

## Fiction Within Fiction as Means of Extreme Realism : The Case of "Death and the Dancing Footman" By N. Marsh

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### Abstract

Dame Ngaio Edith Marsh (1899-1982), a writer of detective fiction, was born at Christchurch, New Zealand. Her hero, Chief Detective Inspector Roderick Alleyn, appears in her first novel, A Man Lay Dead (1934), and in subsequent novels including Death and the Dancing Footman (1942). She wrote twenty detective novels.

The Dancing Footman, Thomas, listening to a playful song from the smoking-room's radio where William lay dead after being killed by his brother, Nicholas, provides the most suspected guest at Highfold with badly needed alibi. The murderer, Nicholas, plans an almost perfect crime, but the dance of this footman spoils his scheme. When Alleyn and his group of policemen stage a show in which there is a reconstruction of the murder, Nicholas collapses, and tries to escape, hits Bailey, Alleyn's finger-print specialist, but they overpower him and take him away with the two corpses of his mother and brother.

In the critical controversy over realism and romanticism, William Dean Howells wrote an appraisal of

*Realism is nothing more and nothing less than the truthful treatment of material, and Jane Austen was the first and the last of the English novelists to treat material with entire truthfulness.* (Current-Garcia and Patrick,46)

In other words, fiction, even though dealing with purely imaginary persons and events, should present a world recognizably similar to the world we experience through our senses; and in this sense, Jane Austen was the first of the truth-tellers, but might not have been the last. Not only does Ngaio Marsh (1899-1982) refer to Jane Austen's Northanger Abbey in her novel, Death and the Dancing Footman (1942) (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, Ltd, 1954, p.196), but her fidelity to truth rivals that of Miss Austen, despite the fact that she wrote

Jane Austen and other English fiction-writers, in which he stated:

mainly detective fiction; this novel corroborates the fact.

In her natural aptitude for truth-telling, Marsh shows, ironically, indications of the influence of two lady-novelists, Jane Austen and Agatha Christie, both English writers. The influence of Miss Austen does not only show in her brief reference to her work, but in other respects, as well: her "drawing-room" fiction, human relationships, especially within the family, with spates of outdoor outings and descriptions of nature, benignly beautiful and furiously rainy and stormy. Jane Austen, like her English predecessors, uses fiction within fiction to buttress her realism, indirectly and imperceptibly, by referring to fiction-writers and their

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work. Virtually, the purpose of Northanger Abbey (1818) is to ridicule the popular tales of romance and terror, such as Mrs Radcliffe's Mysteries of Adolpho (1794), and to contrast them with the normal realities of life.

In Pride and Prejudice (1813) Mr Collins, a cousin of the Bennets

*but on beholding it, (for everything announced it to be from a circulating library,) he started back begging pardon, protested that he never read a novel.... Other books were produced, and after some deliberations he chose Fordyce's Sermons. (Pride and Prejudice, London: Everyman's Library, 1965, p. 57)*

This reference to works of fiction creates the sensation that one is reading a private history or memoir, and not an imaginative, creative work of fiction; and this has become a convention since (and perhaps earlier) Geoffrey Chaucer (c.1342-1400) who wrote The Canterbury Tales (1387), a frame story of a collection of tales related by pilgrims in their progress to Canterbury. The host of these pilgrims,

*He seyde, "Sin I shall begin the game,  
What, welcome be the cut, a Goddes name!  
Now let us ryde, and herkneth what I seye."*

*And with that word we ridden forth our weye,  
And he bigan with right a myrie chere*

*His tale anon, and seyde in this manere. (F W Robinson, "The Prologue" to "The Canterbury Tales", London: Pan Educational Books, 1976, p. 23)*

So, Chaucer is a mere reporter, re-telling the proceedings of these pilgrims' progress to Canterbury; before Chaucer, Boccaccio (1313-1375) wrote his The Decameron which deeply influenced Chaucer and later, The Arabian Nights Entertainments or The Thousand and One Nights, became known in Europe by the translation of Antoine Galland (1646-1715). (Drabble and Stringer, 20)

The frame tale of Chaucer includes twenty-nine pilgrims to become thirty one after they leave Tibard Inn in Southwark, and Ngaio Marsh's eight guests who are invited to Highfold by their host Jonathan Royal, do not tell a story (though some do

and much hated inheritor of their estate, Longbourn, by entail, comes on a visit and is asked by Mr Bennet to read aloud for the young girls; Mr Collins readily assents and a book is produced;

Harry Bailey, proposes that they should shorten the road by telling four stories each, two on the way to Canterbury and two on the way back; he is to accompany them and award a free supper on their return to the teller of the best story. Chaucer himself tells only two stories, and thus deluding his audience into believing the frame story to be actual history; his knight ends The Prologue thus:

relate incidents), but perform their idiosyncratic roles in a "human drama", indited and enacted with flesh and blood. Quite interestingly, Death and the Dancing Footman (henceforward "DF") has various affinities with Shakespeare's Hamlet (1602); fratricide is the central crime around which everything revolves in both works. Fratricide, as old a theme as Abel and Cain, sons of Adam and Eve, is the common theme that links Shakespeare's drama with Marsh's dramatic novel. Hamlet acts as his own private detective to find out the truth of the story told by the ghost of his own late father, that Claudius, his own brother has assassinated him to assume

the throne and marry his widow, Gertrude. There are many indications of this treachery, and not least of them is the hurried marriage of the suspected perpetrators of this crime, but he wants a better and more concrete evidence.

So Hamlet resorts to an old-modern police technique called "reconstruction" of the crime in which the suspect and his collaborators are obliged to re-enact their foul play; he welcomes a troupe of visiting players,

*I have heard*

*That guilty creatures sitting at a play*

*Have by the very cunning of the scene*

*Been struck so to the soul that presently*

*They have proclaimed their malefactions;*

*For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak*

*With most miraculous organ. (Hamlet, Act II, Scene 2, ll617-623)*

His conclusion: "*the play is the thing/ wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king,*" (Hamlet, II, 2, ll 633-634) fits, most aptly, the reconstruction of the murder of William Compline by his younger, vicious brother, Nicholas. The difference, of course, is a very modern one; the lady whom Nicholas desires is an enchanting, married woman, Madam Lisse, who tries to indict her own husband, Dr Francis

*She thought I killed William Compline and that when I was hanged she would wait for a discreet period and then marry his brother. She will now strain every nerve to disassociate herself with the brother. (Dancing Footman, 306)*

Now Madam Hart does not have to "*wait for a discreet time*", for her lover collapses at the end of the police reconstruction of the crime, and

*[Nicholas] was almost knocked over. Nicholas had stumbled towards*

*the door where he was checked by Bailey. He struck at Bailey, turned*

*into the hall where Alleyn barred the way. Nicholas mouthed at him. (DF, 304)*

This is the tragic end of Jonathan's idea of a dramatic party in the form of a "*human drama*" for the benefit of

*That was my plan. I thought Aubrey might make a poetic drama of it. I'm a mischievous, selfish fellow, trying to amuse myself and never thinking-just as you said, my dear. (DF, 315)*

Jonathan Royal, an elderly myopic gentleman, inheritor of Highfold, suffers from boredom and plans to "amuse" himself by inviting

and arranges a performance of a play ("the Mouse-trap") about fratricide. Claudius breaks off, in apparently guilty and fearful fury, when the actor Lucranus appears to murder his uncle by pouring poison into his ear. Hamlet fulminates against the "bloody, bawdy villain!" to end with a fact that has proved to be the undoing of many "Remorseless, treacherous, kindless villain[s]": Hamlet tells the troupe:

Hart, an Austrian Jew, for the murder of William; thus, when he is hanged she would be free to marry her lover, Nicholas, who has already murdered his own brother, to become rich by entail of Penfelton. But this lady, a femme fatale of a sort, is more circumspect and wiser than the mother queen of Hamlet; Hart tells Alleyn, Ngaio Marsh's version of Sherlock Holmes:

tries to escape; listening to the song that has been the concomitant to his fratricide in Jonathan's smoking-room,

Aubrey Mandrake to compose a poetic drama, based on it. He tells his cousin, Lady Hersey, penitently:

eight quests to a week-end party. At the beginning he is extremely pleased with what he calls "My Idea", and while contemplating his idea he sings:

"Il était une bergère/ Qui ron-ton-ton.

*He moved his head from side to side, in time with his tune, and owing to a trick of the firelight on his thick-lensed glasses, he seemed to have large white eyes that gleamed like those of the dead drummer in the Ingoldsby Legends. (DF, 10)*

In this same mood of delight and delicious expectancy, he briefs his butler, Caper, to take good care of his guests' welfare, for "*Much depends upon it. There must be a warmth, a feeling of festivity, of anticipation, of-*

*Mrs Compline, Mr Nicholas and Mr William Compline, Dr Francis Hart, Madame Lisse, Miss Wynne, Lady Hersey Amblington, and Mr Mandrake. Eight. Mr Mandrake tonight, the rest for dinner tomorrow.* (DF, 11)

Mandrake comes earlier, for as a poetic dramatist he is going to act as an intelligent audience (DF, 17) to Jonathan's party, witness, participant, consultant who warns Jonathan that his party is leading to "*stark murder*" (DF, 23), and, in short, a chorus. Jonathan expatiates on his idea to Mandrake (for the benefit of the greater audience, the readers) that his "*play will be less pretty but more exciting*", (DF, 27); he himself acts as "*Compere. Part of my business is to unlock the cupboards and show the fears to be less terrible in*

*I would set my palette with human colours and the picture would paint itself. I would summon my characters to the theatre of my own house and the drama would unfold itself.* (DF, 16)

Mandrake at once jumps to the conclusion that it is Pirandello with his six characters in search of an author, but Jonathan's riposte is : "*as author who has deliberately summoned seven characters to do his work for him.*" (DF, 16)

So Jonathan Royal is not a mere host at his own house, Highfold, but a compere of a drama whose players are antagonistic to each other; he tells Mandrake: "*I found my seven characters. And since I must have an audience...I invited an eighth guest-yourself.*" (DF,17). He is unmarried, well-off, secure in his fine house and large estate. His interests are, among other things, the support of surrealist

Petit pat-a plan."

*go so far- of positive luxury.*" To ensure this he enumerates his guests by name, adding "*the party may be a little sticky at first. I regard it as an experiment.*" He ticks them on his plump fingers:

*the light of day.*" (DF, 60). He dubs his guests "*dramatis personae*" and proceeds to make Mandrake "*happily familiar*" with them, (DF, 17) also for the benefit of the audience-readers.

Before detailing Mandrake on the background of each of these "*characters*" or performers, he explains that his idea is based on a curious criterion: "*My characters must...be as far as possible antagonistic to each other.*" (DF, 17). He rounds off with a romantic aesthetic:

plays; indeed, he had done much to establish the reputation of the young dramatist, Mandrake, especially with "*Mandrake's latest play Bad Blackout... [which] was soon to go into rehearsal with an untried company of young artists.*" (DF, 13).

These seven friends of Jonathan are to arrive the following day at Highfold to spend the weekend; none of them knows of the impending presence of the others and once assembled it would be very difficult for them to separate. Winter weather is very harsh, so they have to stay indoors, away from other diversions. Jonathan blandly acts as host, assiduously keeping the party in being,

dissuading those who flare into furious indignation from absconding. Watching their reactions is a great fun mixed with apprehension; one expectantly observes how they settle down to their imposed communal isolation. It is intended to be a play, and as exciting drama, it goes on, with 'curtain' coming down on the miserable exit of the murderer after Inspector Alleyn unravels the "plot", in all its senses: "*Plotting! That's the word! My dear, I am up to my ears in conspiracy, says Jonathan.*" (DF, 14).

Aubrey Mandrake, alias Stanloy Footling (ironically, he suffers from being lame, and is "*extremely sensitive about the deformed foot*" which causes this deformity), (DF, 13): like the chorus in Greek drama, he performs many functions. Inspector

*As regards fact, [it is dependable], ... As regards his interpretation of fact, I fancy it wanders a bit. For a symbolic expressionist he seems to have remained very firmly wedded to a convention. But perhaps that's the secret of two-dimensional poetic drama.* (DF, 213)

But Mandrake is not the only binding agent of the structure, for detective novels depend heavily on its logically and subtly ordered plot, despite all the surprises it subsumes. The murder, quite surprising to everyone, except Nicholas and his

*If Mandrake had walked in casually he might have thought at first glance that William was staring at some small object that lay between his feet...Mandrake had no wish to look at William, but he limped over to the chair.* (DF, 153)

Aubrey Mandrake has many affinities with his creator, Ngaio Marsh, not least of them thinking of "*phrases from detective novels,*" (DF, 154) while he is horrified by William's face and widely-open eyes and mouth, and the cleft at the back of his head. Both of them had lived a long celibate

*You'll have to get used to my common ways, because I think I might want to marry you. I'm going to alter my name by deed poll, so you wouldn't have to be Mrs Stanley Footling. And if you think Mrs Aubrey Mandrake is too arty we could find something else.* (DF, 293)

Though this might be too tepid to be called romantic, it is strongly

Alleyn, during his investigation, calls him the "*most detached member of the party*" (DF, 284); it is the required detachment of a perceptive observer, from whom few incidents are hidden, undisclosed. Thus he binds the drama of the novel together, and keeps its structure taut; it begins with his briefing by Jonathan on the players identities, and ends with a kind of debriefing where he badgers Alleyn with insistent queries on the knots of the murder case. In between these two poles, Mandrake volunteers to go to Cloudyfold to fetch Alleyn and his company of investigators, after writing his own resumé of what have already happened, leading to the murder of Williams (DF, 180 ff); Alleyn's comment on Mandrake's notes, his statement of facts, is

intuitive mother, Sandra Compline, takes place at the end of part one (p. 153), in the middle of the novel. Curiously, even at this tragic juncture, Mandrake arrives immediately at the scene of the murder with Jonathan:

life, and both were "*dabbling at crime fiction*", (DF, 129). Ngaio went farther in her career than mere dabbling; but, unlike her, he is amorous enough to "*make a pass*" at Chloris Wynne and get a kiss from her. (DF, 180) Under the stress and strain of police investigation he proposes to her:

reminiscent of Romeo's and Juliet's wrangling over the names of their

warring families, the Capulets and the Montagues; Juliet passionately rationalizes in a beautiful metaphor: "What's in a name? That which we call a rose/ By any other word would smell as sweet". (Romeo & Juliet, Act Two, Scene I, ll 85-86). Chloris is no less beautiful than Juliet (DF, 30), though older than her, less passionate and more sedate in her answer: "There are plenty of names just as funny as Footling." (DF, 112).

Unlike her alter ego, poetic dramatist Mandrake, Ngaio Marsh was awarded, in 1948, an O.B.E for "services in connection with drama and literature in New Zealand;" (Ward, 346) she used to divide her time between the production of plays, long journeys in small sea-going freighters, and writing crime stories. Dame Ngaio Edith Marsh, born at Christchurch, New Zealand, was educated in that country at St Margaret's College and at the School of Art in Christchurch. She worked as actress for two years before going to UK in 1928 as partner in interior decorating business. Her hero, Chief Detective Inspector Roderick Alleyn, first appeared in A Man Lay Dead (1934), and since then she became one of the outstanding writers of detective novels, "enjoying no less praise from critics than popularity with the general public". (Ward, 346). In addition to the upper-crust Scotland Yard detective, Alleyn, Sergeant Fox, his assistant and butt, a shrewd stooge, and Agatha Troy, an artist who becomes Alleyn's wife, are beautifully and knowledgeably drawn characters in her novels, especially in Death and the Dancing Footman. As play-producer and drama lecturer in New Zealand, she placed some of her most effective crime novels in theatre settings: Enter a Murderer (1935), Final Curtain (1947), Opening Night (1951). She wrote other detective novels: Vintage Murder

(1937), Surfeit of Lampreys (1941), Colour Scheme (1943), Died in the Wool (1945), Scales of Justice (1954), Death at the Dolphin (1967), and Black as He's Painted (1974). Death and the Dancing Footman (1942) is the most adaptable to stage and can be easily dramatised as a film, but not into poetic drama as Mandrake might have wished, for this kind of drama was popular at that time (see Withfield on "The Return of Verse Drama", p. 179-180), but no more.

Her experience in both fields had come useful in her novels, as well as her knowledge of house-decoration (each member of Jonathan's party is asked to describe the interior of the smoking-room when William has been murdered, by Alleyn, after his own minute scrutiny of it, pp. 239ff). During a wet week-end at the beginning of the nineteen thirties, she read what was the first contemporary crime story to come her own way. Until then, Arthur Conan Doyle, Wilkie Collins, and Austin Freeman had been her sole authors of this kind of literature. After reading this story, she thought it was early Agatha Christie, it seemed to her that she might venture and write something in the same vein. As a kind of hobby and with no hope of publication she wrote her first novel, A Man Lay Dead, scribbling it down with lead pencil in a very cheap exercise book. On returning from New Zealand, she left this tale with an agent, and was astonished to learn, some six months later, that a publisher had been found. It was followed by twenty other detective stories which had been written between and influenced by, theatrical productions (Ward, 346)

Agatha Christie (1890-1973), according to T. J. Winnifrith, "is almost without rival as a writer of detective stories" (Vinson, 151); she wrote over seventy novels, a large

collection of short stories, several successful plays, and verse, in addition to travel and autobiography; she set some conventions and established aesthetics of detective novels. Crime fiction aesthetics is based on premises that have been long taken for granted:

*Setting the intellectual puzzle of questing who the murderer is through a skilful but never unfair use of false clues is obviously more interesting to Miss Christie than investigating the moral issue of what makes people take to crime...* (Winnifrieth, in Vinson, 151).

Ngaio Marsh, though influenced by Christie and adopting her aesthetics, never disregarded "*the moral issue of what makes people take to crime*;" she deals with fratricide in her novel with psychological understanding of motives. Nicholas's pre-meditated crime is based on many motives; first, entail: "*William*" his mother says, "*has Penfelton to look after in peak time.*" (DF, 32) Second, rivalry in love of Chloris Wynne, who

*Mandrake saw adoration in her eyes and mentally rubbed his hands together. "The mother-fixation", he thought, "is not going to let me down." And he began to warn himself against the influence to Eugene O'Neill.* (DF, 35)

This comes as a confirmation of what Jonathan has already told Mandrake, his audience, during his briefing in which he familiarised him with the Complines' family background. Sandra

*She dotes on Nicholas and takes William for granted. She's spoilt Nicholas quite hopelessly from the day he was born...If she could have cut William out of entail I promise you she'd have done it. William comes in for the whole packet, and Nick, like the hero of Victorian romance, must fend for himself.* (DF, 20).

To underscore "*the necessary element of antagonism*", (DF, 20) Jonathan adds: "*William is engaged to Nicholas's ex-fiancée*" (DF, 20); Mandrake quite apprehensively says: "*It will more probably resemble some disastrous vaudeville...The actors will either sulk in their dressing-rooms or leave the theatre.*" (DF, 23)

Rivalries that lead to antagonism are not confined to this family; they are the hard-core epicentre

human ambition and love for justice and the fact, derived from criminology, that the perfect crime is inexistent. Dame Agatha Christie, the Mistress of Crime, had her own two main detectives, the Belgian Hercule Poirot and Miss Marph, but,

jilts Nicholas, and in rebound she becomes engaged to William; this vexes both Nicholas and Mrs Compline, their mother. Nicholas shows mother-fixation which can be justified by the Oedipus complex of Sigmund Freud (DF, 127); watching William with his fiancée, Miss Wynne, his mother holds out her hand to Nicholas, who comes and sits on the arm of her chair; she looks at him adoringly.

Compline is a model of the partial mother, who does not hide her preference for the younger son, Nicholas; Jonathan says to Mandrake:

of the whole drama. Mrs Compline's antipathy to Chloris Wynne is normal; as prospective mother-in-law, and because Chloris has already jilted her favourite son, for the less loved one. But her abhorrence of Dr Hart who has disfigured her face with plastic surgery in Vienna is horrifying; she almost faints at recognising him, (DF, 48) and tells Lady Hersey her most painful story. (DF, 56-57) But Nicholas's deadly sin of lusting after Hart's wife, Lisse, in the triangular rivalry of

husband, lover, and coquettish wife is an extremely internecine one. Inspector

*a clear picture of two unhappy people [Lisse and Hart] dominated by the selfish, vain, and, according to the two experts in the front seat [Chloris and Mandrake], excessively oversexed Nicholas. (DF, 228).*

Like Othello, Dr Hart is consumed by jealousy, for Nicholas does not refrain from flirting with Madam Lisse in his presence; but quite unlike Emilia, Lisse is, as William calls her, a "femme fatale" (DF, 98); to which Lady Hersey responds, derisively: "Oh, I grant you her looks. She's got a marvellous skin, thick and close. You can't beat'em" (Ibid)

*"Do you dislike your clients, Lady Hersey?" asked Madame Lisse. "I do not find in myself any antipathy to my clients. Many of them have become my good friends."*

*"You must be able to form friendships very quickly," said Hersey sweetly.*

*"Of course," Madame Lisse continued, "it depends very much upon the class of one's clients."*

*"And possibly," Hersey returned, "upon one's own class, don't you think?" (DF, 51-2)*

Lisse might not be a perfect femme fatale, but she is so beautiful and seductive that even Alleyn is very wary and protective when he interviews her after the murder of William. Alleyn is so affected by the

*She paused, gazing at him. The scene was beginning to develop in the best tradition of the French novel. If the situation had been less serious and she had been less beautiful he might have found it more amusing... (DF, 267)*

Even her complaint against her husband is amorous: "my husband, became madly jealous of our friendship. I am a lonely woman... and Mr [Nicholas] Compline has been a kind and chivalrous friend to me." (DF, 267)

Lady Hersey Amblington, Jonathan's cousin, who has rejected

*You arrived before all of us. He was up to something, wasn't he? No, that's not a fair question. You need not answer. I know he was up to something. But whatever his scheme was, it did not involve you-unless-yes... Mr Mandrake [is] to be audience. (DF, 96-97)*

She is quite uneasy since the moment she has arrived at Highfold; she fights with Jonathan over his intrigue by joining Sandra Compline with Francis

Alleyn, after initial investigation gets

These two ladies, Hersey and Lisse, are arch-enemies, for Madame Lisse has stolen Lady Hersey's reputation and clients from her beauty-parlour, that is why she despises her and regrets the loss of her most refined and well-off clients. They do not miss any opportunity to get at each other's throat; their verbal fencing is evidence of Ngaio Marsh's brand of dialogue:

aura and aroma of her presence that he thinks that few men "are able to feel amused at overwhelming beauty;" he consciously resists her seductive influence, for he has "a difficult job to do." (DF, 267):

him as suitor previously, keeps on friendly terms with him, but she is very suspicious of her cousin's intention in inviting such a diverse and antipathetic "cast" of guests. She scrutinises Mandrake, "you know my cousin quite well, don't you?" and tells him:

Hart under his roof as well as herself with Lisse: "I'm ashamed of you on my account. Forcing me to be civil to that blasted German." (DF, 59) Jonathan



answers defensively: "*One of my objectives is a lavish burial of hatchets. I hope great things of this week-end.*" (DF, 59)

Yet, in spite of her good-will, equanimity, and tolerance, she is unable to provide any alibi for two attempts of murder and the ultimate crime of killing William; she

*"I seem to remember reading somewhere that that makes me innocent, and I'm sure I hope it's true."*

*"It is the best tradition of detective fiction, I understand," said Alleyn with a smile.*

*"That's not very comforting. Am I allowed to smoke?"* (DF, 280)

Hersey proves very helpful with her amazing memory of what happened at the time of the murder, especially that layout of the interior of the smoking-room; after that she serves as nurse with Dr Hart in reviving Mrs Compline

*He worked like a navy over Sandra, and if she'd lived she'd have done her best, poor darling, to have him convicted of homicidal lunacy. He knew that.* (DF, 282)

Nonetheless, and "*in the best tradition of detective fiction*" of false indications, evidence, and clues, Hart is the most suspected by all, of

*At first I thought it was a mistake, that he had meant to kill Nicholas, but then it dawned upon me that it was William's threats to expose him that had driven him to do it.* (DF, 270)

Before she nurses Sandra with Dr Hart, Hersey and the other guests have had no doubt that the killer is this "*lunatic homicide*"; he has the strongest motives of nagging doubt concerning the fidelity of his own wife, and the deadly sin of jealousy, and he uses "*threats*" to intimidate Nicholas, and even his wife, Lisse: "*You know my temperament. It is a mistake to play the fool with me.*" (DF, 41)

Nicholas, the villain of the piece, uses every clue that incriminates

*If as [Nicholas] Compline suggests, anything further is attempted against him, it will not be by my agency. That I am his enemy I do not deny, but I tell now that somewhere among us he has another and a more deadly enemy. Let him remember that.* (DF, 123)

Ironically, Hart warns Nicholas against his brother, William, here; no one, including Mandrake and the

apologises to Alleyn when he questions her: "*if you are going to ask me to provide myself with three nice little alibis, you may as well know straight away that I can't do it.*" She has no motive whatever, even against the Pirate (Madame Lisse); she becomes flippant and not extremely worried:

when she commits suicide by taking extra doses of aspirin and veronal. It is during this period that she is convinced that Dr Hart cannot be a killer, for she says to Alleyn:

murdering William, even by his own treacherous wife, Lisse; the latter tells Alleyn emphatically:

Hart, and with Lisse, he plays the fool with him; he schemes so very intelligently and devilishly that he fools everybody, including, of course, the audience: Mandrake and the readers. Mandrake calls Hart, after the murder of William "*a homicidal lunatic at large.*" (DF, 158) Hart himself confirms his bitter loathing for Nicholas, but denies any involvement in violence of any kind; moreover, before the fratricide, he has predicted who is going to commit it:

readers, realises what he means to do; but even Hart is deluded in his thinking of Nicholas as victim. When William

is discovered murdered in the smoking-room, Jonathan and Mandrake hurry to Hart's room, to find him fast asleep after having taken a

*"I did not do it. There must be some proof. It is the brother [William, as he thinks]. The brother hated him as much as I. It is a pathological case. I am a medical man. I have seen it. He had stolen the mother's love and the girl still adored him."*

*"Doctor Hart," said Mandrake, "it is not Nicholas Compline who is dead. It is his brother, William." (DF, 162)*

Hart is so profoundly shocked by this, and this is a good proof of the cunning of Nicholas's scheme, that in the

*"William," repeated Hart, and his hands moved across his chest, fumbling with his pyjama coat. "William Compline. It cannot be William. It cannot." (DF, 163)*

Hart has to wait till investigation begins and the fact of William's murder to sink in his consciousness, but Sandra Compline, the partial mother of Nicholas and William, realises at once who has done

*My Darling, you must not let this make you sad. If I stayed with you even for the little time there would be left to me, the memory of these terrible days would be between us. I think that during these last hours I have been insane. I cannot write a confession. I have tried, but the words were terrible. I could not write them... All my life, everything I have done has been for you, even this last terrible thing is for you, and, however wicked it may seem, you must always remember that... My last thoughts and my last prayers are for you. Mother. (DF, 283-284)*

It is quite preposterous for a mother to be allied to the last with Cain, Nicholas, but her suicide is a kind of atonement for injustice done to Abel, William. The false ring of her

*The letter is more tragic and less demented than you thought... Her adored son had murdered his brother. She made her last effort to save him and the legend she had made around his character. She wrote him a letter that told him she knew and at the same time she accused herself to us. She could not quite bring herself to say in so many words she had killed her son, but Nicholas understood- and so did we. (DF, 308)*

The lively dance to the tune of the playful song; "Hands, Knees, and Booms-a-daisy" of the young "too high-spirited" (DF, 258) footman, Thomas, proves to be the central clue to the true identity of the murderer and

dose of a barbiturate; he is awakened roughly and told the horrible news. He does not seem surprised and responds:

absolute silence that ensues, the faintest sound could be heard by Jonathan and Mandrake.

it. In her distress, she gulps extra doses of sedative and aspirin, after writing a letter in which she cryptically confesses committing the crime to save Nicholas from persecution and prosecution:

confession of a heinous crime she has not done does not deceive Alleyn, the shrewd and quite perceptive investigator; he explains to Mandrake and Chloris:

serves as alibi for Dr Hart, (DF, 256) which saves him from an almost perfectly planned fratricide. When Alleyn finishes his questioning of the butler, Mrs Pouting, and Thomas, the dancing footman, he cogitates:

*Alleyn noted down the conversation, pulled a grimace at the results and fell to thinking of former cases when the fantastic solution had turned out to be the correct one. (DF, 265)*

When Jonathan tells Mandrake of Mr Compline's sudden death during hunting, "Ironically, though, it was her

*Why, my dear Jonathan, it's quite marvellous, Devastatingly Edwardian. Gloriously county. Another instance of truth being much more theatrical than fiction and a warning to all dramatists to avoid it. (DF, 18)*

It is a chronic complaint of detective inspectors including those at "New Scotland Yard" that they are bored by crime fiction, for reality almost always proves to be more fantastic than the most thrilling of the detective novels.

When Fox describes the case of William's murder as "not complicated", (DF, 290), Alleyn retorts "The thing's so blasted obvious I keep wondering if there is a catch in it;" (DF, 291) he and Fox make an experiment, and Alleyn says: "If it's a success I think we might stage a little show for a select audience." (DF, 292) The select

*I didn't touch it. Hart did it. It's the second booby-trap. Don't look at me like that. You can't prove anything against me. (DF, 304)*

Dr Hart is the exception; he tells Alleyn: "Never for a moment was I in doubt of the issue. As soon as I heard of William Compline's death I knew that it must be his brother." (DF, 305) Ironically, each member of the group could have asserted emphatically: "Never even for a moment was I in doubt who is the killer; it is Dr Hart, and no one else!"

Dr Hart pays his homage to British police, especially the renowned inspectors of Scotland Yard: "I have heard of the efficiency of Scotland Yard" he says to Alleyn (DF, 250) and later, when he departs: "Dr Hart...made a formal speech, causing [Alleyn] acute embarrassment by many

*husband who came a cropper. Fell with his horse and broke his neck", Mandrake comments:*

audience includes the whole cast of Jonathan's dramatic party except, of course, the two dead people, lying side by side: "Sandra Compline lay not far removed from the son for whom she had not greatly cared." (DF, 290) During the show of the most "fantastic solution" of the murder mystery, everyone is horrified when a voice roars "...out the barrel/ Roll out the barrel again;" "Jonathan Royal screamed out an oath and backed away from the table, his hand to his mouth;" but Nicholas collapses, tries to flee, stuttering an inverted confession:

*references to the courtesy and integrity of the British police." (DF, 305)*

Roderick Alleyn, representative of Scotland Yard in Ngaio Marsh's novels, is closely associated with Sherlock Holmes with his pocket lens, scrutinizing the carpet under the murdered William's feet (DF, 238). He is enjoying his weekend with his wife, Troy, when Mandrake calls on them to invite him to Highfold to investigate the murder of William Compline; immediately before that he relaxes with Copeland, the rector, and his daughter, Dinah, an actress who performs in Mandrake's drama. He tells them:

-*"If I was on duty," said Alleyn, looking along the shelves, I should never dare to make those observations[on snow]"*.

-*"Why not?"*

-*"Because if I did, as sure as fate I'd be called out into the snow, like a melodrama heroine, to a particularly disagreeable case. "However," said Alleyn, taking down a copy of Northanger Abbey, "I'm not on duty, thank the Lord. Shall we have Miss Austen?" (DE, 196)*

Roderick Alleyn might enjoy reading Miss Austen's satire on the Gothic tale, but, like her, he does not approve of Mandrake's interpretation of facts which shows his inclination as *"symbolic expressionist involved in poetic drama,"* (DE, 213) but supports him when he claims that *"truth [is]*

*By the time this case comes off, the papers won't have much room for fancy touches, I believe...if you don't mind my mentioning it I think you're going to find that your particular bogey will be forgotten in a welter of what we are probably going to call "extreme realism". (DE, 279)*

Writers of crime detection fiction, like their inspectors, must abide by this welter of what is called *"extreme realism"*; the most fantastic solution to the most cryptic and mysterious crimes cannot be pinned down except by this extreme realism.

Ngaio Marsh, as extreme realist, does not resort to sensationalism at the expense of style; her description of the fury of nature, reflecting the seething antagonism within Highfold is so insistent from beginning to end, especially during the short period of the crimes, attempted

*that the passage of hours was seen only in a stealthy alteration of shadow. Jonathan and Mandrake lunched by lamplight. Mandrake said that he felt the house to be alive with anticipation, but whether of a storm without or within he was unable to decide. "It is a grisly day," said Mandrake. (DE, 26)*

It soon proves to be a storm both within and without Highfold; but, nonetheless, Jonathan as host expresses his welcoming hospitality in what Leigh Hart calls in his conceit as *"saying all one feels and thinks in*

*but here, you [Mandrake] see, is the great Doctor's ensign of supreme command, the myrtle, and here, after all, is most of poor Ophelia's rather dreary little collection. The sombre note predominates. (DE, 29)*

*much more theatrical than fiction." (DE, 18) And, ultimately he aspires for nothing less than "extreme realism" in his investigations; that is why he flares up when Mandrake hesitates, showing his obsession with his real name, Stanley Footling:*

and committed, that one cannot overlook or forget it. Kneeling by the corpse of William, Mandrake's consciousness becomes crowded with a *"hundred impressions" and a "multitude of ideas"*, but above them all dominate *"an image of deep snow;"* (DE, 154) on the morning of Mandrake's second day at Highfold, during the previous *"night there was another light fall of snow."* (DE, 26). Jonathan remarks several times with *"extraordinary glee"* that they are *"in for a severer storm."* (DE, 26) Soon the sky becomes so dark,

*clever daffodils and pinks; in puns of tulips and in phrases, charming for the truth, of daisies." (DE, 28) He is sorry for his glass houses lets him down in providing a "Shakespearean nosegay";*

It seems that Hamlet with its dramatization of fratricide as a play within a play is not absent from Ngaio's subconsciousness, for poor Ophelia's "*dreary, little collection*" provides the "*sombre note*" of Death and the Dancing Footman, as well. Sandra Compline's tragedy is similar to Ophelia's in many respects: she fails in winning back her husband's love, and in trying to regain it, her beauty is permanently destroyed by Dr Hart's apprentice plastic surgery. Ophelia loses her love, father, and a brother, while Sandra loses her beauty, her husband, and a son; that is why, perhaps, both of them commit suicide.

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## القصة ضمن قصة أخرى كوسيلة لمضاعفة واقعيّتها: قضية "الموت والخادم الراقص"، رواية بقلم نكايو مارش

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### الخلاصة

ولدت السيدة نكايو أدبث مارش (١٨٩٩-١٩٨٢) وهي كاتبة روايات بوليسية من مدينة كرايستشرتش في نيوزيلندة وأشتهرت ببطلها المفتش الأقدم رودريك ألين الذي يظهر في روايتها **رجل يرقد ميتاً** وفي روايات بضمنها **الموت والخادم الراقص** ١٩٤٢ وقد الفت عشرين رواية.

توماس هو الخادم الراقص الذي تهزه أغنية مرحة منبعثة من مذياع في غرفة التدخين حيث يرقد ويليام ميتاً بعد أن قتله أخوه نيكولاس، وهو الذي يقدم الدليل الضروري لتبرئة الرجل الأكثر شكاً فيه بإثبات أنه لم يكن في مسرح الجريمة. وكان نيكولاس قد خطط لجريمة تكاد تكون كاملة لولا رقصة هذا الخادم التي أفشلتها، وعندما يقدم ألين ورجال شرطته عرضاً تعاد فيه كيفية كيفية ارتكاب الجريمة، ينهار نيكولاس ويحاول الهرب ضارباً ببيلي (وهو خبير البصمات الذي يعمل مع ألين) غير أنهم يتغلبون عليه ويقتادونه معهم برفقة جنتي كل من أمه التي تنتحر لأجله وأخيه الذي إغتاله.