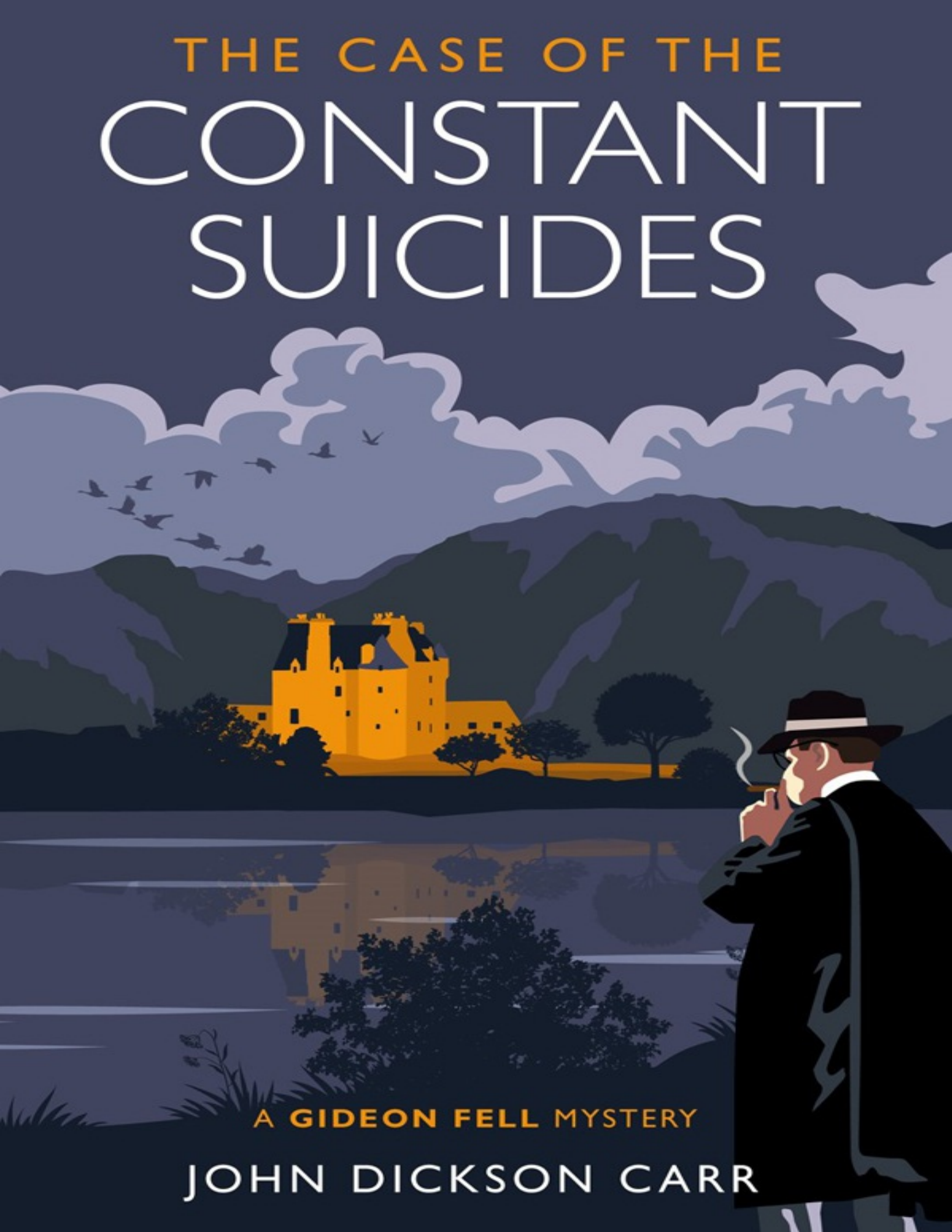
THE CASE OF THE CONSTANT SUICIDES



A GIDEON FELL MYSTERY

JOHN DICKSON CARR

THE CASE OF THE CONSTANT SUICIDES

John Dickson Carr was born in 1906 in Uniontown, Pennsylvania, the son of a lawyer. While at school and college, he wrote ghost, detective and adventure stories. After studying law, he headed to Paris in 1928. Once there, he lost any desire to study law and soon turned to writing crime fiction full-time. His first novel, *It Walks by Night*, was published in 1930. Two years later, he moved to England with his English wife; thereafter he became a prolific author and became a master of the locked-room mystery. He also wrote a biography of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, radio plays, dozens of short stories, and magazine reviews. He died in 1977 in South Carolina.

The Case of the Constant Suicides

A Gideon Fell Mystery

JOHN DICKSON CARR

Introduced by Robert J. Harris

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John Dickson Carr:
Master of The Impossible

One night in 1945 two non-existent characters sat up into the early hours enthusiastically discussing the intricacies of the ‘miracle crime’. These two fictitious persons were Ellery Queen (the joint pen name of cousins Frederic Dannay and Manfred Bennington Lee) and Carter Dickson (a pen name often adopted by John Dickson Carr, which became nearly as famous as his own). We know this conversation took place from the dedication in the 1945 Carter Dickson novel *The Curse of the Bronze Lamp*.

What a pleasure it would have been to eavesdrop on these two giants of the detective genre and hear them explore how a man might walk across the threshold of his own house and disappear into thin air, or be murdered in a locked room that no one else has entered.

John Dickson Carr has long been regarded as the absolute master of the impossible crime, where the question is not merely who is the culprit, but how could this crime possibly have been committed without violating the laws of time and space? How could a man be stabbed to death standing alone on top of a tower? How could someone be killed by a shot from a gun that is pointed in the opposite direction?

Carr presented his readers with many such puzzles and solved them all ingeniously. But there is far more to the irresistible appeal of John Dickson Carr than mere cleverness. He also excels in delicious Gothic atmosphere, and creates comic scenes worthy of P.G. Wodehouse. In addition to this, as an American who made his home in Britain, he delights in the English

countryside and the Scottish Highlands with the freshness and enthusiasm of one who has dreamed of these places long before ever setting eyes on them.

Then there is his cast of wonderful, lively characters, chief among them the magnificent Dr Gideon Fell, the brilliant detective whom you will meet in these pages. Carr based Fell on his literary idol G.K. Chesterton, the essayist and author of the Father Brown stories. He is a Falstaffian figure with a bandit moustache who needs two stout walking sticks to support his impressive bulk. In the first Fell novel (*Hag's Nook*, 1933), an old friend of the good doctor describes him like this: 'The man has more obscure, useless and fascinating information than any person I ever met. He'll ply you with food and whisky until your head reels; he'll talk interminably, on any subject whatsoever, but particularly on the glories and sports of old-time England. He likes band music, melodrama, beer and slapstick comedies; he's a great old boy and you'll like him.'

Indeed, Dr Fell is the one fictional detective in whose company I would love to spend an evening by a roaring fire (with a plentiful supply of beer and cigars, of course). His irrepressible gusto is surely matched by that of his creator, for in the crime genre, Carr's writing is unmatched for its sheer exuberance and the pure joy of storytelling.

And so to *The Case of the Constant Suicides*, which many regard as the most entertaining book he ever wrote. This is quite a compliment when you consider both the quality and the quantity of his output. Here we have a haunted Scottish castle, colourful dashes of comedy and romance, and a series of impossible deaths to be solved. Who could resist it?

We'd best hurry along to Euston station now to catch the night train to Glasgow. At the end of our journey waits a thrilling adventure and the very best of company – Dr Gideon Fell.

Robert J. Harris
St Andrews
2018

Robert J. Harris is the author of *The Thirty-One Kings: Richard Hannay Returns* and the Artie Conan Doyle Mystery series.

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The 9:15 train for Glasgow pulled out of Euston half an hour late that night, and forty minutes after the sirens had sounded.

When the sirens went, even the dim blue lights along the platform were extinguished.

A milling, jostling, swearing crowd, mainly in khaki, groped about the platform, its shins and knuckles barked by kit and luggage, its hearing deadened by the iron coughing of engines. Lost in it was a youngish professor of history, who was trying to find his sleeping compartment on the Glasgow train.

Not that anyone had cause for apprehension. It was only the first of September, and the heavy raiding of London had not yet begun. We were very young in those days. An air-raid alert meant merely inconvenience, with perhaps one lone raider droning somewhere, and no barrage.

But the professor of history, Alan Campbell (MA, Oxon.; Ph.D, Harvard) bumped along with unacademic profanity. The first-class sleepers appeared to be at the head of a long train. He could see a porter, with much luggage, striking matches at the open door of a carriage, where names were posted on a board opposite the numbers of the compartments assigned to them.

Striking a match in his turn, Alan Campbell discovered that the train

appeared to be full and that his own compartment was number four.

He climbed in. Dim little lighted numerals over each door in the corridor showed him the way. When he opened the door of his compartment, he felt distinctly better.

This, he thought, was really first-rate in the way of comfort. The compartment was a tiny metal room, green-painted, with a single berth, nickel washbasin, and a long mirror on the door communicating with the next compartment. Its blackout consisted of a sliding shutter which sealed the window. Though it was intensely hot and close, he saw over the berth a metal ventilator which you could twist to let in air.

Pushing his suitcase under the berth, Alan sat down to get his breath. His reading matter, a Penguin novel and a copy of the *Sunday Watchman*, lay beside him. He eyed the newspaper, and his soul grew dark with bile.

"May he perish in the everlasting bonfire!" Alan said aloud, referring to his only enemy in the world. "May he –"

Then he checked himself, remembering that he ought to remain in a good temper. After all, he had a week's leave; and, though no doubt his mission was sad enough in a formal way, still it was in the nature of a holiday.

Alan Campbell was a Scot who had never in his life set foot in Scotland. For that matter, except for his years at the American Cambridge and a few visits to the Continent, he had never been out of England. He was thirty-five: bookish, serious-minded though not without humor, well-enough looking but perhaps already inclined toward stodginess.

His notions of Scotland were drawn from the novels of Sir Walter Scott or, if he felt in a frivolous mood, John Buchan. Added to this was a vague idea of granite and heather and Scottish jokes – which last he rather resented, showing himself no true Scot in spirit. Now he was at last going to see for himself. And if only –

The sleeping-car attendant knocked at the door, and put his head in.

"Mr Campbell?" he inquired, consulting the little imitation ivory card on the door, on which names could be written with a pencil and rubbed out.

"Dr Campbell," said Alan, not without stateliness. He was still young enough to get a thrill at the newness and unexpectedness of the title.

"What time would you like to be called in the morning, sir?"

"What time do we get to Glasgow?"

"Well, sir, we're *due* in at six-thirty."

"Better call me at six, then."

The attendant coughed. Alan correctly interpreted this.

"Call me half an hour before we do get in, then."

"Yes, sir. Would you like tea and biscuits in the morning?"

"Can I get a proper breakfast on the train?"

"No, sir. Only tea and biscuits."

Alan's heart sank along with his stomach. He had been in such a hurry to pack that he had eaten no dinner, and his inside now felt squeezed up like a concertina. The attendant understood his look.

"If I was you, sir, I should nip out and get something at the buffet now."

"But the train's due to start in less than five minutes!"

"I shouldn't let that worry you, sir. We'll not be starting as soon as that, to my way of thinking."

Yes: he'd better do it.

Ruffled, he left the train. Ruffled, he groped along a noisy and crowded platform in the dark, back through the barrier. When he stood at the buffet, with a slopped cup of tea and some dry sandwiches containing ham cut so thin as to have achieved a degree of transparency, his eye fell again on the *Sunday Watchman.* And bile rose again in his soul.

It has been stated that Alan Campbell had only one enemy in the world. Indeed, except for a fight in his schooldays in which he had exchanged black eyes and a bloody nose with the boy who later became his best friend, he could not even remember disliking anyone very much.

The man in question was also named Campbell: though he was not, Alan hoped and believed, any relation. The other Campbell lived in a sinister lair at Harpenden, Herts. Alan had never set eyes on him, and did not even know who he was. Yet he disliked him very cordially indeed.

Mr Belloc has pointed out that no controversy can grow more heated, more bitter (or, to a detached observer, more funny) than a controversy between two learned dons over some obscure point that nobody cares