THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

"STUDIES IN MURDER"

Reviewed by John E. Lind

THE scene is a hot August morning thirty years ago. An elderly gentleman is walking toward his home on a quiet street in Fall River, Massachusetts. He is tall and erect, his rather stern face framed by an aureola of white whiskers; he might have sat for the portrait of a Puritan. He turns the corner and enters the simple frame house in which he still lives, although the years have made him wealthy. In that home are his wife, his daughter Lizzie, and a servant, Bridget. Half an hour later he and his wife are discovered brutally murdered; a few days later suspicion is directed to the daughter, Lizzie, and in the course of a few weeks the whole county is discussing the question of her guilt or innocence.

The famous Borden murder is the first one discussed by Mr. Pearson in his book. The others are the murder of Benjamin Nathan in New York, in 1870; the strange affair of the "Herbert Fuller", whose captain, second officer, and captain's wife were all hacked to death by an unknown hand a few days out at sea; the murder of Mabel Page in 1904 and the astonishing efforts of the public to have her slayer pardoned; and, finally, a serio-comic episode of the early nineteenth century in which the Boorn brothers were convicted of murdering their brother-in-law, Russell Colvin, who turned up just in time to save them.

Mr. Pearson has attempted the dangerous task of dealing with reality. For any neophyte in the art of writing can construct an acceptable murder story. The formula is as follows: First, introduce your victim and, preferably, make him just a little unpopular; second, kill him. (The murder should, of course, be mysterious and, if possible, a bit outré.) Third, strew suspicion all over the shop. Fourth, bring in your official policemen. Fifth, send for the super sleuth. Sixth, disclose the most unlikely person in the cast as the murderer. But Mr. Pearson has scorned such stereotyped devices and has made his studies from life itself.

To be sure, there are precedents. Many a famous detective has written about his favorite subject — his own exploits. Criminals have written their confessions, and below-stairs periodicals have flaunted the bait of true stories and true confessions before their moronic audiences. But these stories on examination prove either to be uninteresting or artistically improbable — both fatal defects.

Mr. Pearson's studies fall in neither of these categories. He has selected unerringly cases which fulfil all the requirements, especially the Borden murder and the affair of the "Herbert Fuller", which together occupy about two thirds of the book. His other three cases may be dismissed rather briefly. In the Boorn case in 1812 one of the brothers made a circumstantial confession of a murder which never happened and as a result was nearly hanged. In 1904 in the little town of Weston a

woman was murdered and a young man named Charley Tucker convicted of the crime on evidence which, while entirely circumstantial, was conclusive. Then ensued an extraordinary demonstration of mob sentiment. All possible pressure was brought to bear on the Governor of Massachusetts to pardon the murderer or commute his sentence; in short, there was an exhibition of maudlinism which reminds Mr. Pearson quite appropriately of Mark Twain's comments on the petition for the pardon of Injun Joe in "Tom Sawyer".

The third of the three shorter cases in the book, the murder of Benjamin Nathan, was a nine days' wonder, but lacked the necessary psychopathological ingredients. While the murderer of the Jewish philanthropist was never tried, for lack of sufficient evidence, there seems reason to believe that the case was simply one of burglarious entry, interruption, and murderous assault.

In the other two murders, however, Mr. Pearson quite palpably delights. Here, indeed, are all the necessary elements, and with the sure touch of an artist he lays them on — brutality, mystery, grotesque humor, appropriate settings. In the mind of your true connoisseur of murder there are but two sorts of stage settings: first, the one in harmony with the deed, isolation, fear, the wailing of the wind, madness and shrieks by night; second, a quiet peaceful scene, broad daylight, sunshine, happiness, good people, and then red handed murder crashing down.

The Borden case was an example of the latter; the "Herbert Fuller", of the former.

On July 3, 1896, a little ship, the "Herbert Fuller", set sail for the Argentine. Eighteen days later she returned to harbor with the dead bodies of the captain, his wife, and the second mate. In the middle of the night someone had stolen into the cabin with an ax and battered out their brains.

The whole affair was one of those tragedies of the sea taken from the pages of Russell or Melville; it might have been psychologized by Eugene O'Neill and presented at the Grand Guignol. The cast numbers seven: three victims, two suspects, an innocent bystander, and an interlocutor. From time to time, in minor rôles, five sailors appear. The three victims have already been enumerated. They occupied three rooms of the cabin. In the fourth room slept a Harvard student, Monks, the only passenger on board, who was taking a sea trip at the advice of his physician, in search of peace and quiet! At the helm on the night of the murder was an old sailor, Charley Brown, who was considered eccentric and talked to himself. Later it developed that he had once been insane for a short while. Pacing the deck was the first mate, Thomas Bram, a sinister figure whose personality is one of those psychological puzzles which crop up from time to time in murder cases.

At two o'clock in the morning the passenger, Monks, was awakened by a woman's scream. Sitting upright in his bunk, he listened carefully and heard "a gurgling noise" from the captain's cabin. He went in and found the captain dying of wounds and then, going into another room, he found the captain's wife murdered. Later on, the second mate's body was discovered. The weapon, a bloody ax, was subsequently found on deck.

For a week after these murders the "Herbert Fuller", with its ghastly freight, sailed back toward land. No one knew who the murderer was, but all knew he was on board, that every day he saw and spoke with them, that

any night he might creep again about the ship, like Dracula, gorging himself with blood. Small wonder that few were the hours that anyone slept on board that vessel! There were two trials, and the first mate, Bram, was sentenced to life imprisonment. He was paroled fifteen years later, and in 1919 was given a full pardon.

But the psychological puzzle presented by Mate Bram was as nothing to the Borden case. At the time of the murder Lizzie Borden was a spinster of thirty two, a religious woman, active in church work, and of blameless character. Did she attack her aged stepmother with an ax or hatchet and, after leaving her battered and lifeless body in an upstairs room, go about her work quietly for an hour and a half and then, catching her father asleep on a couch, kill him in the same manner? This was the contention of the State of Massachusetts, who prosecuted her. Or, was there a mysterious intruder in that quiet frame house that hot August noonday, an incarnate spirit of evil, whom no one saw come and go or heard at his bloody work; who, as one writer explained it, "came and went as gently as the south wind, but fulfilled his mission as terrifically as a cyclone"?

The same writer points out that if there were a murderous intruder, he must have had the advantage of a series of coincidences which in their cumulative improbabilities were as one in a billion. He must avoid five persons to catch Mrs. Borden alone; he must kill her noiselessly and run the risk of her body's not being discovered for two hours, during which time he must lurk about the house and avoid several inmates. He must count on the servant's being asleep in the attic for a half hour, on the daughter's being out in the barn in the rear of the house for twenty minutes, on a guest's not returning in that time, on Mr. Borden's taking a nap, and finally, on escaping from the house in his blood stained garments with no one in the surrounding houses seeing him.

Mr. Pearson himself has his own belief in the matter, which may be read between the lines. He has told the story admirably. He might have called it "The Laugh on the Stairs". For it was testified at the trial that when Mr. Borden found the front door locked on that fatal August morning, the servant Bridget ran to let him in; and as she fumbled with the fastenings, she heard Lizzie laugh on the stairs or in the hall above. This hall above opened into the guest room, and also from the top of the stairs the floor of that room was visible. And even then, her head in a pool of blood, the murdered woman lay dead.

So to the crime itself, with all its terror and mystery, is added the touch of the grotesque, the outré, that laugh in the house of death.

The readers of mystery will smack their lips over this book. For, while the problem of who stole the Princess's pearls is quite engrossing and we all admire the reasoning in "The Purloined Letter", there is, after all, nothing like a good murder — the more sanguinary the better. Once having tasted blood, the reader of detective stories, like Shere Khan, is insatiable. The larceny of plans of submarines, no matter how internationally important, leaves him cold. He must have sudden death, and locked rooms and bloody finger prints, or life is a bore. To all such we recommend Mr. Pearson's pasticcio, done in all the colors of life, but dominating them all, the scarlet and sinister strain.

Studies in Murder. By Edmund Lester Pearson. The Macmillan Co.