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Murder on the Mauretania

THE BOOK

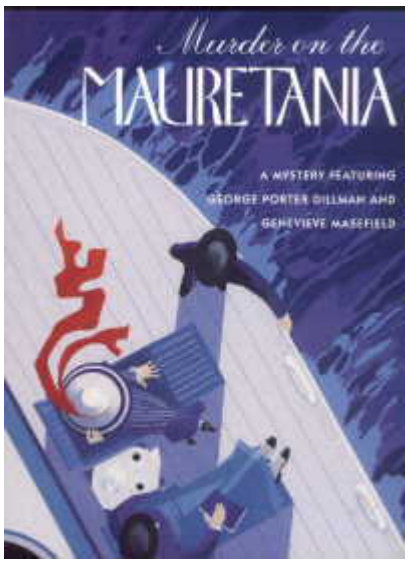
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A SEAFARING NOVEL OF ROMANCE AND SUSPENSE

Murder on the Mauretania *by* Conrad Allen, paperback
St. Martin's Minotaur, St. Martin's Press, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010: 277 Pages: ISBN 0-312-24116-X: Price US $23.95, Canada $36.99



Conrad Allen delivers yet another winner from his inimitable repertoire with *Murder on the Mauretania*. Second in the series of ship borne detective novels, featuring the delectable pair of George Porter Dillman and Genevieve Masefield, *Murder on the Mauretania* is rich in atmosphere and with a convivial assortment of characters weaves a magical spell on the reader's mind. Conrad

Allen has certainly carved a niche for himself in the crime fiction genre with his imaginative narrative and the depiction of two of the most likable detective pairs against the backdrop of huge passenger liners and the tumultuous Atlantic Ocean.

Conrad Allen

Conrad Allen, the author of this book, is the author of two previous mysteries in this series, "Murder on the Lusitania" and "Murder on the Mauretania". He lives in England.

Following their usual subterfuge we again find Genevieve Masefield and George Porter Dillman boarding Mauretania-the largest ship in the world-separately and into different class during its maiden voyage from Liverpool to New York. The time of November is known for rough seas and it is with much apprehension that the passengers board the ship. The historic voyage of Mauretania is also marked for its cache of gold bullion worth nearly three million pounds being carried in a security room that is designed to sustain all kind of robbery attempts. Though a common knowledge of its presence onboard, the detectives are not entrusted with the safekeeping of the bullion. They are only looking for ordinary crimes. Genevieve moves into the First Class and quickly mixes around with the elite crowd, while Dillman moves into the Second Class and keeps an eye on the passengers of Second Class and Steerage.

On the way to the ship Genevieve had already joined a group consisting of the wealthy pair of Donald and Theodora Belfrage (the former aiming for a seat in the House of Lords), Susan Faulconbridge, Harvey Denning, and Ruth Constantine. Susan is madly in love with Donald and is also involved with Harvey and the two make formidable Bridge pair who moves into high social circle. While Ruth is a calm and composed woman of rare wit and is constantly making well-meaning digs at Donald ably aided by the sharp wit of Harvey. It is impossible for Genevieve not to attract attention wherever she goes and with graceful ease she catches the fancy of several men: the affable Orvill Delaney, the beautiful Katherine Wymark, Edgar Fenby, and Harvey Denning who would lay his heart bare to any beautiful woman. Donald Belfrage also makes ungentlemanly advances to Genevieve that she handles with utmost subtlety.

In the Second Class Dillman befriends the Jarvis family comprising the banker husband, the docile wife, the charming mother-in-law, the son and the adorable daughter Alexandra. Dillman and Alexandra strike an instant friendship and Alexandra also discovers the ship mascot Bobo, a black cat. Dillman also comes across the hyperactive reporter Mrs. Hester Littlejohn from 'Ladies Weekly Journal' who is on the lookout of some hot story. She is unusually inquisitive and lands up at all the wrong places asking all kinds of questions.

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Trouble starts when Dillman catches one Max Hirsch pilfering a silver salt-and-pepper dispenser from the dining hall. Confronted by Dillman, Hirsch coins a somewhat implausible story of having a wife for whom he wished to carry a souvenir and even offered Dillman money for the dispensers. Dillman lets him go without reporting it to the purser. Dillman further comes across a pair of migrating miners-the gruff Mansell Price and the subdued Glyn Bowen-from the steerage loitering in the Second Class deck. They claimed to have lost their way though Dillman could see otherwise

and decides to keep an eye on the pair. Soon the ship is rocked by a series of thefts, all from the Second Class cabins, save one and having a common thread of all being silvers. Dillman suspects Hirsch since he liked silver and knew all the victims. But he is unable to find anything concrete to pin down Hirsch, who openly taunts the detective to catch him as the thief. Sometime later the ship mascot Bobo disappears too much to the distress of Alexandra who had become attached to the cat. To add to the mysterious disappearances a crowbar and hammer disappears too from the Third class deck as well as a trolley from the galley. Meanwhile Mansell Price, the miner hatches a ridiculously fallible plan to steal some gold bars from the security room and hand them over to the purser as having recovered from the real culprits and thus claim some prize money from the shipping company. His companion Bowen advises him otherwise but finally agrees to assist Price after much coercion. As the thefts remain unsolved the purser, Maurice Buxton is at his wits end. He and Dillman think of several plans to uncover the thief but all to no avail though Dillman is quite certain of the thief's identity as being Hirsch.

During its passage, Mauretania is suddenly hit one day by extreme bad weather. Lashed by angry waves she tosses and plummets like a wild horse much to the discomfort of the passengers. Amidst this the anchor suddenly comes loose from its stowage and wreaks havoc on the deck. Dillman joins the deckhands in securing the anchor back to its place. And during the same period Max Hirsch too disappears mysteriously. His absence is taken very seriously by Agnes Cameron, a single lady whom he had befriended during the voyage and had been in intimate terms with. After a long and thorough search throughout the ship Dillman feels that Hirsch could not be aboard any longer and for some reason had fallen overboard. He further deduces that Hirsch could have used Ms Cameron's cabin for hiding his loot. Eventually the stolen goods are recovered and restored to their owners.

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Amidst all other strange occurrences suddenly it is discovered one night that the security room had been broken into and some of the gold bar boxes has been opened. Much to the horror of the purser he finds that the opened boxes contain normal house bricks and not gold bars. The thieves had even lined the boxes with lead to make up for the weight differences. Dillman sees a much cleverer planning into the modus operandi of the theft than as presumed by the purser that the ones who had broken into the security room using a crowbar were the real perpetrators. The ones who broke into the room were in fact blunderers and but for them the replaced bricks into the gold boxes might not have been discovered till it was too late.

Pursuing Bobo into the cargo hold Dillman discovers a steel box containing the missing gold bars. The case seemed almost solved as the thief is apprehended with enough evidence to pin him down for good, but the climax scene is enacted elsewhere when the thief's associate makes a murderous attempt on Genevieve that is thwarted in time by Dillman. As expected the novel ends with the reunion of the detectives when they are finally able to spend some time with each other in privacy and enjoy the afterglow of yet another successful case.

The book under review is remarkable for its subplots woven into the main story all of which have some bearing on the final outcome and provide enough red herrings to keep the readers guessing till the end.



-Satyabrata Dam
Satyabrata Dam is a leading crime fiction writer. His book "Eyewitness and other tales of detection" published by Minerva Press has been hailed as a landmark in Crime fiction.

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-Editor-in-Chief

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