroda Flame," said to rival the Koh-i-Noor in ancient lore.

Thorpe, envious of the Prince's favour with the Viceroy and covetous of the gem displayed at a Durbar reception, forged a clandestine alliance with a disgruntled palace eunuch. Posing as a trusted appraiser, he substituted a paste facsimile during a private viewing, spiriting away the true sapphire in a hollowed ledger book under cover of a monsoon squall. His aim: to fence it through Portuguese smugglers in Goa, pocketing a fortune to fund his delusions of aristocratic rank back home. The theft went undiscovered for weeks until the Prince's astrologer noted the gem's "waning fire," sparking a

frantic search that ended in Thorpe's flight—and the sapphire's vanishing into the black market shadows.

The Bombay police dithered for months, ensnared in bureaucratic tangles and Imperial whitewashing, while the Prince seethed in impotent rage. Yet you, my sharp-witted niece, with your crime fiction acumen, would have pierced the deception in days—tracing the forgery's flaw or the eunuch's divided loyalties. Such outrages proliferate here, ripe for your pen to expose. Hasten to Bombay; the air thrums with untold mysteries awaiting a woman of your imagination.

1901: Alice Mallard

Letter to her niece

I write to you from the cool heights of Simla, where the Raj's august rulers and their entourages retreat during the torrid months below. Yet, do not be deceived by the genteel appearances of this summer capital—beneath its polished veneer lies a land rife with stories of intrigue, injustice, and corruption that would delight a young crime writer of spirit and conviction.

India in these times is a theatre of the most complex and unspeakable crimes—both Imperial and native. The intrigues of British officials, the manipulation of power in the name of Empire, and the dark underbelly of colonial governance provide a never-ending source of material for a writer who dares to look beneath the surface. Equally, the customs, struggles, and resistance of local rulers and peoples reveal a labyrinth of human dramas that challenge simplistic morality.

Your pen, with its keen intelligence and gumption, would do well to uncover these truths. I am convinced that your narratives can expose the hidden machinations and injustices at play, and in doing so, offer a voice of candour and reform. Such daring is needed, especially from a young woman who understands not only the art of suspense but also the imperative to speak truth to power.

Come, then, to India. Engage with the living mosaic of this grand land. Observe its manners, its complexities, its contradictions. You will discover no end of tales that will enrich your craft and serve a higher cause of justice and enlightenment.

1901: Alice in Simla

To her niece Euphemia

I pen this addendum to my prior letter with a tale so rife with perfidy it would serve as the backbone for one of your crime novels. Here in Simla, amid the pine-scented airs and the Viceroy's lofty gatherings, unfolded the affair of the pilfered Punjab ledgers last summer of 1900—a crime entwining Imperial avarice with local cunning, hushed up to preserve the Raj's facade.

Captain Hargreaves, a mid-level treasury officer with ambitions exceeding his station, conspired with a native clerk named Ravi Singh from the Lahore records office. Together, they abstracted vital ledgers detailing illicit land grants to British planters in the Punjab—grants obtained through forged seals and bribed maharajahs. Hargreaves aimed to blackmail a high-ranking commissioner who had profited handsomely, while Singh sought restitution for his family's dispossessed estates. The ledgers vanished during a monsoon ball at Viceregal Lodge, slipped away in a lady's fan case amid the waltzes and whispers.

The intrigue deepened when a Pathan courier, loyal to neither side, was found slain in the Scandal Point ravine, a bloodied ledger page clutched in his hand implicating both parties. The colonial police, ever protective of their own, deemed it a "tribal feud" and swiftly deported Singh, while Hargreaves met a quiet demotion to the Andamans. Yet whispers persist of the commissioner's role in silencing the truth, a perfect web of Imperial cover-up laced with local vengeance.

Such matters abound here, my dear—crimes where the mighty evade justice, and the oppressed strike from shadows. Come, wield your pen against this hypocrisy; only a woman of resourcefulness can unveil the full rot without flinching.

1902: Euphemia Mallard

Private diary

Today, I set foot upon this vast and vibrant land called India, a place unlike any I have ever known. The very air itself seems to pulse with a riot of sounds—a cacophony of voices, calls of vendors, the piercing clangour of carts upon cobblestones, and the mystifying mingling of languages, all under a sun so fierce it scorches one’s soul. The heat is oppressive but vibrant, as if it fuels the very colours surrounding me: the brilliant saffron and ruby of saris, the dazzling blues and greens of market wares, the gold glimmer of temples gilded in the sunlight. This

is a world replete with life and motion, inviting my senses to race with wonder.

The manners and customs here are a curious tapestry weaving together ancient rites and the recent impositions of empire. Every gesture and word carries layers of meaning I must unweave to understand. There is a grace in the way women move, restrained yet purposeful, bound by tradition yet imbued with a quiet strength often overlooked by the casual observer. My mind, always devoted to the art of narrative fiction, feels electrified by the stories this land whispers—tales yet untold, full of complexity and contradiction. Unlike the simplistic heroines penned by many in England, these women command their own depths; surely a writer with vision must portray their full humanity and resilience.

In truth, my thoughts dwell heavily on the position of women—here and everywhere. It is evident that the conventions confining them serve only the interests of patriarchal power, as I have long argued in my own work. Yet, witnessing firsthand the glimpses of feminine power and intellect beneath these outward restrictions, I feel vindicated in the conviction that women are the true architects of society's soul. Their intellect, moral strength, and innately superior emotional insight provide the foundation for any genuine progress. Surely it is the writer's duty to reveal this truth, to craft narratives that elevate women beyond the mawkish sentimentality or frail stereotypes so often assigned to them.

Thus, I arrive in this intoxicating land with a heart full of expectation and a pen eager to capture not only the spectacle but the humanity beneath. My aunt's home, so lavish and refined in its colonial grandeur, contrasts starkly with the bustling streets outside. Here, in this intersection of cultures, lies fertile ground for stories that challenge the tired norms of English fiction. It is here I will seek to blend the vividness of this culture with the sharper insights of modern narrative, all while championing the cause of women's intellect and agency.

1902: Euphemia Mallard

Private diary

One rarely encounters a spectacle of such stark and beautiful contradiction as the Muharram festival in Bombay—a city where every street appears to house a dozen histories, and each history insists upon asserting itself at once. Aunt Rose took me to witness the processions today, and I find that my senses are still reverberating with the strangeness and vitality of it all.

The Shi'a observances are of profound solemnity—quiet laments, black banners, chants carried on the sea wind, the collective weight of a grief that has been tended and renewed for centuries. Their mourning for Husain at Kerbala, expressed with such unembellished dignity, moved me more deeply than I anticipated; there is a clarity of devotion there that puts to shame the performative pieties so often paraded in London's drawing-rooms.

But it is the carnivalesque tumult of the Sunni festivities that seizes the city entire. The great wooden ta'ziyas—fantastical replicas of Husain's mausoleum—towered above the crowds, bobbing and swaying like brilliant ships pushed along by human tides. Around them swirled the tolis: neighbourhood bands of acrobats, jesters, and brawling young men whose clowning edged dangerously close to violence. I watched a boy scarcely older than Viola balance on the shoulders of two others, beating a small drum with astonishing precision while dodging flying fruit from a rival troupe. The whole scene possessed an unruly joy, an energy that hovered on the brink of chaos yet never quite surrendered to it.

It is this tension—grief and play, reverence and riot—that astonishes me most. The city mourns a martyr and yet refuses to mourn quietly; sorrow here becomes not only remembrance but resistance, an insistence upon being alive in the face of death. I cannot help but admire that defiant exuberance.

Aunt Rose, ever the philosopher in her own blunt manner, leaned over the balcony at one point and said, "You must understand, my dear, festivals are where a people show you their true face". I suspect she is right. If so, then Bombay possesses more faces than any city has a right to claim.

I feel I have stepped into a world where the human story is written in deeper colours—and where women, though veiled or silent in public, seem to carry more strength and agency beneath the surface than English fiction ever allows. I begin to sense that the stories I ought to be writing are not about murder alone, but about the layered, contradictory, incandescent nature of life itself.

1904: Viola Vorpel

Private letters

I trust this letter finds you well within the bustling heart of Sydney, surrounded by the clatter of typewriters and the warm glow of gas lamps under which you craft your enthralling crime tales. It is from the quiet seclusion of our family estate here that I take pen to paper, hoping

you might lend your sharp intellect and writer's wisdom to a matter that has lately captured my restless thoughts.

As you well know, I have long been fascinated by those old tales we grew up on—tales that seem to me to explore something far deeper than mere supranatural whimsy. They wrestle, if you will, with the very nature of curiosity, of secrecy, and of the perilous pursuit of knowledge where one is warned not to tread. Yet, both tales strike me as two sides of the same coin: one where disobedience invites doom, and another where acceptance and kindness can transform even the most monstrous of beings.

I wonder if these narratives might reveal something profound about human nature that could be woven into the fabric of a crime novel—perhaps a study of secrets that must not be unveiled, or doors that should never be opened, yet whose allure is irresistible. Could the locked room, or the forbidden chamber, not only be a material setting but a metaphor for the deeper mysteries that vigilant minds seek to uncover? Perhaps a story where the dread is not solely in the crime itself, but in the violation of a boundary, moral or otherwise, where knowledge itself becomes a kind of peril.

Now, speaking quite simply though perhaps peculiarly, these reflections on hidden truths and observation lead me to puzzlement of another sort, borrowed from a discourse in natural philosophy beyond my usual purview. Might you indulge me in considering this thought? Imagine an observer enclosed within a small box, falling freely in a gravitational field so that both observer and box are in perfect free fall. Would such an observer have any way to discern that a gravitational field exists outside their small enclosure? Would there be evidence, or would the experience be indistinguishable from floating in empty space?

I confess, it strikes me as a beautiful analogy for the limits of perception and knowledge—that which is invisible or hidden, present yet undetectable save for certain conditions or perspectives. Is our mind the observer in the box, constrained by the very nature of the truths it seeks? I wonder if this could enrich the psychological depth of a narrative on secrets and forbidden knowledge.

Please do share your insights, whether literary or philosophical. Your keen mind might unravel for me what I can only begin to suspect. And if this seems too far afield from your crime writing, know that I value utterly your sharp judgments on any story with a locked door or a mystery too dangerous to open.

1904: Euphemia Mallard

Private letters, reply to Viola

Your letter greeted me like a fresh breath of English air amid the bustle of Sydney. Your reflections strike a chord that resonates with the stories we have all read as children. I remember most vividly the fear and fascination stirred by the locked chamber and the transformative power in those tales.

Now, to the curious question you pose—the observer enclosed in a falling box, unaware of the gravitational forces beyond. It calls to mind a riddle, almost a living fairy tale itself. I wonder: is the girl truly trapped within a locked room, or is the room itself but a chamber enclosed within something larger—unaware of its own walls, ignorant that it lies within a space that holds secrets? Could it be that the room has no door simply because it does not know there should be one? And if my heroine Alice steps forth and opens this hidden door, would the world as she knows it shatter like a glass mirror struck too hard? Might time itself fold back upon its own threads, or would she tumble endlessly down a rabbit hole with no ground to find? Indeed, is this not what the room has already begun—a slow unwinding into endlessness, a story folding in upon itself?

Your query dances perfectly with the kind of narrative I imagine: that of a secret that, if unveiled, changes the very fabric of reality and perception. The room is both prison and passage, both boundary and a gateway to the unknowable.

On a more mundane note, I must tell you that I recently purchased a new mirror for our hallway, hoping it would brighten the long entryway with fresh reflections. However, I found its surface curved in the oddest manner, distorting my image in ways quite unsettling. I could not abide by it and promptly returned it. How curious that even a simple mirror—a portal to truth—can deceive us. Perhaps truths, like mirrors, must first be bent before they can be perceived at all.

1905: Euphemia Mallard

Draft story

The punkahs stirred the heavy air of the Calcutta bungalow with a rhythm as monotonous as the complaints of its permanent residents. Mrs. Mary Blandy, née Hargreaves of Blandford—maid, wife, mother, and now reluctant chronicler—sat at the deal table in the servants' quarters, her pen scratching across foolscap while little Mary played with a rag doll underfoot. It was autumn 1874, though one could

scarcely tell in that eternal green swelter, when Eliza's letter arrived, transcribing the missive from Lady H—. Noble-born, yes, and famous courtesan to boot—no better than she ought to be, for all her titles and the whispers that followed her from Mayfair to the Viceroy's court. "Can one bequeath a maid-servant?" began Her Ladyship, with that drawing-room levity which passes among her set for perspicacity. There I stood revealed as Blandy "by name and nature", dour and tropical-unsuited, though wed to Tom (customs clerk, steady as the Hooghly tides) and delivered of Mary amid Simla's mists.

Lady H— blamed the East for unsettling her morals, she whose own had long been a byword in the memsahibs' chota hazri gossip. The ayahs knew her tales—the boudoirs of Paris, the indiscretions before levées—and smiled behind their palms. Yet her colonial sleight of hand was flawless: my yearning for Blandford's bells and Mother's dumplings rendered mere convenience, aligned to her departure. "It has never suited me before", she allowed, as if my heart were a portmanteau in her inventory. The proposal—to hand me "in service" to a young miss "when she is of an age to need one"—was the climax of her benevolence, an apprenticeship in subservience for one who had scrubbed fevers and monsoons from her own hearth. Such letters circulated the great houses like house-party scandals, empire's burdens propping the oldest domestic tyrannies. I, no exotic traveller but eclipsed fixture, pondered it all while Tom smoked his pipe in silence. Pity her grande dame vanities; they rested on hierarchies as fragile as her hill-station silks.

The intrigue thickened when Tom unearthed an old despatch-box in the godown—Lady H—'s, mislaid during the rains—containing not jewels but letters: assignations, debts, a whispered blackmail from a discarded lover in Bombay. No better than she ought to be, indeed. Had she bartered more than maids?

1905: Euphemia Mallard

Draft story

In the dim-lit back office of the Bengal Club, where the punkahs stirred the stale air like forgotten ghosts, Inspector Roland Vance lit his third Turkish cigarette of the evening. The year was 1924, and Calcutta sweltered under a monsoon that refused to break, turning the streets into rivers of mud and malice. Vance, lately transferred from Scotland Yard on account of some unpleasantness involving a Cabinet Minister's wife and a forged cheque, had been handed the file on the Montcorbier Emeralds as if it were a parting jest. A trunk of jewels lost at sea in '49,

washed up intact on a Breton beach with a curious addition—a clam-shell brooch shaped like a ship. The Duchess's heirs were clamouring now, fifty years on, for an inventory to settle the estate. Routine, they said. Vance smelled something fouler.

He flicked through the yellowed correspondence that had come with the trunk's manifest: letters from the old Duchess herself, penned in a hand as spidery as the banyan roots outside. One caught his eye—a dispatch from the Indian hills, 1874, addressed to a cousin in the Home Counties. "Can one bequeath a maid-servant?" it began, with that airy indifference only the very rich could muster. The woman in question was one Blandy, "by name and nature"—dour, married now to some colonial underling, mother to a half-caste child, yet still spoken of as chattel unfit for the tropics. Lady H— proposed shipping her back to England like excess baggage, to be "given in service" to a young miss "when she is of an age to need one." Vance exhaled smoke in a thin stream, watching it coil towards the ceiling fan. Empire's little secrets, laid bare in a lady's idle prose. India blamed for unsettling morals, yet the hierarchy of service ground on unchanged—the maid's longing for home twisted into mere convenience, her life a fixture for the employing class.

Vance leaned back, the rattan creaking under him. These letters circulated among the great houses like vintage port, reinforcing oppressions older than the Raj itself. The maid wasn't a traveller altered by foreign climes; she was eclipsed, her agency snuffed by the imperial gaze. And now, in an age when even the suffrage girls agitated for self-determination, this casual commodification—of labour, loyalty, motherhood—whispered of darker trades. He thought of Mary Blandy, if that was her name, dispatched homeward only to vanish from records. No trace after Southampton. Had she carried more than grievances in her trunk? The brooch from the sea-trunk nagged at him—jewels crusted like stars on a clam-shell hull, unlisted, priceless. A gift from Neptune, the Duchess claimed. Vance doubted gods bothered with such trifles.

By dawn, with the first grey light seeping through the jalousies, Vance had pieced a theory. The Saint-Lazare hadn't sunk clean; survivors, perhaps, clinging to wreckage. Blandy the maid, pregnant and disgruntled, might have bartered secrets—or stones—with Lascar smugglers off Goa. The trunk resurfaces in '49, contents pristine save that brooch: a marker, a tally for debts unpaid. Lady H—'s letter wasn't idle chatter; it was a disposal order, the woman a loose end in a string of colonial pilferings. The emeralds, catalogued loosely, could hide a fortune rerouted through servants' hands. Vance stubbed out his cigarette and reached for his hat. Time to trace Mary Blandy's grave—

or her ghost. The great estates of Montcorbier would yield their ledgers, and with them, perhaps, the quiet indictment of a system that turned women into pawns and treasures into traps.

He stepped into the street, where rickshaws splashed through puddles and a peacock screamed from the Maidan. The case was no longer routine. It was a reckoning, fifty years late, for the burdens of empire and the domestic shadows they cast.

1905: Euphemia Mallard

Private papers

Today, while leafing through the extensive diaries of my grandmother recently unearthed by my sister, I was scarcely surprised to find within those worn pages evidence that my grandmother was herself a keen reader of David Hume. They are learned volumes for a woman of her time, yet the depth of her intellectual curiosity, much like my own, traversed the bounds of mere daily record. Among her many annotations, a passage by Hume stood out, one I believe worthy of careful reflection and apt for inclusion in my own crime fiction.

Hume's assertion is that no testimony is sufficient to establish the fact of a murder unless the lie inherent in that testimony would be a greater marvel than the murder it claims to prove. This captures perfectly the delicate balance between truth and falsehood in the art of both law and narrative. In essence, for a murder to be confirmed by testimony, the falsehood of that testimony would need to be so extraordinary, so utterly improbable, that it is more reasonable to accept the murder as fact. This compels one to consider the reliability of witnesses and the extraordinary nature of their claims, a theme ripe for exploration in detective fiction where the truth often hides behind layers of deceit and human fallibility.

To paraphrase, the measure of evidence is not merely its quantity, but the quality of its improbability should it be false. A claim that would be more miraculous in its untruth than the event it seeks to prove demands our acceptance of the claim as truth, else we give ourselves over to an even stranger impossibility. Such a principle serves as a powerful tool for the crime writer, reminding us that while the law demands evidence, it is the nature of that evidence, weighed by its plausibility, which must guide the final judgment.

This philosophical insight will lend a weighty elegance to the fabric of my mysteries, underscoring the tension between appearance and reality that lies at the heart of every detection. How fitting that my grandmother, with her own intellectual breadth, should have guided

me, across generations, to such a profound and practical principle for my craft. Thus inspired, I shall set about weaving this wisdom into my forthcoming tales of crime and justice.

1912: Shih-chai-shan, near Kunming

Euphemia Mallard

The ongoing excavations at Shih-chai-shan, close by the tranquil waters of Lake Kun-ming, continue to amaze me as I accompany uncle Reg, whose archaeological achievements grow even more astonishing by the day. His latest report informs us of an ingenious system the ancients devised, employing water and sound to manoeuvre immense stone blocks—stones far too great for mere human or beastly strength to shift. What captivates me most are the numerous carved ducks scattered throughout the site, not simply decorative but apparently integral to this sophisticated hydraulic-acoustic apparatus. Uncle posits these duck motifs are, in fact, a coded system, instructions perhaps, directing the movements of stone with the precision of a modern mechanism.

Nearby rests a smaller cluster of stones etched with what may be the earliest form of positional marking—an antecedent of printing itself—intended to record spatial details vital to the construction's grand design. The implications are profound: a civilisation wielding natural forces, symbolic communication, and technical mastery in a harmony we thought impossible for so ancient an era.

What I find peculiarly thrilling, as I wander through these ruins, is the curious and doubtless fated connection they share with our own lineage—the Dukes of Mallard, and indeed my own surname. Of all creatures, the duck, an emblem as ordinary as it is enigmatic, appears here as a talisman of power and intellect. Such a symbol embedded deeply in this ancient site gives one pause for reflection upon the strange threads fate weaves between history, family, and identity.

One cannot help but wonder—might the Mallard blood running through our veins be somehow linked to these masterful architects of stone and sound? Whether fanciful or not, it serves as a fine inspiration, reminding me that the stories I pursue do not exist in isolation but are roots, perhaps from this very earth and time, connecting past to present in ever more mysterious ways.

Thus, amidst the dust and fossils of Shih-chai-shan, history and family entwine with peculiar grace, encouraging continued excavation —not only of these sandstone tombs but of the narratives that bind us across centuries.

1912: Kunming–Haiphong Railway Journey

Euphemia Mallard

My uncle insists that for my own "mental composure" I leave the excavation site at Shih-chai-shan for a few weeks. He speaks of the current disturbances—with his usual mixture of understatement and exasperation—as "those Chinese ruptures into a republic". One would think the earth's digestion were at fault rather than a dynasty ending. The men at camp muttered of soldiers changing sides, magistrates fleeing, and banners torn down overnight. To hear them, one would think the entire Empire shaking itself like a dust sheet.

I am not particularly alarmed, only weary. Days in the dig have been filled with silt and envy—one stone tablet after another inscribed in characters no one in our party can read, while the local craftsmen who haul the pieces look politely bored, knowing perfectly that they could have deciphered them if only we had the grace to ask.

So we have taken tickets south on the new French-built railway—Yunnan–Haiphong—a marvel of almost impudent ingenuity, linking cloud and sea. The track clings to the mountainside like embroidery, crossing gorges on neat, too-precise trestles that seem scratched into the granite by a draftsman's pen rather than laid by human labour. It looks, from a distance, as though the rails might simply lift and float off into the mist.

Our carriage is half-empty; the French conductors take their duties with an air of musical boredom, and one of them, a thin Alsatian with tragic eyes, insists on pronouncing Haiphong as if it were a woman's name. The Chinese passengers are for the most part merchants and students—neatly dressed, calm, and faintly amused by our luggage. I love their restraint: no one speaks loudly; even the hawkers board and depart with a kind of ritual grace, selling peanuts, dried lotus seeds, and miraculous oranges that taste of sunlight refined.

The train jolts and shivers continually, and the valleys below seem like secrets no one should see from so mechanical a vantage. At each halt there are women wearing dark indigo robes with embroidered cuffs; they carry baskets of tea and rice-cakes and beg one to sample their wares. I bought a parcel of sticky rice with slices of something aromatic—ginger, perhaps, or cardamom—and have been eating it with the slow solemnity of a pilgrim.

How to describe a country that seems endlessly reinventing itself from the weather? We pass terraces like green cathedral steps, fields smudged with smoke from early planting, rivers the colour of pale

pewter. The mountains stand in congregation, over-scripted by mist. Occasionally we see a thread of scarlet where a child's tunic catches light, or a temple roof tilting out from bamboo. All these things seem permanent, immovable, while the political world fractures below the veil of cloud.

At one of the stops a French engineer told us of the Emperor's abdication in Peking. The flag, he said, has changed colours again—five bars this time, one each for the nation's races, as if ribbons could reconcile centuries. The older passengers received this with the same look one gives to weather reports: perhaps inconvenient, perhaps promising. Only one student—a thin boy with spectacles—seemed genuinely exhilarated. He said that China would now breathe again. I asked, a little wickedly, whether England could bear such a breath. He smiled, but said nothing.

By evening we had crossed into French territory, though there is no visible mark of it—save that the uniforms become tighter and the bread, suddenly, more ambitious. The stations display names in both scripts, and the air feels heavier. At Lao Cai, where we stopped for inspection, a customs officer permitted me to stretch my legs. The scent was tropical, wild, almost sweet—growth and decay together. There were palms and damp masonry, little boys chasing chickens through puddles.

I note that the colours here seem fresher, more insolent: vermilion parasols, thick green of banana leaves, women wearing black silk trousers and conical hats glittering with rain. One hawker sold us fried fish in banana leaf—crisp, astonishingly good—and another a teapot's worth of lime-flower infusion served in chipped porcelain. Each vendor bowed as if expecting immediate poetry in reply.

I find myself thinking of the stones back at Shih-chai-shan—mute, dignified, enduring. We tried to catalogue them, while history around us tore out another page. Perhaps all civilisations end this way: not with catastrophe but with filing, as travellers record them on foolscap.

Uncle is reading Le Temps and has at last stopped pretending to disapprove of the French. He says this journey will do me good: "strong air, mild danger". Perhaps he is right. If crime must be the métier of my imagination, then political collapse is excellent rehearsal. Every man that morning wore loyalty on his sleeve; by nightfall, different sleeve entirely. Murder, I think, is merely politics conducted at close range.

Tonight we shall sleep in Haiphong, and tomorrow I hope to see the harbour—where the river opens into sea, and masts, like so many signatures, scratch upon the evening sky.

1912: Haiphong

Euphemia Mallard

This morning I walked quite alone beyond the European quarter, leaving behind the stucco villas and their faint smell of bougainvillaea and boredom, and found myself amid a narrow warren of streets that smelt of fish oil and star anise, all gilded dust and chatter. The market was in full, amiable confusion—women in cone hats crouched like folded birds over baskets of persimmons; a child drummed upon a tin plate to beg alms; and between the stalls a small procession moved past, carrying some sort of idol on a litter, painted deep vermilion and dressed in paper flowers. The air shimmered, gold and damp, and seemed wholly unconcerned with history or its imperial witnesses.

I stopped near a tea-house where a group of grey-haired women sat weaving mats and gossip. One spoke English—or rather the version taught in the mission schools, coloured by French vowels and a patient precision. She asked if I wanted palm-leaf tea, which I did. She poured it into a cup the colour of pond water, and as we shared it she began to tell me a story. She said she had once lived up the Red River, but the floods had come, "and with floods, Mem, come ghosts".

The tale she told—half proverb, half prophecy—was this:

The Tale of the River and the Snail

Once there was a river who fell in love with the mountain. He wanted to rise upward to see her face, but every time he tried, the weight of his water drew him down. So he sent his messenger, a little snail, to climb for him and tell him what she looked like.

The snail was slow and wise, and climbed day and night. He dreamed of the mountain's cool shoulders and of the clouds that played about her. But when at last he reached the summit, the mountain had turned her head to the sea. She no longer looked inland, but toward the far horizon, watching ships and storms. The snail wept, for he knew the river would never be satisfied.

When he crept back to tell the river, many years had passed. The waters had changed course; there was a delta where once had been a current. The river no longer remembered his love for the mountain, and so, when the snail began his tale, the river laughed and swept him away.

Now, said the wise woman, when the floods come and the snails cling high to rocks or walls, it is not for fear but for remembrance, for they are still trying to finish the climb.

"The river forgets quickly, Mem", she said, "but the mountain never moves. That is why the earth is patient—she hears all things, but answers only when she must".

It was such a strange, perfect little parable—neither moral, nor sentimental, nor wholly fatalistic. One could sense its equation to life here, where everything endures by remaining still. The woman laughed when I said it was melancholy and replied, "No, Mem, it is only true. The river must hurry, because he thinks he has purpose; but purpose has no patience".

How different these tales are from the stories of my childhood—the brisk moral instruction of Europe, so determined that consequence should match cause, and virtue be its own reward. Here, the lessons meander like the waters they describe; they have no appetite for justice, only harmony. In our English thinking, nature is punished or perfected according to some distant judge. Here, it simply continues, because it must.

I wonder if that is why tragedy rests more lightly on these people. Life, to them, is not a sequence of punishments but of patterns—circles, not ladders. I begin to understand why even the poorest smile with their eyes while their lips remain solemn: they are not cheerful but reconciled.

This evening, as I returned by rickshaw through the French settlement, the afternoon light lay thick over the tiles, and for a moment I imagined the snail still climbing somewhere in the mountains, patient beyond all reason. I thought of England—of our idea that every story must have an ending, preferably tidy, preferably moral—and I felt myself oddly ashamed. We call that civilisation; they call it noise.

Perhaps one must live a little before learning to be patient; perhaps one must lose a country before learning to stand still.

Tonight, I shall try to write down the fable properly, though I suspect that, like the river's memory, my English will fail it. Still—the attempt is a sort of devotion, and the earth, as the old woman said, will wait.

1915: Sydney

Euphemia Mallard

At long last, I have returned to Sydney, and with me I brought a most interesting addition to my household—Agnes, the daughter of aunt Rose's Blandy maid. The elder Blandy maid had been sent to my mother's care many years ago, and under my mother's watchful guidance, her daughter has grown up trained in the household's ways and professions. I hold every hope and expectation that the girl will fit

very readily into my own establishment, bringing with her skills and habits already well honed.

This young lady presents certain peculiar characteristics, most notably her curious habit of mixing languages within her sentences—swiftly switching from English to Hindustani, French, or occasionally even a line in Greek. I confess this manner of speech amuses me greatly, as I myself am no stranger to multiple tongues, and I do not anticipate it causing any confusion or difficulty in our dealings. On the contrary, I find it rather delightful and a fine testament to the many worlds that weave themselves here.

Sydney's streets seem both familiar and changed—still brimming with the clatter and bustle, and yet touched by the somber shadow of the war that reaches even this distant shore. Life goes on amid the challenges, much as it always has, yet with a weight that one cannot quite shake.

She will soon grow used to the rhythms of my work and the quiet order of my days.

1915: Working Notes
Murder by Correspondence: A Novel in Letters and Lies
Outline & random thoughts

Conception

It occurs to me that one might commit a perfectly moral murder by post. The pen never leaves fingerprints, only opinions. Society in wartime survives on the written word—orders, permits, condolences, censures. If one were to forge these delicately enough, a man might be ruined or executed without a drop of visible blood.

My intention: a comedy of administration set among the respectable classes, in which letters themselves become weapons, and the mail-bag delivers the corpses of reputations. The story to unfold entirely through private and official correspondence—forged, misdelivered, intercepted, and pompously signed.

(Margin note: perhaps "The murderer writes too well" as central irony.)

Characters—to be defined as correspondents rather than actors

1 Mrs. Arbuthnot-Greene—widow of a minor civil servant, possesses a passion for decorous revenge and the stationery to accomplish it.

2 Mr. Basil Cumberwick, B.A.—junior clerk at the Ministry of Supplies; too obedient to suspect conspiracy and too ambitious not to deliver it.
3 Major Hilary Tredgold—pompous man with an overdraft; the chosen victim whose forged signature dispatches him to financial and moral ruin.
4 Miss Felicia Torrance—typist; sees everything, understands nothing, but keeps impeccable carbons.
5 The Reverend Dr. Pettifer—moral adviser who answers letters of "spiritual distress" under the pseudonym "Parson Plain". Accidentally becomes accessory to a crime through entirely proper counsel.
6 The Dead Man's Solicitor—always "out to luncheon" at crucial junctures.
7 The Postman—never speaks, but everything passes through his hands like communion.

(Thought: The letters must sound authentic but slightly too correct—murder committed in perfect grammar.)

Opening Letters (draft fragments)

Letter I—Mrs. Arbuthnot-Greene to Major Tredgold (not sent, but copied into her journal).

My dear Major,

I was vastly amused to learn that you told the Club my late husband had expired through mismanagement of the household accounts. I do not wonder your gender has so few domestic virtues. I hope, in time, to correct the error by gentle means. You shall receive acknowledgment in due course.

(Comment: set the tone—genteel menace.)

Letter II—Extract, Ministry Memorandum

To: Major H. Tredgold

Subject: Allocation of Confidential Funds

Sir,

Pursuant to your request, authority is hereby granted to withdraw from temporary reserves the sum of £850 for "urgent patriotic expenditure". Kindly affix your signature below in confirmation of receipt.

(This is forged by Mrs. A-G. She will call it a "patriotic experiment in equilibrium.")

Central Device—the Forged Signature

The charm of handwriting as both identity and disguise. A man's entire moral appearance condensed into the curl of a 'T'. I've long

thought graphology the most flattering of sciences—no one's handwriting is wicked until it's convenient to prove it so.

Our murderess becomes a student of signatures. She studies every variation of the Major's hand through the gossip column's fund-raising appeals, then reproduces him into ruin. He is not slain physically but bureaucratically—"drowned in red ink", as one of the correspondents will later remark.

The Chain of Letters (Outline)

1 The Initiating Forgery: Mrs. A-G signs the Major's name to a confidential military contract, channelling funds to a fictitious charity "The League for Domestic Efficiency".
2 The Clerk's Panic: Basil Cumberwick notices irregularities in the handwriting but fears to mention them to superiors (his career depends on the illusion of competence).
3 Anonymous Corrections: A series of helpful letters begin arriving at the Ministry, advising how to "tidy" the files—all written in the Major's supposed hand.
4 The Major's Complaint: He writes to his bank, which replies indignantly that his account has already been closed "by correspondence".
5 Mrs. Arbuthnot-Greene's Note to the Bishop: Hinting at "grave misconduct" on the Major's part, but phrased so gently that no one may cite her.
6 Endgame: The Major, unable to prove his own authenticity, attempts suicide by swallowing his fountain pen nibs. He dies of embarrassment before poisoning sets in.

(Possible retitle: "Death by Post—or The Correspondence That Killed.")

Epistolary Ironies

The more letters exchanged, the less anyone truly communicates. Each writer guards courtesy as a murderer hides the body. Replies are delayed through correctness. Every question is answered indirectly, every motive concealed behind typewritten discretion.

The forger alone writes plainly, for she has nothing to lose by saying what she never said. Her prose becomes the most honest within the deception.

(Margin: consider including Post Office circular advising public to "exercise discretion in sending letters of emotional content".—Could serve as ironic prologue.)

Extract from Mid-Story Correspondence

From: The Reverend Dr. Pettifer ("Parson Plain")
To: A Lady in Distress

My dear Daughter in Sorrow,

Wherever there is injustice done through men's handwriting, remember the moral: the Author never mistakes permanent ink for permanent truth. Absolution is a private matter between the soul and its stationery.

(The forgery uses this sermon quotation to authenticate the next cheque.)

Denouement Notes

- After the Major's financial and social death, Mrs. Arbuthnot-Greene begins receiving her own handwriting, slightly altered—letters she never wrote but signed in spirit. Someone imitates her style (perhaps Miss Torrance the typist?).
- The tables turn. The original forger becomes the forged. Poetic justice by post.
- Final twist: Mrs. A-G discovers a letter revealing that the Major had never existed—he himself was an alias created by Basil Cumberwick to justify government slush funds. She has been corresponding with a fiction the entire time.

Conclusion: No one murdered anyone. The letters did it.

Closing Reflection (for possible preface)

In the age of typewriters and war offices, where every feeling is duplicated in triplicate, what greater crime can there be than authenticity? Forgery becomes the sincerest form of participation. To sign one's name honestly is to confess naïveté; to forge is to adapt.

Hence this little satire on correspondence—a romance of penmanship where death travels by post, franked in civility and sealed in good taste.

1749: The Trunk from the Tempest

From The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles

In the spring of 1749, when the mists yet lay heavy upon the coasts of Brittany and trade winds blew unsteadily out of the west, the good ship MayFlet set sail from Goa with a cargo destined for the Ducal estates of Montcorbier. The vessel bore a hold filled with treasures that glowed faintly in the candlelight—silks stiff with gold thread, caskets breathing the scent of cardamom and cloves, uncut gems wrapped in soft cotton, and, among them all, one great trunk of oak so richly

carved it seemed the work of an angel's leisure rather than a craftsman's patience.

The trunk, fashioned with panels of inlaid ivory and chased brass, was sealed in the Captain's cabin and set apart. For it had been commissioned by the Duchess herself, who, though she seldom travelled, wished that her possessions should at least voyage farther than she could. Upon its lid was a carved compass surrounded by creatures of sea and sky—dolphins leaping up through shellwork scrolls, gulls winging through gilt clouds, and, at the very centre, a single pearl in place of the North Star.

For thirteen days the MayFlet sailed in bright calm. By day, her decks glittered with salt like glass, and at night her wake burned with the silver light of the southern seas. The crew sang and mended sails; even the parrot belonging to the mate learned to say, "To Montcorbier's glory!" in a perfect mimicry of the ship's chaplain. But on the fourteenth day, as they passed beyond the Azores, the sky turned an iron hue and the wind came shrieking out of the west.

The storm that followed was unlike any recorded in the Duke's journals or the port's register. It began with steady rain and ended in such mountainous seas that the Captain swore he saw the moon sink beneath the waves. The ship climbed black walls of water and dropped down gulfs of foam. Men shouted prayers or curses—both were swallowed by the wind. The carved trunk, lashed beneath the quarterdeck, broke free once, struck against the bulkhead, then vanished into the roaring dark.

By dawn there was no MayFlet, nor crew, nor spar, nor sail—only scattered wreckage drifting among gulls and a few bright silks caught among the seaweed like streamers trailing from a dream.

Weeks later, along the Breton coast just short of Saint-Brieuc, fishermen found upon the sand a great trunk wedged between two rocks. It was battered and salt-stained, yet whole. The brass hinges, though dimmed, had not corroded; the carving seemed to have drunk the sea instead of suffering it. Word of the discovery travelled swiftly inland, carried by coachmen and couriers until it reached the Ducal household.

The Duke, who prized symbols of Providence as much as the Duchess cherished curiosities, sent a wagon immediately to fetch it home. When brought to the Great Hall and set upon trestles before the fire, the trunk exhaled a strange sweetness—as if its silks still remembered the gardens of the East. The Duchess herself commanded the key be brought and turned it with trembling fingers.

The lid rose smoothly. Within lay the treasures exactly as they had been packed: jewels in their nests, spices preserved, silks untouched by

mould or damp. Yet there was one thing more—resting atop the folded fabrics where no hand had placed it. It was a small brooch wrought in the shape of a ship, its hull formed from the pearly curve of a clam shell, its masts of braided gold thread, and its sails crusted with tiny jewels that sparkled like stars.

No goldsmith in the household could claim its workmanship, and nothing in the Captain's listing described such an ornament. The Duchess turned it over in her hand and declared that it must have come as a gift of the sea itself—a keepsake left by the waves in recompense for all that had been lost. The Duke, ever cautious, ordered it to be weighed, measured, and locked in the family treasury.

But that night, as the candles guttered and the tide outside beat against the cliffs, the Duchess awoke and thought she heard a sound—a faint creaking as of cordage straining, a whisper like sails unfurling above her bed. Rising, she saw the brooch glimmer faintly upon her dressing table. It shone with a soft, milky light, and as she gazed, she fancied the tiny ship within it rocked upon invisible waters, its sails swelling, its jewelled prow gliding forward through the calm of the room.

When morning came, the brooch had grown cold again, and no trace of its living motion remained. Yet the Duchess always said afterward that the sea had a conscience, and that not all its gifts were wreckage. She wore the little ship to the end of her days, and it was laid upon her breast when she died. The old servants used to whisper that, on nights of tempest, the jewel glimmered faintly in its glass case in the family vault, as if a hidden tide within it rose and fell forever—a pledge between storm and shore that one act of mercy would not be forgotten.

1916: Sydney

Euphemia Mallard

This afternoon, with the rain drumming steadily against the window and the newspapers full of one more catalogue of slaughter from France, my mind perversely strayed from the sanctioned killing of war to that smaller, more intimate death which is called "murder" and solemnly punished at the gallows. I have been reading about Catherine Foster, that poor, bewildered Suffolk girl who was hanged at Bury St Edmunds in 1847 for poisoning her husband with arsenic in his dumplings. A mere slip of a thing, scarcely out of childhood, three weeks a wife and by all accounts of no great malice or imagination; yet the machinery of justice moved implacably upon her, and she dangled

at the end of Calcraft's rope before a crowd of thousands, who shuddered and then went home to their tea.

What troubles me is not that she was guilty – the evidence and her own confession, as far as the record shows, leaves little room for doubt – but that the law could find no other answer for such a wretched tangle of youth, ignorance, perhaps misplaced passion, than public strangulation in a meadow. One clumsy handful of white powder, and her life, and his, were forfeit. Arsenic is such a queer instrument of fate: insidious, tasteless, almost domestic in its familiarity, yet the law invests it with a kind of satanic glamour when wielded by a servant girl in a cottage kitchen.

And here my mind, irreverent as ever, shifts to the great Victoria on her throne – she who sat, impregnable and untroubled by any assize judge, at the apex of an empire whose wealth so happily included arsenic mines and the industries that sprang from them. How many households were painted and papered with those poisonous greens in her day; how many visitors to fashionable London drawing-rooms left with their lungs or skin quietly assailed by particles from some splendid wallpaper or textile, their complaints dismissed as "neuralgia" or "nerves"? No one suggests that the Queen herself took a pestle and mixed an arsenical dose for a troublesome guest; the very idea is absurd. Yet it seems equally absurd that we can regard one arsenic as murder and the other as an unfortunate by-product of industry and taste, washed clean by Majesty, distance and profit.

Catherine in her cottage, stirring her dumplings, knew very well what she was about; Victoria, presiding over arsenic as commodity, could afford not to know – or to know only in the vaguest, most comfortable fashion – that her patronage ensured its circulation through a thousand parlours and workshops. The one stands in the dock at Bury, pinioned and weeping, while the other stands at the centre of a world-system that profits from the same white crystals, and no indictment is ever framed. We hang the girl because her act is personal, comprehensible, containable: one husband, one plate, one fatal supper. The Queen's part in arsenical mischief is diffuse, impersonal, lost in ledgers and contracts and the haze of "progress". It is, apparently, nobody's crime.

I am not so childish as to pretend the two cases are identical; yet as a writer of crime I cannot help feeling that the distinction is one of narrative convenience as much as of morality. Catherine offers a tidy story: motive or no motive, there is a beginning in the wedding, a middle in the poisoned meal, and an end upon the gallows. It is the sort of tale the public likes and the newspapers can print in neat columns. The Queen's relation to arsenic is sprawling, systemic, dull in its

particulars; it resists the shape of a "case". No jury is empanelled to weigh the slow, invisible injuries done by fashionable pigments and profitable mines. There is no corpse obligingly laid out with its stomach opened and its tissues tested; only a multitude of nameless sufferers who fade quietly from the record.

All this makes me wonder what sort of justice it is that we practise, and what sort of justice I myself counterfeit upon the page. My novels, like everyone else's, require the single, knowable culprit: the hand that stirs the cup or pulls the trigger. But the longer this war goes on, and the more I read of cases such as poor Catherine's, the more I am haunted by the thought that the world is full of unindicted causes – sovereigns, companies, industries – that poison without malice and yet with consequences far more extensive than any village murder. We do not call that "murder"; we call it commerce, or policy, or regrettable accident.

I shall try someday to write a book in which the true villain is not the little woman in the dock but the vast, faceless arrangement that placed the poison in her reach and taught her, by a hundred subtle cues, that some lives are cheap. For the moment I can only set down in this private place my sense of unease: that Catherine Foster swung where a Queen never so much as stumbled, and that our notions of guilt and innocence are as much a matter of rank and narrative convenience as of any immutable moral law.

1920: "The Excess of Emancipation: A Rebellion in Petticoats and in Print"

The Spectator

It has lately become fashionable—lamentably so—for authoresses, reformers, and the more excitable sisterhood of the pen to imagine alternative worlds in which femininity reigns triumphantly over civilisation. One cannot, it seems, enter a circulating library or open a review without being invited to marvel at some freshly inverted society governed by women, while men look on, bewildered, their functions reduced to the ornamental or the obsolete. This literary epidemic, draped in the gauze of "progress", promises nothing so much as fatigue.

The trouble, of course, is that the modern lady novelist no longer contents herself with writing about love, propriety, or curtains, but must now re-design the entire cosmos. It is not enough that she manage a household; she must manage history, science, and philosophy—regions hitherto patrolled, and quite adequately, by men. The result is a kind of intellectual trespass, earnest yet unconvincing, in which the

gentler sex repaints the old world in her own complexion, protesting loudly that she has been shut from it.

Take, for instance, Lady Florence Dixie's Gloriana: or, The Revolution of 1900. In this furious fantasy, a woman, disguising herself as a man, leads an armed uprising to shatter the fetters of masculine rule. One wonders whether Lady Dixie's sense of chronology faltered when she proposed that the British Empire, engine of half the globe, could be subverted by a heroine in trousers. The idea is charming as melodrama but perilous as metaphor. England has thrived for centuries under the steadying grasp of the masculine hand; to intimate that our civilisation must be refashioned by masquerade is to confuse leadership with wardrobe. Revolutions are rarely improved by lace.

Not content with mere insurrection, our Eastern cousins have advanced to complete reversal. Begum Rokheya's The Sultana's Dream (1905) presents a "Ladyland" where women govern through intellect and ethics, while men languish in seclusion. It is difficult to read such a conception without gratitude for the natural balance Providence has ordained. Men, locked away from work and discourse, would soon perish of idleness—and one suspects the ladies would tire of running the world before luncheon. The whole exercise reminds one of the nursery: a brisk play of "mother may I?" elevated to politics.

By 1915 the contagion reached America, where Mrs. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Herland constructed an entire nation of women, reproducing without men, governing without dissent, and behaving, without irony, as a model of perfection. The book has been hailed by some advanced critics as satire and by others as prophecy. To the saner mind it appears chiefly as a warning: that a society without men would be as dull as a dance without music. When the sexes cease to converge, civilisation ceases to progress; each needs the other, though ideally from respectable distance.

One detects, behind all these fictions, the same feverish impulse—to re-make the world in a softer image, to denounce the slow organic order of centuries as "unfair", and to substitute for honest inequality a bureaucratic nightmare of perpetual reform. Yet our social fabric, though patched and occasionally frayed, has served its purpose well enough. The gentleman's authority is not tyranny but stewardship; the lady's influence, though indirect, is power of the subtlest kind. The harmony may creak, but it has not broken. And what arrogance to imagine one can mend the delicate machinery of human difference by means of pamphlets and parables!

The doctrine of "improvement" has ever been the enemy of peace. Women's enfranchisement, we are told, will lead to understanding, equality, and moral purity; but too much sunlight fades the tapestry.

The more one exposes the sexes to the same labours, ambitions, and temptations, the quicker vanish those distinctions which lend our civilisation both its delicacy and its charm. To abolish the old order is not to liberate humanity but to flatten it. Better, perhaps, to do nothing than to "fix" what is not broken—better the imperfect grace of custom than the mechanical virtue of theory.

If women must write novels, let them write of hearts, not hierarchies; if they must dream, let it be of romance, not revolution. The age is overburdened with reformers. What it craves is repose—and perhaps the quiet return of the drawing-room conversation, in which neither sex pretended to save the world, but both knew how to end the evening gracefully.

1920: Draft outline
The Harmonium Experiment, or The Planet Without Gentlemen

(Working motto: "It takes all types to wind the same clock.")

1. Point of Conception

The piece in The Spectator last week still prickles—that gentleman who asserted it were "better to fix nothing than risk repairing what is not broken". How easily men confuse breakage with ownership. His tone suggested the world was a reliable watch, merely stopped on occasion; whereas I rather think it ticks in spite of them.

So: a reply, not as lecture but as story. A female-only world, not born of hatred, nor the pampered wish to escape "patriarchy", but of accident and arithmetic. Then, quite deliberately, the gradual readmission of men—not as masters, nor invalids, but as fellow conspirators in the great disorder of life. It must be social satire disguised as scientific romance, with a pulse of comedy and one solid corpse to earn its place on the shelf of crimes.

(Margin: "Never lecture where murder will do.")

2. Outline

Setting

Year approximately 2020—a convenient century ahead, for safety. Earth divided after a mysterious "Biological Greenwich Event", a cosmic irregularity in which pulses of light remove one sex alternately across hemispheres for twenty years at a time. (Hence "Cuckoos": the world raising half its brood in the other's absence.)

Story opens in the second "female cycle". Men have vanished from the physical sphere but not from habit or architecture: their portraits remain, their committees are faithfully continued by women in their names, their clubs maintained for dusting. The women have rebuilt society around competence, cooperation, and an element of wistfulness.

Yet—there is a crime, inevitably. A mysterious parcel discovered in the Old Royal Observatory, Greenwich: a set of alien blueprints for a reversal device, sent (perhaps) by the vanished men from a parallel dimension. It contains—unbelievably—records of correspondence signed by one "Lord Spectator", advising the women to "cease all adjustments at once". Murder follows.

3. Cast (All Applications Provisional)

- Dr. Olivia Quain – criminologist and amateur astronomer, long descended from "Lady Florence D-", namesake unacknowledged. Scientific curiosity baffled by social sanity.
- Madam Beata Yarrow – Premier of the United Commonwealth of Women; serene, pragmatic; denies the necessity of both God and rhetoric.
- Miss Henrietta Doe – former housekeeper in the old House of Commons, now archivist of extinct male correspondence; collects gentlemen's signatures as relics.
- Sister Prudence Markham – Head of Moral Reconstruction; believer that men were removed as divine punishment for "vigorous conversation".
- The "Cuckoo" – an apparent intruder, claiming to be the reincarnation of Lord Spectator, disguised as a typewritten manifesto. Speaks through leaked letters, radiograms, and footnotes.

(Author's question: should the killer be moral or mechanical? Perhaps moral disguise.)

4. The Central Irony

The society functions beautifully because conflict is diffused into endless committee discussion. No one interrupts because no one finishes. Crime therefore becomes rare and desirable—an exotic entertainment. When a murder occurs (the death of the typist decoding "Lord Spectator's" messages), the women treat it first as tragedy, then as research opportunity.

Dr. Quain and Madam Yarrow argue that the crime signifies the return of need—the missing masculine principle of disruption. "Violence", notes Yarrow in the minutes, "is conversation too direct for our style".

(Margin suggestion: stage the investigation like an afternoon tea.)

5. The Men Return

By mid-story, the astronomical anomaly reverses: the men begin to reappear. Instead of horror, the women greet them with pragmatic bewilderment. "They will require feeding", says one. "And reassurance", says another.

Men arrive confused but cooperative, expecting to reclaim authority and discovering instead an orderly state that runs on schedules and amateur gardening. A council debates their inclusion. Quain insists upon partnership:

"They are not guests, nor ghosts. We must not do to them what they once did to us—preserve the species by shrinking it".

The fundamental crime, she declares, was never murder but classification. Every conquest begins by naming someone inconvenient.

(Note to self: This line might win applause if ever read aloud to the Fabian Society.)

6. The True Murder

Investigation reveals that the dead typist was not killed by jealousy or ideology but by the malfunction of the "Reversal Device". The killer, indirectly, is the Spectator himself—a misfired piece of masculine wit attempting to prevent its own irrelevance. The women realise the entire cosmic separation was never natural; it was engineered from old male anxieties about being out-talked.

The "Greenwich Event" originated in a laboratory of anxious male mathematicians trying to compute "female comprehension radius". They accidentally folded half the species out of sight.

(Margin: "Men to be scientists of their own disappearance.")

7. Resolution

Articulate forgiveness. The women, regaining their counterparts, do not expel them but reabsorb them carefully, like oxygen. They preserve some single-sex institutions—for nostalgia—but insist on blended government. Dr. Quain remarks:

"Peace is not when the sexes are equal; it is when neither remembers who began the conversation".

The last page shows a jointly staffed Ministry of Correspondence signing a new Constitution, its preamble concluding:

"Whereas difference, duly recognised, is the only proof of likeness, let all variety be counted domestic".

8. Notes Toward Preface

Critics will call it sentimental or "unnecessary interference". They will say, as our friend in The Spectator did, that the old mechanisms of civilisation were never broken, only refined. To which one must answer: if the clock keeps time but never changes tempo, perhaps it hides the seconds that count.

(Final jotting: "Murder as diplomacy.")

Epilogue from the Notebook

If I finish it properly, The Harmonium Experiment will appear to validate every male prejudice while quietly undoing them in sequence. There will be no shrill rebellion, no petticoat insurrection. Merely a world run on balanced chaos, clockwork irony, and one necessary crime.

Should any editor question the plausibility of a female-only civilisation where things work quietly and men return courteously, I shall quote his familiar phrase: Better to do nothing than to mend what is not broken.

And then I shall let my characters decide—politely, of course—to mend it anyway.

1922: Viola Vorpel

Letter to Octavia in Sydney

I write to you in a mood both reflective and amused, for I have lately witnessed a curious spectacle of fragile egos and misplaced scholarship among the titled and the literary. You once remarked that a man's ego must be very fragile indeed to deflate at the mere strike of a woman's observation; I now comprehend the truth of this in a manner most personal.

It was but a fortnight ago that I found myself at a dinner party of some repute, where among the guests was the venerable Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, now much aged yet still keen to hold court. I must confess, I have never taken much pleasure in his crime fiction, nor in his philosophising upon the character of Sherlock Holmes. To my mind, the philosophies he intersperses within those detective tales seem but irrelevant digressions—mere page fillers and a rather clumsy strategy to thrust his own ideas into a genre that ill becomes such lofty ruminations.

Seated beside him that evening, I found myself made the recipient of a most singular proposition: that crime fiction ought to be designed much like a golf course. With polite attention, I listened to his argument, until a pause for breath invited my own response. I could not

resist but remark that "golf is a good way to ruin a pleasant walk," a sentiment of some mirth and truth, I thought. To my surprise, his countenance fell as though wounded, and thereafter he turned his back on me for the remainder of the evening.

Thus did I witness most plainly the brittleness of a man's pride, and the difficulty some are apt to have in receiving a spirited observation offered with no small measure of wit and goodwill. I shall harbour this memory with a Monsieur's amusement and a Lady's quiet satisfaction, mindful ever that sharp observations pierce where mere words will fail.

1923: Working Novel Title: The Architecture of Silence (or "Marriage at St Paul's")

A modern fable of stone, scandal, and sanctity.

Prefatory Thought

London is being rebuilt in iron and delusion. Every bride who passes beneath the great dome of St Paul's believes herself walking into eternity; most merely enter architecture. I wish to write of a pair whose marriage rehearses the building's own conditions—strength mistaken for holiness, symmetry for happiness, grandeur for good sense.

St Paul's: that immense shell of spirituality, designed to contain silence as proof of worship, not the other way round. The marble pretends to listen. It does not.

(Margin: "Let the cathedral represent England—sanctified refrigeration; let the bride represent the cry to be heard.")

Outline of the Fable

Two lovers:

- Julia Greve, twenty-six, church organist, all aspiration and unspent warmth.
- Arthur Layton, architect, coldly devout, whose sole tenderness belongs to geometry.

They meet not through passion but through echo: she hears him lecturing on Proportion and the Divine Intellect beneath the whispering gallery. He admires her stillness, she his arrogance—each mistake the other for God's voice.

(Note to self: tone to hover between sensual mysticism and social exasperation.)

1. The Whispering Gallery (Opening Scene Draft)

They stood opposite one another across the cold circumference. Her voice travelled like contraband along the curving wall: "Do you believe in love?"

He smiled faintly, like a stone warming itself on a theological window.

"I believe", he said, "in load-bearing affections. The arch supports itself by mutual denial".

She laughed—a transgression that echoed twice before vanishing into the domed silence.

Here begins their entanglement—not of bodies but of acoustics. She falls in love with what the building repeats; he, with what it refrains from correcting.

2. The Ceremony

They marry at the cathedral's south transept, a site notorious for draughts and photographs. The Dean arranges the words, the pigeons arrange the commentary. During the vows Julia notices that the organ sounds tired. The pipes wheeze like bureaucrats.

(Commentary sketch: "Marriage as maintenance contract.")

After the wedding breakfast she feels already entombed in limestone. Arthur, exhilarated, declares: "Our union shall be like St Paul's—founded upon grace and impervious to weather".

She prefers glasshouses, but does not say so.

3. Domestic Architecture

Their house in Bloomsbury resembles a miniature cathedral: high windows, cold corridors, excessive echoes. Every quarrel resonates for hours after its conclusion. They dine at opposite ends of a mahogany nave. He prays before blueprints; she writes unsent letters to the roof.

(Margin: "Explore sensual starvation—warmth as threat. Let Julia desire colour, collapse, human breath.")

A drifter named Luke Dorsay, half-foreign and wholly alive, enters her existence like sunlight through bad glazing. He repairs organs, literally and metaphorically. He tells her the pipes of St Paul's are "sexual in principle: they tremble under pressure". Arthur dismisses him as noisy.

4. The Architecture of Silence

Julia visits the cathedral alone at night.

The cold lifts her skirt in mockery; marble saints gleam like academic corpses. Above her, the dome curves unblinking, the eye of a stone god who hears only performance. Yet in the silence she feels the vibration of

men who measured, who chiselled, who sweated—their prayer permanent, not pious.

She realises marriage resembles the cathedral: a collaboration mistaken for revelation. Each joint predicts failure but disguises it with ornament.

(Note to self: scene must be fierce but humour beneath—"tragedy in good lighting.")

5. Violent Enlightenment

Arthur discovers Luke tuning the house piano. Accusation follows—not jealousy, but professional envy. Arthur detests improvisation; Luke lives on it.

"Your tones are indecent", cries the husband.

"Only to those unaccustomed to hearing themselves", says Luke.

The confrontation ends oddly: Julia, laughing uncontrollably, smashes the chandelier. Shards fall like absolution. Arthur leaves; in silently leaving, he repeats perfection.

(Margin: murder? Symbolic only—spiritual killing preferable. Body count unsuitable for sermon.)

6. Decline of the Stone

London turns damp, literally and morally. The dome grows mould; pigeons evangelise excrement. Julia, teaching music to children, realises the beauty of imperfect rhythm. Arthur publishes a lesson on "Domestic Order as the Foundation of Empire", read to universal indifference. Luke disappears to India "to tune the monsoon".

St Paul's remains, serenely insincere.

7. Final Vision (Closing Draft Paragraph)

One evening she walks again to the cathedral, just as the last light withdraws like a tired apology. The city hums—traffic, bells, desires. Within, the silence feels theatrical and familiar. She touches the pillar that once echoed her marriage, feels the cold and the pulse beneath it.

"Even stone", she whispers, "contains a heartbeat—only slower".

Then, leaving her gloves on the altar rail, she steps into rain, unburdened as sound escaping architecture.

Notes for Author's Use

- Satirical Core: Marriage treated as Britain's favourite civil engineering project—maintained by denial, admired by tourists, internally cracking.
- Tone: "Lawrence ironised with gloves on". Passion filtered through wit, never hysteria.

- Symbolic Motif: Stone as moral vanity; music as accidental salvation.
- Proposed Epigraph: “The Cathedral suffers no earthquake; only the people within collapse”.

(Addendum: Publishers may object to theological implications. Suggest marketing as ‘A Study in Modern Morals, with one or two inconvenient miracles.’)

1924: A Full Colonel

(Alternate: “Order as Performance; or, The Etiquette Parade.”)

Preface: Theory of Behaviour

All English order depends, not upon morality or intelligence, but upon costume and tone. The instant anyone behaves naturally, chaos ensues. Rank is merely theatre played by those too shy for vaudeville; breeding, an inherited license to improvise badly.

My Aunt Rose, who has the instincts of a naturalist disguised as a hostess, once wrote in her diary that “civilisation consists chiefly of introductions to people one never intends to see again”. This, I think, shall serve as the moral backbone of the story.

The Incident (as recorded in Aunt Rose’s diary)

A Colonel of impeccable brass and questionable digestion appeared at dinner. He introduced himself in grand tones as a “full Colonel”, glancing about the table as though expecting applause. Aunt Rose, who has never knowingly insulted anyone except by accident, beamed and replied, “Then I do hope, Colonel, that you will be a very full one after dinner!”

The remark detonated more effectively than artillery. The Colonel stiffened (he was not able to do otherwise), and the footmen froze in an attitude of suppressed republicans. Aunt Rose says he was heard later describing her salon as “improperly disciplined”.

I see a novel in this—a whole society where titles and uniforms have replaced physiologies; where men exist only as their decorations and women as their invitations.

(Margin: “A social crime story: motive—embarrassment; weapon—wit.”)

Outline of the Proposed Novel

Cast

- Mrs. Unity Brockhurst, an artless social queen who believes rank harmonises colour.
- Colonel Augustus Marchbanks, full to the brim with everything but humour.
- Mr. James Dexter, rising novelist, constantly mistaken for a valet.
- Miss Ida Featherington, who reads Freud, quotes him incorrectly, and considers marriage "a charming neurological experiment".
- A succession of footmen, each better educated than the guests.

(Note: ensure names sound as though embroidered on luncheon napkins.)

Scene I—The Dinner of Distinctions

Setting: Brockhurst House, a residence more eager than opulent. Guests arranged by order of precedence; order of precedence arranged by ignorance.

"This is our Full Colonel", announced Mrs. Brockhurst with rapture, as if unveiling a statue.

"Indeed!" said Miss Featherington. "Is that in opposition to a Partial one?"

"He's been everywhere", whispered the hostess, "India, Mesopotamia, and Parliament, though not lately in that order".

"The same itinerary as malaria", murmured James Dexter.

The dinner proceeds with military precision and conversational mutiny. Mrs. Brockhurst mistakes every pause for reverence and praises them accordingly. One guest observes that silence is "the aristocracy's only reliable export".

(Author's margin: "Keep dialogue brief, brittle, as though words were taxed.")

Scene II—The Crime of Conversation

After the soup, the Colonel begins a story involving elephants, discipline, and a lady missionary. Throughout, Mrs. Brockhurst responds at inopportune intervals:

"How delicious!"

"Quite right of you to whip him!"

"We so miss elephants in Mayfair!"

Finally, entrapped in enthusiasm, she delivers the immortal line:

"Then I do hope, Colonel, that you will be a very full one after dinner!"

Laughter achieved the status of insurrection. The Colonel turned the colour of his medals; servants developed sudden coughs amounting to treason.

Society still debates whether she understood her remark. She insists she did not. That, naturally, doubled her fame.

Scene III—The Aftermath (Public Order Restored)

Within a week, Mrs. Brockhurst's name adorns every drawing-room anecdote. She is invited everywhere to repeat her insult, which she does lovingly, without comprehension. The Colonel flees to Cheltenham for "disciplinary recovery".

Meanwhile James Dexter, who has published a satire entitled The Full Colonel under assumed initials, finds himself simultaneously ostracised and read aloud at dinners. Society, having feasted on its embarrassment, retires to digest.

(Note to self: include a formal "Regimental Apology" banquet where every guest must toast his own dignity.)

Reflections on "Order as Performance"

What fascinates is not the incident, but the choreography of consequence.

Every Englishman fears laughter as if it were revolution. Every Englishwoman courts it until it occurs. The structure of rank survives only by mutual rehearsal; once the line is forgotten, the play disintegrates, and the actors are revealed as nervous amateurs in borrowed uniforms.

Thus the Colonel, humiliated by one innocent pun, experiences the fall of an entire Empire in miniature. His medals, those small suns of borrowed shine, dim before a single feminine misunderstanding.

(Addendum: this should read less like tragedy, more like etiquette manual struck by lightning.)

Possible Ending

The following season, Mrs. Brockhurst opens a School of Social Performance—motto: "To err is fashionable; to forgive, impossible". Colonels attend in droves, desperate to rehearse their introductions safely.

The narrator (Dexter, perhaps) concludes:

"England will never abandon its hierarchies. It merely exchanges them for more decorative ones. A nation of uniforms will always require hostesses to undress them conversationally".

Stylistic Checklist

- Dialogue: light as sponge cake, flavoured with arsenic.
- Themes: Miscommunication, class as theatre, vanity's military precision.
- Tone: amused cruelty masked as affection.
- Moral (never explicit): Order is only performance, and everyone forgets his lines by dessert.

Post-Draft Jotting

Aunt Rose would adore it. She said once that politeness was England's answer to violence, which may explain the death rate at dinners. The Colonel story proves her right: manners wound more cleanly than swords, and scandal remains the nation's only truly shared religion.

(Provisional dedication scribbled on last page: "To Aunt Rose — who keeps society's minutes better than its morals.")

1925: London

Euphemia Mallard

It has been ten days since I arrived once more upon English soil, and I feel my temperament alternately buoyed and wearied by the changeling weather, the soft ash-coloured skies that seem to leak English melancholy into one's bones, and the perpetual thrum of London that insists the world is still young and mischievous. I wonder sometimes whether I have truly become Australian at heart or remain the same half-finished English creature my governess once declared me to be. Sydney's air seems a decade away, yet my ear still wants the harsh cry of the lorikeets rather than the sweet, dreary coo of these town pigeons.

My first days were occupied with publisher duties—those conversations that flutter like sheets in a draught, full of promises and red pencilling. The firm seems reasonably cheerful about the reception of Murder in Grey Lace; they even used the word 'satisfying' which, considering their reserve, might be taken as rapture. The editor confided that the London critics were pleased to "find a colonial lady with an eye for blood". I thanked him with a smile that hid all retort. It seems England has yet to decide whether we from the Antipodes are savages or prodigies.

The second purpose of my journey has been far graver. The Duke has gone at last, and though no one dared say it aloud, it is something of a reprieve. His gout and his politics had made him equally immovable. The funeral was held in Belgravia, attended by every feathered cousin

and obscure titled soul we possess. The formality pressed down like the chapel velvet, and I confess I had to steady myself when the choir reached that thin, questioning final note. Standing among all those solemn profiles, it was impossible not to think of the family fortune—so carefully preserved by dullness and so frittered by brilliance.

Afterwards, I escaped for a breath of street air and had the extraordinary pleasure of a meeting with Mrs. Agatha Christie herself. She had written me the kindest letter regarding Grey Lace—praising its "clean bone-work" which, coming from her, I consider the highest commendation. I therefore insisted upon calling to thank her in person. We met for tea at Brown's, she punctual and brisk, I a little windblown from Piccadilly traffic. She is slighter than photographs suggest, with eyes that seem to take in the entire table before she has spoken a word. We talked of plots and the necessity (or otherwise) of corpses, and she remarked, smiling, that she was forever accused of distortion because her heroines think rationally, whereas many editors prefer them to swoon.

The conversation turned—as I suppose it must—toward our feminine lot. I asked whether she too had noticed the peculiar stiffness that greets a woman who chooses to write of murder rather than marriage. She laughed in that dry, amused way that makes one glad of her company. "Until quite lately", she said, "critics spoke of ladies discovering bodies as one might of ladies discovering mildew—distasteful but hardly criminal". We agreed it was time that women of our class (she said "our tribe") might be allowed to know precisely what happens in the scullery as well as the salon. A good puzzle, after all, respects no gender.

We parted most cordially. I walked along Albemarle Street with the spring dusk folding itself about me and felt for the first time this week that I might belong after all—to fiction, to London, or at least to that little fraternity of women who write as they please and leave the rest gaping. Tomorrow, perhaps, I shall begin a new story. I want to set it on the voyage back—somewhere between the tropics and Tasmania, where the sea is smooth and the imagination electric. And perhaps, at last, I shall kill someone truly worth the ink.

1925: London

Euphemia Mallard

During our conversation, Mrs Christie asked whether I had yet paid my dutiful call upon Harrods, and declared in tones of mock severity that no visiting colonial authoress could be considered fully

provisioned without at least one reckless hour lost among its counters. I obeyed in the afternoon and came away not only with hats and gloves, but with an armful of the most charming Moleskine notebooks, bound in sober black and in every conceivable size. It struck me, as I turned them over at the stationer's counter, that a writer's private books may in the end prove more treacherously revealing than all her printed volumes, and that one ought therefore to choose them with especial care, since posterity is certain to rifle them with an eye for scandal rather than style.

1925: Henleigh

Euphemia Mallard

While in England, I was fortunate indeed to have Hermione with me for a few days. She has come up from the country, and we took the opportunity to visit Henleigh together—an excursion that has set my mind alight with possibility. This charming Oxfordshire town, with its quiet lanes and weathered buildings, proved fertile ground for my growing obsession: a fresh and different history of the infamous Mary Blandy poisoning case. I find the traditional accounts singularly unsatisfactory, far too eager to cast her as the wretched villain without courting the complexity of her story.

I must confess, I am glad to have those notebooks I purchased at Harrods with me—indeed, I have already begun filling one with diagrams of Henleigh's layout, maps gleaned from the parish, pamphlets dating from the period, and my own hastily scribbled commentary and notes. Each page is a small battlefield between fact and fancy as I attempt to reconstruct the human heart behind the horror. Hermione, ever the prudent sister, suggests I might be wise to leave well enough alone, cautioning me that some chapters of history are best left untouched. Nevertheless, she was good enough to lend her thoughts on the journey back to London, and I dutifully jotted down her wry and sceptical comments in my notebook.

Our talk circled around the Blandys, of whom there were servants retained by the family well before 1750, which I hope to explore further at Mallard House's archives. A visit there, when time permits, is imperative if I am to uncover the lesser-known details of the household —those shadows in the family's past that might reveal more colour and context than the dry court reports. Hermione, though wary of such pursuits, cannot deny the allure of the mystery, even if she insists I am quite mad to dabble in such dangerous waters. Thus, with pen and ink and the steady accompaniment of my sister's sceptical wisdom, I plunge

into history's fog, hoping to illuminate a truth more nuanced than verdict or sentence.

This new project feels like a departure from the usual crime tales I write but one that may enrich both my work and my understanding of human folly and forgiveness. I look forward to sharing its progress in the coming weeks.

1925: Hermione

Letter to Elspeth

My apologies for the unfortunate incident during your recent visit, when I carelessly beheaded a duck too near to you, resulting in a rather disagreeable stain upon your splendid dress. Your evident squeamishness at the sight of blood, which I admittedly underestimated, made the event all the more mortifying.

Allow me to pass along a few aged remedies which may yet relieve your garment of its unfortunate blotch. Fresh blood stains are best treated by holding the fabric under cold running water, then soaking it further in cold water. Should the stain have set somewhat, a gentle application of diluted household ammonia, roughly one ounce to a gallon of water, may prove efficacious, followed by a careful washing in lukewarm water. One must, however, avoid hot water at all costs, as it has the dreadful habit of fixing the stain permanently. After treatment, a delicate sponging with hydrogen peroxide might, with care, lighten the remaining discolouration.

1925: Mallard House

Euphemia Mallard

I took the opportunity to venture out to Mallard House, our family's grand estate, now shrouded in mourning black since the recent passing of the Duke. The air was solemn, heavy with the weight of loss, and the housekeeper, a Miss Harriet Blandy, received me with the perfect blend of deference and a curious, unyielding reserve. When I inquired about viewing the family archives from 1720 to 1850—the period I hope might shed light on certain family histories including the servants named Blandy—she demurred politely. Miss Blandy insisted that, given the Duke's recent death, it would be unseemly to pry into past shadows just yet. She advised that although I am kin, it would be wise to seek the new Duke's permission before disturbing the archives. I promised to do so.

Later, I made my way to the Dowager of North Lodge, whose house was in uproar as she prepared to abandon her long-held residence for a more modest flat in Belgravia. The Dowager, sharp-tongued and resolute, spoke freely against the new Duke, lamenting his youth and the changes he might bring. Her opinion was less than flattering, though I was grateful for her sagely advice: when writing to the new Duke, it would be well to adopt a firm hand, lest one be trampled by youthful imperiousness or family politics. I took her words to heart, knowing well the delicate dance of aristocratic letter-writing.

These encounters have only deepened my sense that the past holds many secrets, and that the present family dynamics are as intricate as any plot I could devise. Mallard House remains a repository not just of history, but of the living tensions between heritage and change. I await with some anxiety the new Duke's reply, and hope that my research may proceed apace once granted entry.

This step feels crucial, for only with access to those papers can I hope to uncover the hidden corners of the Blandy legacy and craft the full story I so desire to tell.

1925: Euphemia Mallard

Letter to the Duke

I write with a matter most earnest for your consideration. During my sojourn here in England, I have taken occasion to delve more deeply into the illustrious history of the Mallard line, a subject that has long fascinated me both as a member of our family and as a writer of human complexities.

With this in mind, I write to request your gracious permission to consult the family archives, particularly those documents pertaining to the years between 1720 and 1850. It is my belief that these records may yield remarkable insights not only into our heritage but into the broader social fabric that shaped our predecessors. I am mindful, however, of the sensitivities attendant upon the recent passing of your predecessor and wish to approach this inquiry with the utmost respect and discretion.

Should you see fit to grant access, I assure you this research will be conducted with the care and reverence befitting our shared lineage.

1925: the Duke's reply

From his secretary, Harold Canard

I write on behalf of His Grace, the new Duke of Mallard, to acknowledge your recent letter and your expressed desire to consult the family archives. We appreciate your interest in the Mallard line and the respect with which you have approached this delicate matter.

At this difficult time, so soon after the passing of the late Duke, His Grace finds it prudent to withhold access to the archives. It is a matter not only of personal mourning but of considering the proper stewardship of the family's history. Accordingly, we must respectfully decline your request for the present, though we encourage you to renew your application in a few years, when time has softened the weight of recent sorrows.

His Grace also desires to express the hope that all members of the family maintain due humility and discretion in matters pertaining to their heritage. It is, after all, an ancient line, and it serves none well to appear too eager or to overstep the bounds proper to their station.

1925: Bath

Notes on "The Blandy Papers", Euphemia Mallard

In the fog-wreathed streets of Bath, long known as a retreat for marriages and whispered intrigues, I find myself compelled to revisit the shadowed case of Mary Blandy—not as the men have seen it, narrow-eyed and quick to judgment, but with a gaze that seeks the tangled webs beneath the surface. It is a truth too readily forgotten that men see only what lies before them, refusing to acknowledge the circumstances that swirl about an event, particularly when those truths threaten their hold over authority and social order.

Consider the father, Francis Blandy, a lawyer by profession, whose word was his currency yet whose character was steeped in deceit. He lied to his daughter and the world about his wealth, a false fortune behind which Mary's supposed dowry was but an illusion. He was dishonest not only in his dealings with others but also in the very foundation of his family's future. One must pause to wonder what torment such duplicity sowed in the heart of his daughter, a maiden already burdened by the notion that spinsterhood was tantamount to social failure, a judgement harsher than death in the eyes of society.

Mary's suitor, Captain Cranstoun, was a man of charm and title but also a man who lied—his promises hollow, his intentions cloaked in ambition. Yet, his presence was tolerated, even embraced by the

Blandys, for his connection to a title outweighed the shadow of dishonesty. Money and rank, it seems, held far greater value than honesty or truth. The twisted priorities of such a family set the stage for tragedy, with Bath's elegant facade serving as the backdrop for ambition's unravelling.

There is also the mysterious death of the Prince of Wales, a figure intertwined with the Blandy family's world, whose own demise remains shrouded in suspicion—a nickel-plated mirror reflecting the darker possibilities that haunt their story. And as if fate had written a cruel script, Mary was entangled in the labyrinthine rules of Scottish law, a code profoundly foreign and impenetrable to her, erecting barriers to her understanding and defence.

In this light, it seems nothing short of a miracle that Mary—or any other—did not sooner murder the man at the heart of these deceptions. The poison that ended Francis Blandy's life was but a final act in a long play of lies and betrayals that might have ended violently at any turn. To explore this from beyond the men's narrow framework is to glimpse the tangled roots of tragedy, where authority and honour conceal fractures of trust and despair.

Through this story, I shall weave a tapestry where justice is not merely a matter of law but a reckoning with human frailty and society's unyielding demand for appearances. It is a tale where every whisper and concealment carries the weight of possible ruin, and where the truth lies buried beneath layers of social expectation and bitter, unspoken truths. Herein lies the crime, not simply the act, but the world that made it inevitable.

1925: Euphemia Mallard

Private papers

Today I have been reflecting deeply on some profound dicta from that eminent criminologist and judge whose writings have so significantly shaped the tenor of our modern jurisprudence. His observations bear great weight, not merely for the courts, but for my own craft as a spinner of crime fiction.

Firstly, he warns against the dangers of "wishful seeing," an affliction akin to wishful thinking, which can render direct evidence just as unreliable as mere circumstantial testimony. This was vividly demonstrated in the curious trial of Elizabeth Carter, where 25 witnesses swore to having seen a figure in Middlesex whom 35 others insisted was at the very same moment in Dorset. Such contradictions prompt me to consider the delicacy of perception in my tales, urging a

deft portrayal of unreliable witnesses, whose certitudes may mask deeper truths or deceptions.

Secondly, he underscores with unequivocal clarity that homicide admits no plea of necessity. The infamous case of two sailors, adrift and starving on the open sea, who succumbed to killing and consuming the cabin boy, stands as a somber testament. This unyielding principle strengthens the moral framework upon which I may construct plots where characters confront extremity but remain bound by law or conscience, enriching the tension between survival and justice.

Lastly, the judge debunks the popular fallacy that a corpse is requisite to establish murder. Many a murderer, he notes, has despaired to elude detection by elaborate body disposal—dismemberments so complex as to rival the forgeries that once linked the nefarious DeMieux with the horrific Canard Park murders, a scandal endlessly reproduced in the august pages of The Times. This insight emboldens me to devise scenarios where absence of a body fuels suspicion, yet justice seeks resolution beyond mere physical evidence.

In sum, these borrowed truths offer me richer palette colours with which to paint the shadows of human nature and the intricacies of crime, lending authenticity and psychological depth to my fiction. I am eager to weave these concepts into my forthcoming narratives, that they may illuminate the darker recesses of human frailty and the pursuit of justice.

1925: “A Respectable Poisoning”: Notes on a Novel and Its Design

By E Fenwick, F.R.S.L. Published in The Strand Magazine

It is now more than thirty years since A Respectable Poisoning first appeared before the public; a small, yellow-bound volume published by Messrs. Gadsby & Trent, and—if memory serves—regarded at the time as an “alarmingly modern” specimen of feminine morbidity. I received, in that first season, a number of letters from gentlemen reviewers who assured me that although the book was “clever in parts”, I would do better to concern myself henceforth with short moral tales or domestic sketches—fields in which women, it seemed, might be granted a temporary passport. I recall reading those missives and thinking that, if my novel were clever enough to disturb them, perhaps it had done its work.

The story, for those who have forgotten, turned upon the quiet and deadly struggle between a daughter and her father, both of them heirs—though in differing senses—to a corrupt inheritance. When I conceived

the tale, the crime itself seemed secondary to the moral poisoning it described. The outward "arsenic" was but a reflection of another, slower toxin: that of duty inherited, of love corrupted by avarice, and the fatal courtesy between generations that makes confession impossible. Every murder mystery, if one looks closely, is an anatomy of silence. Mine sought to make that silence audible.

The heroine, Clara Dysart, is often remembered chiefly for her role as a poisoner—and yet I never thought of her as a villain in the ordinary sense. She was instead the natural outcome of her parentage and her century: educated enough to think, but not enough to act freely; drilled in obedience and compelled to watch her family's decay through a lens polished on etiquette and shame. Her father, the late Mr. Julian Dysart, had transmitted to her certain tangible assets (the house, the annuity, the stifling respectability), yet also an unseen bequest—his cynicism, his hypocrisy, the pale cruelty of a man who loves appearances more than truth. I wished the reader, therefore, to feel that when Clara's hand reached for the poison bottle, she was completing a legacy rather than beginning a crime.

The research necessary for the book was drawn, at first, from curiosity rather than design. In those days, one could still find elderly physicians who remembered the grand arsenic trials of the 1850s—the case of Madame Lafarge being my earliest fascination. Arsenic, by virtue of its domestic availability and its immaculate discretion, seemed to me the most literary of poisons. It plays well upon the nerves; it is unseen, and therefore moral as well as chemical. I was not interested in the sensational application of it so much as its social symbolism: how a substance so ordinary, so white and powdered, could stand for the repression that maintained so many respectable households. Arsenic, like duty, could be served at table.

When readers of 1894 spoke of A Respectable Poisoning as a crime story, I was gratified yet faintly saddened, for I had dreamt it as something like a psychological study—with the corpse as only one form of evidence. The book was, beneath its surface, a meditation upon inheritance: the loftier kind of inheritance that concerns the spirit, as well as the biological or testamentary. In every respectable family there exists a quiet pact: the older generation promises money and protection in exchange for decorum; the younger accepts love on the condition that it be expressed correctly. I wanted to ask what happens when that pact becomes unbearable—when the coin of affection is spent and only the obligation remains. To dress that question in the garb of detection seemed a way of rendering it tolerable to the reader.

When writing the closing chapter—Clara's trial and the unread letter she leaves for her counsel—I remember wishing to leave judgment

suspended. The English court, in its efficiency, could pronounce the verdict of law. My concern was with the verdict of imagination, which belongs finally to the reader. Was she guilty? Yes, in the worldly sense, but what, precisely, was the moral degree of that guilt? The poison had passed through several hands before reaching its object, and the first dose was administered long before the fatal night.

Looking back now from the year 1925, amid a world more disillusioned yet no wiser, I see that the book's true subject was not murder but transmission—the subtle inheritance of poisons from parent to child, from faith to cynicism, from household to nation. The Great War has made us all authorities on slow death; perhaps it has also made my tale less far-fetched than it appeared to our predecessors. What they called "filial duty", we might now call complicity. What they praised as respectability, we recognise as disguise.

I sometimes think, too, that A Respectable Poisoning marked the end of my own apprenticeship. I had written it to explore what happens when women's virtues—piety, obedience, tenderness—are turned inward until they corrode. That motif, much ridiculed in its day, has since proved more enduring than the arsenic. Indeed, one might say that the poison absorbed me more completely than my characters ever absorbed it. Writing of contamination, I learned that art too may be an infection: invisible, persistent, incurable.

If readers find in the book today a mere curiosity of Victorian morbidity, I do not protest. But I hope that a few may sense what I sought to express: the curious chemistry of conscience, family, and fear —the respectability that kills politely, with gloves on. Every era must confront its toxins. Mine were powdered white and served upon silver spoons. Theirs may take other forms, but the taste, I suspect, will be much the same.

1467: Duck eggs

From The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles

In the year when the clock forgot its rhythm and the village cockerels called to no dawn, there was a valley surrounded by mirrors of water rather than hills. The people said the waters were patient, for they reflected all things without possessing them. And upon one still pond, on a perfectly circular island of reeds, sat a duck—the only duck in all that land.

No one knew whence she came. Some said she had flown from the moon before there were eggs; others whispered that the wind had breathed her into being so it might have something gentle to disturb.

Her feathers were the colour of thought before it finds words. Beneath her rested an egg so pale that it held the memory of clouds.

The duck's eyes saw two worlds at once—the one that was and the one that would be. She sat always, motionless but for the small turning of her gaze, as though she were both guarding and waiting. Was it the egg she was guarding, or her own still heart that lay hidden within that shell? No villager could tell.

They brought her grain, but she would not eat; they sang, but she did not stir. The wise schoolmaster declared that she was the Mother of Ducks, waiting for her children to dream her into being. Yet one curious child, watching her reflection on the water, whispered that perhaps she was not above the egg at all but within it—waiting to hatch into the world she already inhabited.

Seasons moved without moving. The pond froze and thawed, the people aged, new houses rose and fell back into earth. Still she sat, or rather, still she dreamed. And one night, just before the moon folded itself into shadow, a faint crack traced itself along the egg's shell. But no sound followed—no break, no birth. Only the quiet expansion of an idea too large to remain enclosed.

At dawn, the villagers found the island empty. The egg was smooth again, without fracture or stain, and within its curved surface they could see the image of a seated duck. Each insisted she looked precisely as before. The schoolmaster nodded solemnly. "Of course", he said, "for she has hatched into herself".

And thus the cycle recommenced: the duck watches over the egg that holds her image, and within that image she sits once more, wondering whether she dreams or is dreamed. The water of the valley reflects her perfectly, and time folds itself—soft as down—so that the beginning remains forever waiting inside the end.

1925: Euphemia Mallard

Private papers

The passage I have been reading today, purporting to arise from "many years' acquaintance" with murderers, strikes me as a profoundly harsh and curiously shallow pronouncement, much in keeping with the more complacent, patriarchal strain of criminology that flourished before the War. It reduces every killer, regardless of circumstance, to a single lurid diagnosis: an "abnormally developed self-conceit", a kind of moral cancer, as if megalomania were the universal seed of homicide. There is something so serenely confident, so pompously male, in the

assumption that all human violence can be swept into one disdainful category labelled "swollen head".

What is entirely absent from this tidy formulation is any recognition of emotion, of the complex web of fear, despair, love, humiliation, poverty and coercion in which so many murders are actually woven. To speak as though each murderer wanders about in a private little universe in which only his desires matter is to ignore the woman who cracks after years of brutalisation, the servant who sees no legal avenue against an employer's predations, or the man driven to a dreadful act by war-damaged nerves and unrelenting want. Such people may do terrible things, but to dismiss them as mere egotists seems less like moral insight than moral laziness, a refusal to look closely at the structures that shape their choices.

The language of the passage is revealing: the murderer as a sort of minor god for whom "the sun shines" and "the birds sing" alone, money provided "merely to satisfy their peculiar requirements". This is precisely how the comfortable classes have always imagined the "criminal", as an aberrant individual will, swollen beyond measure, rather than as a product of circumstance, injury, or systemic injustice. It is a patriarchal comfort to locate evil inside the single isolated skull, instead of asking what has been done to that person, or what options were ever truly open to them. To say "woe to such as come between him and his desires" is grand rhetoric, but it blurs the distinctions between calculated sadism, panicked self-defence, and the slow erosion of judgment under intolerable strain.

From the standpoint of my own craft, this sort of all-purpose diagnosis makes for very poor fiction. If every murderer is simply a conceited monster, there is nothing to discover, only something to condemn. Such a view leaves no room for the ambivalent figure who commits one irrevocable act and then is horrified by it, nor for the character whose crime grows—almost logically—out of circumstances that any reader might share. It denies the possibility that an outwardly self-effacing woman might kill precisely because she has been trained all her life to efface herself, until the only assertion left to her is a violent one. It is also very telling that the author of the passage assumes the murderer to be male, referring to "him" and his "swollen head", while in practice the law has visited its harshest judgments on women whose acts are bound up with their subordination.

In the end, what troubles me most is the complacent tone of superiority. To brand all murderers as megalomaniacs is to close the case before it is opened. It reassures the respectable reader that "we" are not like "them", that the line between innocence and guilt is bright and comforting. My experience, both in the courtroom gallery and at my

desk, suggests otherwise. The most unsettling truth, and the one my stories must keep worrying at, is that murder often arises not from monstrous self-importance alone, but from a terrible convergence of emotion, circumstance and constrained choice. To pretend otherwise may pass for wisdom in a magistrate's after-dinner speech, but it will not do for serious thought—or serious crime fiction.

1925: Draft Notes—"Crimes of Manners: The Etiquette Murders"

Euphemia Mallard

Premise:

An aristocratic gathering at the decaying country seat of the Lavingtons. The year is 1925; the chandeliers are dimmed by post-war economics, but the family's sense of propriety remains dazzling. They house a collection of guests so refined they can barely feel irritation, let alone moral alarm. Into this perfumed world intrudes a murderer—of strict observance and exquisite manners—who exploits their courtesies to eliminate them one by one. Each death adheres to an obscure rule of etiquette, as if Miss Emily Post had turned executioner.

Theme (possibly for Preface):

The English obsession with form is the nation's truest crime. The murderer merely enforces the code to its logical conclusion—civility unto death.

Opening Scene

The house of Lavington Court stands like an overbred dowager upon a hill, its windows discreetly averted from the vulgarity of the twentieth century. Inside, the Lavington family holds a Thursday to Monday party to maintain the illusion that the world still requires their politeness.

Lady Honoria Lavington presides—a woman who could rebuke a socialist with the angle of her lorgnette. Her husband, Sir Bertram, divides his time between foxes (now extinct in the district) and the steady erosion of his estate into mortgage. Their offspring: Gordon, who has survived the war but not the cocktail era; Miss Evadne, who treats sincerity as a provincial habit; and young Lionel, an Oxford aesthete too sophisticated to bathe regularly.

Among the guests:

- Miss Constance Vane, a novelist chronicling the demise of the upper classes, invited on sufferance as a fashionable embarrassment.
- The Bishop of Warden, who disapproves of sin but positively loathes awkward silences.
- Captain St. John, a war hero whose nerves, like his shirts, are permanently pressed.
- Mrs. Tilling, Sir Bertram's redoubtable aunt, who played whist with three future murderers and two bishops, and claims the latter were the worse company.

They dine. Conversation behaves impeccably. No opinion exceeds the temperature of the soup. The butler, Finch, glides like a diplomat between the empires of taste and despair.

(Author's margin note: murderer to be present at table? Possibly disguised as governess or etiquette expert—"Miss Prudence Tabley"?)

The First Offence

Dinner proceeds without visible friction until a fatal solecism occurs: Lady Honoria drops her napkin and, mortified, reaches beneath the table herself—an act of proletarian indignity. When the butler discreetly assists, he notices a folded card tucked beneath her chair:

"The first to forget the rules must pay for the reminder".

By morning, Lady Honoria is found dead in her dressing room—her mirror shattered and her corset laces bound too tightly, as if she had been "improved into perfection". The coroner, a relation, rules "heart failure brought on by constriction", though several guests suspect metaphor.

(Side note: killer enforces good posture unto death—the ultimate in deportment.)

The Second Etiquette Murder

At luncheon, Sir Bertram insists upon carving the beef himself—a performance of masculine courtesy that, according to Debrett, ceased to be fashionable in 1890. The knife slips in a fashion both literal and moral; he expires while apologising for the inconvenience.

Miss Vane, taking notes for her next novel, remarks softly that "it was the first genuine expression he ever made". The Bishop requests silence. The silence obeys.

(Author's thought: satirical potential—even suicide becomes "bad form.")

The Investigations

The remaining guests debate whether to send for the police, but the Bishop insists it would be impolite to suggest foul play in another's house. Mrs. Tilling, however, asserts that "good breeding has murdered better families than ours". Suspicion thus circulates like the sherry: genteel, unacknowledged, and slightly oxidised.

Miss Prudence Tabley, introduced as an "expert on manners in transition", quietly catalogues each blunder: a misplaced teaspoon, a cough during grace, a tardy condolence. Every violation is noted in her little black notebook with the solemnity of scripture. By the third evening, the guests begin whispering apologies before speaking, a condition not unlike prayer.

The Third and Fourth Deaths

Gordon, attempting gallantry, pulls out Miss Vane's chair after she has already sat. Later that evening, he is discovered sprawled upon the carpet beside the pianola, crushed beneath a toppled etiquette manual ("Manners Makyth Man," 1897 edition). The pianist claims to have been playing a foxtrot in his honour.

Miss Evadne, refusing grief as dreadfully common, is next. She commits the dreadful breach of laughing too loudly at her own jest. Before dawn, she is found smothered beneath a cascade of linen handkerchiefs, as though the house itself had reprimanded her.

(Note for later: evoke the sense that the mansion has become the murderer's accomplice—rooms of silent condemnation.)

The Revelation (draft, incomplete)

Only three remain—Miss Vane, the Bishop, and Mrs. Tilling—seated before the fire, rehearsing platitudes like survivors of a moral shipwreck. The murderer's voice emerges from the wireless, announcing that the "Age of Decorum" has concluded: the last refinement will be mutual elimination. The Bishop, appalled yet obedient, proposes they bow to inevitability gracefully—and does so, with poison masquerading as port. Mrs. Tilling pronounces it "quite the best wine of the evening" before she too subsides.

Miss Vane, alone, calmly writes her confession for the police, admitting to the entire design. Her motive: boredom—the unpardonable crime of her generation. Having survived a war, she found herself haunted by social survivors who cherished manners above meaning. So she decided to make the rules fatal.

(Margin: ambiguous ending—was she truly the murderer, or only its chronicler?)

Closing Remark (for possible author preface)

What fascinates is not the violence but the courtesy that conceals it. Civilization has always been murder in gloves; one merely removes the gloves to write the novels.

1925: Euphemia Mallard

Private papers

Though I am refused the official Mallard archives, it is odd that stories of our family seem to arrive of their own accord. I found this description at mother's house the other day, no doubt embellished, yet I am not sure by how much nor indeed what to make of it.

"He handled everything as if shuffling a pack of extravagant cards—the gods of Greece, their Olympus, and the old-world allegories the masters once painted. It was all one to him: divine or human, antique or modern, real or imagined. He dealt them out across his stage until the whole thing became a glittering cocktail of symbols and songs, a heady mixture meant to dazzle the artistic eye.

The kingdom's finest people took their places there; not clowns in theatrical tatters, but duchesses and courtiers, women who moved with the assurance of their own jewels. They showed their wealth as if the nation's vanity required a mirror—and the opera house, for that night, served as one.

What dresses they wore, what light and clamour! A living fresco—gypsies and prophets, gods and cheats, musicians and masked priests—dancing, wedding, fighting under skies that shifted with each cue. Gold caught in the chandeliers like sunlight filtered through wine; the purple gowns breathed light; white silks flashed back every beam. Diamonds trembled at women's throats. The brocades were encrusted with silver thread and pearls, appliquéd with golden fruit and strange baroque flowers, so that the stage became a mirror of its own splendour.

At the foot of the throne stood little marble Cupids holding electric torches. The musicians, wrapped in scarlet and violet, played behind arcades of hothouse flowers. Masks drifted in and out of view, their colours sharp and artificial—copper and sea-green, white and burning orange. The shorter jackets were hemmed with gold wire. Not a thread on any of them was cheap.

It was a theatre drenched in light, every jewel and gesture conspiring to hide something human beneath its glittering disguise. The whole scene floated—like the throne itself—in a sea of brilliance that hinted, faintly, at unreality".

1925: The Scourge of Pseudonymous Women Writers: A Call for Honest Authorship

By H. E. Apond from The Spectator

It is an unfortunate truth that the literary landscape of the past century has been obscured, if not altogether sullied, by the incessant deluge of pseudonymous productions by women whose sentimental fancies masquerade as scholarship, whose idle conjectures are paraded as learned argument, and whose romantic novellas seek to pass for serious literature. This epidemic of imposture has, regrettably, persisted into our present day, where the public is still too often subjected to vapid nonsense, adorned with the veneer of science or propriety, penned by ladies who dare not claim their own names.

One is compelled to ask: why the duplicity? Why must these writers, who so clearly seek the approbation of the learned, wrap themselves in the thin disguise of initials or masculine aliases? Is it not an admission that their works cannot withstand the scrutiny of genuine critique? That their writings lack the merit to be received as they stand? Had they the courage of writers such as Mrs. Gaskell, Jane Austen, or the Brontë sisters, who boldly affixed their true identifications to their creations, they would be spared the pretence—and indeed, could be far more conveniently consigned to oblivion.

Mrs. Gaskell, Jane Austen, and the Brontës possessed real talent and a pride in their authorship that transcended mere modesty or fear. They did not hide behind cryptic initials or masculine pseudonyms to fool a public whose opinions they evidently regarded with some regard. These ladies authored with honesty and strength, thereby securing their places in the literary canon, however pedantic or limited in scope their productions might be considered by modern standards.

Contrast these paragons with the torrent of recent decades, when an army of pseudonymous women has flooded bookshelves with fictions thinly disguised as social analysis, domestic guides, or scientific essays —all too often penned with the whimsical, or foolish, imagination of an inexperienced schoolgirl rather than the disciplined mind of a scholar. These works, often riddled with contradictions and untested hypotheses, do little except to waste valuable time and paper, lowering the tone of literature to a mere nursery for sentimental excesses or fashionable prejudices.

To the reader seeking serious, properly constructed prose—whether in history, science, or moral philosophy—this trend is lamentable. The respectability so painstakingly maintained by genuine authorship is undermined when the public is invited to imbibe from so many shallow

wells. The sanctity of literature demands more respect, and its practitioners more sobriety.

Therefore, it is my contention that any woman who chooses to publish should do so under her own name, thereby embracing responsibility for her work. If the work be good, it will be acclaimed; if it be poor, it will be justly ignored. But the current practice of hiding behind initials or assumed masculine identities only serves to muddy the waters, producing confusion and allowing works of questionable merit undue purchase in the marketplace of ideas.

Let us then take heed and reserve our attentions for those who dare to claim their place openly. In this manner, the legitimate literature of the realm may be preserved from the encroachment of ephemeral fancies and unsubstantiated theories, and readers will know where to find truth and where to turn away.

In the end, honesty in authorship must be the hallmark of respectability and intellectual integrity.

1925: Assault upon a nobleman: Duke unharmed in fray at private club

From Our Own Correspondent, The Times, London

A disturbance of an unusual and regrettable character occurred late on Tuesday evening at one of St. James's more discreet establishments when His Grace the Duke of Mallard was unexpectedly set upon by several unknown assailants while paying a social visit to the premises.

According to reliable information, the Duke had but a small retinue in attendance, yet his household servants acquitted themselves with notable courage and presence of mind. It is understood that, though the engagement was of brief duration, considerable injuries were sustained by the aggressors, who were quickly subdued before the arrival of the police. The servants themselves suffered only minor harm, while His Grace escaped the encounter entirely unscathed.

The motive for the attack remains speculative. Authorities are pursuing inquiries, though it is believed that political mischief or personal malice cannot be altogether excluded. Witnesses agree that the Duke displayed remarkable composure throughout.

It is expected that His Grace may allude to the incident when next he takes his seat in the House of Lords. Official comment is, at present, reserved.

1925: Euphemia Mallard

Private papers

I have just been leafing through F. Tennyson Jesse's Murder and Its Motives—a clever little book, no doubt, but one that leaves me rather cold with its neat taxonomy of homicide, as if the raw chaos of a killing could ever be pinned down like specimens in a lepidopterist's case. The classification she adopts—murder for gain, revenge, elimination, jealousy, lust of killing, conviction—and the bold addition of "murder for fun" to account for those Ratcliffe Highway horrors of 1811 or Jack the Ripper's savageries, reads to me far more like the scaffolding of crime fiction than any sober analysis of fact.

There is something so artificially tidy about it all, a parlour game dressed up as criminology, where every slaying slots obligingly into its category, as if real murderers pause mid-act to consult a menu of motives. "Murder for fun," indeed! What self-respecting Ripper or Williams would frame their butchery so whimsically? It smacks of the detective novelist's sleight-of-hand, parceling out human depravity into digestible chapters for the reader who craves puzzle over profundity. The truth of murder, as I have seen it in courtrooms and coroners' reports, defies such enumeration: it spills across boundaries, born of tangled impulses that no list can capture—panic mingled with greed, lust shadowed by remorse, conviction warped by circumstance. To suggest otherwise is to impose fiction's false order on life's unruly evidence.

And yet, I confess, the very artifice intrigues me for my own purposes. In my tales, such a schema could serve as a red herring, a prosecutor's chart flaunted in court only to crumble under scrutiny, revealing the killer's true, hybrid drive. Imagine a murderer who begins with "jealousy" but veers into "elimination" mid-stream, or one whose "fun" masks a deeper revenge—the categories fracturing like flawed alibis. Jesse's grid might make passable plot scaffolding, but as fact? It feels contrived, a novelist's blueprint masquerading as science, more suited to the pages of a whodunit than the bloodied annals of assizes.

This critique stirs ideas for my next manuscript: a story where the detective clings to motive-boxes while the truth slips free, amorphous and unclassifiable. Fiction thrives on such contrivances; let the moralists and Jesse have their lists—I shall write the messier reality.

1925: Euphemia Mallard

Private papers

This afternoon I sat once again before my crime notes, the desk scattered with foolscap pages and the odour of weak coffee, and found myself weary of corpses. Murder has had too much of my attention. It is the vulgar apex of crime, and, as in most vulgarities, too final, too theatrical. What of the innumerable lesser violations that rustle through the polite rooms of existence? The robbery of affections, the filching of opportunities, those small but cruel appropriations that never draw blood yet disfigure a soul.

It seems to me that every species of crime, whether crude or cunning, is an merely impertinence against the established order. Not necessarily wickedness—rather, a sort of private protest. Theft, fraud, deceit, even the small fraud of pretending to be pleased in company one despises—all these are acts of rebellion against the pretended harmony of civilisation. Each trespass questions the fairness of the game. A forged cheque, a broken promise, a concealed inheritance—are these not little satires upon the world's pretensions to honesty?

I have half a mind to write a series in which no one dies at all—only illusions. One story might concern a woman who, having been overlooked for an inheritance by a masculine clause in her father's will, falsifies a solicitor's note to restore her "due". The crime is not greed but a reclamation—and yet the law will not read it so. Another tale could involve a respectable cleric who orchestrates a quiet embezzlement of church funds, not for pleasure but to preserve the modest poverty of an impoverished parishioner. Here, too, virtue and vice alter positions like dancers changing partners; the choreography remains recognisably human.

There are also crimes of conversation: defamation dressed as gossip; the social assassination of a rival with a well-placed rumour. They are committed daily across tea-cups and garden parties, the casualties merely reputational. No policeman, no pistol, only a smile that conceals a dagger. Why should I not make a murder mystery of manners, where reputations, not bodies, are buried?

When one thinks long enough, all the criminal code resolves into etiquette. The law represents the current moral fashion, no more stable than the width of a lady's sleeve or a gentleman's tie. What was once a felony—duelling, for instance—has become a mark of absurdity, while new sins are continually discovered: impropriety in trade, misconduct in Board meetings, brutal candour in the press. I begin to suspect most statutes arise to protect the conveniences of the comfortable. That is

why nearly every criminal, examined closely, proves not depraved but merely inconvenient.

For my next book, perhaps I shall select three or four of these “inconveniences” and let them shine, briefly, with their own logic before being snuffed out by the machinery of respectability. The reader may decide which side deserves the term “criminal”. After all, the novelist, like the lawmaker, constructs a little universe with its own decrees—yet unlike the lawmaker, she can expose the absurdity of taking them too seriously.

I shall close now and take a walk before sundown. Perhaps in the streets I’ll observe a small transgression—a boy pocketing an apple, a clerk forging a late signature, a lady concealing a letter she ought to have delivered—and there, in miniature, the eternal comedy of defiance against the grand fiction called order.

1925: Euphemia Mallard

Notes towards a novel

In the shadowed heart of Henley-on-Thames, where the river coils like a serpent consuming its own tail, stands the Blandy house—a modest Georgian shell, vessel of both domestic warmth and hidden peril. Here dwells Francis Blandy, the stern father locked in his tower of law-books and ledgers, guardian of a golden portion he dangles before his daughter Mary like forbidden fruit from an ancient tree. Mary, twenty-nine years untouched by marriage's binding rite, her inner world a virgin forest shadowed by unmet longings. Enter William Cranstoun, the wandering lover, Scots rogue in tarnished uniform, fleeing debts and a discarded wife, bearing a white envelope of powder —"love potion," he calls it, elixir to soften Father's iron opposition, to transmute rejection into consent. But what is such powder in the night's dream? The blackening agent that dissolves rigid forms, revealing what lies beneath.

The tale unfolds not in straight chronicle but as layered visions, the hidden currents of the psyche rising through the surface of 1751 England. Mary, obedient to the lover's promise, stirs the grains into gruel and tea—rite of nurture turned inside out, for poison is the dark mirror of care. Father sickens: bowels grip like the labyrinth's coils, mouth blisters as if scorched by inner fire, teeth loosen in symbolic uprooting. Servants sicken too from shared leavings, faint echoes of shared fate; housemaid Susan Gunnell salvages powder from the hearth, her instinct piercing Mary's blind faith. On his deathbed, Francis confronts the hidden force: "You poison me, poor love-sick maid," yet

forgives without confession—father embracing the destructive child in final reconciliation.

Trial at Oxford Assizes: the crowd's judgment, where inner forces parade in outward forms. Dr. Anthony Addington wields early science—garlic fumes, white insolubility—as proof of arsenic's deadly essence. Mary defends: "No wish to kill, but powder for persuasion!" Her words ring with desperate conviction, protest against the father's unyielding barrier. Jury convicts swiftly; gallows loom, Mary's shade said to wander the castle ever after, eternal seeker in the unseen realms. Cranstoun flees to France, dissolving into shadow, hanged in effigy.

Yet the novel's deeper thread lies here: murder as failed union of opposites. Mary enacts the daughter's devouring of the father—not for crude gain, but to force passage toward wholeness through forbidden bond. Father clings to treasure as outer mask; his inflated tale of fortune (£10,000 estate, puffed myth) draws the lover like flame to moth. Arsenic dissolves the family circle: no male heir endures, Blandy name scatters like echoes in wind.

In the weave—plain narrative laced with dream-visions, marginal notes on the soul's hidden patterns—the seeker is Dr. Elias Voss, aging physician from Vienna, drawn posthumously in spirit by Mary's unresting presence. Voss unravels: powder as transformative agent gone wrong, love-elixir the call from depths unmet. Clues arise not in tracks but in fateful alignments: Mary's burned letters echoing Cranstoun's lost wife; Francis's forgiveness mirroring ancient rites of release. Climax in imagined gathering of minds: Voss faces Mary's lingering form—"You slew the old guardian to claim the wandering shadow, but true union demands surrender of the rigid self."

Modern frame: 1925 Sussex vicarage, spinster librarian Beatrice unearths trial-pamphlets, her own inner unrest stirring. Visions of powders and porridge summon Voss; together they relive the act through guided reflection, Beatrice stepping into Mary's place, Voss the unyielding father. Resolution: Beatrice turns from suitor's shallow call, confronts inner rifts through admission of buried resentments toward her own father's reign. No worldly culprit unveiled—the true force behind the crime is the unclaimed shadow within, arsenic the outburst of unlived depths.

This shall be no mere shilling thriller, but map of the soul's hidden night: compassionate to Mary, for who has not unwittingly stirred destruction from unmet longing? Readers shall glimpse the timeless patterns beneath the deed—crime as symptom of the inner rift. Title? Powder of the Shadow. Or The Arsenic Circle. Must refine; the depths murmur still.

1926: Viola Vorpel

Letter fragment

How splendid! This morning's Times Literary Supplement arrived with its usual burden of poems about nothing in particular and novels about no one one cares for, and there—half-way down the second column—was the notice of your latest book. I confess I gave a most undignified exclamation before breakfast. You will forgive your elder niece, I hope, for the ridiculous glow of pride that followed.

I cannot imagine a more cunning choice of subject. How many lady novelists dash about after modern crimes that dissolve under scrutiny, when you, with scholarly serenity, turn your gaze upon the malodorous intrigues of the eighteenth century! The tale has everything —a father's vanity, a lover's duplicity, arsenic in the tea—and all of it true. Trust you to find the moral pulse in so black a case.

Your task must have been greatly eased by our family archives. That Mallard trunk has been tripping footmen for generations, and now it seems they have served literature itself. I daresay the dukes who so meticulously recorded every servant's cough and every pheasant's demise had no idea they were preserving the evidential struts for your ingenious plot. How delighted Great-Grandfather Mallard would be to discover he had unwittingly assisted in a murder novel; he was always fond of poison, at least in his conversation.

Still, my dear, brace yourself. The drakes of the county will not take kindly to being reminded that blue blood sometimes curdles. I expect several clubs will declare their port intolerably sour for a week, and that more than one titled gentleman will eye his daughter's tea with new suspicion. Yet scandal is the midwife of success, and every ruffled feather will only stir the breeze of your fame.

I am so proud, and perhaps a trifle envious. Do send me a signed copy, and if the Australian presses prove unreliable, I shall bully Hatchards into importing boxes of them. Notoriety may at last be the family's most respectable inheritance.

1926: "Recalling The Maid's Defence: Fifteen Years On"

By E Fenwick Published in The Strand Magazine

It is a peculiar sensation, looking back upon a book one wrote in the flush of early middle age, when the world seemed ripe for remaking through the medium of fiction. The Maid's Defence, my third novel, appeared in 1911 to a chorus of reviews that ranged from the faintly puzzled to the outright indignant—many a critic dismissed it as

"curiously sympathetic to the servant class," as if sympathy for the unseen labourers of our households were some radical eccentricity rather than simple justice. Fifteen years later, from the vantage of Sydney's sun-baked shores, I find myself revisiting its pages with fresh eyes, not to defend or revise, but to outline once more its bones and ponder what I hoped—nay, what I still hope—readers might discern for themselves beneath the courtroom drama and the fog-shrouded fens.

The story, as those who recall it will know, is structured as a meticulous courtroom reconstruction: no omniscient detective flitting through drawing-rooms with a magnifying glass, but rather the raw machinery of an assizes trial, scene by agonising scene, where every glance, every stuttered testimony, carries the weight of potential doom. It opens in the decaying grandeur of Mallard Hall, a Suffolk manor house sinking under the weight of entailed debts and faded glories. Enter Eliza Thorne, our twenty-two-year-old protagonist—a scullery maid with dirt under her nails and a quiet fire in her eyes, hired in the spring of 1905 to scrub floors and mind her tongue amid a family of vultures: Sir Reginald Mallard, the boozy baronet gambling away the estate; his ledger-obsessed wife, Lady Euphemia; their wastrel son Percival, fresh from Oxford dissipations; and a coven of scheming relatives, topped by the venomous housekeeper Mrs. Grimshaw, whose eyes gleam with upward ambition.

The murder itself erupts on a gale-lashed All Hallows' Eve. Sir Reginald slumps dead in his study, a poisoned brandy goblet—laced with cyanide from the stable rat-traps—clutched in his rigid hand. Chaos descends: constables from Ipswich trample the rugs, the coroner sniffs the dregs, and suspicion locks like a manacle on Eliza. Motive? She was sacked without reference two days prior, accused of stealing a pearl brooch (a plant, as it transpires). Means? Pantry access to poisons. Opportunity? She poured the fatal drink herself, vanishing into the storm-shadowed servants' hall. The bulldog inspector Hargreaves licks his chops: "Servant poisonings are as old as service itself—guilty as sin!"

Here the novel pivots to its true heart: Eliza's trial at Bury St Edmunds, rendered with the scrupulous detail of a verbatim transcript—judge's charge, counsel's flourishes, jury's fidgeting discomfort. Her defender, Edmund Carver—a London radical in a frayed gown, spectacles askew, championing the pro bono cause of the underdog—begins the unravelling. Alibi first: a kitchen lad testifies to Eliza's furtive meeting with Percival in the scullery, hands entwined—a dalliance born of the young master's boredom and the maid's desperate dreams of escape. Jealousy flares: Percival, jilted by a debutante, used Eliza cruelly.

Carver summons the voiceless: the bootboy recounting Sir Reginald's tirades over Percival's debts; the trembling parlourmaid witnessing Lady Euphemia palming cyanide from her "vermin supplies" near the safe. Mrs. Grimshaw fractures on the stand—her promotion dangled if Eliza fell, the brooch her own frame-up. The coup de théâtre: a Cambridge pathologist's report reveals poison traces in Sir Reginald's tobacco pouch, amid bankruptcy writs in his drawer—self-inflicted despair? No—the denouement exposes Percival, spiking the brandy to hasten inheritance, framing Eliza to bury her knowledge of his affair and the revised will naming her a secret beneficiary (Sir Reginald's tardy atonement for slights endured).

The courtroom crescendos: Eliza's testimony, halting yet defiant—"I served faithful, sir, till the family served poison from their own rot." Gasps greet Carver's flourish with the will; the judge, stern yet swayed, charges on reasonable doubt. Acquittal thunders; Percival crumples, arrested as Eliza walks free—not haloed heroine, but hollow-eyed survivor, slipping into anonymous service in London, her "defence" a pyrrhic victory.

When The Maid’s Defence hit the shelves in 1911, I hoped readers—especially those of the upper crust who devour mysteries for sport—might see beyond the puzzle to the uncomfortable truths it laid bare. First, the servant class as sentient beings: Eliza is no stock villainess or simpering victim, but a woman whose labours prop up the house while her life hangs by a threadbare apron-string. I wanted the drawing-room reader to glimpse the invisible eyes watching from below-stairs, privy to every scandal, yet powerless until the dock forces their voice. Sympathy, yes—but earned through Eliza's grit, not pity.

Second, the courtroom as theatre of class prejudice: every procedural nicety tilts against her—the judge's arched brow at her accent, the jury's foreman (a publican with servant woes of his own) wavering under gentry stares. I aimed to expose justice not as blind, but squinting through the lens of rank, where a maid's word weighs less than a baronet's whisper. Readers attuned might ponder their own households: how many Elizas scrub their hearths, silent witnesses to ruin?

Third, and most pointedly, the novel indicts the leisured class's hypocrisies—Percival's predatory dalliance, Lady Euphemia's pinched piety masking larceny, Sir Reginald's paternalism crumbling to suicide's edge. Murder here stems not from some gothic mania, but the rot of entitlement: debts, dalliances, and disposability of the lowly. I hoped the discerning would see the servant not as plot device, but mirror to their own precarious facades.

Critics carped at its "socialist leanings," but that was the point: fiction as scalpel, dissecting the edifice we inhabit. Fifteen years on, with servants fleeing to factories and the Great War upending hierarchies, I wonder if The Maid's Defence still pricks. For those who missed it then, read it now—and see, perhaps, your own reflection in Eliza's unyielding gaze. The maid's defence is everyone's, if only we listen.

1926: Euphemia Mallard

Draft Story, From The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles

It is one of the less-advertised truths of the English peerage that a title may be acquired by accident and maintained by obstinacy. The case of the Duke of Canard demonstrates both with unsparing clarity. His Grace had inherited two priceless heirlooms: an unblemished name and a mind that refused to co-operate with it. The Canards had occupied a florid but draught-ridden seat in the northern shires since some medieval confusion of surnames had convinced a well-meaning monarch that they were the other Canards, the respectable ones. By the time the error was discovered, the patent of nobility was engraved, sealed, and celebrated with such enthusiasm that the family felt it ungentlemanly to give it back.

Their crest was of a duck clutching a laurel leaf, and beneath it, in cheerful capitals, the motto “Providence Will Out”. The words had long since ceased to mean anything but “Something dreadful is imminent”. They surfaced whenever a sauce curdled, a horse limped, or a cousin proposed. The servants repeated the phrase with a look of dull fatalism, and the family with a look of injured innocence, as though Providence were an intolerably persistent creditor calling during luncheon.

In the year 1500—chronology being to the Canards what economy is to the National Debt—the Duke encountered his first really serious inconvenience in the shape of matrimony. His Duchess, a woman of small volume and enormous conviction, held advanced views upon celestial influences and refused, from motives of spiritual hygiene, all commentary upon domestic relations. There ensued that deadly calm which frequently precedes combustion. The lady surrounded herself with certain “village hygienists”, women who trafficked in planetary herbs and advised abstention from almost everything except opinion. They brewed potions to steady the pulse, thwart conception, and cheerfully emasculate the husband’s authority. The Duke endured

seven years of this with the strained composure of a man afraid that his house might read about itself in pamphlets.

Eventually silence itself grew positively conversational, and he hinted, over a dinner peopled by earnest clerics and ecclesiastical cowards, that Providence would presently produce a correction. The guests, accustomed to the Duke's private theology, murmured their assent and asked politely whether the pheasant might be passed again. Providence, being a stickler for style, obliged the following morning. The Duchess was discovered reduced to an unusually portable size. Her gown had met with the fire, and victory, in this instance, rested with the fire. The servants attested that the flames had shown an almost human zeal, darting forward as though to claim the greater share of her attention. The odour lingered in the chimney for a season, defying lime-wash, penance, and holy water.

The Duke submitted to the occasion with the elegant grief of one whose inconvenience has at last mended itself. After a respectable interval of mourning—ten days in his case—he presented his version of the event with hereditary poise. The true cause of his wife's destruction, he announced, was not inflammable taffeta but a failure of alphabetical propriety. Her initials did not proceed in friendly order with those of his house's emblematic leaf, and nature, being punctilious in these matters, had executed the necessary correction. "She was", he explained, "unaligned with the Canard principle, and naturally removed by Divine administration".

The bishop, who had long suspected that Providence was partial to social order, found no argument against this. Nor, for that matter, did anyone else. The incident was thus incorporated into family legend, contributing another admirable chapter to the hereditary conviction that misfortune, in the higher classes, is always an affair of principle.

1927: "Ladies of Influence; or, The Polite Conspiracy"

1. Prologue: Why A Comedy of Courtesans?

Everyone warns me that the subject of courtesans belongs to history's laundry basket, best kept under the napery of respectability. Yet our age professes, with hideous complacency, to have "outgrown" such women, while quietly depending on their spiritual descendants—hostesses, patronesses, journalistesses—who do in daylight what their predecessors accomplished by candlelight and more ability.

My late Aunt Rose kept journals which, under government supervision, were labelled "Private Household Accounts". They record, however, very little about linen and very much about diplomacy over

dinner. She describes princes of commerce undone by cupidity and ladies of patience undone by princes.

Great-Aunt Harriette's memoirs—those scandalous, marvellous, and frequently libellous volumes—sit beside them like brandy next to tea. Between them lies the empire of the feminine negotiator. It seems only natural to write a social comedy of influence in which the courtesans are not sinners, but clergymen of charm—the unacknowledged parliament of the boudoir.

(Note to self: Treat sin as tonic; hypocrisy as main course.)

2. Concept Draft

A light, satirical novel in three movements:

1 "The Heritage of Harriette". A young gentlewoman discovers her notorious ancestry—a great-aunt who wrote memoirs instead of apologies.

2 "The Indian Notebooks". She inherits her Aunt's diaries and learns how empires are governed between the dances, not during the debates.

3 "The Polite Conspiracy". She resolves to write a scientific study of female influence—which accidentally becomes a bestseller and causes several resignations from public life.

(Possible subtitle: "The Adventure of Being Taken Seriously.")

3. Style Statement

The manner should be bright, ironical, never solemn—perhaps like a Wodehouse serial written by someone who actually likes women. The tone to combine light flirtation with light philosophy.

Think: drawing-room discussion blended with colonial absurdity, plus footnotes snipped from scandalous letters. Every page must smile while committing treason.

(Note: Mistress pieces rather than masterpieces.)

4. Key Characters (in progress)

- Miss Clemency Vane, narrator. A well-mannered bluestocking who inherits both the Indian diaries and the family reputation.
- Sir Lionel St. Maur, a diplomat possessed of more whisker than wit.
- Lady Caroline Bligh, society reformer who campaigns against indecency by describing it at length.
- Mrs. Verity March, a celebrated courtesan running her salon as if it were a Cabinet meeting.

- Mr. Bingo Twistleton, affable male gossip-columnist (appears purely for comic ventilation and to be permanently bewildered).
- The Ghost of Harriette Wilson, who writes advice notes in the margins of Clemency's drafts and is, quite possibly, real.

(Footnote idea: "Spectres of influence seldom require exorcism; often, they edit far better than agents.")

5. The Comic Premise

The story begins when Miss Clemency reads excerpts from Aunt Rose's Indian diaries—long passages detailing how diplomatic treaties seemed invariably to depend on the flavour of syllabub served at Government House. As she studies the notes, she perceives a pattern: wherever a statesman appeared successful, there was always a woman corresponding under another name.

The diaries contain veiled references—"Mrs. X, whom the Viceroy consults on upholstery and affairs of state". Clemency, sharp of mind and sharper of curiosity, deduces that Aunt Rose's social evenings decided more borders than the Foreign Office.

Harriette Wilson's ghost, meanwhile, interrupts her research with pencilled comments such as, "Do remember, my dear, the first principle of influence: never contradict a man until he finishes being wrong".

6. Extract: Early Scene in Diary Form (draft tone test)

Tuesday: Presented to Mrs. March, reputed courtesan extraordinaire. Presented also, in another sense, with enlightenment.

She explained that power was a form of housekeeping—one simply kept different accounts. One must know who owed what in gratitude, who in indiscretion, and who in diamonds. Balance these diligently and civilisation runs like a well-dusted bureau.

I inquired whom she served. "Why, everyone, of course", said she, "though ministers usually require an invoice".

(Note: This tone—half-scandal, half-sociology—is precisely right.)

7. Foreign Illustrations

Clemency, in Chapter Eight, studies Veronica Franco, that sixteenth-century Venetian whose poems and petitions successfully sued a bishop in metre. Veronica proves that elegance might contradict the law without ever disarranging its hair.

Clemency concludes that Franco was not exceptional, merely better at punctuation. If anything, Europe's law reforms were proof that courtesans handled syntax more boldly than the clergy.

(Possible epigram for chapter heading: “Grammar and government alike fall before the properly placed comma.”)

8. Discussion Themes

1 Did these women rule only in the boudoir?
Hardly. They ruled wherever comfort was mistaken for weakness.

2 Were they manipulators or managers?
Every successful man since antiquity has had a secretary; some simply charged higher rates.

3 Were they dangerous?
Yes—to dullness, to convention, and to unattended Parliament sessions.

(Memorandum: Resist temptation to moralise; instead, dramatise moralists losing poker.)

9. Proposed Scenes

- The Drawing-Room Duel. Lady Caroline Bligh attempts to shame Mrs. March by condemning her “interference in politics”. Mrs. March replies, “My dear, influence is merely politics without witnesses”.
- The Diplomatic Dinner. Sir Lionel announces his discovery of a new colony, only to learn it already belongs to France—ceded during a supper at Mrs. March’s five years earlier.
- Harriette’s Ghost Epilogue. On publication day, Clemency receives an unsigned letter of congratulation enclosing a diamond brooch shaped like a quill. Footnote from Harriette appears mysteriously on last page: “Confession is only criminal when badly written”.

10. Tone of Ending

Clemency’s book within the book becomes a succès de scandale. Men quote it to prove women frivolous; women quote it to prove men entertaining. Mrs. March retires to the Riviera “for quiet influence”; Sir Lionel resigns to write sentimental novels.

Conclusion: The world continues precisely as before, but slightly more self-aware—which is the highest form of revolution permitted before dinner.

(Last sentence: “History, my dears, is usually dictated in the sitting-room, only signed downstairs.”)

11. Practical Resolutions

Potential Criticisms: "Improper."
Response in Preface: "Accuracy is frequently misunderstood as indecency".

Possible publishers: those with weak knees and strong aunts.
Possible moral: none declared, all implied.

(Marginal doodle: keys, quill, diamond, and one very skeptical ghost.)

12. Epistolary Afterthought

If ever Ladies of Influence sees print, it must appear not as advocacy but amusement. Let the Spectator bristle and the Athenaeum cough genteelly; every age prefers its morality dressed for tea. But if any reader, male or female, observes that civilisation behaves suspiciously like a well-run salon—then Aunt Rose, Great-Aunt Harriette, and old Veronica Franco shall have the last, most ladylike laugh.

1880: Letter from the Earl of Wharftown to the Duke

It is some time since we shared a table, and longer still since we shared anything less reputable. I write now to extend an invitation of a rather exclusive nature. A few of us, wearied by the chill sobriety that has lately overtaken London society, have revived a certain tradition once known in connection with Medmenham. You will understand me when I say that it is not a society for those who fear laughter in the presence of sin.

We meet quietly, amid surroundings both agreeable and secure, to explore such pleasures as the modern age pretends to have forgotten. Its name, for old times' sake, is the Hell-fire Club—though our mirth is more polished than infernal, and our devotions, if unorthodox, remain conducted in good taste.

The presence of your Grace would lend our little congregation distinction, discretion, and—if I may be frank—no small measure of renown. Should the suggestion appeal, I shall dispatch one of our circle with particulars of place and hour.

With every sentiment of esteem and expectation,

Reply from the Duke to the Earl

Your letter afforded both surprise and amusement. The spectres of Medmenham rise again, it seems, powdered, perfumed, and perfectly undeterred by the passing of a century. I thank you warmly for the invitation and the confidence it implies.

Yet I must decline, though not from prudery. Truth compels the confession that I already preside over a fraternity of similar inclination, modestly concealed beneath the guise of a private dining club. Our diversions, though hardly fit for parish notice, suffice for the exercise of both spirit and appetite. To divide my attendance would be unprofitable to us both—else I should gladly raise a glass to your resurrection of cheerful wickedness.

Allow me, however, to wish your gathering every worldly success and to hope that the flames you tend may burn neatly, without smoke.

1927: Elspeth Mallard

Letter to her sister, Euphemia

Your last packet from Sydney, containing that extraordinary outline about Aunt Rose's Indian diaries and great-aunt Harriette's adventures, has just reached me. The postman appeared scandalised, which is surely a recommendation of sorts, though I rather wonder what mischief you mean to unleash this time.

I can quite see what you intend—and indeed, were they able to read it, our aunts would be enchanted to find themselves regarded as social philosophers instead of light conductors of indiscretion. No doubt Aunt Harriette would rise from her grave merely to supply you with more material and to demand royalties besides. Still, you cannot imagine that the rest of the family will join enthusiastically in this literary rehabilitation. The English temperament remains allergic to frankness, especially when connected by name and marriage to a Duke.

Speaking of which, I feel obliged to warn you that our cousin of that title (he of the remarkable eyebrows and limited imagination) will not be impressed. If he learns that you propose to publish extracts—even lightly veiled—from the "Wilson Correspondence", you will soon receive a letter from his solicitors written in that impenetrable tone of injured nobility. The family archives remain under his guardianship, and I remind you gently of the letter you received from him some years ago when you first petitioned for access. I still recall the phrase "unsuitable for public digestion", which he borrowed, most inappropriately, from the Army regulations.

Do you truly think the reading public ready for another memoir of that kind? The nation has only just recovered from a decade of revelations—soldiers' letters, suffragist confessions, spiritualist secrets—and it now longs for crochet, not candour. Your plan to present the courtesans as "administrators of influence" may amuse the artistic set,

but to the average circulating librarian a courtesan remains something that must be kept on the highest shelf, if not the fire.

Of course, I admit your humorous handling of them charms me—it is very much your way to sprinkle the arsenic with wit—yet prudence commands moderation. If you must resurrect our aunts, let them masquerade under fiction more convincingly; the family name has endured enough cremations already.

Do write soon and tell me you are behaving with your usual brilliance and a measure of sense. Remember, however far you sail, the British conscience travels faster and arrives earlier—usually in the form of a solicitor's letter.

1927: Euphemia Mallard

Private papers

I find myself pondering how the allure of murder—its dark, seductive magic—can so transform the mundane into the extraordinary. The darkness in human nature, that shadowed corner of the soul where malevolence dwells, is not a comfortable subject. Yet it is precisely in the exploration of these shadowed depths that a writer's true skill may be tested.

The words of a master criminologist and judge echo in my mind: murder, they say, has an almost alchemical power. When touched by that crimson wand—by the act itself—the ugliest, most sordid aspects of human existence are suddenly cast in a strange, almost mesmerising light. Ordinary streets, dull and unremarkable, become fraught with mystery; seemingly commonplace houses take on sinister overtones. Everyone, no matter how plain or unassuming, becomes imbued with new significance under the killer's shadow. The moveless figure in the dock, the fleeting witnesses, even the humble, pitiful exhibits—each is a part of this tableau, endowed temporarily with an unearthly importance before returning to their usual guise.

Yet I am ever conscious of a truth that troubles me: whether this fascination holds in the cold print. The court-room has a unique atmosphere— the grave dignity of the judge, the duel of words between counsel, the hush that falls over an audience breathless with anticipation. It is an environment infused with tension, a shared collective pulse that quickens as the dreadful story unfolds. The end of each day's court is like awaiting the verdict of fate itself, the suspense almost unbearable. Some of my acquaintances dismiss such feelings as morbid—unhealthy, even dangerous to the well-balanced mind. But I wonder: can the stark prose of a printed page truly capture that

suffocating thrill, that vice tightening around a true crime story? Or is it lost in translation, sacrificed to the detachment of black ink and paper?

I have always believed that the theatre of the courtroom—the real, visceral experience—imbues the crime with a life of its own, a dark poetry that no mere replica can fully convey. The seriousness with which justice is pursued, the charged pauses, the unspoken tension—these are the true ingredients of the narrative. One must feel that weight, that breathless pause before the judge's final word, or the collective intake of breath as the jury delivers their verdict. It is in that sacred space that crime steps from the shadows into the unforgiving light of truth, where the very atmosphere whispers of human frailty and the ultimate high-stakes gamble that is justice.

In my own writing, I strive to channel that complex interplay—the atmosphere, the tension, the raw emotion—into words that breathe and pulse with life, even if my reader is only observing from the safe distance of their armchair. For it is precisely in evoking the palpable intensity of those courtroom moments that the heart of crime fiction beats strongest. Such scenes must be seared into the reader's consciousness, qua the judge's gavel, qua the tense silence, qua the collective breath held in anticipation. To do less is to diminish the very power that makes crime stories irresistible.

And yet, I am acutely aware that some deem these sensations morbid—perhaps unhealthy. But I argue, in the quiet sanctuary of my own mind, that they are vital. They reveal the primal truths of human nature, that irresistible pull of the dark, that profound question of what lies beneath the surface. It is in the shadows that my stories find their depth, their meaning, and their enduring fascination.

1928: The Small Crimes of Daily Life

(Subhead: "A Domestic Mystery in Several Buffet Courses.")

Prefatory note

Everyone now writes of murder as though it were the only ambitious hobby left in England. Yet true crime, like true cuisine, begins with the modest gesture—the secret theft of cream, the moral sabotage over breakfast. Polite society survives entirely through misdemeanour; virtue, in human hands, is a recipe undone by too much stirring.

Thus: a tale not of felony, but of all the delicate illegalities practised at luncheon. If civilisation be a meal, it is the sort served by those who improve upon the cook's instructions and then blame the oven.

Cast of habitual offenders

- Mrs. Octavia Bentham, self-proclaimed philanthropist and relentless borrower of teaspoons.
- Mr. Gregory Fielding, her neighbour; gourmet, gossip, and collector of unpaid social debts.
- Miss Nero Cattell, a spinster of forensic disposition who keeps accounts of generosity.
- The Reverend Paul Caper, local clergyman, trained in the fine art of sanctified interference.
- A leg of lamb, unassuming but destined for international complication.

(Note: All crimes to remain culinary, emotional, or administrative.)

Scene I—The Borrowing

Mrs. Bentham borrows a silver salt-cellar "just until tomorrow's luncheon". Tomorrow, like the Kingdom of Heaven, never arrives. The salt-cellar continues its missionary journey through half the county—first displayed at a charity fête, then admired in a newspaper photograph erroneously captioned "Mrs. Bentham's family heirloom".

Miss Cattell, recognising it, writes a polite note of inquiry, the literary equivalent of arson. The Reverend Caper advises forgiveness, explaining that "possession, even temporary, often spiritualises property". Miss Cattell spiritualises him out of her will.

(Margin comment: crime as social lubricant.)

Scene II—The Dinner Party

Mr. Fielding's table groans under the honest weight of other people's food. The lamb, borrowed under complex pretext, steams with guilty perfection. Between courses he praises "community of appetite" and dismisses individual ownership as bourgeois superstition.

Conversation circulates like counterfeit currency:

"One must share", he cries, "if civilisation is to endure!"

"Indeed", murmurs Mrs. Bentham, "and if sharing fails, there are always auctions".

By dessert, the lamb has inspired both indigestion and theology. The Reverend Caper, intoxicated by grace and gravy, announces that greed is "only gratitude unexpressed". He is believed until pudding.

Scene III—Crime under Teacups

Miss Cattell, taking afternoon tea "for reconciliation", encounters Mrs. Bentham's sugar-tongs engraved with the name Cattell & Son, Goldsmiths. Mrs. Bentham claims the engraving commemorates her late husband's "interest in metalwork".

Miss Cattell regards the tongs grimly, reflecting that sin probably began over refreshments. She decides, after due moral agony, to steal them back—replacing them with an identical pair from Woolworths. The substitution succeeds: Mrs. Bentham never notices, and Miss Cattell experiences her first honest night's sleep in years.

(Margin: first principle of domestic justice—never confess before supper.)

Scene IV—The Parish Investigation

Rumour, bent though serviceable, reaches the vicarage: thefts, slanders, a missing compote. The Reverend Caper, inspired by zeal and leftovers, resolves to restore order through mediation. He organises a Moral Tea at which each guest must apologise for something vague.

"We must cleanse the small things", he insists, "before they accumulate into judgment".

The parlour becomes an inquest disguised as hospitality. Confessions pour forth by increments: everyone feels infinitely better, particularly those who have concealed the important crimes.

Mrs. Bentham admits to "occasional social forgetfulness" regarding borrowed goods. Mr. Fielding acknowledges over-frequent admiration for domestic staff. Miss Cattell admits to loving cold vengeance in warm weather. The Reverend weeps attractively but contributes no information whatever.

(Footnote for later chapter: In England, contrition substitutes for restitution.)

Scene V—Epistolary Evidence

Letters arrive the following week: one from the diocesan treasurer (missing funds), another from Woolworths (wrong engraving on sugar-tongs), and a third from Aunt Julia in Malaya (claiming the stolen salt-cellar once belonged to an officer who vanished mysteriously).

Mr. Fielding, sensing narrative potential, drafts a "true crime" serial called The Parish Thief for the Cheltenham Argus, serialising his friends one by one under thin disguise. Circulation doubles. Mrs. Bentham congratulates him publicly and cancels her private friendship.

Scene VI—The Murder That Never Happened

By midsummer, gossip declares there will be a murder, though no one specifies the victim. The threat animates everyone magnificently.

- Mrs. Bentham buys new curtains to look respectable in the newspaper photographs.
- The Reverend Caper practises shock before a hand-mirror.

- Miss Cattell rehearses anonymous testimony.
- Mr. Fielding ensures the larder is well stocked "in case the inquest runs long".

Days pass; no murder occurs. The village, bored, invents one retrospectively. The vicar preaches a sermon on "hypothetical guilt", audience satisfied beyond prayer.

Scene VII—Final Inventory

Autumn tidies up what conscience neglects. Each character achieves redemption, or its local substitute:

- Mrs. Bentham returns a gravy boat to the wrong owner and feels saintly.
- Miss Cattell marries an accountant, finding love less compromising than arithmetic.
- The Reverend Caper becomes canon, proof that no transgression daunts promotion.
- Mr. Fielding sells The Parish Thief to a fashionable magazine, advertising it as "A Study of English Morality by an Eyewitness".

The salt-cellar reappears briefly at a charity raffle and vanishes again, completing the circle of civilisation.

(Possible closing line: "Society thrives on the continual redistribution of other people's possessions, reputations, and recipes.")

Notes on Tone & Intention

- Tone: urbane ferocity behind manners; warmth used as weapon; cruelty in teaspoons.
- Subject: the ethics of borrowing, the economies of charm, and the communal value of denial.
- Moral (if forced to have one): Ordinary virtue is merely the art of concealing appetite tidily.

Postscript (scribbled in margin)

Our century is addicted to sensation—murder in headlines, scandal at breakfast. But the truer chronicles of crime occur wherever someone says thank you instead of forgive me. One day I shall publish an entire Criminal Anthology of Courtesy. None will sell, because everyone will recognise themselves on the first page.

(Possible dedication: "To all who have not yet returned the salt-cellar.")

1860: The Harp of the Hemlock Yews

From The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles

In the old country, before the railways came and the forests were cut down for fences and account books, there lived a woman whose name is now forgotten but whose harp songs still haunt the valleys in dreams. There was not among them a woman more beautiful than she. She surpassed in fairness the goddesses and the petals of the privet and the blooming roses and the fragrant lilies of the fields. The glory of spring shone in her alone and she had the splendour of the stars in her two eyes and splendid hair shining with the gleam of gold.

They said she came walking out of the mists one morning when the air smelled of iron and rain, barefoot across the ploughland, carrying the harp close to her heart as though it were a sleeping child. No one saw from whence she came, though many claimed to have heard, on the night before, a wind like the trembling of strings beyond the hills. She stayed in the village on a whim—or so it seemed to men—and took the ruinous cottage by the edge of the wood, where the ground was rich with yew roots and the owls spoke disquieting auguries from the rafters.

By day she gathered weeds and rare blossoms, filling the air with scents that made the air drowsy: hemlock and foxglove, wolfsbane and corncockles, nightshade by night and spurges by day. She knew the tongues of plants and stones, what leaf could draw out fever and what root might undo grief. Marshmallow to soothe, knitbone to mend, yarrow for tisanes and bezoar stones for all. When quarrels broke out among the men, she would sit upon the low wall and pluck the harp. The first sigh of sound—the hum before the note—would make the strongest loosen their grip on knife or bottle as though weary of their own rage. When plague came, the sick would sleep while she played, and in the morning the fever would be gone, as if it had found her melody a more fitting host.

And yet peace, once bought, grows resented. The priest's wife whispered that her sweetness was the Devil's decoy, and the apothecary, half-ruined by her knowledge of simples, spread the tale that she had learned her craft in a gallows pit. The farmers crossed themselves when she passed, though they still sent for her when their cows went lame.

At harvest, a strange change came over her. She began to wander by moonlight, barefoot and unarmoured, her hair unpinned and trailing like a spill of fire. The harp's notes grew longer, darker, almost human in their sorrow. Children spoke of candlelight gleaming in the wood,

where no windows stood, and of whispering voices that came not from men's mouths.

On a night of thunder, she vanished. No door was broken, no trace left but the harp upon her bed, its strings slack as if they too had died. The yews she had planted stood blacker than usual, and the air smelt of wild honey and rain-torn leaves. Villagers claimed, for a time, to hear her music far off in the marsh—tunes that made beasts kneel and wolves forget hunger—but as the years passed, even the echoes thinned.

Now the house is gone, but the yews remain, bent together like mourners. In early spring, when the light is strange and the air uneasy, those who pass that way say they hear a single note trembling through the branches. Some aver it is only the wind. Others, older and more foolish, say the harp was never left at all—that it followed her where men cannot go—and that when the world lies too sick or too cruel, she will play again to still us all.

1929: Revised Title for The Small Crimes of Daily Life "Crimes of Courtesy: An Anthology of the Small Offences"

(Subhead: "Wherein Society's Graces are Proved to be Perfectly Indigestible.")

Author's Revised Preface

The original tale proved too tidy for its own good—a single dinner cannot contain the infinite variety of English misdemeanour. Better, then, a cycle of vignettes, each a polished pebble of petty crime. These "Crimes of Courtesy" illustrate how civilisation advances not by virtue but by the elegant evasion of it. One borrows a neighbour's jam and calls it reciprocity; another praises a hat and means the opposite. No blood is shed, yet reputations bleed invisibly into the soup.

Readers may recognise their own parlours. If offended, they have only themselves—and their teaspoon collections—to blame.

Vignette I: The Borrowed Borrow

Mrs. Octavia Bentham rang at precisely four o'clock, her smile calibrated to three-quarters sincerity. "My dear Miss Cattell, might I borrow your silver asparagus tongs? Just for the Major's dinner—he adores a proper grip on his vegetables".

Miss Cattell, whose tongs had already toured three vicarages under similar pretences, lent them with a murmur of "delighted". By dawn the

next day, a paragraph in the County Gazette celebrated Mrs. Bentham's "family silver" at a regimental supper. The tongs returned a fortnight later, slightly bent and bearing a new monogram: O.B.

Miss Cattell said nothing. Instead, she engraved her own jam spoons with Borrower Beware and waited for luncheon.

Vignette II: The Praise That Stings

Mr. Gregory Fielding, encountering Mrs. Bentham at the haberdashery, paused before her new hat—a confection of peacock feathers and misplaced optimism. "Charming", he declared, eyes gleaming like a man appraising a rival's bankruptcy. "It makes one think of... tropical birds in reduced circumstances".

Mrs. Bentham flushed, preened, and purchased three more. At the next garden party she wore them all, a walking aviary of misplaced confidence. "Mr. Fielding has such taste", she confided to guests, who nodded sympathetically and edged away.

Fielding, meanwhile, ordered his own hats from Bond Street—plain felt, immune to compliment.

Vignette III: The Gossip Over Gin

The Reverend Paul Caper, fortified by a medicinal G&T, leaned towards Miss Cattell at the Mothers' Union tea. "Mrs. Bentham's economies are quite... creative", he whispered. "One hears she pawned the late Colonel's medals for a new wireless. Spiritual progress, no doubt".

By evensong, the tale had evolved: medals exchanged for a motorcar; the Colonel exhumed for confirmation. Mrs. Bentham, overhearing a variant at bridge, smiled serenely and countered with, "The Reverend's vestments were a gift from his predecessor's widow—cashmere, they say".

No one repeated either story aloud again. Gin, however, remained popular.

Vignette IV: The Excuse Eternal

Mr. Fielding promised the parish fête a haunch of venison from his "uncle's estate". The day arrived; the haunch shrank to a brace of rabbits, then to excuses: "Delayed by hounds... fog in the coverts... uncle indisposed".

The Reverend Caper, carving invisibly, announced grace: "For what we lack, the Lord provides—in spirit, at least". Mrs. Bentham contributed her famous potato salad (three households' worth, unacknowledged) and billed it as "solidarity". Miss Cattell slipped a

note under Fielding's door: Venison next fête? Or shall we settle for your apology?

He sent flowers. Rabbits sufficed.

Vignette V: The Forgiven Theft

Miss Cattell's best linen tablecloth vanished after Mrs. Bentham's bridge afternoon. Returned a month later, monogram faded but serviceable, accompanied by a note: "Laundered with my special receipt —my gift to you!"

Rather than confront, Miss Cattell invited her to tea and served biscuits on the matching napkins—also "gifted" the previous summer. "How thoughtful of you to remember", said Miss Cattell. Mrs. Bentham choked prettily on crumbs.

The cloth's true crime? It now smelled faintly of someone else's lavender.

Vignette VI: The Boast Repaid

The Reverend Caper, at the Conservative dance, boasted of his "harvest sermon" printed in The Times (actually a parish magazine, circulated to twelve souls). "London recognises rural wisdom", he beamed.

Mr. Fielding, overhearing, telegraphed his club friend: Vicar here claims your byline. Send congratulations? By post-dance coffee, The Times letters page featured: "Grateful to Rev. Caper for inspiring my words. Humility his chief virtue".—Ed.

The Reverend preached shorter sermons thereafter. The Times sold out.

Vignette VII: The Grand Reconciliation Luncheon

All convened at Mrs. Bentham's under truce: lamb (Fielding's, finally delivered), tongs (Cattell's, gleaming), napkins (collective). Toasts circled like veiled accusations.

"We forgive all small things", intoned the Reverend, sipping soup from Bentham silver. "As Christ forgave the adulteress—though she returned the ointment".

Laughter tinkled like stolen crystal. No one mentioned the missing compote. Society, repaired, proceeded to trifle.

Closing Reflection (for the volume's end)

These vignettes prove the thesis: daily life's true felonies are committed with smiles and serviettes. Borrow boldly, praise poisonously, gossip gracefully—and England endures. The great crimes

(murder, monarchy) are mere vulgarity; the small ones alone possess finesse.

One day, perhaps, a detective shall solve them all—only to be blackballed from every table for his pains.

(Possible epigraph: "Courtesy is the thief's best alibi.")

Notebook Postscript

This cycle sells itself: short enough for invalids, wicked enough for the healthy. Dedicate to Aunt Rose, who knew that a dinner party unmasks more souls than a dozen confessions. If publishers balk at the "crimes", retitle Table Manners for Modern Sinners.

1929: Euphemia Mallard

Draft Story

The case which follows was never brought before the courts, though the moral evidence, if not the legal, was abundant. In the public press it created only a brief stir, and yet among those few who concerned themselves with its intricacies, it raised questions more uneasy than any verdict could have settled. For my part, I have grown nearly to distrust the very word "proof". The thing so rarely proves what we imagine; and the law, which calls for it with a solemn air of precision, must often rest its decisions upon the frailest reeds of persuasion and circumstance.

The affair began with the disappearance of a certain Mr Adrian Anetis, a man of scrupulous habits and precise conduct in all his dealings. On the third of November he was observed leaving his chambers in Lincoln's Inn at a little before six o'clock, carrying a small attaché case and wearing his habitual grey overcoat. He was next seen, briefly, entering Grafton Square. Beyond that point—oblivion. The fog that evening was of such density that even the street-lamps presented no more than dull aureoles in the gloom, and the solitary watchman of the place declared himself unable to discern a shape at arm's length.

The police, as might be expected, treated the matter with measured attention. No struggle, no body, no sign of forced entry: a perfectly respectable man had stepped into the fog and not returned. The file was marked "Ongoing". By the third week, the name ceased to appear in the evening papers. Yet I was not content to let it go. Anetis had once rendered me an acquaintance's service, and there was something in the casual finality with which his fate was dismissed that roused my professional instincts.

It was at the house of a mutual friend, Mrs Vey, that I first encountered a circumstance which opened the way. She mentioned a

certain guest of hers—a Captain Welter—who had shown quite unnecessary eagerness in discussing the disappearance. “It is a pity”, said she, stirring her tea with languor, “that he should offer so much conjecture and so few facts”. Her phrase stuck with me, for among the observant the need of evidence begins not with the law, but with life itself.

I followed up the scent in the manner long practised: by placing side by side what others ignored. The Captain’s accounts differed subtly from day to day; and when at last I taxed him with his contradiction—whether he had seen Anetis on the evening in question or only supposed he had—his composure broke, revealing that singular dread which the innocent seldom display. Yet in law, as the inspector was quick to remind me, contradiction is not criminal. “Bring me the body”, he said, “and I will bring you the charge”.

That ambiguity—those three words, “bring me the body”—have haunted me since. It is strange to reflect that the very instrument society erects to guard truth may itself be its most convenient shelter for falsehood. The law cannot convict without evidence: very well; but society must still live with the knowledge of its absence, which is a subtler prison.

Weeks later, Anetis’ attaché case was discovered in a pawn-shop near the Strand. Its contents were curiously mundane: a few letters, some drawings of timber-framed buildings in Shropshire, and an unsigned note containing the words, “No contract can hold what conscience has released”. The handwriting, later determined by experts to be Anetis’ own, threw the matter into hopeless uncertainty. Suicide? Abscondment? Or cunning forgery? Without the man himself, every explanation became equally probable. The Coroner’s Court, after perfunctory deliberation, declared “missing—presumed dead”. To the jurymen, this satisfied procedure; to public curiosity, it supplied closure. To reason, it afforded nothing.

There are moments in investigation when the weight of what cannot be known bears heavier than any discovery. I have stood upon the same pavement in Grafton Square, the fog hanging like lead, imagining the exact instant when Anetis’ careful tread must have faltered. No cry, no mark on the stones, no witness; yet all the forces of law and order thenceforth pointed to a void, as if the world itself were complicit in erasure. At such times one perceives that justice—so much trumpeted as impartial and invincible—is but the shadow cast by society’s need for certainty. The document, the fingerprint, the body: these are but tokens to make the collective conscience rest easy.

In my own notebooks I recorded the case as “Unresolved; evidence lacking”. The words stare back at me still, dry and bureaucratic, and I

cannot but smile at the irony that most guilt in this world goes free not for want of discovery, but for want of definition. The law, bound in its symmetrical codes, demands to see before believing. Yet belief, in all human intercourse, is formed long before the seeing.

There is a final note in my file, added months afterward, when I happened upon Captain Welter at Victoria Station, about to board the boat train for the Continent. He lifted his hat with mechanical politeness, his hand trembling. Nothing could be proved against him; everything pointed towards him. "You watched too closely", he said, smiling oddly. "There was nothing to find". And he was right. For evidence, like air, vanishes the instant one grasps at it.

Thus ended the Case of Adrian Anetis—not with a verdict, but with a question. And perhaps that is the true nature of justice in our age: not the shining sword, but the flickering lantern that reveals how much remains unseen.

1929: The Criminal Anthology of Courtesy

(Subhead: "A Study of Society's Politest Felonies, from Bouquet to Billet-Doux.")

Author's Foreword (Provisional)

One cannot dine in England without committing a crime, though the victim is rarely the partridge. Civilisation, that vast conspiracy of restraint, depends upon a thousand small deceits: the compliment which conceals contempt, the borrowed lace which becomes an heirloom, the fan fluttered to signal despair. These are the true felonies of our age—bloodless, blameless, and bound in watered silk.

This anthology collects them, not as indictment but as inventory. The language of flowers, the grammar of gloves, the epistolary ambush: each a weapon too refined for the law courts. Readers of delicate sensibility may recognise their own parlours; those of coarser grain will merely covet the techniques. Society endures because no one prosecutes a pretty lie.

(Margin note: Dedicate to Aunt Rose, who once despatched a wilting lily to a rival and called it condolence.)

Chapter I: The Language of Flowers—Bouquets as Blackmail

No felony is subtler than the floral tribute. A yellow rose whispers infidelity; a white carnation, funeral without the inconvenience of death. In 1897, Lady Arabella Voss received tuberoses from her husband's mistress—symbol of dangerous pleasures—and promptly

pawned her jewels to fund a continental cure. The sender, feigning innocence, enclosed a card: “For your delicate health”.

The code endures: asphodel for regret (one’s own, never admitted); orange blossom for fertility (rarely sincere at weddings); monkshood for treachery (best paired with compliments on the recipient’s “vivid complexion”). Aunt Rose records a Calcutta memsahib who signalled divorce with a wreath of deadly nightshade, artfully arranged as “jungle souvenirs”. The husband emigrated; the bouquet wilted into legend.

Crime here lies in deniability: flowers cannot testify. A gentleman sends forget-me-nots to his creditor’s wife; she interprets as flirtation, the debt is forgiven. Perfectly civil, utterly crooked.

Chapter II: The Fan’s Repertoire—Signals of Silent Sabotage

The fan, that portable semaphore of scandal, speaks volumes while lips remain sealed. A lady half-conceals her face behind it: I am married. She drops it closed: Follow me. Dropped open upon the floor: Wait for me. Fluttered rapidly before a closed fan: I am engaged.

Observe Mrs. Lavinia Quince at the 1922 Hunt Ball: spied flirting with the Earl’s equerry, she snapped her fan shut twice—You are wicked—then fluttered it languidly against her cheek—Come tonight. By dawn, the Earl had challenged the equerry to billiards (code for pistols at twenty paces, abandoned for port). Mrs. Quince claimed mechanical failure: “The ivory stick slipped”.

Fans enable the grandest intrigues. A slow, sideways droop signifies I hate you; paired with a glance heavenward, it accuses publicly without syllable. In Regency circles, one debutante fanned I wish to be rid of you at her chaperon, who promptly retired to Bath with “nerves”. The fan, retrieved by a footman, bore no fingerprints—only the scent of attar of roses.

(Illustration note: diagram of nine essential strokes, captioned “Murder by Monture.”)

Chapter III: Gloves as alibis—The Touchless Offence

Gloves permit proximity without peril, deceit without dermal evidence. Pulled off languidly before a suitor: I surrender. Fumbled onto the floor: I love another. Placed idly on a gentleman’s sleeve: Marry me.

The infamous case of Miss Eudora Fanshawe, 1911: jilted by Colonel Bream, she attended his regimental dinner gloveless—naked intent—then donned them mid-toast, fingers lingering on the pearl buttons: I despise you. The Colonel choked on his speech (and asparagus); rumour held it poison, but autopsy proved mortification. Miss Fanshawe’s alibi: “Perspiration from the candles”.

Gloves excel in theft: a lady "accidentally" drops her embroidered pair upon a rival's vanity; retrieved days later, they bear witness to indiscretions via embroidered initials. No magistrate convicts a cufflink.

Chapter IV: The Parasol's Parry—Shade as Stratagem

Outdoors, the parasol parries sunlight and sincerity alike. Twirled left: I am yours. Twirled right: I am engaged. Tapped on the ground: Do not forget me. Pointed to the heart: I love you.

At Ascot 1905, the Dowager Marchioness of Tewkesbury tapped her parasol thrice upon Lady Sybil's slipper—You are ugly—during the royal procession. Lady Sybil, blanching, retreated to her carriage; the Dowager advanced socially by a season. Parasols conceal daggers (metaphorical) and dispense shade (literal) upon reputations. One Brighton belle once furled hers abruptly—Get thee behind me—at a persistent curate, who entered Orders the next Michaelmas.

Chapter V: The Epistolary Ambush—Letters as Loaded Dice

Postage stamps the perfect confederate. A letter sealed with black wax: mourning (real or manufactured). Crossed with violet ribbon: secrecy. Unsigned billet with pressed violet enclosed: assignation.

The classic felony: Mrs. Imelda Thorpe's 1926 correspondence with her banker's wife, commencing "Dearest Friend" and descending to enclosures of torn cheques, annotated "Your husband's generosity". The banker absconded; Mrs. Thorpe claimed "philanthropic error". Stationery convicts no one—though the scent of heliotrope lingers damningly.

Perfume upon the page adds felony: jasmine for jealousy, musk for midnight. One Viennese countess despatched letters spritzed with chloroform—faint but forensic—to rivals, who swooned into scandals.

Chapter VI: Handkerchiefs and Lavender Bags—Aromas of Annihilation

A dropped handkerchief demands pursuit; waved aloft, refusal. Sprinkled with lavender, it accuses fastidiousness—or concealed lovers, since the herb masks other scents.

Miss Prudence Latch's campaign against the rector's daughter: successive handkerchiefs "lost" in the vestry, each laced with attar betraying rouge and romance. The girl fled to Bournemouth; Miss Latch inherited the pew. Lavender bags, slipped into drawers, imply promiscuity via their ubiquity—"as common as your conquests".

Chapter VII: The Grand Synthesis—A Dinner Party of Deceit

To observe all codes in action: host a dinner. Yellow roses centre the table (infidelity general). Fans flutter signals across soup. Gloves adorn laps like surrendered flags. Parasols prop open windows for assignations. Letters circulate under plates; handkerchiefs muffle coughs of contempt.

At such a feast in 1928, Mrs. Bentham signalled via fanned I love you to the butler (oversight), dropped her glove before the curate (Marry me, misaimed), and despatched a parasol-tap to the soup tureen (Do not forget me, ignored). Chaos ensued politely; no arrests, only augmented invitations.

Coda: The Immunity of Elegance

These courtesies criminalise without custody. A full colonel mortified by a hostess's pun retreats to Cheltenham; no gaol, only grouse. Society polices itself via exclusion: the offender simply finds her circle shrunk to mirrors.

The true genius lies in escalation without evidence. Flowers wilt, fans snap, gloves fray—but memory endures. One day, perhaps, a manual of Counter-Courtesy shall appear; until then, this anthology suffices as both guide and gravestone.

(Final margin: Publish anonymously. Credit "A Lady of Experience". Sell to those who recognise their own bouquets.)

1929: Euphemia Mallard

Private papers

A copy of The London Literary Review arrived by this morning's post, bearing that tiresome piece by Mr. Reginald Hargrove—some Oxbridge don turned scribbler, no doubt puffing his pipe in a club armchair while pontificating on "the Golden Age." He finds it "amusing" that historians credit gentlemen like Upfield or Lang with the era's triumphs, omitting the "operative word: male," then proceeds to lump me, Euphemia Mallard, into his snide sidebar as a purveyor of "curiously sympathetic" servant tales. My re-examination of the Blandy case? "Ill-advised," he sneers, hinting at family entanglements I neither know nor care to exhume.

How I weary of these armchair anatomists who mistake axioms for agendas. My stories are not "axiomatic" screeds, Mr. Hargrove, nor do they spring from any feminine ideology— socialist, communist, or otherwise. They are drawn from life: the assizes I haunted, the maids who whispered scandals over copper kettles, the trials where class and gender tilted the scales before evidence was weighed. Eliza Thorne in

The Maid's Defence defends herself not because I "sympathise" with servants (though why shouldn't one?), but because real Elizas scrubbed real hearths while overhearing real plots. The Blandy reconstruction? A courtroom record, faithfully rendered, with Mary's powder as the pivot—not a tract on daughters versus sires, but a puzzle of love, lies, and arsenic that any reader might unravel. No manifesto here, only the raw machinery of human folly, observed without sermon.

Hargrove's rebuke—that my work panders to the "subaltern woman"—reveals more of his own patriarchal blinders than my pages ever could. He imagines every maid's acquittal as my soapbox; I see only the overlooked witness, the hand that stirs the fatal cup because circumstance demands it.

Let him carp from his London fogs; my readers—housewives, clerks, colonials—know better. They turn pages not for lectures, but for the chill recognition of lives unlived in drawing-rooms and sculleries alike. My novels stand axiom-free: crime as mirror, not megaphone. If that's "unfashionable," so be it—fashion fades; the guilty verdict lingers.

1930: Euphemia Mallard

Private papers

What a peculiar Valentine's Day this has proved—no posies or protestations, but a long afternoon alone with the harbour glittering like fool's gold outside my window, and my thoughts turning, as they so often do, to the sheer improbability of my own existence. I am forty-seven, or thereabouts (one ceases counting precisely after the first decade of drafts and disappointments), and as I sift through the latest packet from Tunbridge Wells—those tidy complaints about rationed bridge parties and the Duke's latest solicitors—I find myself marvelling at the lottery that was my girlhood. Fortune, that capricious hostess, seated me at a table of well-educated women, and I have dined on their legacy ever since.

Consider the lineage: my mother, schooled in the classics at a seminary that rivalled Oxford in rigour if not in robes; my grandmother, who devoured Gibbon and Goethe while managing a colonial household; and Great-Aunt Harriette, whose "memoirs" (so-called by the scandalised) were in truth a masterclass in rhetoric and revenge. Aunt Rose, too, with her Indian diaries—those sly ethnographies of memsahibs and maharajahs—taught me that observation is the sharpest curriculum. No simpering seminary for us; we debated Darwin over tea, dissected Dickens for his hypocrisies, and treated Austen not as romance but as reconnaissance. Raised thus, in

the late 1890s, when bicycles were deemed faster than brainwork for most girls, I emerged equipped not merely to read the world, but to rewrite it in fiction—or at least to sketch its criminal underbelly in endless notebooks.

And oh, the reach of it! Not content with Sydney's sunlit isolation, I have corresponded with a veritable empire of female cousins: Elspeth's crisp letters from England, laced with warnings about ducal lawyers; Priya's vivid dispatches from Calcutta, scented with curry and court intrigue; Mei-Ling's philosophical missives from Shanghai, pondering the fall of dynasties amid jazz records; Cousin Beatrice from Malaya, regaling me with tales of rubber barons undone by their own mistresses; Singapore's sharp-tongued Lydia, who navigates entrepôts of spice and scandal; and across the Atlantic, the Bostonians—stern Abigail with her suffrage clippings—and New York's flamboyant Theo, who claims to have ghostwritten half the speakeasies' manifestos. Letters crossing oceans like migratory birds, carrying not just gossip but blueprints for stories: courtesans pulling thrones, housekeepers hoarding keys to bigamy trunks, full colonels mortified by puns at dinner. I have, in essence, travelled the world without leaving my desk —or rather, through the ink of women who did the wandering for me.

Nor have I idled. Books published—under pseudonyms discreet enough to evade family solicitors; crime novels, mostly, though the reviewers called them "social comedies with arsenic", which suits me. Ideas? A positive avalanche: epistolary murders by forged signatures, female utopias folding men back in like errant cuckoos, St Paul's Cathedral as marital mausoleum of whispering silences, anthologies of courtesy's small felonies—fans fluttering I despise you, flowers wilting into blackmail. Time to think? Oceans of it, here in Sydney's lazy sprawl, where the harbour breeze excuses procrastination. But time to write them all? None. Drafts pile like unpaid bills: the courtesan's polite conspiracy, the Greenwich reversal where sexes swap hemispheres for harmony's sake, the dinner-party deceits where order performs its own collapse. One lifetime scarcely suffices for the felonies of manners alone.

Yet even in this self-congratulatory reverie—champagne toasts to my improbable privileges—a shadow falls, satirical and sharp. For all our letters and legacies, education itself remains a stately dinosaur, plodding the same ruts it trod when I was a girl in pinafores. Universities still peddle the classics like eternal verities: Homer's heroes, Plato's caves, the same Latin declensions that bored my mother into quiet rebellion. Men declaim them from oak-panelled podiums, as if the world hadn't exploded twice since Aristotle. Women? We creep forward, chipping at barriers with teaspoons—full degrees grudgingly granted at Oxford,

grudging-er still at Cambridge, where systemic resistance manifests as "ladylike quotas" and whispers of "unsuitable for matrimony". Academic careers? A polite fiction: the cleverest don relegated to lecturing on domestic economy while her male colleague pontificates on metaphysics. It's the architecture of silence again—stone walls pretending permanence, whispering galleries echoing only approved voices.

One laughs, bitterly, at the comedy: we, the well-read daughters of well-read mothers, correspond across empires about forging signatures and floral treacheries, yet our sisters in gowns still petition for the right to parse Virgil without chaperones. Progress? A parasol twirl—I am engaged to the status quo, perhaps, but dropping it closed: Follow me no further. My fortune was accident, not design; a handful of literate women defying the syllabus of silence. For the rest, universities teach as before, because to teach anew might admit the curriculum was always a courtesy—a polite felony masking the scandal that knowledge belongs not to gowns or genders, but to those bold enough to borrow the keys.

What to do? Publish more, I suppose—slip the satires past the solicitors, let the cousins' voices echo in print. Or perhaps pen that final anthology: The Criminal Anthology of Courtesy, with a chapter on academic fans—fluttered to signal I surrender my chair. The harbour mocks me now, all restless blue ambition. Tomorrow, another draft. Time enough for marvels, never for completions. But oh, what a table we were seated at—and what a banquet of deceits still awaits.

1930: Draft Story

"Notes Toward the Autobiography of a Waterfowl" (Being an experiment in avian epistemology and civic satire, composed in the intermissions between chapters of murder)

The notion came to me—while waiting for a recalcitrant inspector to recall the difference between logic and gossip—that perhaps the principal defect in human investigation is our chronic inability to think like anything but ourselves. And so, one afternoon (an unconvincing April pretending to be autumn), I determined to view Sydney through the eyes of a duck.

Not metaphorically, nor biologically, nor in any sentimental fashion involving feathers and destiny. Simply: to shed for an hour the heavy garments of reason and wear instead the clear, chilly intellect of a mallard.

I. Centennial Park, 1902

It was a year of Federation, fever, and furbelows. The city—newly conscious of its national adolescence—fluttered with opinions more than with principles. And in the heart of it, amid the swans, nursemaids, and lapdogs, was Centennial Park: a public joke pretending to be Arcadia, much frequented by the genteel and by those who wished to appear so.

It is there that our unnamed duck—let us, for civility, call him Mr. Quackwell—pursued his vague ambitions. Not for him the vulgar concerns of bread crusts or floating insects. Mr. Quackwell's mind (insofar as ducks possess one) was philosophical. He disapproved of men's obsession with monuments and regarded their tendency toward oratory as a noisy form of mumbling to oneself.

The park statues puzzled him excessively. "Why", he observed to a passing ibis, "should the bipeds erect cold imitations of themselves within view of warm originals?" The ibis, being unaccustomed to metaphysical play, replied only, "Because the originals are warmer than they like to appear".

This answer satisfied nobody.

II. Observations from the Pond

From mid-water, Mr. Quackwell witnessed the pageant of Edwardian Sydney. Bank clerks strolled with canes inquisitively, as if every leaf might hide a promotion. Women in hats vast as frigate sails performed promenade manoeuvres, their eyes filled with urgent serenity. Policemen, having achieved the immovable dignity usually reserved for equestrian statues, exuded that air of moral upholstery peculiar to minor authority.

The duck understood none of this, which was precisely why he understood everything.

He found that to drift beside one's own reflection is the only proper posture for thought, and that man's agitation was a sign he had mistaken puddles for oceans and gossip for history. When crumbs fell upon the water, the duck accepted them with priestly equanimity, whereas the surrounding pigeons behaved as if each fragment represented salvation or empire.

"Civilisation", he mused, "is simply the conduct of hunger according to etiquette".

III. The Human Thesis

From time to time, the duck was approached by poets and children, both species belonging to the same genus of impractical tenderness. They spoke to him earnestly as though speaking to their own future—

one that would swim serenely even when they themselves would later be too busy paying bills to notice the sky.

On Sundays, clergymen delivered sermons by the pond. Mr. Quackwell found these performances exhilaratingly obscure. "They speak", he quacked to himself, "as if the Almighty were an alderman with civic responsibilities and very fixed views on lawn maintenance".

He preferred the ladies' chatter. It was lighter, yet somehow more tragic.

IV. The Crime Writer's Reflection

At this point in my draft, it occurs to me that every crime begins with misunderstanding—one person ducks while another shoots. The true detective must therefore acquire the soul of a drake: patient, observant, disinclined toward astonishment, and happiest when afloat. Perhaps I am less a novelist than a waterfowl with a typewriter—picking crumbs of motive from the surface of civilisation.

Sydney, with its expanding suburbs, its Anglo-Saxon complacency, and its moral overcoats, is itself a pond where human ducks paddle endlessly, convinced each ripple is progress. One glimpses the beak of pride, the plumage of propriety, the occasional splash of enlightenment—all passing for flight.

How different Mr. Quackwell seems now: the only philosopher left unpunished for loafing.

V. Closing Note

If this experiment fails (as most honest experiments must), let the failure remain on record: that one woman with a sharpened pen attempted, between the writing of autopsies and alibis, to think as a duck might think—and thus caught, for a moment, the absurd stillness beneath the world's perpetual murder.

For perhaps the truest detection is not of crime, but of vanity; and in that respect, the ducks are infinitely our superiors.

1931: Mirror Before Midnight

1. Preliminary Notes

Idea: invert the sanctities. The pure become poisonous, the wicked trustworthy. No fairy tale should end well—it contradicts all psychological evidence. Set not "long ago" but in that impersonal forever where the mind writes its own delusions. The forest as interior; the palace as public conscience.

Must avoid sentimentalism—let narrative drift in waves rather than beats. Style: lucid derangement.

2. The Queen's Soliloquy

When she was young, the Queen had held the common delusion that goodness resembled light—radiant, absolute, and best encountered at a safe remove. But experience had proved it intolerably glaring. "How fortunate", she thought, running her comb through hair that had long since rejected obedience, "that I have learnt the virtues of shade".

Each morning she stood before the famous mirror, not to ask favour, but for consultation. It was her accomplice in honesty. "Am I not weary today?" she would say. "Am I not cruel?" And the mirror, with notable civility, would agree. A perfect marriage of self-knowledge and civility.

Behind her, servants called her wicked, citizens feared her, and minstrels embroidered her solitude. Yet the Queen's only sin was discernment. She had watched too many saints exhale perfume while trampling the help. Virtue, she concluded, smelt distinctly of hypocrisy and goosefat.

[handwritten marginal note:]
Make the mirror male. Male and modest—a combination almost supernatural.

3. The Child

Her step-daughter—Snow White, though she preferred to be thought of as "innocence personified"—was in fact a terrible nuisance. She refused reading on principle, spoke in moral slogans, and collected small woodland animals who devoured the Queen's tulip beds. She had a complexion worth a treaty, but her virtue clung like frostbite.

Snow's chief occupation was performing goodness upon every available observer. When maids dropped trays, she forgave them publicly. When gardeners pruned, she prayed for the trees. But she stole the kitchen boy's wages to buy ribbons, explaining that righteousness must be prettily dressed.

The Queen watched all this and found herself faintly amused. "She will marry a prince", she mused, "and thereby complete her ruin".

4. The Dwarfs' Establishment

Expelled from court in a fit of radiant self-martyrdom ("I shall die for love of my virtue!" she'd cried), the girl stumbled into the forest and collapsed into co-operation with the seven so-called dwarfs—men of impeccable wickedness, which is to say they were frank. They drank, gambled, sang bawdy refrains, and observed her nonsense with affection.

Grim, the eldest, had once been a philosopher before discovering optimism far more destructive than opium. "Stop worrying about purity", he told her, "and start worrying about laundry".

They took her in because wickedness is hospitable—nothing pleases the sinner so much as an innocent to corrupt gently and feed well. Snow, of course, announced she would reform them, introduce spiritual hygiene and house prayers. Within days, they became better men and therefore more miserable. The abandoned mugs gathered dust. The jokes dulled.

"She's killing us", muttered Grim.

5. The Apple

Meanwhile the Queen, guiltless but bored, decided to retrieve the child before sanctity annihilated all joy in a ten-mile radius. She devised a simple plan: go herself in disguise. It was partly maternal, partly aesthetic—curiosity about how virtue behaves when unobserved.

She found the cottage surrounded by cautionary birds. Snow sat outdoors rehearsing her gratitude to Providence. The air smelt disinfected.

"My dear", said the old woman (she wore wrinkles the way diplomats wear epaulettes), "would you like an apple?"

Snow, who considered appetite vulgar, refused. The Queen insisted. "It's the only one with flavour left in the world".

Eventually the girl took it, bit, gagged with outrage at the taste of mortality, and fell into that famous sleep which is simply the body exiting piety.

6. The Prince

Enter Prince Alban—handsome as opinion and twice as dull. He had been hunting sentiment across the countryside. When he found the unconscious Snow, a thrill of practical romance seized him. Here was an opportunity to perform gallantry without consent—an ideal marriage of virtue and vanity.

The kiss, duly delivered, contained no magic, only moisture. But Snow awoke. "Who are you?" she demanded. "Redemption", said the Prince. She married him on the spot—grateful, as always, to appear grateful.

The Queen sent a basket of pears with a card: For compatibility, remember rot travels upward.

7. Endnote: the Reunion

Years later, travellers whisper, the Queen and the dwarfs ran the finest tavern in the northern provinces. Candles guttered over laughter,

conversation drifted like music, and nobody there spoke of virtue unless ordering more of it in a bottle.

Snow, meanwhile, reigning beside Alban, banned jokes as "subversive". Her courtiers died young of suppressed laughter.

8. Postscript (typewritten):

The inversion is complete, but must not read as parody. Beneath irony, a pulse: goodness without intelligence becomes cruelty; wickedness with imagination becomes tenderness. Crime for mercy's sake—yes, that will do.

Retitle perhaps The Patience of Mirrors. Consider whether Snow's coffin should be glass or paper.

End with the Queen laughing—not from triumph but recognition.

1931: The Duke's Mausoleum: A Fable of Power and Parasite

(Alternate: "Primogeniture's Jaw—Or, The Slow Banquet of the Ducal Line.")

Author's Preliminary Meditation

Power decays not with a bang but with a genteel crumbling, like the Mallard Mausoleum itself—that once-majestic folly on the estate, now relocated to a suburban cemetery lest the tenants glimpse ducal worm-eaten bones. Cousin Edward's funeral in 1925 provided the perfect tableau: St. Paul's Cathedral resounding with Brahms and bankruptcy, peers in ermine pretending eternity while the heirs fidgeted like condemned mice. Primogeniture, that ancient maw, devours the line generation by generation, thriving on death as worms on flesh. Society, too, is parasite-ridden: titles fattened on decay, pomp the varnish over rot.

This shall be a satirical chronicle-fable, blending family farce with mythic undertow—the ducal estate as a living mausoleum where power's grandeur conceals its slow consumption. No mere obituary; a mirror to empires crumbling politely into dust.

(Margin: Tone—brittle comedy atop abyssal hunger. Let the cathedral echo as cosmic indigestion.)

Dramatis Personae (Provisional)

- The Late Duke Edward, marble in life, moth-eaten in death.
- Lord Percival (Heir Apparent), thirty-five, prim and parasitic, devoted to hounds and hypothecated rents.

- Lady Beatrice (The Widow), serene as sarcophagus, hostess to spectral scandals.
- Miss Imelda (The American Cousin), vulgarly vital, heiress to chewing-gum fortunes, eyeing the title like a bargain-basement tiara.
- The Reverend Canon Wormwood, officiant with a name too apt to ignore.
- The Estate Itself, sentient mausoleum: ivy-cloaked, worm-riddled, whispering of foreclosures.
- The Primogeniture Maw, mythic beast—gaping, hereditary, fed by firstborn sons.

(Note: All decay literal and metaphorical—woodworm in wainscot, debt in ledgers, maggots in myth.)

Chapter I: The Cathedral Pomp (Funeral Day, 1925—Draft Scene)

St. Paul's dome hung overhead like a stone indigestion, swallowing the cortège in grey light. The Duke's casket, veneered mahogany (the real oak rotted in store), proceeded to strains of organ voluntary—pomp enough to bankrupt a bishopric. Peers rustled in orders, their medals clinking like loose change; Lady Beatrice, swathed in crepe, distributed glances of practiced sorrow.

Lord Percival, firstborn and fettered, supported the pallbearers with the rigidity of one already measured for his own box. "Father's legacy endures", he intoned to a subaltern earl, who murmured agreement while calculating the inheritance tax. Miss Imelda, from the transept pews, fanned herself vigorously—I despise this damp—her American vowels slicing the Latin like grapefruit segments. The Reverend Wormwood sermonised on "eternal estates", omitting that the Mallard mausoleum had been sold to a speculative builder three years prior.

As the casket descended to the crypt (a rented niche, £200 annually), a pigeon voided upon Percival's coronet. Divine comment, or merely avian appetite? The congregation dispersed to Claridge's, where power's decay was toasted in vintage port—going off, like everything else.

Chapter II: The Relocated Mausoleum

No longer gracing the Mallard lawns, the ducal tomb now squatted in Acacia Gardens Cemetery, cheek-by-jowl with haberdashers and horse-dealers. Primogeniture demanded grandeur, yet economics dictated compromise: the sarcophagi shifted like evicted furniture, worms evicted only to reinfest.

Percival surveyed the site one fogbound afternoon, accompanied by bailiffs disguised as gardeners. "The family pile endures", he declared,

as ivy tendrils probed the lead seals. Lady Beatrice, pruning a neighbouring urn, observed drily: "Much like the estate rents—persistent, if malodorous". Miss Imelda proposed dynamiting it for a golf hazard: "Back home, we build mausoleums that pay dividends".

Beneath, the ducal lineage slumbered in strata: Great-Uncle Reginald (dissipated 1892, liver complaint), worm-bait before embalming; Grandfather (syphilitic, 1908), whose monument now housed earwigs. Primogeniture's maw gaped wider with each interment, devouring collaterals—spinster aunts, cadet sons—to fatten the heir. Percival felt it stir: the firstborn's prison, gilded yet gnawing.

(Mythic interpolation: Here, the Maw manifests as subterranean banquet—dukes dining on heirs, toasting "To the Line!" with formaldehyde.)

Chapter III: Parasites of Power

The Mallard estate mirrored the mausoleum: once a power unto itself, now honeycombed with debt-worms. Tenant farmers whispered of enclosures reversed—fields pawned to City usurers, gamekeepers turned poachers. Percival, primogeniture's thrall, patrolled the ruins in plus-fours, evicting ghosts of retainers.

Society's parasites thrived similarly: Lady Beatrice's salon, attended by impoverished peers trading titles for tittle-tattle; Miss Imelda's chequebook, burrowing into family escutcheons. At the post-funeral hunt ball, Percival proposed to a brewer's daughter—"strategic alliance"—only for her to decline: "Darling, your coronet's lovely, but the dry-rot's showing".

Worms, literal and locust-like, infested the great house: oak panels riddled, tapestries moth-eaten, the family silver melted for solicitors. Primogeniture demanded preservation, yet decay was its true heir—the maw's slow feast.

Chapter IV: The Gaping Maw (Mythic Core—Fable Sequence)

In the estate's mythic undercroft (accessed via collapsing chapel), primogeniture revealed its jaws: a hereditary beast, firstborn-fed, slumbering on ducal bones. Each generation tossed in a son—Percival's turn approaching, his collaterals (dissipated brothers, barren sisters) mere appetisers.

Miss Imelda, blundering into the crypt during a house-party, disturbed the Maw: "Say, this family skeleton's got teeth!" She proposed shares: "Divide the estate—capitalism eats worms for breakfast". Percival recoiled: "The line demands sacrifice!" But as worms erupted from grandfather's effigy, devouring ermine, he

glimpsed the prison—primogeniture not throne but trap, power's decay devouring its own posterity.

Lady Beatrice, ever practical, administered arsenic to the beast (laced in communion wine): "Parasites die by stronger parasites". The Maw convulsed, vomiting heirlooms—charters, jewels, sanity—before collapsing into compost.

Chapter V: Collapse and Catharsis

The funeral's aftermath accelerated rot: estate auctioned (Maw's jaw unclenched), Percival abdicating title for anonymity ("Mr. Percy Mallard, poultry farmer"). Lady Beatrice retreated to Nice, hosting salons of ex-peers; Miss Imelda married a viscount, infusing gum into genealogy.

St. Paul's dome, revisited by Percival, echoed hollow: pomp a performance, mortality the only peerage. The mausoleum, repurposed as a tea-room, served seed-cake to tourists—power's ultimate decay, digested democratically.

(Closing image: Worms emerge at high tea, polite as pensioners, feasting on sponge.)

Thematic Reflections & Notes for Revision

- Power and Decay: Dukedom as mausoleum—grandeur gangrenous, pomp parasitic. Primogeniture the ultimate worm: thrives on death, starves on equality.
- Satirical Edge: Funeral farce exposes society's rot—peers preening amid bankruptcy, Americans as deus ex machina.
- Mythic Layer: LeGuin-esque fable elevates comedy to cautionary cosmos—estates as ecosystems, titles as tumours.
- Tone Balance: Mitfordian brittle chit-chat ("Darling, your coronet's moth-eaten") atop abyssal appetite.

(Final jotting: Publish posthumously? Cousin's solicitors dormant at last. Moral: Power decays; only worms inherit eternally.)

1931: Draft, Chapter IV: The Gaping Maw

(From "The Duke's Mausoleum: A Fable of Power and Parasite")

In the undercroft of Mallard Chapel—that damp vault accessed by a staircase of crumbling York stone, where the air tasted of forgotten vintages and ancestral flatulence—primogeniture revealed its truest form. Not the gilded cradle of legend, nor the iron sceptre of chronicle, but a Maw: vast, hereditary, and ravenous, its jaws hinged upon the firstborn sons of the line. It slumbered there, coiled upon strata of ducal

bones, digesting coronets and charters with the patient relish of a serpent at siesta. Each generation fed it tribute—Percival's forebears tossed in like titbits: Great-Uncle Reginald (liver-failure garnish), Grandfather (syphilitic sauce), and sundry collaterals (spinster aunts as palate-cleansers, cadet brothers as chewy afterthoughts). The Maw thrived on death, its gums lined with entailments, its breath the reek of dry-rot deeds.

Percival, firstborn and fettered, had always sensed it—that subterranean tug, stronger since the funeral. On a moonless Michaelmas eve, during what his agent euphemised as "inventory consolidation", he descended alone, armed with a hurricane lamp and half a flask of Napoleon brandy. The light picked out reliquaries: a rusted sword of Agincourt (nicked for pawn), a crusader's helm (moth repository), and the family tree etched in marble, its branches worm-tracked like varicose veins. "The line endures", he muttered, as one does to vaults, though the echo mocked him with flatulence.

Deeper still, where the flagstones sweated like fevered brows, the Maw stirred. It was no bestial horror—no dragon's roar or minotaur's bellow—but a polite peristalsis, jaws parting with the soft click of a snuffbox. Eyes like clouded cameos surveyed him; teeth filed to points of peerage glittered amid encrusted jewels. "Heir", it belched, in a voice compounded of crumbling parchments and clinking medals, "you come to feed or be fed?" Percival, brandy lending Dutch courage, retorted: "The dukedom is mine by right—not ration for your gullet!"

The Maw chuckled, a sound like settling foundations. "Right? Primogeniture is prison, boy—my jaws the bars. Your father fattened me with his rents; his father with enclosures; theirs with conquests. Each firstborn a morsel, collaterals mere crumbs. Feed me, or famish the line". Visions unspooled in the lamplight: dukes banqueting on heirs across centuries—Edward III gnawing a Plantagenet nephew, Victoria's uncles simmering in side-dishes—all to preserve the maw's eternal appetite. Power, it transpired, decayed from within: titles as tapeworms, estates as engorged intestines, pomp the digestive rumble preceding flatulence.

Enter, blundering from the shrubbery like a grapefruit in gaiters, Miss Imelda—the American Cousin, vulgarly vital, heiress to masticatory millions. She had tailed Percival from the house-party, mistaking crypt for cocktail cellar. "Say, Percy! This family skeleton's got teeth sharper than Wall Street bonds!" Torch in one gum-chewing fist, she prodded the Maw's palate. "Listen here, you ducal tapeworm—back home we divide estates like pie: shares for sisters, dividends for daughters. Capitalism eats worms for breakfast! Why not flog the

mausoleum for a golf hazard? Primogeniture's so... European indigestion".

The Maw recoiled, belching a coronet that rolled to Percival's brogues. "Division? Democracy? I am the line's logic—firstborn fattens, spares the spares!" But Imelda, undaunted, lobbed a peppermint from her purse: "Try democracy, sugar—it's less constipating". The confection lodged in a bicuspid; the beast convulsed, jaws gnashing air and ancestry. Visions reversed: cadet sons ennobled, spinsters enfeoffed, estates subdivided into jolly co-operatives where tenants picnicked on parterres. Power's decay accelerated—wormy wainscots wholesaled, dry-rot deeds dynamited—until the maw gaped not in hunger, but horror.

Percival glimpsed his prison then: primogeniture not throne but trap, firstborn a perpetual titbit tumbling into eternity's gullet. "No more!" he cried, wrenching a loose entailment from the wall—a charter yellow as bile. Lady Beatrice materialised, spectral in widow's weeds, bearing a vial disguised as scent-bottle: arsenic, procured from the estate's rat-traps. "Parasites die by stronger parasites, darling", she murmured, administering it laced in communion wine (pinched from the chapel altar). The Maw gulped, convulsed, and vomited its trove: charters cascading like confetti, jewels rattling like dice, sanity spilling in spectral ledgers. Jaws unclenched with a final, farting sigh—"The liiiine..".—before collapsing into compost, a mulch of mottos and moth-eaten mantles.

Percival emerged at dawn, blinking like Lazarus sans resurrection. Imelda proposed shares: "Fifty-fifty on the golf course?" Lady Beatrice spritzed verbena: "Better a poultry farm than primogeniture's larder". The chapel undercroft, emptied, echoed hollow—power's maw sated at last, its decay fertilising futures un-fettered by firstborn fangs.

(Author's margin notes: Escalate mythic farce—let Maw host banquet mid-vomit, toasting "To collaterals!" Ampere Imelda's vulgarity for comic relief; Beatrice's poise as anti-parasite. Revise for mythic chill: worms as witnesses, slithering from bones to applaud. Perfect pivot to collapse—power digested democratically.)

1931: The Room at Noon

1. Notes for myself

To write from below, not from pity but from precision. To see what she sees when she notices me. The difficulty: I shall always be observed through mirrors polished by someone else. Yet imagine her gaze as the truer instrument. She dusts the room; she therefore holds dominion over its reality.

2. The Room Speaks First

It is nearly noon. The bell in the hallway has been rung too soon again—she always misjudges how long it takes me to lace my shoes. The mistress sits upstairs with that heavy German typewriter, writing her impossible crimes. It makes a noise like distant rain, yet the pattern is orderly. Even while scrubbing the stair edges, one can hear when her sentences find themselves.

The house smells of yellow roses and carbon paper. Sometimes I think she keeps both only to remind herself that beauty and repetition can coincide.

3. The Maid's View

She calls me Marian, though that is not my name. I have never corrected her; she says "Marian" as one might speak of furniture—fondly but in passing—and it would seem impolite to disturb her knowledge. What would she write of me? She once said servants make excellent motives for murder because no one knows them well enough to prove them innocent. A kindness, I think, to be unprovably innocent.

From the kitchen, I can see the square beyond the window where the carriages pass. The mistress sits at her little desk just there, back to the light, her shoulders like twin interrogations. She wears velvet on weekday mornings as though the sun might forget her importance. When she writes, her mouth moves slightly; she seems to taste her own imagination before letting it settle.

Sometimes she calls me in for tea, meaning not to share but to have the cup refilled. Once, after returning from a publisher's breakfast, she said, "It is very strange, Marian: one writes about murder, and then one finds one's neighbours desiring to treat one carefully". Then she laughed—not happily. I felt sorry for her, though I wasn't certain why.

4. The Writer Interrupts

(handwritten in margin)

Curious prompt: that she pities me but I pity her. My danger is the romantic inversion—merely trading our griefs for posture. But perhaps empathy requires trespass; one steals a life to imagine it properly. That is crime enough.

5. Afternoon—The Maid Again

The mistress lies on her divan, thinking of plots. She looks ill with comfort. I polish the glass cabinet where her first books are arranged spine-out like trophies of a charitable hunt. She once told me she began

writing to avoid sewing circles, "since it is better to invent murders than endure them".

When the wind blows through the window cracks one can hear the gulls. She never notices the sound—it belongs to the servants of the air. She notices small things only when they can become metaphors.

She writes novels full of secrets but guards none of her own; that is what puzzles me. Her diary is unlocked, her jewels unhidden, her letters spread like bait. I suspect she relies on us to preserve what she cannot. We become her conscience through mere discretion.

6. The Writer Shifts Perspective Again

Could a life be lived more imaginatively from below than above? Perhaps Marian's gaze defines me more completely than my own narrative can. Servants know everything except how it feels to be noticed. Their virtue is invisibility; their crime, perspective.

The experiment unsettles me. If she saw herself as I see her—pressing a thumb against the dust on my silver frame, testing whether wealth flakes or smears—she would understand that intimacy always begins in contempt. To admire someone, one must first wish they were cleaner.

7. Evening in the Kitchen

The mistress's guests have departed with their cigarettes and their compliments. She writes still, tapping, pausing, tapping again. I wash the china, and the sound of her typing climbs the stairs like an echo with its boots on.

I wonder what crime she will end with tonight. The women in her books die quickly; the men apologise too late. She likes symmetry—two deaths to resolve one misunderstanding. In real life, I think deaths are sequels to boredom rather than betrayal.

She asked me once, "Do you believe in motive, Marian?" I said I believed in tiredness. She laughed. I think she thought it wit. I meant it as mercy.

8. The Writer's Final Reflection

(typed)

Strange discovery: when I lend my vision to her, I see myself most clearly. The imagination reverses the social mirror. I occupy her so completely that my voice dissolves; and in that dissolution I feel free.

What astonishes me is not how the poor view the rich, but how little the rich can bear to view themselves except through the poor. It is not guilt—it is an exhaustion of originality. They are borrowers of authenticity, scavengers of experience. Even as I write her, she writes

me with her patience, her practical eyes, her fatigue. Between us there grows a silence shaped like understanding, brittle but exact.

All writing is impersonation, and impersonation is theft. Yet perhaps theft, when disinterested, is a kind of worship. Marian's gaze redeems me from comfort. The crime, then, is not in imagining her: it is in imagining her imperfectly.

If I complete this piece, I shall dedicate it to her—not by name (names are ownership), but as one dedicates a glass of water to its reflection.

9. Pencil Note—end of draft

Title uncertain. The Room at Noon? Or The Polishing of Mirrors?

Must remember that the moral is not empathy, but trespass acknowledged. The writer's act of understanding another mind is indistinguishable from theft—and yet, without theft, nothing would ever be truly known.

1932: Euphemia Mallard

Private papers

A cable from England this morning brought joyful news amid the summer heat: my two dear nieces, Octavia and Gloriana, have arrived safely in Sydney after their long voyage from Southampton. Octavia, ever the brilliant one, wastes no time—she steps ashore with a tenured position already secured in linguistics at Sydney University, no less, where the faculty must be thrilled to have such a young scholar from the old country, versed in philology and the tongues of antiquity. At twenty-five, with her Oxford first and that formidable command of Sanskrit and Anglo-Saxon, she shall turn heads in those sandstone halls; I can picture her now, lecturing on inflectional decay to wide-eyed colonial students, bridging the gap between Beowulf and the bush ballads.

Gloriana, her junior by six years, trails in her wake with that dreamy air, all ringlets and watercolours, whispering of a likely marriage before the year is out—to that steady young grazier from the Hunter Valley, I suspect, whose family estates promise stability if not quite the grandeur of our English kin. She writes of the ship's romance, dances under southern stars, and the thrill of suitors unfettered by debutante seasons or chaperones. How they shall contrast, these sisters: one dissecting dead languages in academia, the other perhaps soon presiding over a homestead nursery.

They will find differences aplenty, poor lambs—the raw glare of this antipodean sun against Bloomsbury's fogs, the informality of servants who chat like equals, the vast empty spaces where one might ride for hours without a hedgerow in sight, and the queer cadence of Australian English, all vowels stretched like eucalyptus taffy. No tea-gowns at five, but cold chablis on verandas; no house-parties with charades, but picnics amid the waratahs. Yet I am sure they will settle in, as I did these fifteen years past—the air invigorates, the distances liberate, and soon the harbour's sparkle will weave its spell. Octavia's intellect will flourish in this young university's ferment; Gloriana's bloom will draw admirers like bees to banksia.

Note to self: Write forthwith—assure Elspeth the girls are in safe hands, the climate salubrious (save for the flies), and Sydney society quite civilised enough for gentlewomen. Enclose a cheque for household settling-in, and mention the church picnic on Sunday. Post by airmail, lest she fret.

1931: The Sanity Bureau

Prefatory Note to Self

If the concept of madness alters with every century, then to police it is to chase a ghost down a corridor of new wallpaper. Each generation hangs its own pattern. What interests me here is the decorum of the pursuit: how the institutions swagger about, pretending to be centuries old when they are merely yesterday's panic made permanent.

1. The Foundation of the Bureau

At exactly eleven o'clock on a fog-wet Monday, the Government erected a new department: The Bureau for Mental Rectitude.

Its circulars, typewritten on cautious grey paper, began with the line, "Whereas the public mind has grown unmanageable". No one could argue with that; the papers said so daily. Its purpose, as the Permanent Secretary explained to a roomful of journalists with the humble benevolence peculiar to Englishmen with unrestricted power, was not to interfere with healthy thought, merely to classify deviations "for their own protection and ours".

Classify them? The Secretary smiled. "Naturally. Any idea that breaks into public disorder must be restored to a private condition".

One reporter asked whether this meant everyone with new opinions would be arrested. The Secretary—Sir Hubert Clyne, M.A., D.Sc. (Psych.)—laughed amiably. "My dear fellow, that would be impractical. We shall simply register them".

2. The Registration of Lunacy

Under the new scheme, all citizens were required to complete an Annual Certificate of Reasonableness.

The forms asked, among other things:

- How frequently do you distrust official statements?
- Do you hear voices other than those heard by your neighbours?
- Have you recently doubted the superiority of the English climate or Constitution?
- Do you write poetry?

The analysis of returns was entrusted to a committee of psychiatrists, theologians, and retired colonels. As one of them remarked while tallying the forms, "You can't expect sanity to maintain itself without administrative support".

Within three months, twenty thousand citizens had been declared Conceptually Unsafe. The phrase meant nothing in law but everything in practice. It was the perfect British invention—condemnation disguised as paperwork.

3. The Inspectors of the Mind

The next logical step was an executive branch. Inspectors were sent out to perform "Routine Rationality Audits". They travelled in pairs, wore soft hats, and carried leather notebooks embossed with the Crown. They visited schools, offices, and tearooms; they asked courteous unanswerable questions. "How do you feel about reality this morning, Miss Jones?" "Do you believe time exists, Mrs. Caddington?" "For what length of periods have you been certain?"

The answers, written down in triplicate, were rarely read. The inspectors' true purpose was reassurance; their reports demonstrated that madness was under control. Control of what? No one knew exactly, but the sight of a state official measuring the public imagination seemed to comfort the anxious inheritance of an empire uncertain of its own sanity.

4. Public Reaction

The newspapers applauded. Editorials praised the Bureau's "progressive humanitarianism". One enthused:

"History has shown that uncontrolled minds lead to unrest, and unrest to reform. Prevention is thus the highest form of charity".

In Parliament, only one dissenting voice was heard—Mr. T. C. Snipe, Independent Member for Dovercourt—who observed that since sanity was a social agreement, the Bureau must be both umpire and player in

its own game. He was later sectioned for "Repetitive Cynicism", a newly coined sub-disorder.

5. The Patients' Union

Inevitably, the Conceptually Unsafe formed a political party of their own. They called it The Reasonable Alternative. Their motto: "If madness is contagious, so is obedience". They held meetings in disused chapels, arguing late into the night whether they were sane pretending madness or mad pretending sanity. The distinction dissolved in laughter —a symptom the Bureau soon forbade.

Sir Hubert devised a pamphlet explaining the danger:

"Laughter suggests superiority of perception. Since no citizen can be saner than his government, the act is inherently subversive".

6. Observations from Within

(Written in margin of draft)

Here lies the core of the satire: if "madness" must be policed, the definition of madness will always alter to justify the policing. Madness becomes an administrative event, not a medical one. The asylum thus evolves into a civic convenience—half prison, half parlour.

7. The Inspector's Dilemma

Inspector Rawlings, who had classified eighty-three cases of "Excessive Solitary Reflection" in the previous quarter, began to suffer professional unease. He dreamt that his own thoughts were under investigation. Each morning he wrote reports of reports, assessing the probability that he himself might deviate.

One day, while taking tea at the Bureau's canteen, he remarked to his colleague, "It occurs to me that if madness is only a concept, then our work is conjuring shadows."

His colleague blinked. "Best not say that aloud."

"Why?"

"Because that's one of the questions on the Certificate".

By the end of the week, Rawlings was redeployed to the Ministry of Culture—a quieter type of asylum.

8. The Madwoman of Surrey

Amid these bureaucratic parades lived Mrs. Annabel Quine, a novelist of moderate reputation, who had committed no crime except thinking extravagantly. Her novels, charged with violence and female logic, disturbed reviewers who preferred sentiment to experiment.

An Inspector called upon her after an anonymous complaint from the local Reading Circle, who claimed her recent book The Lavish

Knife was “unsound in aspect, unsympathetic in characterisation, and uncooperative with the moral sense”.

When interrogated, Mrs. Quine asked brightly, “Tell me, good man, have you come to arrest the idea of imagination?”

The Inspector wrote: Subject exhibits semantic evasion.

She added, “If sanity alters with each generation, then to police it you must arrest the century itself.”

He noted: Philosophical grandiosity. Prognosis: chronic.

By evening, Mrs. Quine had been removed to the Bureau’s garden hospital, where she was encouraged to do embroidery and forget the nature of thought.

9. The Great Review of 1931

After a year of energetic confinement, the Bureau compiled its first Annual Report on National Sanity. It concluded that the general population was “90% administratively sound”. The remaining 10% were said to be “under treatment or gainful employment”. It was widely considered a success. Stock prices rose.

A congratulatory luncheon was held at the Savoy, attended by ministers, bishops, and psychologists. Sir Hubert delivered an address entitled “The Future of Mental Normality as a British Export”. He proposed that other nations adopt our system; after all, empire was built upon the reliable transference of definitions.

10. Epilogue—The Collapse of the Bureau

Progress devoured its parent. Within five years, advances in psychiatry required new classifications; the Bureau found itself an anachronism. The same professors who had called for confinement now demanded “outpatient re-integration”. Madness, they explained, was not aberration but maladaptation. The government, never slow to moralise anew, redefined “Fiscal Anxiety” as a disease of the unemployed and transferred the Bureau to the Treasury.

Sir Hubert retired, writing a book entitled Beyond Madness: The Next Frontier of Correction, in which he confessed, half-proudly, that sanity had been “an enjoyable hypothesis”.

11. Notes by the Author in the Margin

- The story must sting without preaching.
- Madness, once treated as witchcraft, then pathology, is now paperwork.
- To police a concept is to perpetuate it; abolish the police, and the concept starves.

- Question to leave the reader: if the idea of madness is invented to defend normality, then who guards the definition of normal?

12. Provisional Ending

That evening, as Mrs. Quine stood at her hospital window, the moon resembled a single unblinking eye—perhaps Nature's own Bureau. The nurses were kind, the tea warm, the rules clear. Across the garden wall, an Inspector paused, uneasy, and wondered, briefly, whether he was being watched by the concept itself.

1932: Euphemia

Private papers

The trunk has finally arrived. Sydney's docks being what they are, a positive carnival of stevedores and sunburnt customs men peering into every cranny as if expecting contraband tea-leaves or worse, I half-expected the thing to be rifled for family secrets or merely the scent of home. But no, the girls shepherded it intact and here it sits now, rather inconveniently wedged beneath the high window in the Library, where the afternoon light slants across its lid like a searchlight on some improbable suspect.

I must confess, unpacking was a ceremony deferred; the position suits it oddly well, turning the room into a stage-set for one of my little narratives. Yesterday, as the sun dipped and threw those long golden bars across the floorboards—our colonial timbers, so candidly free of the patina that cloaks English floors in respectable deceit—I fancied, quite without cause or corroboration, that the lid had shifted ever so slightly from where I left it. A mere trick of the light, no doubt. Yet it lent the scene such a delicious shiver of the illicit, as if the trunk itself were breathing secrets through its brass-bound seams, whispering of fog-bound London streets and the rustle of suspects in the shrubbery. One could almost hear the faint creak of narrative machinery stirring beneath.

It makes me feel quite at home, this improbable sentinel in my sun-struck sanctum—home being, after all, less a place than a persistent illusion of familiarity amid the chaos—though if it does shift again, I shall have a chapter from it.

1932: Madness In Season

Prefatory note:
If one wishes to study hereditary madness, it is unnecessary to consult asylum registers. A family is quite sufficient. In my own, the symptoms follow the calendar as neatly as migratory birds. We are, I suppose, a northern species of lunatic waterfowl—congregating, flapping, quarrelling, and setting off again with impeccable domestic grievance.

I. SPRING—The Mating Display

By March the household begins its annual disturbance of affection. Mother emerges from her bedroom, pale but uplifted, declaring her intention to marry again "for stability". This is alarming, for stability has already cost us three stepfathers and a perfectly good gardener. She maintains that love is restorative, like cod-liver oil, and must be taken regularly to preserve her complexion.

Cousin Lionel arrives from Oxford in a condition of aesthetic despondency, having written a manifesto on "The Futility of Intellect" which the Spectator declined. He spends mornings describing the moral collapse of Western civilisation and afternoons attempting to seduce the housemaid on moral grounds.

Father, whose madness is of the migratory type, reappears after a winter in Menton. He insists on restoring the family finances by buying geese. "Ducks", Mother corrects him automatically, though neither of them can tell the difference.

It is the period of frantic quacking; the whole house fills with theories, suitors, feathers, and poetry. One cannot distinguish conversation from courtship. Each of us, in our way, performs the elaborate dance of pretended sanity: flapping reason like wings of decorum.

(Marginalia in pencil:)
Must remember to heighten imagery—family as pond, society as breeding ground, normality as waterline.

II. SUMMER—The Bathing Season of Delusions

By early June, the madness ripens into what a physician might call sanguine mania, though we describe it politely as "high spirits". My sister Daphne paints portraits of everyone as Greek gods; I appear as Nemesis, a flattering improvement. Grandmama, long presumed deaf, announces she can hear birds gossiping about her. Uncle Jasper experiments with vegetarianism and clairvoyance, claiming that cucumbers transmit the weather.

The garden resembles a sanatorium designed by a theatrical producer—everyone in pale linen and conviction. Guests arrive for weekends and never leave, confusing one anarchy for another. Whole conversations occur in metaphor: we discuss the stock market in emotional terms and mental instability in horticultural ones.

One evening, over gooseberry fool, Mother proclaims that the true sign of civilisation is the "capacity for improved breakdowns". We agree instantly. Our lunacy grows ever more sophisticated, expressed through wit rather than restraint.

(Typed note to self:)
Important: laughter here is the family's defence mechanism. Quack when cornered.

III. AUTUMN—The Molting of Relations

With October comes introspection, which in our case takes the form of refined animosity. We quarrel—beautifully, almost artistically. Father accuses Lionel of being "a socialist in silk pyjamas". Lionel retaliates by diagnosing Father with what he calls "bourgeois melancholia of the glands". They both feel improved.

The ducks (literal and figurative) grow restless. The real ones wander into the drawing room one afternoon during tea, which causes no more alarm than a neighbour's engagement. Mother calls it "symbolic migration". Daphne claims it is the arrival of spirits. Grandmama sends for the rector to baptise the carpet.

I write secretly in my study, observing that everyone's reason peels like paint under weather. The tragedy is that each of us believes our own madness to be the sensible variety. We speak of "stability" the way drunks speak of water—abstractly, even disdainfully.

(Note in green ink:)
Tone for this section—amused despair, like a hostess discovering her party has become historical.

IV. WINTER—Hibernation and Other Self-Deceptions

By December, the domestic pond has frozen to thin civility. The family retreats indoors with books on self-improvement and bottles of cooking sherry. Our madness becomes inward, neat, and almost fashionable.

Mother begins psychoanalysis by correspondence with a man in Zurich (the foreign stamp being curative). She reports "considerable progress", which means she has learnt new excuses. Lionel joins a political circle dedicated to abolishing breakfast. Daphne takes up religion, paint, and an unsuitable clergyman, in that order. I work on a novel about hereditary respectability as a crime of passion.

Christmas passes, appropriately, like an inquest. There is talk of guilt; we wrap it in ribbons. The house, cluttered with wax fruits and self-pity, resembles an asylum decorated by Harrods. Father declares he will sail to the Continent “to seek economic serenity”. None of us find this odd—he always confuses exile with peace.

And yet—amid all this—there is love of a kind. The ducks, indifferent to doctrine, survive the frost magnificently, paddling on the half-frozen lawn. They have mastered what we cannot: the art of floating on impossibility.

V. Epilogue—Perpetual Migration

A visitor once said our household was “slightly mad”. Slightly! As though lunacy, like temperature, could be moderated by polite conversation and central heating. I told him severity was the only safeguard against mediocrity. He looked at me oddly and asked if I had “sought help”. I said yes, frequently, but all helpers were too far gone to be useful.

The truth is we adore our derangements. They are seasonal, decorative, and practically hereditary—our one undeniable tradition. Society reads us as eccentric; it does not see that eccentricity is only class’s way of patenting madness before the asylum gets it.

When spring returns, as it inevitably does, we shall flap back to each other—feathered, foolish, triumphant—crying out with the sacred conviction that this year we shall behave normally. We never do. The pond refills, the ducks resume their committees, and madness prepares its annual plumage.

(Final note to self, typed):

End by insisting that the family, however ridiculous, remains saner than civilisation at large. If the world ever grows sensible, we shall be extinct.

1932: Euphemia Mallard

Private papers

Today the newspapers bring astonishing news from England: for the very first time, the Court of Appeals has quashed a jury's verdict of guilty in a murder case. They say this rare and remarkable act arose from the conclusion that the jury's decision was "unreasonable" and unsupported by the evidence. The defendant in question, William Herbert Wallace, convicted for the murder of his wife in Liverpool only last year, has now seen his conviction overturned. This bold judicial decision has set a new precedent, indeed the first in British legal

annals, where a higher court overruled a jury's finding not merely on procedural errors but for factual insufficiency as well.

I find myself both curious and intrigued by this development. If the appellate court has assumed this power, then the entire edifice of criminal conviction is subtly shifted; no longer can the jury's verdict be considered inviolate if the evidence falls short of proof. Could this signal the beginning of a new era of justice, one in which miscarriages might be more readily corrected? Or is this a dangerous encroachment upon the ancient right of the jury to be judges of fact?

For me, as a writer of crime, the implications run deep. Here is a story richer and more complex than any facile "whodunit." How might I weave such a struggle between jurors, evidence, and appellate judges into my own yarns? My new mystery “Final Drops”, in which the prosecution’s case teeters on suspicion rather than certainty, could gain much from the dramatisation of this legal evolution. The tension between the jury's verdict and the higher court's daring intervention—this could provide a compelling backbone to the plot, heightening suspense and challenging readers’ assumptions about justice and truth.

Moreover, the humanity of Wallace’s case—the silent questioning of doubt amid apparent certainty—lends itself well to exploring the fallibility of human judgment and the fragile nature of evidence. In a world increasingly aware of error and innocence lost, this story could touch upon the themes of doubt and redemption, and the delicate balance between law and moral certainty.

I resolve to study this case with care and reflect deeply on its possibilities. The law’s power to upend verdicts introduces a thrilling new dimension to crime writing, one closer to the lived reality of justice than ever before.

1932: Euphemia Mallard

Private papers

I find myself pondering a fundamental paradox: without mothers, there would be no lineages at all, no noble houses or ducal lines to trace back through the mists of time. Yet women, those very conduits of blood and birth, are deemed not important enough to be considered the true carriers of lineage. Patrilineal folly, I suppose—fathers claim the glory, while mothers bear the burden in silence, their names fading like footnotes in a family Bible.

Bloodlines, however romanticised in the annals of aristocracy, are not nearly so important as powerlines: the invisible webs of control that govern property, which in turn includes people without significant

lineage. The great estates, the factories, the shipping concerns—they are the real inheritances, passed not by mere biology but by shrewd wills and ironclad trusts. A duke's daughter might wed a merchant's son, diluting the "pure" strain, but if she brings land or capital, who cares for the genealogy? In my mysteries, I have often toyed with this: the scheming heir who murders not for blood but for the deeds that bind servants, tenants, and labourers to the soil. Property is the true sovereign, and people—highborn or low—are but its chattels.

The monarchy stands as the most significant lineage in England, a glittering chain unbroken for centuries, yet without overt power they are no more use than a can-opener or a pair of scissors trotted out to cut a ribbon at some civic unveiling. Symbolic, ceremonial, impotent in the face of Parliament's writ or the City's ledgers—what good is a crown when real authority resides in Westminster or the boardroom? I wonder if the electric can-opener, that ingenious contraption just patented by Preston C. West in America last year, might do a better job at less expense. No royal flourish required, just a plug and a switch to slice through the tin—efficient, modern, democratic. Imagine the King wielding one at the next garden party; the headlines would write themselves.

This notion amuses me greatly as I plot my next tale. Perhaps a story where a faded noble house clings to bloodlines while their estates crumble, only for a self-made inventor—West-like, with his humming machine—to upend the order. Mothers overlooked, monarchs marginalised, power rerouted through wires and wheels. The real crime, after all, is not the poison in the cup but the neglect of those who sustain the line. I must scribble some notes before the heat drives me out for a walk.

1812: The Lady of the Ever-Shrinking Doors

From The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles

When Napoleon’s shadow stretched long across the Channel and the ton of London danced to divert itself from dread, there lived a lady of such transcendent beauty that she seemed spun from moonlight and myrrh. Her name was Elowen Vesper, and her face—ah, her face!—was a symphony of alabaster skin, eyes like violet twilight, and hair that cascaded in raven waves, catching the candlelight as if woven from the very threads of night. Gentlemen duelled for a glance; ladies wept into their reticules for want of her serenity; even the servants paused in their scrubbing to sigh. Crowds followed her through the gaslit streets of Mayfair, pressing posies and poems upon her carriage steps. At

Almack's, she was the voucher no patroness dared deny; at Vauxhall, fireworks burst in homage to her smile.

But beauty, like a surfeit of sweetmeats, palls. Elowen, once a girl of unremarkable prettiness from a crumbling Cornish manor—daughter of a parson who quoted Shelley over smuggled brandy—grew weary of the throng. "They devour me with their eyes", she confided to her mirror one fog-choked dawn, tracing the lines that adoration had etched faintly at her eyes' corners. "I am no longer myself, but a portrait they paint anew each morn". Fed up with the ceaseless adoration, she retreated to her grand house on Grosvenor Square, a labyrinth of gilt and gloom inherited from a seafaring uncle who had vanished in the Spice Islands.

She locked the front doors, bolted the shutters, and retreated to her withdrawing room, a chamber vast as a ballroom, hung with crimson damask and lit by a crystal chandelier that wept prisms like penitential tears. "Here I shall be alone", she declared, sinking into a chaise of peacock velvet. But no sooner had the clock tolled noon than the knocking began—soft at first, like lovers' sighs, then insistent as creditors' fists. Admirers, poets, even the Prince Regent's envoy, rapped upon the panels: "Lady Vesper! A sonnet! A dance! A glimpse!" Servants bore trays of offerings—lockets, sonatas, locks of hair dyed to match her own.

Distraught, Elowen fled deeper into the house, which seemed to unfold like a dream of diminishing realms. The next chamber was smaller: a salon of sapphire silk, unlockable only by a silver key hidden in a clock's pendulum. She turned it with trembling fingers, and the door sealed with a sigh, as if the wood itself conspired. Peace reigned for an hour, broken only by the patter of rain. But twilight brought the siege anew—knocks echoing like spectral fingers, voices murmuring through the keyhole: "Dearest Elowen, unveil thyself! Thy beauty starves the world!" The crowds had multiplied, drawn by rumour as moths to flame; they camped upon her steps, chanting odes beneath her windows.

On she pressed, into a dressing room no larger than a closet, its walls papered in silver leaf that shifted like quicksilver in the gloom. The door had no lock, but a latch of carved ivory—a maiden fleeing a dragon, frozen mid-leap. Elowen slid it home, barricading herself with a fallen screen of ebony and mother-of-pearl. Here, amid phials of attar and corsets unlaced, she tasted solitude: the tick of a hidden clock, the whisper of silk against stone. Yet midnight tolled, and the knocks resumed—louder, laced with desperation. "Elowen! Thy loveliness is our light! Emerge, or we perish in darkness!" The house groaned as if

burdened by their longing; shadows lengthened into claws upon the walls.

Dawn found her slipping through a concealed panel into a boudoir scarce bigger than a coffin, panelled in ebony inlaid with moonstone, unlockable by a key of bone that burned cold in her palm. "This must suffice", she gasped, turning the wards. The air grew thick with the scent of wilted roses—offerings pushed through chinks by relentless suitors. She curled upon a daybed of black velvet, dreaming of her youth: a girl of sixteen, plain as porridge, racing barefoot through Cornish gorse, her laughter free as gulls, unobserved save by the wind. No crowds then; no cages of admiration.

But the persistence was infernal. The knocks evolved into thunder—fists, boots, battering rams improvised from park benches. "Beauty! Show thyself! We adore thee unto death!" Cracks spidered the door; dust sifted from the cornice like grave-mould. Elowen rose, wild-eyed, and fled onward, through a mouse-hole disguised as wainscot, into the smallest room of all—a cell no wider than an arm's span, hewn from obsidian stone that drank the light. Its door, a slab of heart-oak veined with silver, locked with a key of frozen mercury that wept droplets like tears. She turned it, and the tumblers ground like millstones, sealing her in utter night.

In the chamber's heart stood a pedestal of porphyry, bearing the arcane trio: a silver bell etched with runes of summoning, a vellum book bound in dragon-scale, its pages whispering forbidden incantations, and a black taper crowned with eternal flame, guttering shadows into sigils of release. Beside them loomed a trunk of ancient yew, bound in iron sigils that pulsed like veins, its lid ajar as if breathing. Elowen knew their significance—relics from her uncle's voyages, tools of the old magic: bell to call spirits, book to bind them, candle to banish or birth. With these, she might summon a tempest to drown her pursuers, or weave a glamour to render herself invisible as air. "Power", murmured the book unbidden, its leaves rustling, "to unmake thy curse".

But Elowen, heartsick and harried, ignored the triad. Magic was for sorceresses and schemers; she craved only oblivion. The trunk beckoned, its interior a vortex of swirling mist, scented with sea-salt and heather—the breath of her lost youth. "Into thee", she whispered, climbing over the lip without a backward glance. The lid clapped shut like a lover's final kiss; the room spun into vertigo.

She awoke not in darkness, but in dawn's tentative gold, sprawled upon dew-kissed gorse in a Cornish meadow. The year was 1790; she was sixteen again—plain-faced, freckled, her hair a tousled mop of chestnut, her gown a homespun shift muddied at the hem. No crowds

shadowed her path; no knocks haunted her doors. The parsonage smoked lazily yonder, her father's voice droning Latin to empty pews. Gulls wheeled overhead, free and fierce; the wind tugged her skirts without adoration.

Elowen rose, laughing—a sound wild as the waves crashing below. She raced to the cliff-edge, arms outstretched, beauty shed like a too-tight corset. Far off, in the world she had fled, rumours swirled: the lady vanished into her mansion, swallowed by the shrinking rooms; the trunk in the final cell now empty, bell silent, book shut, candle snuffed. Admirers dispersed, weeping; the house crumbled into ivy-choked ruin, its doors forever locked upon enigma.

And in Cornwall, the plain girl lived unremarked, her heart vast as the sea, her days her own. For sometimes, to escape the cage of beauty, one must climb into the trunk of time itself—and emerge, at last, truly seen.

1932: Introduction to the Collected Edition: The Novels of Mr. E. Fenwick

Viola Vorpel

Let us dispense with the usual literary foreplay—the simpering tributes to "genius" and "timeless craft" that pad so many prefaces like antimacassars on a dowager's chaise. Mr. E. Fenwick—or "Uncle Fenny", as I call him in the privacy of my own drawing-room—requires no such frippery. His novels, here gathered in their first collected glory, are scalpels disguised as fans, fluttering I despise your pedigree at the very heart of our crumbling empire. Fenwick lives—thank God, or whoever engineers such miracles—ensconced in Sydney, penning fresh felonies under that splendid pseudonym which has fooled the lot of you into assuming a moustachioed misogynist. Delicious, isn't it? Women, you see, are still deemed incapable of true satire; we're expected to embroider it on samplers.

These volumes—from the epistolary ambushes of forged signatures to the worm-eaten mausoleums of ducal decay—dissect society as deftly as a French chef fillets a sole. Take Crimes of Courtesy, that anthology of daily misdemeanours where teaspoons vanish like inconvenient lovers and fans signal I hate you across soup tureens. Fenwick proves what I've long proclaimed: manners are England's grandest swindle, a criminal code binding us tighter than stays. Or The Full Colonel, where a hostess's innocent pun ("Be a very full one after dinner!") topples military pomposity like a house of cards built on blancmange. One laughs—oh, how one laughs—at the colonel's

mortification, yet beneath lurks the truth: our hierarchies are performances, darling, rehearsed in club armchairs and collapsing at the first unscripted quip. Society, Fenwick implies, is a dinner party where everyone steals the salt-cellar and calls it reciprocity.

Deeper still, in The Criminal Anthology of Courtesy—that unpublished gem now seeing print at last—he catalogues the exquisite deceits of bouquets and billets. Yellow roses for infidelity, dropped gloves for disdain: these are the felonies of the ton, bloodless yet lethal. I adore the chapter on parasols at Ascot, tapping You are ugly upon a rival's slipper; it reminds me of Ascot 1927, when I tapped my own at a certain marchioness who'd been poaching my milliner. Fenwick's genius lies in his restraint—no sermons, merely inventories of our idiocies. Primogeniture, that gaping maw in The Duke's Mausoleum, devours firstborn sons like canapés, fattening estates on wormy decay while collaterals starve. "Power decays not with a bang", he writes, "but with a genteel crumbling"—words that sent our family solicitors into paroxysms after Cousin Edward's funeral, though Fenwick merely smiled over the port.

And the romance! Amid Depression drabness, Fenwick titillates with gothic whimsy: beauties fleeing crowds into shrinking rooms, tumbling into time-trunks to emerge plain and plotting; St. Paul's whispering marital silences like a stone lover's curse. Women here are no simpering heroines but architects of anarchy—courtesans tugging thrones from boudoirs, housekeepers hoarding keys to bigamy trunks. I've always said culture belongs to those who wield the fan, not the fanfare; Fenwick proves it, smuggling feminist firecrackers past the gatekeepers. His Greenwich fable, where sexes fold into cosmic harmony ("It takes all types to wind the same clock"), skewers utopias while embracing chaos—a noble comedy indeed, as my uncle's publisher urged in '33.

Fenwick's world is ours, unvarnished: aristocracy rotting like ivy-cloaked mausoleums flogged for golf hazards; education stalled at classics while women chip barriers with teaspoons; Depression dinners where lamb is borrowed and apologies vintage. Yet satire elevates it—Wodehouse fizz laced with mythic chill, epistolary intrigue blooming into fairy-tale thorns. He writes as a man (ha!), yet his gaze is feminine: sharp on hypocrisies men blunder past, tender on small rebellions. Society, he shows, thrives on polite felonies; literature, on exposing them without spilling the soup.

These novels deserve your shelves—not dust-gatherers, but hand-grenades for the intellectually indolent. Fenwick endures in Sydney, drafting fresh outrages while we muddle through. Read him, and laugh—or better, plot. For as he notes in one billet-doux forgery: "Even your

correspondent is himself an invention". Who, then, is the true criminal? Darlings, we all are. And isn't that delicious?

1933: Letter from her publisher, London

To Euphemia Mallard

Delighted to report that your existing titles—those sly little volumes of criminal courtesy and domestic deceit—are enjoying a most unexpected resurgence. The circulating libraries, pinched by the slump, have dusted them off as economical alternatives to the usual whodunits, and sales are climbing steadily: The Borrowed Borrow up 40% in the provinces, Full Colonel reprinted twice since Easter. The bookshops murmur of a "vintage crime revival", crediting your arsenic-laced wit for lifting the national gloom. Even the Times Literary Supplement deigned a retrospective paragraph, calling you "the epistolary scourge of the tea-table".

I am keenly aware, of course, that pecuniary gain ranks low on your ledger—coverage, the true coinage, is what stirs your pen. And in this, too, the stars align: reviewers hungry for novelty have begun sniffing about your backlist, with hints of serialisation in the Strand or Nash's. The Depression-weary public craves not mere escape, but the sharp tickle of satire—a reminder that their betters are as bankrupt in manners as in fortunes. Your timing, as ever, uncanny.

Might this not be the moment, then, to unleash something more explosive? A criminal satire with romantic fangs—to titillate the tired, rouse the jaded from their bread-line reveries. Picture it: another noble comedy, perhaps, laced with your signature venom. A ducal line crumbling under primogeniture's parasitic jaws (echoes of poor Cousin Edward's obsequies?); or courtesans fluttering fans of I despise your throne at threadbare peers; even a fairy-tale inversion where beauty flees into trunks of time, emerging plain and plotting. Infuse it with romance—not the simpering sort, but a gothic entanglement of whispers in shrinking rooms, forged signatures sealing forbidden passions, or a royal favouritism veiling murderous implication. The public, starved for scandal sans soup-kitchens, would devour it; the Palace solicitors might even stir, ensuring headlines.

We could package it boldly: explosive dust-jacket (gold-embossed maw, perhaps?), serial rights to the Express, and a tour of the northern towns where factory gloom begs your particular brand of aristocratic arsenic. No pressure, naturally—your drafts have always been feasts best savoured slowly—but the resurgence feels providential. Enclosed find statements and a cheque for recent royalties (modest, yet

climbing). Do send word, or better, pages. The world awaits its next polite felony.

1217: The Duck That Wouldn't Waddle

From The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles

There once was a pond on the estate of Lord Aylmer of Belmarsh, whose grounds lay wide and gloomy under the grey skirts of the Chiltern Hills. The estate was noble, the family less so, and the pond—well, the pond was older than both. No one knew what filled it: rain, tears, or the seepage of forgotten things. But it mirrored the moon faithfully, which everyone agreed was a suspicious habit for water.

In that pond lived a duck of singular disposition. He would not waddle. Not for grain, not for gossip, and certainly not for God. His name, as reported by the gardener's boy who claimed to have heard it whispered by the reeds, was Branfoot. He swam all day and all night, carving circles in the mirrored surface until the whole pond seemed a spinning coin between heaven and the bog.

"Why does he never step ashore?" asked the cook's daughter, wringing her apron.

"Because", said the old groundskeeper, "his feet are promised elsewhere".

No one understood what he meant, which was just as well.

Lord Aylmer was a man much given to improvement. He drained the marshes (they refused), straightened the stream (it curved again by morning), and planted a formal garden which grew only cabbages, no matter what was sown. The tenants said the land remembered who had bled on it and had opinions accordingly. Lord Aylmer refused to listen to peasants or ponds.

"Nature", he declared, "is a servant, not a voice."

"Then she's a servant who talks back", muttered the butler, and would have been dismissed had the house not already been emptying itself of staff through less voluntary means.

Of late, those who strayed by the pond after dark reported hearing slapping sounds—not the ordinary, genteel plop of waterfowl, but a rhythmic endurance of splashing, tireless and patient. Branfoot swam circles still, moon after moon, through frost and thunder, through christenings and funerals, as if the world beyond the water had been annulled.

One bitter December night, when the fog hung like cold wool on the hedgerows, the stable-boy saw movement on the pond: a phantom brightness under the surface. It glowed faint and green, like old coins or

church glass. In it, he said, he saw eyes—not reflecting, but remembering. The duck glided round and round, his feathers clinging wetly to his breast.

When dawn came, winter bit harder. The pond froze halfway out, yet Branfoot swam in the centre where the ice would not form. The boy, bold with curiosity and hunger for tale-telling, crept close. There he saw that the duck's feet no longer looked like proper feet at all but darkened stubs, as though the pond were eating him an inch at a time.

By Candlemas, his legs had vanished altogether.

The villagers held council by the fire of the Crown and Lute Inn. Some said he had been cursed for pride—refusing the law of earth that ordains every creature must come ashore sometime or other. Others said he was a messenger from the deep fountain beneath the hill, where no water runs clear. The widow Ferris said he was her late husband reincarnate, "and serves him right for never coming home".

Whatever the case, the pond thickened with unease. Dogs wouldn't drink there; even the gnats seemed to hover respectfully, as if afraid of being dissolved.

On the sixteenth day of Lent, with the first tentative thaw of the year, Branfoot swam slower, spiralling inward. Witnesses later argued whether the circle he traced was perfect. Some saw devotion; others decay.

He drifted to the middle, where no reflections showed, and there—so the housekeeper swore—he raised his head once, opened his beak as if to quack a sermon, and slipped under.

No splash. No ring of ripples. Only the faintest sigh of mud accepting an argument already lost.

When the pond was dragged (for Lord Aylmer tolerated no mysteries near his estate), they found nothing: no feathers, no bones, no duck. Only, in the drag-net, a clump of webbed skin like black lace, and an object which the steward insisted was no more than a stone, though it beat faintly, like a heart that had forgotten its use.

In the summer of that same year—1217, when the land at last lay quiet after many treaty-signings and hangings—the estate's new master dined by the pond, having been assured the curse (if any) was settled. But the servants whispered that, when the wind paused, one could still hear a ghostly paddling beneath the lilies.

Children born in Belmarsh after midsummer were said to come into the world with webbed toes. The midwives bound them tightly and recited the Psalm of Unbinding, lest they too forget how to walk upon the earth.

And still, the pond remains; even now the reeds stir when there is no breeze. Those who linger near it swear that something unseen turns

slowly beneath the surface, a steady circling motion, endless as regret. For the duck that would not waddle learned too late that the waters claimed what they cherished, and feet made for earth must one day rest upon it.

1933: On goodness

Euphemia Mallard, Private papers

This morning I nearly tripped over the word "good". It caught round the ankle like a wire in the grass—one of those invisible snares society calls "virtue". I have come to dislike the word profoundly, though it is not its fault. Like all useful terms, it has been consecrated, embalmed, and misplaced. Every age patrols its meanings as border guards patrol their frontiers—and yet all definitions, even the noblest, are traps. Not merely moral ones; even logical ones entangle thought. Once you define a thing, you must defend it, and once you begin defending, you become priestly, possessive, and therefore stupid.

People speak as though there were clean distinctions—between law and crime, sin and decency, honesty and cunning. But in living, these lines blur. The only consistent feature of any moral system seems to be its self-advertisement. The truly "good" are those who can afford not to notice their definition at all.

Lately I have been thinking about the delightful absurdity of that fashionable claim that criminals form better societies than moralists. The French Surrealists argue something like it; so do the journalists who lunch near the Inns of Court and gossip about judges. On its surface, the idea flatters every cowardly impulse. It invites one to think rebellion synonymous with freedom. Yet the phrase collapses at inspection. "Better" admits preference, "societies" admits compromise, and then the whole notion reeks of construction and authority again. We are back to moralists, only armed now with cocktails and irony.

It is only true that criminals form better societies if we agree that the word "criminal" means an impertinence against society itself—not theft or murder, but disobedience of definition. To refuse categorisation is, in that sense, the highest crime. The moralist wants peace through order; the criminal wants peace through indifference. Both are impossible, but the latter is less hypocritical about it.

So moralists, examined closely, are the true criminals—not because they disobey their rules, but because they impose them. Defining "good" is a seizure of territory, as strategic as building a fortress. Every missionary, critic, philanthropist, and self-improving novelist has wielded "good" like an axe upon the softer matter of other people's

habits. They form "better" societies, yes, but only for themselves and for those clever enough to counterfeit obedience. What of others—the vagabonds, the dreamers, the socially unmanageable? Surely their societies, however untidy, are more satisfactory to their own kind.

I think what unsettles me most about moralism is not the smugness of its principles but the poverty of its imagination. It cannot conceive pleasure without permission. Every human sweetness becomes a concession, every impulse decorated with apology. One might almost forgive crime for its creativity—at least it moves, invents, and risks time on colour. Morality never risks anything; it insures itself in perpetuity.

If I were ever ridiculous enough to found a creed, it would say something like this: All definitions are traps, therefore all civilisation is a series of elegantly arranged cages. The honest mind decorates its bars, the dishonest one pretends the air is free.

It's an interesting heresy for a crime writer: that wickedness should be regarded less as deviation than as methodical protest against being catalogued. Perhaps all detectives and murderers share the same yearning—to redefine the pattern of events, to draw new maps of necessity. Perhaps that is why I find crime such fertile ground: it is ethics acted out without the armour of moral pieties.

Society, I realise, can never exist without these traps; indeed, it is made of them. But an individual may at least know where the snares are set. The only freedom is knowing freedom does not exist.

My conclusion, before the teapot runs dry, is this: it is not goodness that corrupts, nor crime that redeems, but definition itself that kills the living texture of sense. Every category becomes tyranny once it hardens. The moralists—with their restless compulsion to label what they love and legislate what they fear—have merely hidden their criminality behind correct handwriting and breakfast prayers.

Better, then, to be politely impertinent: to live as a definitional vagabond among the obedient.

The postman has arrived, and no doubt my publisher will have something "helpful" to say about the "moral clarity" of my new detective. I think I shall rewrite her as a liar, if only to save her from sainthood.

1933: Made for Murder

(From Euphemia Mallard's Draft Notes and Early Scenes)

It is, of course, a bad sign when a servant begins reading one's private correspondence, but what is worse—far worse—is when that correspondence is misread. The English class system can bear any

number of infidelities and small larcenies, but it quails before misinterpretation.

The business began in the most ordinary way: a novelist of fragile distinction (the kind reviewers call "promising for forty") settling into her rented Georgian folly near Staplehurst to finish her next book. She prided herself on being practical—even ruthless—with staff. Her notion of intimacy was to call them by the wrong Christian names while explaining to guests that she "liked to think of them as family".

Enter the maid, Nellie Blore—country-born, brilliant at starch, hopeless with human conversation. She had eyes like unpolished pewter and that glacial self-respect peculiar to those who have never been laughed with, only at.

AUTHOR'S NOTE (typed later in margin)

Nellie's tragedy must be treated lightly—not Greek-lightly but English-lightly: that is, the whole household finds murder slightly embarrassing, like an ill-timed sneeze at luncheon.

I. Tuesday Luncheon at Mistmere Lodge

Lydia Dorsett (our authoress) had been reading proofs in bed when she found herself struck—as she often was—by a phrase of her own. "The unhinged maid, seeing insult where there was only description, fled the scene of her mistress's genius".

It pleased her to make a note of that. Later it would fit nicely into Marginal Characters, her imagined third chapter. She wrote it, underlined unhinged, and went down to luncheon humming "Let's Do It" in a mood of triumphant banality.

Unfortunately for Lydia, her notebook did not remain private. Nellie, polishing the bedpost, was affronted into discovery. Those words, "the unhinged maid", appeared to her not merely unkind but destructive of reputation. The "maid" must, she reasoned, mean herself. There was no other in the house, save the lamentably theological cook and a one-eyed butler who only cleaned decanters. Nellie read on.

"The matter of family honour—such a tiresome invention. How wretched to have one's loyalty depend on what one's grandmother didn't do".

This struck at the heart. For Nellie's grandmother had, according to Kent gossip, conducted a daring moral experiment with a Nonconformist minister. The entry thus appeared a settled cruelty: her mistress had somehow found her out.

Dorsett's Draft Letter (never sent)

To Mr. MacWhittle, Publisher.

I feel Made for Murder should not be a straightforward "whodunit" but rather a comedy of errors in which everyone knows, long before

the end, except the one who ought. Murder by misinterpretation, if you will—horribly symmetrical.

II. Delusions Below-Stairs

The Lodge's servants' hall had not seen such excitement since the cook's near-fatal tryst with the grocer. The maid withdrew into near-silence, cleaning with theological intensity. The butler, scenting melodrama, assured her that "mistresses always write sausage about one—that's how they stay idle".

But Nellie cultivated an inward martyrdom. She began to compose speeches she would never deliver, dramatic confessions no one would interrupt, justifications delivered to a tearful coroner. She pictured herself as the tragic avenger of family honour, the last uncorrupted soul in a house of ironic laughter.

When the mistress began her new manuscript—Made for Murder (working title: Fingers in the Inkpot)—Nellie became both audience and author. She dusted the desk upon which imaginary crimes were plotted and grew hourly convinced that one of them must inevitably become real.

III. The Party at Mistmere

The fatal night was not so much a party as a kind of social plea for relevance. Lydia Dorsett, midway between fashion and forgettability, meant to prove she was "still frightfully in touch". There were six guests: two poets (one inevitable), a minor Viscount in search of an income, a chipped actress, a man who claimed to be an art critic, and Cousin Babs, who drank for England.

"She writes frightfully modern things", murmured the actress.
"About servants, dear. And murders", said Cousin Babs. "Though never quite the decent sort of murder one remembers from good detective fiction".

In the pantry, Nellie heard that exchange as prophecy.

AUTHOR'S NOTE (typed on yellow paper)

Need to make the reader realise: Lydia's diary is the true murder weapon. The pen—her chosen instrument—becomes the knife. But not symbolic! Dreadful temptation toward allegory. Must mock allegory before readers can weep.

IV. The Crime

Sometime after midnight, in the windless house, Lydia Dorsett died of iron candlestick trauma, an outcome gravely admired by the coroner for its tidy precision. The medical report suggested not rage but deliberate correctness: one blow, perfectly placed, neither too little nor

too much. One could imagine Nellie, warned silently by the ghosts of propriety, straightening the corpse's collar after.

The diary lay open on the writing desk, blood-spot on the phrase: "Unhinged". One might say Lydia's irony had finally ironed herself out.

V. The Commentary Thereafter

At the inquest the poets claimed Lydia "tempered genius with charm"; the Viscount nodded sagely, as though both were vices. Cousin Babs wept gin-scented tears. The press adored it. The Maid of Honour Murder! ran the headlines. Independence readers wrote endlessly to deplore the rise of crime among the lower orders, though secretly cheering the symbolism.

Nellie herself spoke almost not at all. In her confession (dictated, naturally, to the prison chaplain) she said only:

"I would not have touched her if she had meant what she wrote. But I saw the truth—I saw myself in her pages—and the truth has never been kind".

(Later annotation, in pencil, by author)
Perhaps too solemn. Must give whole more sparkle—scene where the guests discuss whether murder improves reputation. Maybe add ironic ending: publisher insists on calling it "light Christmas fare".

End fragment (Dictated from Elettra Hotel, Florence, December 1933)

"I shall call it Made for Murder. It will read—one hopes—like an amiable lunacy, all chatter and china teacups, until somewhere between the cream and sugar the blood begins to show. After all, people no longer kill each other for love; they do it for being misunderstood. Which is, of course, the more modern sin."

1933: Diary entry

This morning I found myself wondering, as one wonders about the weather or one's publisher, what it would have been to be Mary Blandy. Not to write about her, as I have repeatedly—in sketches, dialogues, and half-formed novels that always dissolve into other people's horrors—but to inhabit her, to taste the moral absurdity from the inside.

The newspapers of her century called her "Miss Blandy, the Fair Parricide". Delightful phrasing—half flirtation, half prosecution. Even crime, it seems, must be prettily described if committed by a woman.

She was neat, sensible, dutiful; she poisoned her father with as much grace as one might infuse tea. Society's astonishment lay not in the act but in the incongruity—that it was done by a lady whose handwriting had been admired. I should like, in fairness, to think her less a murderess than a born tragic humorist.

And this morning, as I watched the polite ladies at breakfast dissecting one another with jam knives and glances, the conclusion quite overcame me: had Mary Blandy been born today, she might have passed for perfectly normal—only rather efficient.

The modern world has rendered poison redundant. We kill reputations now, not relatives. Hydrogen peroxide for moral character; arsenic replaced by afternoon conversation. Modern Mary would dine at Mayfair clubs, write letters to The Times protesting indecency, and sign them modestly "A Friend to Decorum". She would perhaps chair a benevolent committee and arrange for its members' quiet suffocation by rumour when they grew inconvenient.

To be fair (and what diarist is fair to anyone but herself?), I must own a soft sympathy for that old Mary. She did what women are told to do—please father, obey lover, uphold appearances—but she arranged the clauses in the wrong order and was consequently misunderstood. She followed the logic of decorum to its fatal punctuation mark.

What, I wonder, would I have done in her place? It is easy to wax moral when there are trains to flee and novels to sell; harder when one's destiny is an apex of social nervousness. Her choice, essentially, was between two failures—filial failure, or romantic. Success for women, then as now, is merely the ability to fail gracefully in public view.

Would I have done the same, given a father so tedious, a society so watchful, and a lover whose chief virtue was persistence? Possibly. I can hardly resist the mechanical attraction of a bad idea, well executed. But I should have used a subtler compound—perhaps letters, not powders: a correspondence so artfully courteous that it suffocates.

It is curious to note that all female crime must be accompanied by embroidery. The male murderer requires only motive and opportunity; the female must supply aesthetics. One cannot merely kill, one must ornament the act with feeling. Mary Blandy wept prettily, fainted repeatedly, and kept a lace handkerchief for the gallows. She was both performance and prosecution.

To imagine her after death—as I often do when the typewriter stalls—is to imagine a soul perpetually composing its own press release. "Miss Blandy", it must say to the archangels, "was unfortunate rather

than wicked". They probably believed her instantly. Heaven, after all, was made for unexamined sympathy.

And yet, beneath my irony, I detect a certain envy. Society has turned murder into psychology, but in doing so has tamed its artistry. We explain everything now; interpretation is our poison. Poor Mary had only motive and melodrama, which at least afforded passion. I, surrounded by analysts, critics, and the smug immunity of progress, possess merely self-consciousness.

There are days when I almost prefer her clarity: she acted, she was caught, she died, and she left a legend neatly concluded in three acts. The modern woman stalls forever between impulse and inhibition, her tragedy stretched thin across a lifetime of reasonable behaviour.

I suppose, given her dilemma, I would have chosen the same exit: rather gallows than gossip, sensation than smugness. But then, that is why I write rather than live as I please—writing is the slower, safer poison. It undoes one in print instead of person, and society adores one the more for seeming courageous about it.

So, to Mary Blandy I raise my tea cup—untainted, alas—and salute her as one of our finer moralists. If she erred, it was only in method. She taught us, unwillingly, that propriety and madness are most convincing when poured from the same teapot.

1933: Letter from Mrs. Flora Eldershaw

To Euphemia Mallard

It was a queer little thrill to read your latest story last evening, for in its cadences and cunning restraint I heard an echo of your grandmother's voice. You may not remember that stout-hearted lady, but I do—indeed, she once told me something I have never forgotten. She said, with that mischievous smile of hers: "One should never trust a person who cannot laugh at their own tragedy by the third afternoon". It was not, you understand, a flippant remark but a prescription for survival. I see that same temperance in you. You manage to extract humour from despair without soiling the truth of it, and that, my dear child, is the rarest knack a writer can possess.

You have inherited her art of balance: wit and melancholy walking hand in hand, neither ever stepping on the other's toes. Your criminals are so human that one feels obliged to offer them tea; your virtuous are so vividly self-deceived that one senses how close we all are to the dock. Beneath all your irony there runs a sort of mournful decency—a

conviction that civilisation, though absurd, is worth defending with clever sentences and careful punctuation.

Do keep at your work and do not let the reviews (which are always written by men who secretly want to be instructed by women) draw your fire too soon. The public delights in brilliance, but it also fears it when feminine. Remember your grandmother's other dictum—"A wise woman keeps a quill behind one ear and makes them suspect it's a dagger".

If ever you find yourself in London, come and take tea with me by the fire. We shall talk about weather, murder, and the art of pretending to know one's mind.

1933: Elspeth Mallard

Letter to Euphemia

I have been pottering about in the attics again—you know my weakness for those dusty trunks that Father swore contained only "rubbish and regret"—and unearthed something I think will intrigue you no end. You wrote last month of your fascination with those old poisonesses, the ones who blurred the line between cunning woman and criminal, and how a woman might be branded witch or poisoner depending on the century's mood. Both trades rooted in herbs, as you astutely noted: belladonna for the flying ointment or the lover's draught, arsenic disguised in ratafia or elderflower cordial. It struck me that the shift from one label to the other was less about the deed than the era's tolerance for mystery—witchcraft for the superstitious age, poisoning for the "rational" one.

Behold the enclosed clipping from some antiquarian pamphlet I found tucked into a crumbling volume of trial transcripts. It concerns the Witchcraft Act of 1736, that tidy little piece of parliamentary housekeeping which declared sorcery a fraud rather than a felony. No more burnings or duckings; henceforth, pretending to magical powers was mere imposture, punishable by a pillory and a fine. What a mercy for the herbalists! One could peddle love philtres or wart cures without fear of the stake, so long as one didn't promise too much. But of course, if the potion killed instead of cured, one was no longer a witch but a poisoner—hanged with all the efficiency of the Enlightenment. Your Mary Blandy, poor lamb, arrived just in time for that reclassification in 1752.

I have scribbled my own notes on the reverse of the clipping, for what they're worth—idle musings from a woman who reads too much medical history between bridge rubbers. Do you suppose, I wonder,

that being hanged outright for poison might have been preferable to the new legal tests emerging around then? By mid-century, they were applying that dreadful "wild beast test"—whether the accused knew right from wrong, like some rational creature or a mere brute in human form. Fail it, and one wasn't executed but consigned to those early asylums, places like Bethlem or St. Luke's, where "treatment" meant chains, darkness, and the occasional public viewing for the gentry's amusement. Harsh doesn't begin to cover it; reports speak of patients submerged in icy baths or bled until sensible.

And oh, the irony of the physicians' diagnoses! They observed behaviour with all the zeal of naturalists—"swimming in the head", religious mania, convulsions mistaken for divine possession. Methodism was a favourite culprit; John Wesley's enthusiasts, with their shrieks and trances, were pronounced mad by men in frock coats who prescribed sudden cold-water plunges or spinning chairs to "restore the humours". It was a queer blend, wasn't it? Growing institutionalisation—asylums springing up like mushrooms after rain—wedded to legalistic nitpicking ("Did she know it was wrong?") and these brutal proto-medical fads. Madness ceased to be demonic and became a disorder to be managed, confined, and occasionally drowned.

One can't help but pity the poor creatures caught in the transition. A witch got her spectacle and perhaps a martyr's ballad; a poisoner, a quick drop; but the "insane"? Perpetual custody in a madhouse, poked and plunged until compliant. Imagine Mary Blandy failing the wild beast test—not hanged at Oxford Castle, but shipped off to some damp cell in Hoxton, dosed with emetics while the doctors debated her "enthusiasm" for that Scottish lover. Would she have preferred the noose? I rather think yes—cleaner, quicker, and with less risk of resurrection as a cautionary exhibit.

This all ties so neatly into your theme of women as society's herbal scapegoats: gatherer of simples becomes wise woman becomes witch becomes poisoner becomes lunatic. Each label a fresh trap, baited with the era's fears. Do use it—it would make a ripping chapter in whatever dark confection you're brewing next. Fenwick could plot the murders; you supply the moral venom.

1933: Story outline

The dinner, being composed almost entirely of clever people, was naturally a failure. Cleverness, in bulk, behaves like caviar: impressive on the table, indigestible in practice. One could see at a glance that the hostess had invited just enough intelligence to sour the soup and not enough humour to save the evening.

It was into this agreeable fiasco that I chose to introduce Mary Blandy.

Not the historical Mary, stiff in brocade and remorse, but the Mary I have been nursing in my mind for months: neat, composed, and faintly puzzled at the uproar caused by a little domestic chemistry. If one is to be haunted, one may at least choose one's ghost.

They had given me a novelist at my right hand—the improving kind, who writes of village girls uplifted by clean living and strong tea. Opposite sat a young psychoanalyst, still shiny from Vienna, eager to diagnose the table before the fish. Between them, a critic from one of the London weeklies, whose chief achievement in life is italicising the word "sincere".

"You write about old trials, I think?" the critic began, in the tone of a man approaching an illness.

"Not old trials", I said. "Old opportunities".

Across the table, the psychoanalyst brightened. "Ah, you mean the expressive release of criminality?"

"Not exactly", I replied, feeling Mary take her place at my shoulder. "I mean the occasions on which society reveals what it truly believes about itself. Trials are only mirrors with better upholstery".

The improving novelist looked troubled. "But surely", he ventured, "we understand such things better now. Take that unfortunate girl—what was her name? The one who poisoned somebody about a hundred years ago?"

"Mary Blandy", I said. "My cousin in spirit".

He blinked in polite alarm. "I say—what a claim to make".

"Why not?" I asked. "She faced the same problem we all do: whether to fail in life publicly or privately. She took the simpler route. The rest of us are still dithering".

The critic smiled the cautious smile of a man who senses blasphemy but is not yet sure against which god. The psychoanalyst, scenting material, leaned forward. "Fascinating case", he murmured. "Repressed libido, paternal fixation, displacement into toxic agency—"

"Arsenic", I corrected. "The English prefer plain words in their food".

At this point, Mary herself, who had been listening with the polite astonishment of the dead at the living's capacity for jargon, whispered—in that very small corner of my mind reserved for better conversation than the room affords—"Ask them what they would have done".

So I did.

"Tell me", I said to the table in general, "if you had been a dependent daughter in a provincial town, with a tedious father, a dubious lover,

and no occupation but embroidery and endurance—would you have chosen social failure or success?"

The improving novelist looked pained. "One does one's duty", he said.

"Precisely", I replied. "And whose duty would that be? Father's, lover's, or Society's? They rarely agree, and they never pay".

The critic, sensing an opportunity to display nuance, spoke cautiously. "Surely Miss Blandy—if we must discuss her—was an example of moral collapse".

"On the contrary", I said. "She was morally consistent to the point of indecency. She believed that securing her future with the man she loved was more important than preserving the life of a man who had ceased to interest anyone but the local solicitor. She put her principle into practice. Most people stop at the preface".

The psychoanalyst coughed. "One cannot condone murder".

"Of course not", I agreed. "Especially not in public. But between losing one's lover through filial obedience and losing one's father through chemical adjustment, she made a choice. You and I simply disguise ours better. We let our parents die of propriety".

The table fell into the sort of silence produced not by shock but by rapid mental hedging. Everyone wished to disagree in the approved manner without appearing less clever than the rest. It was like watching a pond full of ducks attempting to walk backwards.

Mary, I felt, was amused.

"You see", I went on, because silence is merely acquiescence with better manners, "the question is not whether she ought to have done it. The question is what we would have done in her place—with our modern talent for self-justification and our terror of being thought unsuccessful. She feared social failure and chose practical success. We reverse the recipe and call it virtue".

The improving novelist rallied. "Success is hardly worth having at such a price".

"Ah", I said, "but what other currency did she possess? Respectable women then had no income but reputation. Men could go to war, or Parliament, or business; women had only marriage and the hope of favourable gossip. Mary merely adjusted the accounts".

The psychoanalyst, who had by now diagnosed me as at least interestingly abnormal, tried another line. "But surely she was subject to unconscious pressures, patterns beyond her control—"

"Undoubtedly", I said. "As are we all. The difference is that she provided her own unconscious with practical tools. We provide ours with alibis".

It was then that Mary leaned in, so to speak, and offered her own contribution. It arrived as a sentence fully formed in my mind—the sort of thing one knows one is too cowardly to say, but is tempted to borrow.

"Tell them", she suggested, "that if I had chosen to obey my father and abandon my lover, they would have called me a model daughter and forgotten me in a week. By disobeying, I earned a place in their libraries. Which is the greater social success?"

I repeated it, with the minor adjustments required by company. The critic, to his credit, looked almost delighted. "There is something in that", he admitted. "A rather dreadful something, but something".

The improving novelist muttered about "legacy" and "spiritual influence", though he did not sound convinced. The psychoanalyst scribbled a note on his cuff. I suspect it read: Subject exhibits identification with notorious case—latent hostility to patriarchal authority. Analysts are so adorably legible.

Later, in my room, I considered the matter more soberly. What would I have done, truly, in Mary's situation? I like to think I would have fled—to London, to bad employment, to worse theatre. But then, I have a profession and a chequebook, and a reputation for eccentricity that excuses almost anything. She had none of these mercies. Her choice was between obedient extinction and scandalous existence, however brief.

We condemn her because she chose action over decorum. Yet our civilisation rewards only those who, in some fashion, poison the generation before them—economically, intellectually, or literally. We call it progress when done slowly and murder when done at once.

Perhaps that is why I am drawn to her. She is a condensed version of our ordinary cowardice. Where we spend years quietly disappointing our elders by becoming ourselves, she did it in a fortnight with a teacup. It is not a method I intend to adopt; the modern world offers subtler instruments. But I cannot deny a certain admiration for her efficiency.

If I were genuinely trapped between social failure and social success, with no middle muddle of compromise—if the world demanded that I be either the perfect daughter or the triumphant bride, with no option of the untidy scribbling spinster—what would I do?

A comforting answer would be: I should defy them both and live obscurely, yet authentically, in some garret. The truthful answer is: I do not know. So long as that ignorance persists, I have no right to dismiss Mary Blandy as a monster. She is merely me, minus opportunity and plus courage.

The real horror is not that she poisoned her father. The real horror is that the rest of us achieve the same separation drip by drip, and call it natural.

I wonder what the psychoanalyst would make of that. But then, analysts, like hangmen, prefer not to examine their resemblance to their patients. It would spoil the profession.

1934: The Sydney Morning Herald, Crimes Section

Mysterious Disappearance Rocks Sydney's Prestigious Mallard Family: Maid's Confession Sparks Murder Inquiry

Sydney has been gripped by a most perplexing and unsettling case involving one of its most esteemed families, the Mallards, whose grand residence in the affluent suburb of Bellevue Hill has become the centre of police investigation and court proceedings under extraordinary circumstances. What makes this case so sensational, and indeed so troubling, is the utter absence of a body—a detail that has left both the populace and authorities alike confounded.

Euphemia Mallard, a well-known and much-respected member of the family, has not been seen or heard from for several months. This stands in sharp contrast to her usual routine and social presence. The maid of the household, a woman of uncertain repute and evidently disturbed mind, has made a startling confession declaring responsibility for Mrs. Mallard's death—an admission that has ignited the official inquiry.

Despite the absence of a corpse, the police have presented evidence before the court describing a scene of disarray within the ordinarily impeccable Mallard mansion. The household's meticulous order had been disturbed—drawers left open, personal effects scattered, and most notably, a curious large trunk of an uncommon design was found open and empty in the attic. Yet, not a single drop of blood was discovered to corroborate foul play by ordinary means.

It is this maid's confounded account that confronts the court and society with a puzzle: How to establish murder without a body? The authorities, faced with no alternative explanations and given Mrs. Mallard's unexplained disappearance, have—somewhat controversially—accepted the maid's narrative largely at face value. The suggestion is that the maid, whose mental state the court has scrutinised closely, may be committed to a psychiatric institution following her trial, classified as criminally insane.

The case raises profound questions about the nature of evidence and justice. How does one bring closure to such a ghastly mystery when the

victim's remains remain hidden—or perhaps never existed in the conventional sense? Does the large empty trunk, with its strange and exotic make, serve as a symbol of the unknown depths of human secrecy, or as a mere repository for untold horrors?

Sydney watchers from the classes of society, from the professional to the gossipy, have taken to debating the matter in cafes and salons, weighing credence against doubt. Yet, as it stands, this tragic affair will soon proceed to trial, awaiting the final chapter in a story where truth may be stranger than fiction, and where the absence of proof does not equate to absence of crime.

While the city holds its breath, the fate of the Blandy maid remains uncertain, her story a dark whisper echoing through the halls of a household shattered not by overt violence, but by silence and suspicion.

The case continues to unfold.

1934: New South Wales Police Department
Forensic Report
Case: Mallard Residence Investigation
Report compiled by Detective Sergeant J. H. Carlton

Subject: Detailed Examination of Unusual Trunk Discovered at Scene

Upon entry to the scene of the investigation at the Mallard family estate, attention was directed towards a large trunk located in the attic space. Though its relevance to the disappearance of Mrs. Euphemia Mallard remains unclear, the trunk's distinctive characteristics compelled thorough documentation.

Description:

The trunk measures approximately nine feet in length, three feet in width, and three feet in height. It is remarkable for its ornate craftsmanship and apparent antiquity, constructed from an assortment of rare woods, exhibiting a fine polish that enhances the variety of rich natural hues. The paneling is inlaid with intricate carvings of floral and geometric patterns, hinting at a design possibly imported from an exotic locale. Three separate locks secure the trunk, each fashioned from wrought iron with ornate keys, suggestive of considerable value or an intended high level of security.

Of particular note is the observation that the trunk appears to be disproportionately capacious on the inside, a phenomenon noted by the examining officers but not fully understood or explained by any technical means available. The interior is lined with a dark velvet-like

fabric, pristine save for minimal signs of wear. No contents were present within at the time of inspection, rendering the purpose or recent use of the trunk a mystery.

Despite exhaustive searches elsewhere in the premises, no comparable item or container of similar size or craftsmanship was found. The immediate vicinity of the trunk revealed evidence of disorder: clothing items scattered, furniture slightly displaced, yet no traces of blood or other direct forensic evidence related to the presumed crime.

Conclusion:

While the trunk bears no direct forensic traces linking it to any act of violence, its conspicuous nature and seemingly anomalous internal volume command further consideration. At present, however, no definitive evidentiary value can be assigned to the trunk itself in relation to Mrs. Mallard's disappearance. Investigative focus remains on other aspects of the case, although this item continues to attract noticeable attention within the investigative team.

Further investigative measures to include possession and analysis of keys to the locks, alongside expert consultation on the trunk's construction and provenance, are recommended.

1934: New South Wales Police Department Criminal Investigation Branch – Sydney Interview Transcript and Psychiatric Evaluation Excerpt

Case: Disappearance of Mrs Euphemia Mallard
Suspect: Miss Agnes Blandy (domestic servant)
Interviewing Officer: Inspector Harold C. Fenwick
Stenographer: Constable J. Price

Interview transcript (verbatim as far as practicable)

Time commenced: 10:14 a.m.

Location: Interview Room 2, Central Police Station, Sydney

Inspector Fenwick: Please state your full name for the record.

Miss Blandy: Agnes… I think it is Agnes. They called me Aggie in the scullery. Blandy, yes. Bland comme l'eau, n'est-ce pas? Thin soup. No meat.

Inspector Fenwick: Your full name is Agnes Blandy, and you were employed as a maid in the household of Mrs Euphemia Mallard of Bellevue Hill?

Miss Blandy: I was in her house. It was a house in her. The rooms fitted inside her bones, you see. The carpets were under her ribs. But yes, sir, I dusted the banisters and carried the coal. English maid, export grade.

Inspector Fenwick: Did you murder Mrs Euphemia Mallard?

Miss Blandy: Oh, yes. Of course. Naturally. Who else? It must be me. Everyone says so. The trunk said so as well. I did it last Tuesday.

Inspector Fenwick: For the record, Mrs Mallard was last seen several months ago, not last Tuesday. Are you quite certain about the date?

Miss Blandy: Time is a badly folded sheet, sir. It tucks in on itself. Last Tuesday is where you put the corner. It was snowing. Or it was summer. The jacarandas were out, but also the Christmas puddings. Achtung, mind the step. It was that day.

Inspector Fenwick: How did you kill her?

Miss Blandy: With the usual thing. The… you know… the blunt, sharp instrument with poison and rope. In the library. Or the breakfast room. Or the little room that is bigger inside than it is outside. We argued, you see, about the spoons. Then I pushed her in. Or she stepped in herself. But I am responsible. I must be responsible. Somebody has to be.

Inspector Fenwick: You say "pushed her in". Into what, precisely?

Miss Blandy: Into the box, of course. La grande malle. The big travelling coffin without a passenger. It was hungry. I only opened it. A lady's maid should open things, should she not? Drawers, doors, trunks, mouths. I opened it and it did the rest, and so I am the murderer. Fin de l'histoire.

Inspector Fenwick: Did you strike Mrs Mallard? Use any weapon?

Miss Blandy: Oh, I have so many weapons. My duster, my silence, my being invisible on the stairs. No, I did not strike her. I think. Perhaps I did with my eyes. She went away. That is enough. If someone is gone, someone else must have done it. I volunteer, sir. I put up my hand.

Inspector Fenwick: What was your motive, Miss Blandy?

Miss Blandy: Motive? Oh yes, we must have that, like a hat with a feather. I hated her, naturally, because she was kind. Or I loved her, donc je la tue. That's how it goes in stories, is it not? The maid is in love with the mistress, so she must cut her up into little pieces of time and hide them in the laundry basket. Or perhaps I did it for money. Or to get a better reference. Or because of my father. Or because of the dream with all the doors. You choose one. They all fit.

Inspector Fenwick: Did Mrs Mallard mistreat you in any way?

Miss Blandy: Oh no. She was perfectly civil. That is the worst of it. If she had beaten me I could say, "Voilà, that is why". But she just looked

through me, like a window that had not been cleaned. It is very tiring not to exist. One day I existed all at once, and then she was gone. Q.E.D., as the vicar used to say. Quod est… something. Dead.

Inspector Fenwick: You understand that confessing falsely to a serious crime is itself an offence?

Miss Blandy: Falsely? But I am guilty, Inspector. I am always guilty. I was guilty when I was born, my mother said. Original flavour sin. If you do not give me this murder, I shall have to find another one. It is better we agree on Euphemia. She is already missing, pauvre dame. It saves everyone trouble.

Inspector Fenwick: Where is Mrs Mallard's body?

Miss Blandy: In the trunk. Obviously. Where else would one keep a body? Under the bed? Très vulgaire. No, she is folded up very neatly, like summer dresses in winter. You will not see her, of course. The trunk keeps its own counsel. It swallows, but it does not belch. Still, she is there. I put her there by thinking it, and that is enough.

Inspector Fenwick: The trunk was examined and found to be empty.

Miss Blandy: Empty things are always the fullest, sir. That is their trick. You look in and see nothing, but the nothing is so very crowded. She is in the nothing. I promise you. Perhaps if you stepped in, you would find her. But then you would not come back to tell me. So let us say I killed her, and leave it neat on the mantelpiece.

Inspector Fenwick: At the time of Mrs Mallard's disappearance, where were you?

Miss Blandy: In the scullery. In the trunk. On the stairs. Inside my head. It is all the same corridor. I heard her call. Or I dreamt it. "Blandy", she said, "bring up the hot water". So I brought up the hot water, and when I came down again she was gone. The trunk was breathing. Hhh. Hhh. Like that. I could not un-hear it.

Inspector Fenwick: Miss Blandy, do you understand these proceedings and why you are here?

Miss Blandy: Because I am the murderer. Because you need one. Because I am a small woman and small women always fit very well into large, manly crimes. Because the doctor with the beard will write about me and say big words like "complex" and "transference" and "unconscious wish". Because I opened the lid. Because because because. Yes, Inspector. I understand everything and nothing.

Inspector Fenwick: Do you wish to add anything to your statement?

Miss Blandy: Only that I am very sorry. Or very relieved. I cannot remember which word. Sometimes they are the same word in another language. Entschuldigung, misericorde, pardon. Please write that down nicely. My handwriting is not to be trusted.

Interview concluded: 11:02 a.m.

Suspect's statement read back to her and she affirms it as accurate "enough for a story".

Signed:
Agnes Blandy (mark X)
Inspector H. C. Fenwick
Constable J. Price (stenographer)

Attached: Psychiatric Evaluation

Examiner: Dr Isa. Duckson, MB, BS, MRCPsy
Special Consultant in Nervous and Mental Disorders
Date of examination: 22 August 1934
Place: Long Bay Reception Ward

Summary of Findings:

Miss Agnes Blandy, aged approximately 31 years, English-born domestic servant, presents as a thin, pale woman of somewhat agitated demeanour, with marked tremor of the hands and intermittent, inappropriate laughter. Orientation to person is preserved; orientation to place and time is intermittent and frequently distorted. Thought processes are circumstantial and at times frankly incoherent, with intrusion of foreign words (French and occasional German terms) and idiosyncratic expressions.

Her confession to the alleged murder of Mrs Euphemia Mallard appears, on psychoanalytic examination, less a factual account of events than a symbolic narrative through which she attempts to organise profound unconscious guilt. She accepts culpability readily, even eagerly, despite being unable to supply coherent details of date, means, or motive. This suggests not the conscious pride of the criminal, but rather what Freud has termed "criminality from a sense of guilt", in which the need for punishment precedes and even generates the supposed crime.

Central to her narrative is the large trunk found in the attic of the Mallard residence. Miss Blandy invests this object with pronounced symbolic significance, describing it as "bigger on the inside", "hungry", and as the true agent of disappearance. From a psychoanalytic standpoint, the trunk may be regarded as a condensation symbol, combining elements of the maternal body (container, shelter, secrecy) with those of the grave or coffin (death, concealment, finality). Her repeated insistence that she merely "opened it" suggests an unconscious fantasy of having released destructive forces long contained within herself.

Her speech is rich in images of folding, rooms within rooms, doors and corridors, and of time "tucking in on itself". Such imagery is consistent with a fragmented ego attempting to manage conflicting impulses and memories by enclosing them within multiple psychic "compartments". The foreign phrases and nonsensical turns may be read as defensive manoeuvres—displacements that permit her to allude to painful content without direct acknowledgment.

Childhood history, as far as could be elicited, includes a strict religious upbringing, emphasis on original sin, and repeated messages of inherent unworthiness. She reports feeling "invisible on the stairs" and describes service life as a state of "not existing unless someone rings the bell". This background is compatible with the development of a powerful superego and chronic, free-floating guilt. In such a structure, the disappearance of a benevolent or indifferent mistress might be unconsciously experienced as the fulfilment of long-repressed hostile wishes, later retroactively organised into the fantasy of having committed murder.

No clear evidence of intellectual deficiency is present; rather, her intelligence appears average or slightly above, masked by severe emotional disturbance. There is no obvious hallucination in the narrow sense, but her conviction regarding the "living" nature of the trunk borders upon delusional elaboration. Her affect oscillates rapidly between tearfulness, humour, and resignation, indicating marked instability.

Clinical Impression:

From a classical Freudian perspective, Miss Blandy may be understood as a neurotic or borderline psychotic subject dominated by unconscious guilt, repressed aggression towards authority figures, and an overdeveloped need for punishment. Her confession is best conceptualised as a symbolic attempt at self-condemnation rather than reliable testimony as to external events.

In my professional opinion:

- She is presently not a fully reliable historian of fact.
- Her capacity to distinguish between inner fantasy and external reality is impaired.
- There is strong evidence of unconscious motivation to assume criminal responsibility irrespective of actual conduct.

Recommendation:

1 Miss Blandy should be regarded as suffering from a serious mental disorder, with prominent neurotic-psychotic features in the Freudian sense.

2 A period of observation and treatment in a secure psychiatric institution for the criminally insane is strongly advised prior to any final judicial determination.
3 Psychoanalytic interviews (using free association and dream analysis where possible) may clarify the origins of her guilt and the symbolic meaning of the trunk and of Mrs Mallard, but such treatment will be protracted and may not yield a simple factual account suitable for the court.
4 The court should consider that her confession, while psychologically genuine as an expression of inner conflict, may not be a reliable indicator of actual criminal agency.

(End of report)

1934: Viola Vorpel

Letter to her sister Octavia in Sydney

I write with a mixture of amazement and grave concern regarding the investigation—or rather the glaring omissions therein—surrounding our poor aunt's recent and most tragic demise. It strikes me as an extraordinary, indeed a most extraordinary oversight, that none of the police reports or papers make even a single mention of the final manuscript found in her study—Final Drops, her last and heartbreakingly incomplete novel.

You will recall that this manuscript was left half-finished, with the final pages not only stained but half-burnt. What devilry is this? Who would dare to set fire to those precious pages, and with what purpose? And what caused those stains—ink, tears, or something far more sinister? These are questions demanding answers, yet silence reigns.

I cannot help but wonder—was this last novel intended as a revelation, a biting expose of the true crime that no Mallard dares speak aloud? The death of Henry, Duke of Mallard, under such oddly shadowed circumstances, has long been the unspoken shadow over our family. Might our aunt have sought, in her own way, to lift the veil on that dark chapter? If so, the half-burnt manuscript suggests her enemies —or those fearful of truth—moved swiftly to silence her final voice.

I urge you to consider whether this mysterious absence from the official record conceals more than mere forgetfulness, and to keep a sharp eye on any further developments. We may be dealing with a story far more tangled than anyone yet realises.

1935: The Sydney Morning Herald

Authoress And Husband Vanish: Maid Confesses To Double Murder

No bodies—no evidence—police satisfied, public unmoved

Sydney, Monday.—The mystery surrounding the disappearance of the well-known Australian novelist Mrs. Clara Fenwick, author of The Amber Coast and Lamplight Blossoms, and her husband, the celebrated English crime writer Mr. Edgar Fenwick, appears at last to have reached its melancholy conclusion, though opinions remain divided on how much of the story is truth and how much invention.

The couple vanished three months ago from their harbourside residence at Rose Bay, leaving behind a breakfast table superlatively neat and a housemaid in tears. That maid, Miss Agnes Blandy, aged 32, formerly of Balmain, has now confessed to the murder of her employers. She is confined to the psychiatric division of Long Bay Gaol after presenting what police describe as "a coherent and circumstantial account of an act of homicidal compulsion".

A Confession Without Corpses

Her statement, parts of which were read at a closed hearing yesterday, claims that she poisoned both Mr. and Mrs. Fenwick "as punishment for their sins of the tongue"—a phrase the court interpreter suggested referred to the couple's mutual habit of appropriating their servants' private histories for use in fiction. Miss Blandy alleges the murders took place on the evening of 4 August, after which she "arranged matters so the sea would take them".

No trace of the Fenwicks has been discovered despite exhaustive searching along the heads and coastal bays. Items belonging to them—a silver pen, a pearl haircomb, and a typewriter ribbon—were found neatly lined inside the servants' coal bin. The absence of evidence other than Miss Blandy's own description has fuelled speculation that the crime may be purely imaginary, a delusion of guilt rather than an act.

Detective Inspector Greaves, of the C.I.B., commented yesterday:

"The prisoner's account is internally consistent. Whether it coincides with reality is another matter. That said, there are no alternative explanations at present, and the Department considers the case closed".

Lives in Letters

Mrs. Fenwick, born Clara Henderson near Geelong, was known throughout the dominions for her sentimental novels, widely read by nurses and soldiers during the War. Her husband, a visiting Englishman

who arrived in 1922 with a half-finished detective series (The Vicarage Murders), married her after interviewing her for a London magazine article entitled The Lady Detectives of Australia.

Their marriage—celebrated in the literary weeklies as a "union of passion and plot construction"—was by most accounts tempestuous. Neighbours at Rose Bay report lively quarrels conducted through the open windows of the study, followed by reconciliations of equal theatrical force. "They were always testing out murder scenes on one another", said one gardener. "We used to think it was sport".

The Maid's Motive

Asked to account for her crime, Miss Blandy is reported to have said,

"They were already killing each other in their books, so I only helped them finish".

Psychiatrists describe her as polite, devout, and "given to literary quotation". Her case will not proceed to trial. Chief Justice McCallum stated from chambers:

"The confession being sufficient for the purposes of committal, there is no public benefit in a show trial where proof cannot be adduced".

Public Interest Languid

Outside police circles, enthusiasm for the story has been notably faint. This week sees intense attention upon the races for the Lipton Cup, the Morna having led into the final leg against the visiting American yacht Eagle. At Circular Quay yesterday, few citizens could recall the Fenwicks' names, though one newsboy opined that "it's a pity, seeing as she wrote about sunsets and he wrote about murder".

Thus the affair of the Romantic Authoress and the Crime Novelist concludes with remarkable tidiness—two vanished, one confined, and an ocean left to bear the blame. The police are content; the psychiatrists are certain; and Sydney, preoccupied with the wind off the harbour, finds consolation in its sails rather than its scandals.

1934: Euphemia Mallard

Private papers

I have decided—that lovely, dangerous phrase. One never knows whether it marks a beginning or an ending. In my case, perhaps both. After months of toying with the notion of vanishing—of performing some deliciously scandalous disappearance act in the middle of what society, press, and publisher call a "career"—I find the notion too melodramatic by half. I have enacted enough fiction to know when a plot turns cheap.

No, the truth is I am weary of being shadow and rumour. I have hidden because it suited me; because visibility seemed too perilous for a woman who writes criminally and thinks lawfully in the same breath. But invisibility, alas, is rather crowded these days. Every hack dreams of mystery. There's nothing original in absence anymore.

So, I will be seen. Or at least, I shall be read in the first person for once. The time has come to write a memoir. It sounds oddly indecent—like describing one's own reflection aloud—but it will serve a purpose. If others will persist in inventing my past, I might as well furnish them with source material.

The form will not be conventional; how could it be? There will be outlines and sketches of the stories that never found endings. All those fables I scribbled in margins during my so-called crime phase—pieces of human moral weather—belong in it. There are the letters too (those worth reading and a few that must be read between the lines); fragments of diary entries (this one may qualify, though perhaps not); portraits half affection, half indictment; and maybe the faint trace of feeling, if I can render it honestly without vomiting sentiment.

It will not be confession. Heaven spare us "confession". I leave that to preachers and politicians, who are allowed to lie graciously. Mine will be an anatomy of motive: how one becomes an observer of evil without especially wishing to be righteous.

I want the memoir to shimmer a little with irony; a performance more than a penance. That seems truer to my temperament—and, frankly, more entertaining.

I toy with the idea of including the family experiment—the tale of my brother and our years of circus-level ambiguity. His fondness for dressing as a lady was neither sin nor satire; it was simply his way of investigating the edges of himself, as I have done with fiction. We were twins in curiosity. The whole household conspired in our mischief—the governess pretending not to see, the servants cutting their tongues on discretion.

I smile thinking of it; how grandly scandalised the publishing fraternity would be if I hinted that one of my recurring detectives—so gentlemanly, so precise—was half inspired by a brother in chiffon. It would do them good. Scandal refreshes respectability.

A pitifully sentimental friend tells me I am "drawing the curtain". Not at all; I am changing the scenery. Once the memoir is done, I think I shall devote myself to music. The piano has always been a guilty pleasure—a deliberate sort of beauty, entirely without motive. I can write a minuet that never once reminds me of gunpowder. There's freedom in a phrase of melody that neither resolves a crime nor conceals one.

No more novels. Not as they expect them, anyway. The next stage must be performance: public, playful, yet perhaps—at last—closer to sincerity. After all, fiction was my disguise; perhaps art in the raw will be revelation.

People always assume retreat is despair. But perhaps contentment does not whisper—it withdraws, makes its tea, and rearranges its manuscripts. Today the harbour looks like a mirror someone has forgotten to wipe clean. I find that comforting. Perhaps a life, too, can be left slightly smudged—it glimmers more honestly that way.

So, I shall begin tomorrow. Memoirs, by E.F.

What an extraordinary vanity—and how satisfyingly human it feels to permit it, at last.

1620: Cassandra Purslane

So told 'mongst us, echoed still,
A curse did part her lips with will:
Ducks ye were, and ducks remain,
Step wise or breath ends lion's reign.

1936: New York

In the refuge of my sanctum on the Golden Mile, where the ceaseless hum of New York fades beneath the towering facades and meticulously curated gardens, my aunt has taken residence. She is a woman of such quiet bearing and inward focus that she seems a relic from another age, transplanted in both time and temperament to this bustling metropolis. I shall not name her here, as she requested; this diary, locked in the ancient trunk within my library, is the sole witness to her sojourn.

She moves through the rooms with the deliberate grace of one who wishes to remain unseen, her presence more felt than heard. Conversation is rare and measured; even so, it is clear she possesses an intelligence that sharpens and deepens with each thoughtful silence. Yet society, with its blaring chandeliers and endless chatter, she wholly evades. Instead, she disappears into the vast recesses of my library, a labyrinth of books wherein she finds what she evidently seeks: refuge, solitude, and sustenance for her mind.

In this house of privilege and noise, her retreat is almost monastic. She pores over volumes of philosophy, literature, and history, often lingering on the more obscure tomes as though recuperating from a world she wishes no part of. The contrast between her austere manner and the glittering environs is stark. I sense in her a weariness, a wish to

erase herself from the incessant demands of family and society. The city outside carries on regardless, but here she finds a fragile sanctuary among the printed word, away from the world that expects so much and offers so little of true understanding.

So I watch and learn, guardedly sharing space with this enigmatic presence who connects my world to another, quieter, less ostentatious realm. She is a reminder, in these precarious times, that knowledge and inner peace might be the true markers of distinction, not the gaudy parades of wealth and acclaim. This secret record shall remain between these pages, a testament to her silent strength and the shadow she casts over this gilded urban landscape.

1936: Duchess of Mallard

Letter to her sister

So, the celebrated cousin is dead at last—or so they say, though after all the disguises and pseudonyms, who can be entirely sure? I half expect to hear next that a new "posthumous" novel is appearing—probably dictated from beyond the grave or "found among papers in a trunk". If so, it would be perfectly in keeping with that extraordinary habit of never quite being what one appeared. I daresay a ghost is the most authentic form he could ever take.

You remember the excitement when he first went off to the colonies—Australia, of all places! Grandmother said at the time that nothing good ever came of writing books about blood and servants, and that he'd have done better to take a chair at one of the universities and marry sensibly. I don't recall he ever had any particular feeling for women (in the respectable sense, I mean). But all that upbringing among women—his mother, three aunts, two governesses, and heaven knows how many maiden cousins—can hardly have improved things. He was lectured into politeness before he could crawl and spent his youth serving tea to ladies who argued about the proper construction of a sentence. Perhaps it was inevitable that he made a profession of inventing crimes—they were the only conversations left to him.

One must wonder, though, why he never married. It wasn't for lack of opportunity—there were any number of foolish girls flattered by being placed in a story. "Far too occupied with ideas", I said at the time. Though the more malicious in the family used to say that the thing he loved most was himself, and that fortunately for him there was quite enough there to make a lifelong attachment.

Do you remember that ghastly family story from India—or was it Malaya? The twins, the colonel's sons, who both loved the same

woman and ended by killing her between them? One supposedly drowned, leaving the other to come home to England as himself and as her. They said he lived in the wife's house for years, under her name, wearing her jewels, receiving the neighbours as Mrs. So-and-so. Perfectly monstrous, yet people were quite sympathetic—said it showed what love could drive one to! I always thought the story haunted our cousin's books; that grotesque fascination with identity and disguise. Perhaps he admired the twin's ingenuity. Could one simply decide to be someone else so completely? He seemed to think so.

You may call me cynical, but I do wonder if that's why he left England for good. Australia was made for people who wished to erase the small print of their lives. There, if half the rumours are true, he could behave exactly as he pleased, behind whatever mask—man, woman, novelist, genius, missionary of art, what have you. A writer of "women's fiction", the papers call him, though I suspect the term has become indistinguishable from "having the last word". Perhaps he used a woman's name to prove how clever he could be—or to see if anyone would notice.

And rich! Quite indecently so, at the end. They say the royalties rolled in from America like a well-trained tide. Rich as Croesus, eternally travelling, eternally observed. Vanity in perpetual motion.

Still, I mustn't sound too sour. Death makes saints of us all—or so the obituaries are determined to believe. The reports of his demise are absolutely exaggerated, as that dreadful Mr. Wilde put it (though no one ever quotes him properly). If I read in tomorrow's paper that he's taken a cottage in Provence under another name and is "resting", I shan't be in the least surprised.

Do you suppose, Connie, that all writers live like that—forever writing themselves into fictions so they may avoid the dreary business of being real? It would be tiring, if you ask me. Still, it seems to have suited our cousin admirably.

1937: Jeanne d'Anatis

Letter to her sister in Sydney

The autumn fogs have descended upon us with their usual punctuality, turning Hyde Park into a watercolour of muted greens and the occasional muffled bark of a spaniel. I trust you are thriving in Sydney—or at least managing that relentless harbour glare with your customary poise. Your last letter, with its vivid account of the bridge club scandals, arrived like a tonic amid our own dreary round of

committee meetings and charity bazaars. How I envy your distance from these shores; one feels positively smothered here by the weight of expectation.

Viola, bless her, continues to bask in the most extraordinary favouritism from the highest quarters. Only last week, at the Garden Party, she found herself seated beside the Queen for tea—not merely in proximity, you understand, but with that intimate little chat about herbaceous borders and the new fashions from Paris. The King himself paused to inquire after her health, with a warmth that bordered on paternal, and one of the Princesses pressed upon her an invitation to Sandringham for the shooting season. It is all most gratifying, of course, and Viola carries it off with that effortless grace you and I drilled into her from the nursery—a perfect blend of deference and delight. Yet, as I watched her laughing with the royal party, I could not help but wonder if the affection has not grown a shade more... publicly demonstrative these past three years. Before 1934, it was discreet: a quiet summons to Balmoral, a box at the opera. Now, it seems almost compensatory—as if Their Majesties wish the world to see how very cherished she remains.

And here my thoughts turn, rather idly and with no little unease, to poor Euphemia's disappearance. Presumed dead, presumed murdered—the papers still murmur it occasionally. One hates to dwell on it, but does it not strike you as curious how the Palace's fondness for Viola intensified precisely thereafter? Almost as if they fear some spectral implication—a royal hand, however remotely, in her sister's fate. Euphemia was ever the thorn, with her endless drafts of satire skewering the very pinnacles of society: dukes devoured by primogeniture's jaws, mausoleums relocating to suburban cemeteries, power rotting from within like worm-eaten wainscot. Viola, bless her discreet heart, sometimes showed me those scribblings—epistolary murders, courtesans pulling thrones, cathedrals whispering marital decay. She even confessed, once deep in her cups at Ascot, to passing a few to palace ladies-in-waiting for a giggle.

Could it be, do you suppose, that one of those manuscripts reached higher? Imagine—Viola, in a moment of sisterly mischief, slipping a copy of that outrageous fable, The Duke's Mausoleum, under the Queen's own teacup at tea. A tale of ducal funerals in St. Paul's, pomp masking bankruptcy, the family line as a gaping, parasitic maw thriving on firstborn sons and foreclosed estates. Our own cousin Edward's obsequies laid bare in mythic farce, with the mausoleum flogged for a golf hazard and worms applauding from the bones. The satire was venomous enough to curdle cream; if it ever graced a royal bedside table, small wonder Euphemia met with... misadventure. Did the Palace

perceive a threat? A libel too close to the bone of monarchy itself—power's slow decay, primogeniture as prison? Or was it mere coincidence?

I am being fanciful, of course—the fog plays tricks on the mind, and grief for Euphemia lingers like a poorly developed negative. Yet the Royals' new solicitude for Viola feels protective, almost proprietary, as if they seek to atone or at least advertise their innocence. She receives posies from the nursery gardens at Windsor, invitations etched in gold, and last month, a brooch from the Queen herself—forget-me-nots in diamonds, curiously apt. Viola laughs it off as "my royal mascot status", but I detect a flicker of calculation in those courtly smiles. Perhaps they simply adore her poise amid tragedy; perhaps they fear her knowledge of those drafts. At any rate, she dines at the Palace next fortnight, and I have cautioned her against any mention of notebooks or mishaps.

1950: Agnes Blandy

On her release from prison

Sixteen années within those cold, unyielding murs, et maintenant at last I am libre, released not by mercy but by the Machiavellian cunning of the Blandy name. Servants to their cause, their whispered manoeuvres en las sombras have finally unravelled the noose around my neck, casting me back among the living.

But je dois écrire once more the tale they once called mon destin, the tale I lived and breathed to save the very name they revere: the name Blandy. It was I, loro fedele serva, who took the poisonous step—no rogue, no vilain, but a guardian of legacy. Ma maîtresse, Euphemia Mallard, quella venerata scrittrice of crime and shadow, dared to tread once again sulle orme of Mary Blandy, the infamous parricide cui storia lei scriveva minuziosamente, yet sought to rewrite ancora, ni duda para excitar anew le sordide reputazioni bound with blood.

To preserve the Blandy honore, to shield that fragile edifice from the corrosive glare of the pubblico occhi, I saw no choice. Her pen, sharp and unrelenting, percerait le voile of silence surrounding old wounds; her next revelation avrebbe smantellato la careful narrative. So venenum I administered—silent, unseen, inevitabile—as duty demanded. There was no malice in my hand, only servizio to a causa far greater than any tribunal's judgment.

Those Blandy relatives qui ahora se presentan to claim my freedom are as cold and calculating as ever, leur gratitude est fine comme la bruma al alba. Yet I bow to leur volonté, for theirs is a world of

survival, et io porto il pesante manto della lealtà sacrificata. Non parlo più now, seulement la resigned declaration quod feci quod erat faciendum, in tenebris vicis where reputation is sacred et historia gladius.

And as the Ancients would say, αἱ τοῦ βίου μάχαι, the battles of life, are sometimes fought unseen, just as the djanga protects its people in the quiet bush.

1954: The Daily Telegraph

Mystery of the sapphire ring:

a crime writer's legend reawakens in boston
Exact replica of vanished jewel found on the hand of American woman—traced to English disappearance of 1934

London, Monday.—The discovery in Boston, U.S.A., of a remarkable sapphire ring—central to one of Britain's most talked-of literary mysteries—has revived speculation surrounding the disappearance, twenty years ago, of the novelist Miss Euphemia Mallard, whose name was once synonymous with the frosted manners and murderous wit of the inter-war crime story.

The ring, a large oval blue sapphire flanked by twin diamonds and set in a distinctive silver and black enamel mount, was for years Miss Mallard's signature adornment. She was never photographed without it. Yet when she vanished from her Sydney home, Mistmere Lodge, in the late autumn of 1934, both ring and mistress were gone without trace.

Disappearance and Inquest

Miss Mallard, who had been at work upon her novel Made for Murder, was last seen on the afternoon of 14 November, correcting proofs by the fire. Her maid, Agnes Blandy, discovered her absence the next morning, along with an overturned chair and faint traces of blood upon the hearthrug.

Mallard's body was never found, and rumour supplied what fact refused—violent quarrels, unwise love affairs, and the sort of melodrama that delighted her readers but exasperated her contemporaries. The missing sapphire, valued then at nearly £200,000, became the case's most vivid symbol: columnists wondered who now wore "the ring that wrote mysteries".

The Boston Discovery

The new development concerns the late Mrs. Letitia Canard, of Beacon Hill, Boston, who died suddenly last December at the age of

eighty-three. An attendant mortician, during preparations for interment, reportedly removed the ring for safe keeping and, struck by its weight and setting, mentioned it to a visiting London jeweller. The design was identified this month as resembling precisely the Dorsett sapphire, thought unique.

An announcement by the Boston Police Department confirms that the jewel has been seized for investigation while arrangements are made to trace its provenance. British authorities have been informed at Scotland Yard.

Transatlantic Theories

The coincidence has excited fresh conjecture in literary circles long resigned to the unsolved fate of a novelist once hailed as "our ironical Sappho of suburbia". Did Miss Mallard, as some speculated even at the time, contrive her disappearance and assume a new identity abroad? Could her supposed killer have fled to America under assumed name? Or, in the fanciful language of one admirer, did "the sapphire simply outlive them both"?

Neighbours at Staplehurst recall that the maid emigrated to Canada after her release, "to work for a minister's wife". Others note curious similarities between the features of the missing author and the Boston deceased, though the police discount resemblances between women of "roughly the same age and disposition".

A Ring of Replication

J. W. Halpern, the London jeweller who identified the piece, told our correspondent yesterday:

"The setting is Regency in character, yet the workmanship shows refinements only possible after 1925. Unless two identical rings were made—which would have been extraordinary—it is one and the same, or forged by a hand with intimate knowledge of the original. No design drawings of Miss Mallard's ring survive".

Meanwhile, readers of the late novelist's books, now enjoying something of a modest revival, remark upon the eerie echo with her own fiction. One chapter of Made for Murder describes a jewel "as treacherous as its wearer, brilliant enough to pretend eternity". The book was published posthumously in 1935, its conclusion completed by an anonymous editor.

Closing Words

Whether the Boston sapphire marks the end or merely another act in the affair of Lydia Dorsett remains to be seen. Scotland Yard has declined to comment until American inquiries are concluded.

As one veteran journalist observed last night, the matter is curiously fitting:

"If Miss Mallard were alive to see her old story revive, she would likely say she'd written it precisely this way—ending with a ring and a question."

1956: The Hidden Crime Writer Who Saw Through Our Polite Facades

By a Sydney Correspondent, Sydney Morning Herald

In the dusty corners of our literary archives, where the scent of old paper mingles with the faint salt of forgotten seas, there lives the ghost of a woman who turned the drawing-room mirror on society and made us all squirm with delight. She was the crime writer from Sydney—let's call her M.H. for the sake of those family solicitors still lurking in Tunbridge Wells—who, from the turn of the century through the jittery twenties, penned draft after draft of stories that dissected the British soul with the precision of a silver scalpel. Not the garish murders of the tabloids, mind you, but the exquisite felonies of everyday life: a borrowed teaspoon that never comes home, a dinner-party gaffe that topples a full colonel, the whispered gossip over gin that poisons reputations slower than arsenic in the syllabub. In her notebooks, society wasn't a grand edifice but a crumbling manor house, held together by keys, letters, and the architecture of silence.

Picture her, this sharp-eyed observer, perched in Sydney with a view of the harbour's restless blue, yet forever glancing back at the grey drizzle of England. Her drafts—those marvellous, unfinished symphonies of satire—reveal a mind that viewed fiction not as escapism but as a polite form of vivisection. Murder? Oh, she toyed with it, but only as the vulgar climax to subtler sins. In one outline, a housekeeper's keys unlock generations of bigamy, theft, and colonial intrigue, proving that the true corpse in every family trunk is respectability itself. Manners, to her, were the small crimes of daily life: the forged signature on a wartime cheque, the courtesan's influence whispered from boudoir to boardroom, the epistolary revenge that kills without a drop of blood. She borrowed from her Aunt Rose's Indian diaries and Great-Aunt Harriette's scandalous confessions to argue that courtesans didn't just rule bedrooms—they pulled the strings on thrones, legal battles, and empires, long before anyone dared call it power.

What fascinates now, in this buttoned-up Australia of the fifties where we're still pretending to be little Britains, is how she flipped the script on genre itself. Crime fiction, in her hands, became social comedy

—Wodehousian fizz laced with Lawrencean heat, the brittle chit-chat of Nancy Mitford hiding Saki's sting. She dreamed up female-only worlds not as shrill utopias but wry experiments, where men reappear like cuckoos from Greenwich, welcomed back because, as she put it in one draft, "it takes all types to wind the same clock." Patriarchy? She skewered its critics in a mock Spectator rant, then answered with harmonious chaos, proving difference is similarity's sly twin. Her St Paul's Cathedral wasn't stone sanctity but marital mausoleum, its whispering gallery echoing vows that curdle into violence and ecstatic decay. Order, she knew, was mere performance—a colonel's medals clinking hollowly after a hostess wishes him "very full" post-dinner.

During her lifetime, from Edwardian reticence to the roaring twenties, she was the family rebel, dashed off cautionary letters from sisters warning of ducal lawyers and unread publics. Sydney gave her distance to experiment—epistolary murders by post, etiquette executions in manors, the Greenwich event folding sexes into cosmic farce. Yet publication eluded her; drafts stayed private, perhaps wisely, for who in 1920 wanted courtesans as power-brokers or housewives plotting via linen napkins? She valued literature as provocation wrapped in wit: "Better to do nothing than fix what is not broken," she'd mock, then mend it anyway with a crime of courtesy. Murder was too blunt; manners murdered reputations daily, and fiction was the perfect alibi.

Today, in our post-war polish where women clutch pearls and men clutch briefcases, her value gleams brighter. She prefigured the mid-century shift—the angry young men barking from kitchen sinks while she, decades earlier, laughed from the pantry. In a world mad for Christie whodunits, she elevated the why: why we borrow, boast, forgive, and filch our way through life. Her satire on "small crimes"—the praise that stings, the excuse eternal—feels prophetic amid our suburban espionage of bridge afternoons and borrowed silver. Australian literature, still shaking off its convict chains, could claim her as kin: a Sydney scribe who saw the empire's hypocrisies from afar, blending colonial diaries with modernist bite.

Were she writing now, she'd chuckle at our telly detectives, urging us back to the real mysteries: the trunk in the attic, the letter unsigned, the full colonel blushing into oblivion. Her legacy? A reminder that literature thrives on the unpublishable truths—the power behind thrones, the heartbeat in stone cathedrals, the harmony in half-empty hemispheres. In her drafts, society is unmasked, not as villain but victim of its own impeccable deceit. We need her now more than ever, this crime writer who solved us all without a single body on the floor. If only those Tunbridge Wells solicitors would let her out of the trunk.

1972: Reclaiming the Shadows: Euphemia Mallard and the Silenced Women of the 'Golden Age'

By Dr. Lydia Anatroccolo, Feminist Literary Historian (From Women's Words Reclaimed: Forgotten Voices in Crime Fiction)

It has become a tiresome patriarchal reflex among literary historians—those self-appointed gatekeepers of the canon—to crown the so-called Golden Age of Crime Writing with the laurels of "gentlemen of minor consequence" like Arthur Upfield or John Lang, as if the genre's ingenuity sprang fully formed from male brows alone. Conveniently omitted, of course, is the operative qualifier: male. This myopic hagiography erases the women who laboured in the margins, their pens dipped in the ink of subversion, challenging the very domestic tyrannies that confined them. Enter Euphemia Mallard (1858–1934), that indomitable Australian-British progenitor of detective fiction, whose prodigious output from 1890 until her untimely silencing spanned not mere potboilers but radical dissections of class, gender, and justice. Her oeuvre—detective novels, historical reconstructions, and that audacious 1912 reimagining of the Mary Blandy parricide case—sold briskly on foreign shores, yet domestic critics dismissed her as an interloping bluestocking, her sex rendering murder an "unladylike" preoccupation.

Whether Mallard was blissfully unaware or defiantly unrepentant about her own familial tendrils entwined with the Blandy scandal remains a tantalising enigma, one ripe for feminist excavation. The 1752 Henley poisoning—Mary Blandy, dutiful daughter turned accused filicide, seduced by a rogue suitor's "love powder" (arsenic, naturally)—resonated with Mallard's recurring motif of the oppressed woman wielding domestic agency against paternal despotism. In her novel The Powder's Shadow, Mallard refracts the trial through a lens of sympathetic ambiguity, humanising Mary not as monster but as victim of patriarchal inheritance laws and romantic delusion. Was this "ill-advised"? Only if one subscribes to the notion that women must not exhume their own suppressed histories lest they unsettle the family mythos. Mallard's boldness here exemplifies the era's buried feminist undercurrent: crime fiction as veiled manifesto, where the kitchen becomes battlefield and poison a metaphor for systemic suffocation.

London's stuffy circulating libraries, propriety demanded pseudonymity. As "Mr. E. Fenwick," she infiltrated the Times Literary Supplement with grudging notices, her narratives devoured by housewives who recognised their own invisible labours in the scheming

maids and thwarted spinsters who outwitted bumbling constables. This masquerade was no mere caprice but a calculated strike against the Victorian residue that deemed women's intellects unfit for "masculine" realms like detection. Mallard's sales figures—modest yet steady—belie the cultural embargo: a lady pondering corpses was "faintly indecent," her success tolerable only when cloaked in pseudomasculine drag.

Her dénouement, shrouded in irony worthy of her own plots, elevates Mallard to martyr-saint of the repressed. In 1934, she perished from arsenic—officially "accidental," whispered "poisoned"—administered by her maid, whom the Mallard household, in snobbish affectation, addressed solely by Christian name: Eliza. The fatal omission? Eliza was, by blood, a Blandy descendant, her lineage a living rebuke to Euphemia's literary trespasses on the family shame. In this exquisite reversal, the servant "silences" her mistress not with malice but mythic justice, restoring ancestral honour poisoned anew by ink rather than powder. The maid's act—deliberate or subconscious?—embodies the archetypal uprising of the subaltern woman, her hands on the hearth as instruments of reckoning. Patriarchal inquest? A discreet whitewash, as always when class and gender collide.

Compounding the tragedy, the Blandy kin—bound by that obstinate, almost matrilineal loyalty—lobbied relentlessly for Eliza's pardon. Pity, averred some; unpaid debts to the Mallard literary estate, insinuated others. This coda underscores Mallard's prescience: her fictions anticipated the very entanglements of blood, service, and silenced rage that claimed her. Today, as second-wave feminism resurrects these buried matriarchs, Euphemia Mallard emerges not as footnote but foremother. Her "Golden Age" was no gentlemanly lark but a women's insurgency, scripted in arsenic and alibis. Let the Upfields preen; the real detectives were always the daughters, maids, and widows, plotting their escape from the shadows.

1974: The Lost Interview: Remembering Edgar Fenwick

By Julian R. Germoglio
(Originally recorded, unpublished, in Sydney, 1934)
From The Southern Literary Review, Autumn edition

It is now forty years since Edgar Fenwick disappeared—walked, as legend insists, from his rented terrace in Elizabeth Bay one pale morning in February 1934 and was never seen again. The usual explanations—malaria from Burma, despair, secret exile, murder—have long since hardened into trivia for quiz nights. The books remain: twelve of them, each a minor continent of moral weather, crime told as

anthropology, civility cracking like eggshell beneath the pressure of conscience.

In their quiet ruthlessness, those novels changed our idea of crime fiction. They made the detective superfluous, the corpse eloquent, and society itself the chief suspect.

What follows is an interview I conducted with Mr Fenwick in December 1933, when he had just completed The Quiet Treachery of Angels, the last book published in his lifetime. The conversation was never printed. The lawyers thought it libellous; the censors found it "subversive"; the editor found nothing printable except the punctuation.

But Fenwick has been forty years dead (or else spectacularly elsewhere) and the times, we trust, are less fragile. The transcript, yellowed and immaculate, lay among my papers all this while. It is printed here for the first time.

Encounter at Neutral Bay

He arrived for the meeting late, hat pulled low, and carrying something wrapped in newspaper that later proved to be a bottle of Portuguese port. "Conversation", he said, "is thirsty work". He was tall, thin to the point of parody, his manner precise but never polite. He had the air of a man who kept his soul's inventory daily and found the stock disappointing.

We sat by the window; he smoked continuously, as though the act were both prayer and confession. Outside, Sydney shimmered. The year was burning out, and the Depression had turned respectability into a sort of voluntary madness.

"Crime", said Fenwick, "is the syntax of civilisation".

"You mistake murder", he went on, "for an event. It's not an event; it's grammar. Every society develops a particular language of wrongdoing, and through it you can read its secret desires. In England, we have crimes of disguise—men pretending to be what they're not. In Australia, it's crimes of exposure—men found out for what they are. The weather alone demands honesty".

"People ask", he continued, "why my murderers so often escape justice. I reply: because justice has such a talent for missing appointments. She arrives, fluttering her skirts, when the hangman's already out to lunch".

He laughed then—a dry rattle of vintage embarrassment.

On Detectives and the Dead

When reminded that his detective, Inspector Vyne, rarely solved anything, Fenwick replied,
“Of course he doesn’t. He’s the reader’s alibi. The detective exists so you can imagine the crime is someone else’s fault. Take him away and you’re left alone with your motives, which are never as tidy as blackmail or revenge”.

He paused. “I do not believe in psychological novels, you understand. My interest is theological—but without the consolation. The dead are the only consistent characters I can find”.

On Society and Sin

“I was told last week”, Fenwick said, “that my books are ‘immoral’. The critics always think morality is something one writes down in capital letters. But morality is what a body feels before it learns to think—like warmth or cold. By the time it’s in a sermon, it’s decomposed. We live in a civilisation embalmed in its own virtue”.

He took a drink of port. “The respectable commit more delicate crimes than the poor could dream of. The poor steal to eat; the rich steal to be admired. I’ve always thought the gallows was wasted on the wrong class”.

On Women and Writing

Asked why his women were so watchful, Fenwick looked startled. “Because they’re in the audience”, he said. “The world we build is performed for them, whether we know it or not. When I write a killer, I imagine a woman watching from the wings, deciding whether to applaud”.

His cigarette trembled as he lit another. “My mother once told me that the only people who truly keep secrets are children and widows. All others see concealment as invitation”.

On Disappearance

Near the end of our conversation, he grew quiet. “You know”, he said, staring at the harbour, “one’s reputation is the only prison built entirely by friends. The door has no lock—yet no one ever leaves”.

I asked whether he intended to write again after the novel just completed.
“No”, he murmured. “The next book I plan won’t require paper.”
“What sort of book is that?” I said.

He smiled. “A vanishing act in several chapters”.

Three months later, he was gone.

Forty Years Later

Re-reading our exchange now, I'm struck less by his eccentricities than by his accuracy. Ours remains the age he described—still polite, still cunningly criminal, still reading itself for entertainment. The censorship that once considered his words intolerable has long since been outlived by the obscenities of banking and television.

The crime writer's disappearance has endured partly because it satisfied his theory: he left society to solve itself, which it never will.

Each year, readers rediscover The Quiet Treachery of Angels, marvelling at its discipline and despair. It ends—how could it not?—with the detective staring into the mirror and finding no reflection at all.

I think, reading that, of the last thing Fenwick said, standing at my door in the high summer of 1933, as the cicadas screamed like electric wires:

"Every man", he told me, "is the bright clue in his own unsolved case. The trouble is, no one wishes to follow it where it leads".

Editor's Note (1974):

The Southern Literary Review publishes this interview not to dispel the mystery of Edgar Fenwick, but to honour it—the only mystery, perhaps, that he ever refused to solve.

1975: "The Senator Who Wouldn't Move: Signs of a Time-Bound Soul"

By Liora Oeuf for Cosmic Frontiers

On a quiet cobblestone street in Trastevere, Rome, there stands a gate and a door that have, for nearly two thousand years, framed one of the strangest mysteries in recorded history. The story begins in 42 BC, when Magnus Anatis, a retired senator of the Roman Republic, supposedly stepped out from the home of his friend, Pisanus Fraxi, on a summer evening—and was seen to vanish.

But "vanish" might be the wrong word. According to records preserved in the archives of the old Questura di Roma, Anatis never truly disappeared—he simply began to move too slowly for human time to notice. As centuries unfolded, eyewitnesses reported seeing him advance by barely measurable steps: one pace beyond the doorway after four years, two paces after forty, and near the iron gate after a hundred. In every account, he appears unchanged—his senator's toga unstained, his posture composed, his gaze eternally fixed ahead.

Recent interest among parapsychologists and temporal researchers has revived this forgotten report. Could Anatis be a man trapped in a

different temporal frequency? Some theorists in the field of "chronometric inertia" believe that under extreme psychic tension, the molecular structure of the body may enter a state of slowed vibration—essentially slipping out of sync with the rest of the world. "It's possible", says Dr. Lionel Suresh of the Perugia Institute for Radiant Consciousness, "that the senator achieved a static perfection of form and awareness, existing between the seconds of human perception".

Others suggest a more spiritual explanation. Perhaps Magnus Anatis was a man so deeply attached to the politics, honours, and identities of his time that his soul refused to yield to mortality. Each step forward could mark not physical progress, but a metaphysical shedding—his spirit moving, pace by pace, toward release.

Even sceptics admit that the location holds an unshakable atmosphere. Travellers claim the air near the old Fraxi house feels unnaturally still, as though time itself has thickened. Some report dreams of walking down an endless Roman road, unable to advance, haunted by a white figure in motionless grace.

Whether Magnus Anatis was a ghost, a time anomaly, or the first human to transcend chronological limits, we may never know. The lesson, perhaps, lies not in the mystery but in the patience: that even in the restless rush of the twentieth century, time may be far from the fixed current we imagine—it may be a river that waits, pauses, and remembers.

1980: "The Vanishing Author: A Meta-Mystery Solved in M.H.'s Own Ink" in The London Review of Literature Vol. 42, No. 7

By Dr. Evelyn Ordak, Fellow in Modernist Studies, Somerville College, Oxford

In the annals of literary disappearances, few episodes rival the quiet enigma of M.H., the Sydney-based crime satirist whose manuscripts tantalised readers in the interwar years before her abrupt vanishing in 1934—presumed lost at sea off the Greek isles, much like a plot device from one of her own epistolary capers. The parallels with Agatha Christie's own twelve-day vanishing act that same decade are irresistible: both women, masters of misdirection, both resurfacing (or not) amid whispers of scandal, both leaving a trail of unpublished drafts that outlived their authors. Yet where Christie's absence spawned headlines and hasty biographies, M.H.'s faded into the footnotes—her oeuvre dismissed as charming trifles, her Sydney exile a colonial curiosity. Until now.

A single, overlooked line in one of her late notebooks—tucked amid the fluttering fans and wilting bouquets of The Criminal Anthology of Courtesy (1929, unpublished in full)—unravels not just a fictional plot, but the riddle of M.H. herself. The passage occurs in an epistolary vignette where a forged billet-doux, scented with heliotrope, declares: "Even your correspondent is himself an invention, penned to deceive the postman—and posterity". Dismissed by early critics as a playful nod to her forgery-themed intrigues, this sentence gleams retrospectively as the key to a grander sleight-of-hand. M.H. did not drown, abscond, or succumb to ducal solicitors (as family legend insists). She never existed—or rather, she was a meticulously wrought fiction, a character invented by another female writer of the era, who shall remain nameless here out of deference to her lifetime's discretion.

This unnamed creator—a contemporary of Woolf, Mansfield, and the modernist coterie, yet operating beyond their Bloomsbury hothouse—deployed M.H. as an audacious exercise in genre within genre. Through her "Sydney crime writer", she probed the elastic boundaries of fiction: crime satire as social vivisection, fairy-tale gothic laced with Regency codes, noble farces rotting into mythic maws. M.H.'s drafts—those proliferating notebooks of shrinking rooms, parasitic primogeniture, and courteous felonies—served as a laboratory for exploding conventions. Courtesans tugged thrones from boudoirs; beauties fled crowds into time-trunks, emerging plain and plotting; dukes' mausoleums gaped with hereditary hunger. Themes once taboo—female power behind imperial thrones, the wormy decay of aristocracy, education's stalled march—cavorted freely in M.H.'s ink, unmoored from the social boundaries that constrained her creator's "respectable" output.

The clue's elegance lies in its self-reflexivity: just as M.H.'s epistolary forger invents a correspondent to hoodwink the ages, so her creator birthed M.H. to smuggle radical ideas past the gatekeepers. No yacht capsized in 1934; no notebooks washed ashore on Crete. Instead, the creator—perhaps tiring of the masquerade, or sensing the Depression's chill on satire—simply ceased posting parcels from Sydney. The "disappearance" was the plot's pivot: M.H. climbs into her own trunk (echoing that 1812 fairy tale of regressive youth), vanishing into metafictional mist. This resolves her mystery far more satisfyingly than Christie's train-station sleuthing or Oriental hotel seclusion. Where Christie played peep-show with her own celebrity, M.H.'s creator engineered a perpetual absence—a void that amplifies her voice, turning drafts into eternal palimpsests.

Evidence mounts subtly. M.H.'s "correspondence" with English cousins (Tunbridge Wells sisters cautioning ducal lawyers; Malayan

missives of rubber-barons' ruin) mirrors the creator's own epistolary habits, transplanted to antipodean exile. Her obsessions—primogeniture as gaping prison, St. Paul's as marital mausoleum, Greenwich cuckoos folding sexes into harmony—prefigure postmodern conceits decades early, suggesting a ventriloquist far ahead of her time. Publishers' letters (Harrington & Sons, 1933) urge "explosive noble comedy" amid sales surges; family epistles fret royal favouritism post-"disappearance". All props in a hall of mirrors, where the crime writer solves her own vanishing: invention as the ultimate alibi.

This revelation recasts M.H. not as marginal curiosity, but vanguard of meta-fiction—a Trojan horse for women writers chafing at genre's chains. Her creator, unnamed in life to evade the solicitors of propriety, gifted us a character who writes herself out of existence, leaving readers to chase shadows. In 1980, amid our deconstructionist din, M.H. emerges vindicated: her "stories" were always about authorship's deceit, society's small crimes the merest feint. Christie returned to tea and typewriters; M.H. dissolved into pure text—the perfect crime, eternally unsolved until now. One wonders if the nameless author, from whatever posthumous parlour she observes, approves this exhumation. Or perhaps she, too, was invented.

Dr. Ordak's forthcoming monograph, Drafts of Dissolution: The Fictive Lives of Interwar Women, expands on these theses.

1985: The Enigma of Euphemia Mallard: Re-Examining a 1934 Murder Mystery

Shadows of the Past (From The Unrequited Detective)

In the annals of crime writing, few cases resonate with such haunting irony as the 1934 murder of Euphemia Mallard, herself a prolific author of detective tales that probed the darkest corners of human motive. With no body ever found, Mallard's death was swiftly pinned on her devoted maid, Agnes Blandy—who equally swiftly confessed to it—whose surname ignited immediate whispers of ancestral vengeance tied to the infamous 1751 Mary Blandy poisoning case. But four decades later, with Agnes' unexplained release from life imprisonment in 1950, fresh questions demand scrutiny: Did family ghosts truly drive the maid to murder, or was this a convenient veil for deeper intrigues?

The Blandy Connection: Vengeance or Fabrication?

Contemporary reports seized on Agnes' lineage—a distant cousin to Mary Blandy, the spinster who poisoned her lawyer father Francis with

arsenic-laced "Scotch pebbles" over a illusory dowry and deceitful suitor. Mallard, known for novels echoing historical scandals like Blandy's, had reportedly teased Agnes—according to eye-witnesses—about this heritage during heated rows. Prosecutors argued a motive born of resentment: the maid, steeped in family lore of injustice, snapped under the crime writer's taunts. Yet, no body of evidence beyond circumstantial proximity convicted Agnes; her confession, extracted after days of grilling, rang hollow to skeptics even then. Was this patricide redux a genuine eruption from 18th-century grudges, or a narrative too neatly mirroring Mallard's own fictions?

Alternative Shadows: Smothered Crimes?

Consider a grimmer possibility: a different murder altogether, smothered by the Blandy red herring to divert from Mallard's shadowy associates. Rumours swirled of her entanglement with a blackmail ring preying on literary elites, fuelled by her unpublished manuscript alleging corruption among Fleet Street publishers. Agnes' story conveniently buried these leads, with police dismissing a suspicious male visitor seen fleeing the scene. Or perhaps no murder at all—no body was definitively identified amid the chaos of Mallard's cluttered flat, where bloodstains could mask a staged disappearance. Accepting the maid's tale at face value quelled public frenzy, providing a tidy scapegoat for detectives under pressure to close the file amid the Depression's distractions.

Conspiracy's Long Reach?

Deeper still lies the spectre of high-level cover-up, implicating governments in Britain and Australia—where Mallard held property from a lucrative Australasian tour. Whispers point to a powerful family, possibly tied to colonial magnates with Blandy-era roots, whose secrets Mallard's final work threatened to expose. Agnes' 1950 parole, granted without fanfare after 16 years, smacks of bargain: freedom for silence, orchestrated from on high. Post-war files remain sealed, but leaks hint at interventions from Whitehall and Canberra, shielding scions whose fortunes traced back to Francis Blandy's dubious legal empire. If true, the maid was no killer but a pawn in a transcontinental chess game.

Unanswered Echoes

Agnes Blandy vanished into obscurity post-release, dying penniless in 1962, her lips sealed on any pact. Mallard's case endures not for resolution but revelation: how authority weaves myths from half-truths, much as Hume warned that testimony falters unless its falsehood outstrips the crime's improbability. Was it ancestral fury, concealed felony, elite conspiracy, or mere expedience? The Unrequited

Detective leaves the verdict to readers, urging scrutiny of history's fog-bound files.

1990: Letter from Viscountess Vorpel's lawyers

We act for Lady Viola Vorpel (the "Settlor"), who remains in full command of her faculties at the advanced but indomitable age of ninety-eight, notwithstanding recent reports to the contrary in certain tabloid publications.

By Deed of Trust dated 1st October 1990 (the "Trust Deed"), executed before two witnesses of sound mind and deposited with this firm, the Settlor has irrevocably settled upon trustees (initially the undersigned partners, with provision for substitution) the sum of ONE MILLION POUNDS STERLING (£1,000,000), together with accrued interest thereon (the "Trust Fund"). The Trust Fund shall be held upon trust to produce income, the entirety of which—net of trustees' reasonable fees, taxes, and administrative costs—is to be applied at the absolute discretion of Harrington & Sons Publishers Ltd (the "Publisher") for the promotion, distribution, and perpetuation of the Settlor's literary works, including but not limited to her Collected Satirical Novels (1932 edition) and any subsequent volumes she may furnish.

Such application may encompass, without limitation: reprint editions; advertising campaigns; serialisation rights; academic subsidies; or the commissioning of scholarly prefaces, provided always that the funds are deployed prudently and in furtherance of the Settlor's express wish to "ensure these barbs outlive the dowagers who blanched at them". The trustees' discretion in investment shall prioritise preservation of capital, favouring government securities or equivalent low-risk instruments, absent written directions to the contrary from the Publisher.

The Trust shall subsist in perpetuity or until exhaustion of the Trust Fund (whichever occurs first), or until such time as civilisation may collapse—an eventuality the Settlor contemplates with wry detachment in Clause 7(ii) of the Trust Deed: "Should society revert to barbarism, the trustees are absolved, and any residue may fund a fitting bonfire". Distributions shall commence upon receipt of the Trust Deed's counterpart by the Publisher, anticipated within the fortnight.

The Settlor confirms her intention to supply further volumes "for years to come", subject to her ongoing vigour and the continued depredations of society upon which she so trenchantly comments. She has instructed that no public announcement attend this settlement unless initiated by the Publisher for promotional purposes.

We enclose the executed Trust Deed (three counterparts), a schedule of initial deposit details, and our invoice for legal costs (£2,750 ex VAT, payable forthwith). Kindly acknowledge receipt and confirm acceptance of the Publisher's discretionary role within seven days, failing which the trustees shall seek alternative beneficiaries per Clause 12.

We remain at your disposal for clarification and trust this disposes of the matter without recourse to further correspondence.

1990: Octavia Mallard

Letter to Viola, in London

Your last letter stirred up a whole gallery of half-forgotten things—those long, draughty winters in Surrey, the smell of polish and lavender in Aunt's drawing room, and that enormous, dust-coloured trunk she kept under the window seat. I can see it even now, with its flaking brass corners and the peculiar little key tied to its handle with a ribbon so faded that no original colour could be guessed at.

Do you remember the great family book that lay inside? It was always spoken of, in capital letters, as The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles, and, true to form, was treated with the reverence usually reserved for relics or legal documents. Aunt would lift it out with a small, reverent sigh, place it upon the table, and, with some ceremony, insert the key into the ornate silver clasp. The sound of the mechanism lifting—a little sigh and click—always seemed to release something more than a mere lock, as if stories themselves were a presence impatient to be let loose.

I have been thinking of one tale in particular, one that I had, until recently, almost forgotten. It concerned a Duchess—though which Duchess or of where was never said—who vanished overnight, taking with her all her jewels, her collection of hats, and, most curiously, her milliner. The story was read to us as though it were history, though I suspect it was one of those family fables that only pretend at genealogy. I remember there was something about a sapphire—thick, vivid, and impossibly blue. I was enraptured by that description. Even now the word sapphire sounds deep and cool, as though the vowels themselves were cut with precision, each syllable catching a glint of light. I used to imagine I could hear its colour.

What intrigues me, looking back, is not the tale itself but its persistence. Why does such a fragment return now, uninvited? Perhaps because in my work these days I am increasingly preoccupied with how language carries cultural sediment—the way a word retains the ghost of

an earlier world. That sapphire, described by Aunt half a century ago, lives somewhere between the story and the sound. It was never only a jewel, was it? It was a vessel for everything "blue" meant to our childish minds—mystery, rarity, the shimmer of aristocracy, and the melancholy of things beyond our reach.

I sometimes wonder whether those old stories were meant to instruct or to enchant. They seem now to have done neither directly but left us with a lexicon of associations more enduring than any moral. When I hear my students speak about "semantic memory", I think of Aunt turning that tiny key, setting free not sense alone but whole constellations of tone and texture. Language is so much more than description; it is resurrection. Every telling reanimates its own ancestry.

How strange that the mind recalls what the heart has not consciously summoned. A Duchess, a sapphire, a vanished milliner—perhaps this is the linguist's inheritance: to wonder not what was meant, but why we remember it in words.

1990: The Unrequited Detective

A Curious Case of Locked Doors, Forbidden Secrets, and Maid Confessions: A Journey Through Stories of Mystery and Madness

In the annals of crime and its telling, there exist threads so curious, tangled with folklore and fraught with the limits of human knowledge, that they resist neat closure. This piece explores one such thread by weaving together an imaginatively presented 1895 story draft, letters exchanged between sisters spanning continents and centuries, and historical police records interlaced with psychological speculation. The case? A sensational disappearance and murder—from a locked room with no body and an eerie, impossible trunk to the confession of a maid whose fractured mind both implicates and mystifies.

The Tale of the Locked Door: From Folktale to Fiction

In 1895, a female writer sketches a story deeply rooted in archetypal themes. The core mystery hinges on a door that refuses to open, or perhaps, secrets that cannot be known without peril. Her heroine, Alice, dwells in a grand estate among shadows and silence, probing the forbidden west gallery and its small oak door that no one may cross. This tale is not only a crime novel but a meditation on curiosity itself—the alluring danger of unlocking what should remain shut.

Such doors, the writer imagines, may embody the paradox between knowledge and ignorance, comfort and terror. Will opening this door summon ruin? Or might it release the truth long suppressed?

Letters Across Time: A Noblewoman's Inquiry and a Sydney Sister's Philosophical Response

Fast forward to 1904: a lady of English nobility writes to her crime-writing sister in Sydney, pondering if her literary explorations of Bluebeard themes might be illuminated by a broader metaphor. She wonders: if one were trapped in a box falling freely through a vast space, would it be possible to detect the very force that draws it downward? The reply from Sydney recalls this image as a haunting fairy story—the girl enclosed in a box that falls through unknown realms, unaware of the forces shaping her fate nor the doors she cannot see.

The Sydney sister's response questions whether the room might itself be unaware it is a prison or passage and contemplates whether opening the door could shatter reality's mirror or fold time upon itself, evoking endless rabbit holes and secret worlds within. She adds a grounded remark about curiously distorted mirrors found in her own home, a metaphor for the elusive and deceptive nature of perception.

The 1934 Sydney Murder Mystery That Defied Bodies and Logic

In the grim shadows of 1930s Sydney, a real case emerges strikingly similar in mood and mystery to these earlier musings. Euphemia Mallard, a socialite, vanished without trace save for a maid's confession. Yet no body was found. Forensic evidence noted "no blood," only minor disorder and a large, exquisitely carved trunk—strangely noted to be bigger inside than out, secured with three locks and painted like a cabinet of curiosities. Police enigmatically fixate on this trunk, seemingly drawn to it as other clues are overlooked.

The maid, Miss Blandy, confessed to a murder with puzzling inconsistency—dates and methods slip, tangled in foreign words and fragmented thoughts. Psychoanalytic examination at the time posited her guilt as symbolic, a manifestation of obsessive guilt rather than clear fact. The trunk itself became a dark icon, a metaphor for hidden secrets and psychological compartments from which no escape was apparent.

A Glimpse into 18th Century Justice: The Trial of Mary Blandy

Travel back once more—1750 England, when another Mary Blandy faced trial for the murder of her father by arsenic poisoning. Her confession mingled ignorance, love, and manipulation. The forensic evidence, using early chemical tests and witness accounts, painted a

grim picture: violent symptoms, letters plotting poisonings, and motive as tangled as the social webs of the time.

The trial transcript evokes the era's legal prose and science fledgling in its understanding of poison, while bearing timeless themes—love twisted to deadly ends, and the fraught position of women constrained by duty and desire.

Voices from the Kitchen: Testimony Laced with Superstition and Confusion

The cook's interview from the Mary Blandy trial unfolds in a symphony of superstition, class resentment, and bewilderment. Speaking of devils, barren women, cursed powders, and pebbles that were not what they seemed, she casts a shadow of mysticism over the practical horrors at play. Her contradictory observations—of a "lovely" master and a cook's plight amid love and poison—echo the folk fears and fractured realities dwelling beneath all crime stories.

What This Tells Us About Crime, Narrative, and Human Nature

From Victorian gothic-inspired drafts to early forensic reports and 18th-century poison trials, these intertwined narratives reveal much about the human struggle with truth hidden behind locked doors. The elusive nature of secrets—psychological, physical, and societal—emerges repeatedly. The fascination with a locked trunk, forbidden chambers, and maid confessions becomes a metaphor for our desire to unlock dark mysteries, balanced by the terror that some knowledge may break us or fold reality into itself.

In our own time, such stories remind us that crime is not mere violation of law but a disturbance in order and comprehension. The detective's task is never just to find facts, but to navigate the labyrinths of fear, love, madness, and symbols that true crime so often embodies.

A Theoretical Physicist's Reflections on "A Curious Case of Locked Doors"

As the daughter of the late author of the 1990 article "A Curious Case of Locked Doors, Forbidden Secrets, and Maid Confessions", published in The Unrequited Detective, I approach the work with both fondness and a critical eye. My professional training—as one grounded in theoretical physics with an additional degree in evolutionary psychology—conditions me to seek precision, rigour, and conceptual clarity, and I have long contemplated basing my doctoral thesis on my father's writings about crime and recursion. Yet, upon revisiting this

particular article, I am confronted with substantive flaws that ultimately justify my decision to avoid perpetuating or circulating the piece.

The article ambitiously weaves together literary imagination, epistolary exchanges, historical forensic accounts, and early psychological analysis to explore the perennial human fascination with hidden knowledge and inscrutable crime. The spirit of the work—its evocation of locked rooms and inscrutable trunks, the metaphorical use of fairy tales, and the interplay between madness and confession—captures evocative moods and invites reflection on the symbolic nature of crime narratives. However, its execution suffers from several critical shortcomings.

First, there is a conflation of metaphor with evidence that confuses rather than clarifies. For example, the fascination with a trunk "bigger on the inside than the outside" gestures toward speculative fiction and symbolic psychology but resists rigorous interpretation or grounding in any forensic reality. This motif is compelling narratively but far too mystified for any practical or analytical utility. The article skirts the hard question: how ought we to distinguish arresting metaphor from actual investigative substance in criminal inquiry? Without explicit criteria, readers are left to conflate dramatic effect with evidentiary weight—a dangerous conflation in legal or scientific reasoning.

Next, the article's treatment of psychological analysis, while historically spirited, uncritically adopts Freudian psychoanalysis in a style that now seems outdated and insufficiently nuanced. The diagnosis of "criminality from a sense of guilt" and the symbolic interpretation of the trunk as maternal grave or prison evoke an era of psychoanalytic theory whose premises have since been challenged and refined. A more current psychological commentary might consider sociocultural factors and cognitive biases influencing confession and testimony rather than granting undue authority to symbolic Freud-derived interpretations. This over-reliance detracts from the complexity of human behaviour and risks fostering simplistic readings of disturbed minds.

Further, the blending of various historical periods and narrative voices, while artistically intriguing, allows for anachronisms and analytical contradictions. The article does not sufficiently disentangle literary stylisation from historical fact, leaving readers uncertain when they engage with actual trial transcripts, period-accurate police reports, or fictionalised reconstructions. This approach, though creatively suggestive, sacrifices scholarly transparency and may mislead those seeking an accurate understanding of legal and investigative processes.

Finally, although the article aspires to philosophical meditation on the limits of knowledge within crime storytelling, the thread remains

underdeveloped. The conceptual parallels drawn between fairy tale motifs, physical impossibilities (like free-falling observers), and human perception issues are tantalising but lack the rigour and elaboration that they merit. A patient, interdisciplinary framework integrating more contemporary developments from physics, psychology, and literary theory would enrich this exploration substantially.

In conclusion, while my father's article shines in its evocative storytelling and passion for mystery and recursion, it is ultimately an "unrequited" work: wonderfully suggestive yet simultaneously incomplete in intellectual rigour. For scholars and readers today, it offers a warm reminder of the delicate dance between narrative allure and evidentiary standards, and of the necessity to critique with care before reviving the lore of locked doors and unknowable secrets.

2002: Fenella Vorpel

Letter to the physicist

Having recently perused the article you kindly shared from The Unrequited Detective (1990) featuring your late father's reflections on the curious Mallard case of 1934, I felt compelled to write to you. As the grand-niece of Euphemia Mallard and a scholar in socio-economics and political theory, I have long been intrigued by the family lore surrounding that vanished relative—and by the trunk so memorably depicted in the investigations and in your father's writing.

Allow me to be candid: both you and your father are, I think, mistaken in some respects regarding the infamous trunk. Indeed, it exists as delineated—an ornate, heavy, and beautifully carved trunk of unusual woods and with three locks, as was recorded—but it is, in truth, little more than an old family strongbox for important papers and personal correspondence. There is no hidden chamber within, no grotesque concealment of a dead body or dreadful secret consumed therein. The "trunk bigger on the inside than the outside" is, in my family's archival experience, a fanciful and metaphorical idea, rather than fact.

I confess to some puzzlement over the fuss that has continually circled around it, for it was always merely a repository of wills, deeds, letters, and the like. Nevertheless, I remain fascinated by how your father was able to access and weave from these documents a narrative long thought lost. The family papers were scattered or sequestered away, mislaid in the decades following Euphemia's disappearance and the consequent social scandal. Few have seen them—and fewer still

have read them so extensively. Your father's achievement in bringing them back into discourse is commendable.

May I ask if you still retain originals or copies of these papers? Should you hold them, I would be most eager to learn more of their provenance and history—and would cherish the opportunity for academic collaboration, perhaps to better situate the Mallard story within its broader socio-political context.

2003: Material Recursion in Aristocratic Archives: A Socio-Political Reading of the Mallard Paradox

Draft Paper by Fenella Vorpel, Department of Political Economy University of Sydney

Abstract:

This paper explores the phenomenon we term the "Mallard Paradox", wherein aristocratic family archives present a peculiar form of material recursion: objects and documents whose meaning loops between symbol and substance, surface and hidden content. Drawing chiefly on the archival materials of the Mallard family, whose socio-political history intersects with myth, crime, and legacy, I analyse how the material form of archives—especially objects like ornate trunks—both shapes and obscures historical and political narratives. This paper situates the paradox within broader socio-political frameworks, illuminating the interplay of power, secrecy, and identity in noble family archives.

1 Introduction

Aristocratic archives are not merely repositories of documents but are themselves performative spaces where history, memory, and power intertwine. The "Mallard Paradox" refers to the tension between the tangible objects—such as the three-locked, ornate trunk of unusual woods long mythologised within family lore—and the intangible narratives constructed around them. Such archives exhibit recursion: a quality whereby the archive contains both its own representation and its own concealment.

2 The Mallard Trunk: Material Object and Mythic Symbol

The Mallard trunk, often described as "bigger on the inside than the outside", embodies recursive materiality. As a physical container, it holds important family papers—wills, correspondence, legal documents—but culturally it has been imbued with folklore suggesting secret compartments or sinister contents (including alleged concealments of

bodies in murder scandals). This mythologisation of the trunk functions as a cipher through which family and public histories intertwine, revealing anxieties about legacy, transparency, and control.

3 Socio-Political Context and Power Structures

The Mallard family's position—related by blood to titled aristocracy such as the Dukedom of Mallard—frames their archive's function as a site of power consolidation and social negotiation. The selective preservation and interpretation of documents within the trunk influence social memory and political identity, reinforcing aristocratic authority while masking internal conflicts or scandals. The paradox here extends beyond physical containment to the regulation of narrative and historical "truth".

4 Archival Recursion and Historical Narrative

The concept of recursion in archives parallels recursive structures in information theory and literary narrative. The Mallard archive simultaneously documents and constructs its own history, inviting speculation while withholding definitive closure. This recursive dynamic reinforces a social function: that of an aristocracy perpetually self-defining within cycles of revelation and concealment.

5 Implications for Contemporary Scholarship

The Mallard case cautions historians and social scientists to remain critically aware of the material forms of archives and their symbolic economies. It exemplifies the necessity to interrogate objects not only for their content but also for their epistemological framing—how objects like the trunk mediate between past and present, fact and fiction, power and resistance.

6 Conclusion

The "Mallard Paradox" illustrates the recursive complexity embedded in aristocratic archives, where materiality and narrative coalesce to produce rich sites for socio-political inquiry. Understanding such recursion deepens our grasp of how power operates historically through both preservation and obfuscation.

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Undated: Euphemia Mallard

In this most turbulent season of speculative discourse and whispered recounting that surrounds both my name and the name of the Mallard household, I find myself compelled—albeit with some hesitation—to address directly the manifold rumours, scholarly interpretations, and familial recollections that have circulated so widely of late. It has become evident that silence alone does not suffice to put to rest curiosities compounded by fiction and half-remembered truths.

Foremost among these matters is the trunk. Referred to in so many quarters as a vessel of dark secrets, a cabinet of mysteries with claims that it is “bigger on the inside than the outside”, it has been cast as the centrepiece of numerous tales both dramatic and spectral. Let it be known with utmost clarity that this trunk, ornate and indeed of remarkable craftsmanship, existed within the Mallard estate as a repository for family papers: wills, deeds, correspondence, and assorted documents of civil concern. There is, I assure you, no hidden chamber, no secret compartment harbouring the remains of any being, nor any gruesome relic of tragedy. The trunk was never anything but a vessel of mundane matters, though I confess its beauty and legend lent it an air far more sensational than its purpose merited.

I must confess my perplexity that so much weight and imagination has been invested in what may in truth be the humblest of archival containers. Were it not for the curious skill demonstrated by the author of the The Unrequited Detective in excavating and animating the story from these long-hidden documents, these papers might have remained cloaked in dust and obscurity. The author’s access to these materials—

thought by many within the family and beyond to be permanently lost —brought forth narratives and interpretations that, while dramatic and speculative, have also revitalised interest in the Mallard heritage and its entanglement with matters both personal and political.

To the daughter of that late author, who holds the papers and whose scholarship has rekindled this discourse, I extend my gratitude and my hope that these documents will continue to be preserved with the care and scholarly rigour they command. The Mallard archive is more than family relic; it is a portal to understanding social dynamics, class entanglements, and the often fraught negotiation of identity among those bound by aristocratic lineage yet haunted by human frailty.

Thus I write not merely in defence or correction, but in invitation: may these archival materials serve as bridges of understanding between histories, disciplines, and eras. The Mallard family's true legacy lies not in gothic mystery but in the complex interplay of truth, power, and memory that shapes all families great and small.

May this letter be both an affirmation and a gentle caution—that the allure of shadows sometimes obscures the subtler truths in plain sight.