

## ***The Great Hotel Murder* by Vincent Starrett**

### **A Review by Dean Richardson**

Vincent Starrett is perhaps most widely known among Sherlockians for his poem, “221-B,” his pioneering biographical study, *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* (1933; rev., 1960), his masterful pastiche, “The Adventure of the Unique Hamlet,” and as a cofounder of the Baker Street Irregulars, but his accomplishments, range, and influence are much wider: journalist, poet, essayist, bookman (both as collector and critic), novelist, and writer of mysteries and a few supernatural stories. He created several continuing characters, most notably gentleman detective Jimmy Lavender in a series of mystery stories stretching from 1921 to 1964.

*The Great Hotel Murder* began life as a Jimmy Lavender story, “Recipe for Murder” (1934), according to Otto Penzler in his introduction to that story in his *The Big Book of Reel Murders*. Fox Film Corporation (not yet 20th Century Fox) bought it for adaptation, and at the same time Starrett expanded it into novel form, using the same title and protagonist as the resulting movie, *The Great Hotel Murder* (both 1935). The movie (available on Youtube) begins like the novel, but the tone is more humorous (i.e, wise cracks and slapstick), the plot is much simpler, most of the characters are different or have different names, and the resolution is rushed and abrupt (possibly a problem with the print). The only thing all three have in common is a scene in a nightclub. I will say the original story is clever and Lavender is a colorful detective.

So, what about the novel? The plot, of course, is more complex with a larger cast and greater variety of settings. It begins with the discovery of a man’s body in a Chicago hotel room, victim of poison, but was it suicide or murder? Then it’s discovered that he, Chambers, had swapped rooms with another man, Dr. Trample, the night before. If it was murder, which was the intended victim? Enter Riley Blackwood, theater critic and amateur detective, at the request of the hotel owner, to find answers without publicity. Further revelations complicate things. (Why did the victim use an assumed name? Why were there binoculars on the floor?) Theories abound and developments invalidate them. Character relationships keep changing. All standard classic mystery tropes, but still engaging. The writing is witty, the characters interesting, the plot well paced and well developed.

While Starrett was a great admirer and exponent of Conan Doyle, this novel is more a product of its time, the 1930s, in the heart of the Golden Age of the Mystery. I have been reading the Ellery Queen novels of that era, and I find this book has much in common with those, particularly in its amateur detective protagonist. Like Ellery, Riley is tall, slender, wears distinctive glasses (his horn-rimmed, Ellery’s pince-nez), and can be arrogant and sarcastic (hmm, not unlike Sherlock). But he’s far more personable and physically active, and a bit less analytical, although he does work out the mystery a little ahead of the police and the reader. (Riley appeared in one more mystery, *Midnight and Percy Jones* [1938]).

In short, this mystery is an engrossing read and great fun. It is part of the Otto Penzler Presents American Mystery Classics series, which is reprinting Golden Age mysteries (1920s–1940s) by such masters as Ellery Queen, John Dickson Carr, Erle Stanley Gardner, Charlotte Armstrong, et al. All are well worth your time, especially the October 2020 release, *The Case of the Baker Street Irregulars* by Anthony Boucher (1940).