

THE BIG BOW MYSTERY

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The big bow mystery by I. Zangwill

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BOW MYSTERY**

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By
I. Zangwill



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INTRODUCTION.

OF MURDERS AND MYSTERIES.

As this little book was written some four years ago, I feel able to review it without prejudice. A new book just hot from the brain is naturally apt to appear faulty to its begetter, but an old book has got into the proper perspective and may be praised by him without fear or favor. "The Big Bow Mystery" seems to me an excellent murder story, as murder stories go, for, while as sensational as the most of them, it contains more humor and character creation than the best. Indeed, the humor is too abundant. Mysteries should be sedate and sober. There should be a pervasive atmosphere of horror and awe such as Poe manages to create. Humor is out of tone; it would be more artistic to preserve a somber note throughout. But I was a realist in those days, and in real life mysteries occur to real persons with their individual humors, and

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mysterious circumstances are apt to be complicated by comic. The indispensable condition of a good mystery is that it should be able and unable to be solved by the reader, and that the writer's solution should satisfy. Many a mystery runs on breathlessly enough till the dénouement is reached, only to leave the reader with the sense of having been robbed of his breath under false pretenses. And not only must the solution be adequate, but all its data must be given in the body of the story. The author must not suddenly spring a new person or a new circumstance upon his reader at the end. Thus, if a friend were to ask me to guess who dined with him yesterday, it would be fatuous if he had in mind somebody of whom he knew I had never heard. The only person who has ever solved "The Big Bow Mystery" is myself. This is not paradox but plain fact. For long before the book was written, I said to myself one night that no mystery-monger had ever murdered a man in a room to which there was no possible access. The puzzle was scarcely propounded ere the solution flew up and the idea lay stored in my mind till, years later,

during the silly season, the editor of a popular London evening paper, anxious to let the sea-serpent have a year off, asked me to provide him with a more original piece of fiction. I might have refused, but there was murder in my soul, and here was the opportunity. I went to work seriously, though the *Morning Post* subsequently said the skit was too labored, and I succeeded at least in exciting my readers, so many of whom sent in unsolicited testimonials in the shape of solutions during the run of the story that, when it ended, the editor asked me to say something by way of acknowledgement. Thereupon I wrote a letter to the paper, thanking the would-be solvers for their kindly attempts to help me out of the mess into which I had got the plot. I did not like to wound their feelings by saying straight out that they had failed, one and all, to hit on the real murderer, just like real police, so I tried to break the truth to them in a roundabout, mendacious fashion, as thus:

To the Editor of "The Star."

SIR: Now that "The Big Bow Mystery" is solved to the satisfaction of at least one person, will you allow that person the use of your inval-

able columns to enable him to thank the hundreds of your readers who have favored him with their kind suggestions and solutions while his tale was running and they were reading? I ask this more especially because great credit is due to them for enabling me to end the story in a manner so satisfactory to myself. When I started it, I had, of course, no idea who had done the murder, but I was determined no one should guess it. Accordingly, as each correspondent sent in the name of a suspect, I determined he or she should not be the guilty party. By degrees every one of the characters got ticked off as innocent—all except one, and I had no option but to make that character the murderer. I was very sorry to do this, as I rather liked that particular person, but when one has such ingenious readers, what can one do? You can't let anybody boast that he guessed aright, and, in spite of the trouble of altering the plot five or six times, I feel that I have chosen the course most consistent with the dignity of my profession. Had I not been impelled by this consideration I should certainly have brought in a verdict against Mrs. Drabdump, as recommended by the reader who said that, judging by the illustration in the "Star," she must be at least seven feet high, and, therefore, could easily have got on the roof and put her (proportionately) long arm down the chimney to effect the cut. I am not

responsible for the artist's conception of the character. When I last saw the good lady she was under six feet, but your artist may have had later information. The "Star" is always so frightfully up to date. I ought not to omit the humorous remark of a correspondent, who said: "Mortlake might have swung in some wild way from one window to another, *at any rate in a story.*" I hope my fellow-writers thus satirically prodded will not demand his name, as I object to murders, "at any rate in real life." Finally, a word with the legions who have taken me to task for allowing Mr. Gladstone to write over 170 words on a postcard. It is all owing to you, sir, who announced my story as containing humorous elements. I tried to put in some, and this gentle dig at the grand old correspondent's habits was intended to be one of them. However, if I *am* to be taken "at the foot of the letter" (or rather of the postcard), I must say that only to-day I received a postcard containing about 250 words. But this was not from Mr. Gladstone. At any rate, till Mr. Gladstone himself repudiates this postcard, I shall consider myself justified in allowing it to stand in the book.

Again thanking your readers for their valuable assistance,
Yours, etc.