



Benjamin Franklin and a Case of Christmas Murder

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Ben Franklin personified the eighteenth century “universal man”: author and statesman, scientist and inventor—why not a detective too? After all, his age professed the same scientific principles that guide what is now called detective work.

In London for Christmas in 1757, Franklin becomes determined to find rational explanations for a perplexing series of mysteries. First a friend’s daughter, Cassandra Fairbrass, swears she has seen a ghost. Scarcely has Franklin begun an investigation when Cassandra’s father dies with scores of Christmas-party guests looking on. Franklin alone recognizes that the crowd has just witnessed a murder, and he stubbornly goes about proving it, but each new discovery in the tangled case raises as many questions as it answers.

The novel’s historical context—London two decades before the American Revolution—takes a back seat to the action of the whodunit. Infrequently and vaguely, Franklin will complain of the dispute between Pennsylvania colonists and colonial proprietors that brought him to England. There are some gaps in historical data about this period of Franklin’s life, and Hall works with these gaps deftly—being careful, for example, not to overstate the respectful flirtation between Franklin and his London landlady.

To tell the story, Hall invents a natural son for Franklin: twelve-year-old Nicholas Handy. Franklin’s real sons failed to appreciate his genius, but the fictive Nicholas, following his from London’s banking houses to its gambling halls, reports “the gentleman’s” deeds reverentially in a relaxed, quasi-eighteenth century prose style. This engaging novel gets much of its life from the camaraderie between Nicholas and the kindly but shrewd detective.

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