THE LAST STROKE OF CHRISTMAS EVE

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A 24-Day Countdown Mystery

H. J. LINNEL

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The Last Stroke of Christmas Eve: A 24-Day Countdown Mystery

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How to Play

Somebody poisoned Reginald Hesketh's midnight toddy. Each day of Advent you rebuild one half-hour of the last day of his life, starting at noon on Christmas Eve. On the twenty-fourth you reach the half-hour before midnight. On Christmas Day you open the sealed ending.

Each day: read the half-hour (two pages), then solve its puzzle (one page). The facing page is for your working: note today's facts at its foot, copy the key one to *Facts to Keep*, and mark the *Case Board*.

Checking: the first page of the next day begins with *Yesterday at the inn*, which gives yesterday's answer and how it changes the Case Board. Stuck? Two hints for every day are at the back, then a worked answer.

The Case Board changes only through a puzzle's answer: each working page says whether today can change it. It has a row for each of the eight people who had the run of the inn and three columns, one for each thing the poisoner must have had (see *The three windows*). Put a tick when the pages show a person *could* have had it, a cross when they show the person could *not*, and leave the square empty while the pages have not yet said. A later day can turn a tick into a cross. A tick never proves guilt. The poisoner is the one person with no cross.

Every fact you need is printed before the day that needs it. You never need outside knowledge, and you never need to guess.

WITNESSES AND WORDS

What someone on the Case Board says about where they themselves were, spoken or written, is their own account, not a witness's word, and may be wrong on any day. Every other statement is a witness's, wrong only on a day when the puzzle page says one statement is false.

Before and *after* exclude the moment itself; *from … until* and *between* include both ends. *Seen* means seen by a witness (Mr Quarley counts; Hesketh, who cannot be asked, does not), not merely near one.

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The Rules of the House

THE HALL CLOCK

The longcase clock in the hall strikes the hours, one stroke for each hour, and a single stroke at every half-hour. So one o'clock and every half-hour sound exactly alike.

THE THREE WINDOWS

Means. The poison came from a tin of Kellow's Vermin Paste in the tack room. The tin was on its shelf, still sealed, at 12:00 noon and gone at 1:30. From any door of the inn to the tack room and back takes at least eight minutes in the snow, under ten; from further away, longer. Nobody went in or out of the inn by a window that day or that night. Tick a person when the pages so far show a stretch between 12:00 and 1:30 with no witness to where they were, long enough to get from where a witness last saw them to the tack room and on to where one next saw them. Tick, too, anyone a puzzle shows no witness placed in that time. Cross a person when every such stretch was too short.

Knowledge. At the fifth stroke of five by the hall clock, in the billiard room, Hesketh said that tonight his toddy would be in the blue jug on the study hob, not his usual brown one. Tick those a puzzle puts in the room at the fifth stroke; cross those a puzzle puts elsewhere.

Opportunity. The two jugs stood alone on the study hob from 11:30 until Hesketh went in at 11:50. The study is a few steps from every room, so any gap counts: tick a person a puzzle shows no witness can place for part of that time; cross one placed for all of it.

THREE PROMISES

1. Anyone in a room hears what is said aloud in it. Nobody knew the blue jug was for the toddy until Hesketh said so at five, and nobody passed it on.

2. The poison came from the tack-room tin and nowhere else, and changed hands only where these pages record it.

3. One of the eight people on the Case Board poisoned the jug, alone.

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CHRISTMAS MORNING, 1934

The Fellgate Inn

At the twelfth stroke of midnight a cup broke in the study of the Fellgate Inn. I heard it from the foot of the stairs. Dobbs, the porter, heard it too, and reached the study door before me. Reginald Hesketh was slumped over his desk with the papers he had promised to sign or tear up at midnight still squared beneath his hand. The pieces of his toddy cup lay by his chair.

The doctor rode up from Scarth at first light, through snow to his horse's knees. Poison, he said, and the same in the blue jug on the hob: vermin paste. The brown jug beside it was clean. By then Jem, the stable boy, had already gone to the tack room and come back white. The tin of Kellow's had been on its shelf at noon, its paper seal unbroken; he had seen it there at twelve by the ostler's watch. At half past one, hanging up the harness, he had seen the empty space and thought nothing of it. It is the only tin of the stuff on the pass.

The wires are down and the pass is shut. No policeman will reach us before Boxing Day. Eight people had the run of this house yesterday, and one of them put Kellow's in that jug.

My name is Edwin Quarley. I compile timetables for the railway, which means I spend my days deciding where people can and cannot be at a given minute. My train stuck in the drift below Scarth Halt a little before eleven yesterday morning, and I walked up to this inn with two other passengers. I have the register, the kitchen slips, the porter's book, and the memories of everyone in the house. I shall rebuild Christmas Eve half an hour at a time, from noon until the moment that cup broke.

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The Household

Eight people had the run of the inn on Christmas Eve, besides Dobbs the porter, Maisie the maid, Jem the stable boy and myself. Mr Pell, the vicar of St Oswald's, the church down the Scarth road, came up to dine.

1. Clara Hesketh, the owner's niece, who keeps the books.
Her uncle will not let her run the inn, and if he sells it she is left with nothing.

2. Owen Pryce, head ostler.
If the inn is sold the horses go, and with them his job and his cottage.

3. Beatrice Lomax, cook.
Her wages are docked for 'waste', and a hotel company brings its own chef.

4. Major Hugh Tarrant, neighbour, who rents the shooting on the moor.
A sale would end any renewal of the shooting lease he has held for nearly twenty-one years.

5. Iris Penrose, pianist, hired for Christmas Eve.
Hesketh never paid her for last Christmas, and told people she had been drunk.

6. Leonard Shaw, agent for Northern Hotels Ltd.
Hesketh has threatened to tell Shaw's firm about a payment Shaw would rather they never heard of.

7. Nell Ainsley, housekeeper.
A sale means every member of staff is turned out in the new year.

8. Samuel Reed, village schoolmaster, who leads the carol singers.
Hesketh has taken back the long room upstairs, where the village children held their Christmas party.

Words of the house. *ostler*: groom in charge of the horses; *tack room*: harness room; *sledge*: sled; *snug*: small bar parlour; *longcase clock*: grandfather clock; *hob*: iron shelf beside the fire; *toddy*: hot spiced drink; *airing cupboard*: warm cupboard for linen.

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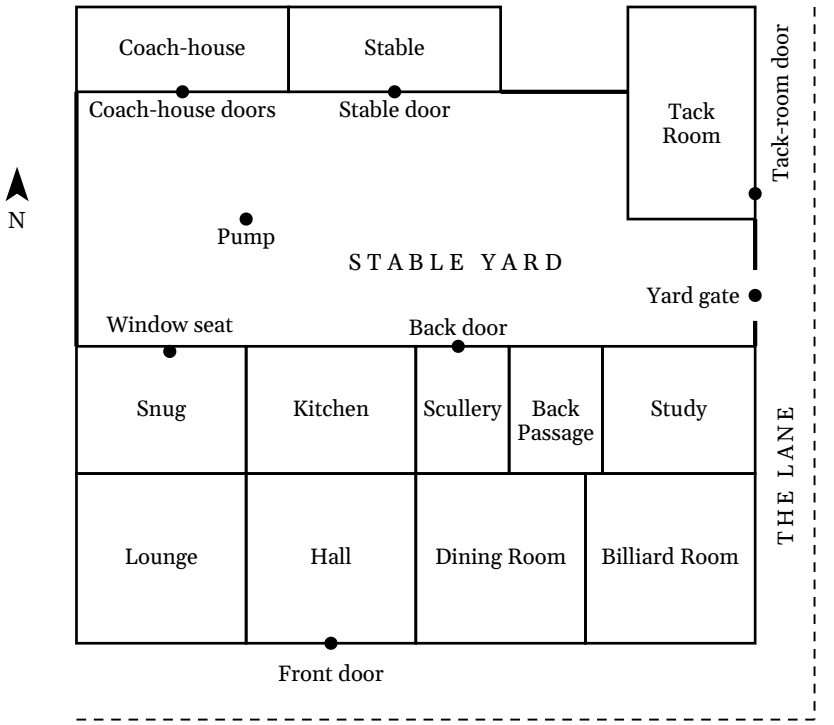
The Fellgate Inn and its Yard



The yard gate is the only way between the yard and the lane. The lane runs round the east end of the inn to the forecourt at the front door.

The tack-room door is on the tack room's east end, facing the lane.

The scullery door (the back door) is the only door between the inn and the yard.

Below the forecourt the road forks: down to Scarth Halt, and west to the Major's lodge. Neither road passes the yard or the lane.

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The Case Board

Tick: could have. Cross: could not. Empty: no puzzle has settled it yet. Mark only what a puzzle settles (rules, p. 4). A false account is not a cross, and a tick is not guilt. The poisoner is the one person with no cross.

Person	**Means could fetch the tin 12:00–1:30**	**Knowledge heard “blue jug” at five**	**Opportunity at the jugs 11:30–11:50**
1. Clara Hesketh			
2. Owen Pryce			
3. Beatrice Lomax			
4. Major Hugh Tarrant			
5. Iris Penrose			
6. Leonard Shaw			
7. Nell Ainsley			
8. Samuel Reed			

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Facts to Keep

One line a day: what you found, and any account you have ruled out.

Day 1

Day 2

Day 3

Day 4

Day 5

Day 6

Day 7

Day 8

Day 9

Day 10

Day 11

Day 12

Day 13

Day 14

Day 15

Day 16

Day 17

Day 18

Day 19

Day 20

Day 21

Day 22

Day 23

Day 24

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DAY 1 · 12:00 TO 12:30

The Twelfth Stroke

We came up from the Halt in single file, Miss Penrose between Mr Shaw and myself, with the snow coming sideways off the moor. The inn showed first as a yellow window and then as a door, and we stamped into the hall just as the long clock by the stairs began to strike. I counted twelve; I always count.

A fire was going beside the stairs. Dobbs, the porter, took our names and passed them to a young woman at the desk with ink on her cuff. “Miss Hesketh,” she said, “I keep the books, and the books say we are full, so you will have to share the trouble.” She wrote slowly, as people do who are paid to be right, and stopped once to read a note that lay on the desk. “Mr Reed, the schoolmaster,” she told Dobbs, “asks whether the carol singers may still come in at eleven, now that my uncle has turned his children out of the long room upstairs.” Dobbs said he would ask.

Miss Penrose and I stood by the fire while she wrote. Mr Shaw did not. He looked at the beams, the staircase and the window frames as a man looks at a horse he means to buy, then asked whether the stables were worth seeing and went out again into the snow.

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A big grey man in a dressing gown and riding boots came halfway down the stairs, looked at Miss Penrose and me, and said, “Stuck, are you? Then you’ll eat what there is.” That was Reginald Hesketh. He went back up without another word.

When Dobbs took our names through to the kitchen, I caught a cook’s broad back through the door and a smell of mutton. Somewhere overhead a girl was singing “The Holly and the Ivy” out of tune: Maisie, the housemaid, who is sixteen. Mr Booth at the Halt had telephoned up as we set off, and Owen Pryce, the ostler, and the boy Jem had taken the sledge down to the Halt for our luggage as we came in; it would not be up, Dobbs said, much before half past one.

At half past twelve by my watch, as the clock gave its single stroke, the front door opened again and let in a gust, a dog and Major Tarrant, who rents the shooting on the moor and walks over from his lodge by the west road on Christmas Eve whatever the weather. He shook the snow off his coat, hung it on the stand, and asked for Hesketh, and was taken through to the study. We took his arrival as our moment to leave the fire to him and find the snug. Of Mr Shaw there was no sign; I did not see him come back, and nor did anyone else who could tell me the time of it.

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THE QUESTION

Dobbs notes everyone who comes in at the front door, by the clock. His entry for Mr Shaw's return reads only "Mr Shaw, in. One stroke." At what time, that afternoon or evening, did Mr Shaw come back in?

> **How this works.** The hall clock strikes the hour (twelve strokes at 12:00, one at 1:00, two at 2:00) and one stroke at every half-hour. A single stroke on its own does not tell you which time it is.

Worked example: the train party came in as the clock struck twelve. Only noon and midnight have twelve strokes, and it was daylight, so the party came in at 12:00.

WHAT THEY SAY

A Maisie: "I heard the front door go for Mr Shaw from the front bedroom, as the clock struck. The next time the clock struck, it struck once as well."

B Dobbs: "He came in after the Major. The Major's coat was already on the stand."

Mr Shaw came back in at _____.

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TODAY'S FACTS

CASE BOARD CHANGE

Today's answer says when Mr Shaw came back, not where he was before it: tomorrow asks a witness who could have seen him. Change no square yet. Note who was where in today's facts.

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