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PERFECT MURDERS

HORACE L. GOLD

INTRODUCTION TO THE
BISON BOOKS EDITION
BY E. J. GOLD

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS
LINCOLN AND LONDON

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Introduction

E. J. Gold

My dad, Horace L. Gold, was born in Montreal in 1914. He grew up there until the family moved to Far Rockaway, where he met and married my mother, Evelyn Stein. He wrote his first science-fiction stories while living at home with his parents, and his folks were shocked to see a large check come in "for making black marks on a piece of paper." He spent some time as a freelance writer living in Greenwich Village and sold many of his sci-fi and fantasy stories to very successful magazines of the 1930s, including *Unknown Worlds*.

In 1944 he was drafted into World War II and served in the South Pacific. After the war, he returned to New York City, where we lived on 49th Street just across from where the United Nations was to be located. We moved to Stuyvesant Town in 1949 when the Russians decided to buy our building to use as their embassy (which they actually never did, as it turned out).

During this period, Horace was the highest paid comic-

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book writer in the world, writing Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, and others, mostly for Action and DC under a variety of pseudonyms or no name at all (meaning that he wrote under the owner's name). He wrote the now famous "Origin of Superman" story, which explains Superman's superpowers as stemming from the high-density, higher-gravity planet of Krypton. He's bullet-proof because his body has a higher density than Earth objects, and gravity is less for him so he can jump higher than the tallest building. Nothing about aerodynamics or flight orientation and balance had been worked out, but for the comic audience, it didn't need to be.

During this same time, he wrote freelance for a number of magazines in a very large number of fields, from *True Romance* to *Dime Detective*. For the latter, he wrote several million words of printed material. He started to combine his detective thrillers with science-fiction and fantasy themes in about 1939 and continued to develop this fusion fiction until his last productive phase in the late 1980s.

He left a great legacy as editor of *Galaxy Science Fiction*, *If Science Fiction*, and *Beyond Fantasy Fiction* magazines. You can't really see his contributions unless you read *Galaxy, 30 Years of Innovative Science Fiction*, edited by Fred Pohl, Martin H. Greenberg, and Joseph D. Olander, in which you'll discover how much he influenced the sci-fi literature of his day.

He left an equally strong legacy in detective fiction, but other than by the few pseudonyms of which we are

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today aware, we cannot now trace his production from 1933 through 1955 in this field. However, there are a few dozen detective stories in *Dime Detective* that I've managed to trace to his very active Royal and Underwood typewriters. The very best of what he wrote in this genre were produced as sci-fi detective thrillers, and that's what I've included in this volume.

Although Horace is better known as an editor than as a writer, some of his short stories (such as "Trouble with Water" and "The Man with English"—retitled "The Man with Backspin" for the British market) are among the most often reprinted in the profession. One of his novels, *None But Lucifer*, which has about a 10 percent contribution by L. Sprague deCamp, is arguably considered one of the greatest fantasy novels ever written.

One day I recall with particular vividness. I had asked him how to write a novel. I was already writing short stories and felt quite comfortable at a production of 1,800 to 2,200 words, but I didn't have a clue how to get any further. "Write a bunch of short stories," he replied, "and then tack them together by having a common theme or a common character, which should be your protagonist."

I have already issued a collection of his best-known science-fiction short stories, along with notes on how he developed the stories. This present volume is a compendium of Horace's very best detective sci-fi tales. How I've connected them is exactly what he recommended for a novel—have the protagonist be the same throughout,

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with a common theme, which I've done with as little disruption to the story as I could manage. My notion was to keep his ideas and stories intact, to introduce as little invasion as possible—the exact opposite of his notorious editing practice of slashing a story to pieces and reassembling it as if it were his own. In his case, for *Galaxy*'s audience, it was a good idea and had a terrific, almost asteroidal impact on the sci-fi reading public of the 1950s, but it just won't wash today. I wouldn't and couldn't do that to his stories—they are tight, clean, and well developed just as they are.

I think you'll find that there's a wealth of ideas and material for further development in these stories, and if you are producing for the sci-fi, fantasy, and horror markets, you'll appreciate the sourdough starter kit in this sci-fi detective collection. Horace had enough ideas for thousands of stories, which is what made him a great editor. He knew how to develop a story and how to let go of the snapper at just the right time without telegraphing the ending to the reader too soon. What he didn't have was enough time to write all the stories he'd thought up, so he gave them away by the hundreds to other writers and spent the time and energy helping them bring the stories to market.

The stories he himself took the time to write were always crafted to the intended market and almost always written to a specified word count. He was so good at it that he wrote "The Biography Project" to fill an eight-hundred-word hole in one issue of *Galaxy*, and the word

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count is exactly eight hundred. In that short-short, which is the hardest type of story to write without telegraphing the ending or letting the snapper go too early or too late, he managed to produce what is now a classic short-short in the sci-fi genre.

He grew up around Ring Lardner's crowd of racetrack touts and was immersed in the detective-writing scene throughout the 1930s and 1940s. As had many of his author friends, Horace had made a fair living during the Depression years writing millions of words in the thriller genre. He loved to write detective thrillers, but by the time he was editing *Galaxy*, he had no market for straight detective and had already chosen sci-fi as his career path, thus making the sci-fi detective thriller his most natural form of artistic expression.

In 1964 Horace moved out to California, where I'd been living since I got out of the military. I had been making a fair income as a television scriptwriter, and Horace wanted and needed a collaborator to turn out some stories for market. He didn't have the energy to deliver words nor the necessary drive to get the jobs from editors, and his customary market, the sci-fi fantasy field, had all but dried up for the time being. I got a call from Harlan Ellison, who was working as story editor for *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*, the most popular show on TV at the time. I tried to interest Horace in writing a script for the show, but by the time he got around to thinking about a potential story for *U.N.C.L.E.*, Harlan had left Arena Productions, not at all happy with how things were going.

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I had been working for several months at *Tiger Beat/Monkee Spectacular* as a feature writer and did some additional stories with Annie Moses. Of course this was far outside Horace's field, but, as he pointed out, so were true confessions and teen-girl love stories—he'd done those to make a living back in the late thirties. So we met for a story conference, came up with a slant on a story about how the Monkees met Jeannie of *I Dream of Jeannie*, wrote the thing at a quarter a word, and I delivered it the next day. Total time on the effort had been about two hours, with both of us slamming away at keyboards, he on his new Olivetti and me on my little Olivetti portable. Electric typewriters? Not for us—those things were strictly for sissies.

That was our first collaboration. Shortly after that, we got a chance to do a real story, sci-fi style, from Fred Pohl, who had taken over *Galaxy* when Horace had landed in the hospital due to a horrendous traffic accident—a moving van had collided with the taxicab he'd been riding in, leaving him an eighty-nine-pound wreck for a period of about two years. By the time he'd recovered and was ready to return to *Galaxy*, Fred had cemented his position and was now agent, writer under pseudonyms, and editor of *Galaxy* and refused to give the job back (which was why Horace ended up in Los Angeles in '64).

Fred sent us the cover artwork, a bunch of pointy-eared green men surrounding a bizarre, very unlikely, badly engineered, fancy battle-tank with Earthmen blazing away at the vicious little green men for some unspecified

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reason. Our job was to write a story around the cover illio, and we did. The green men and battle-tank were mentioned briefly as an image on a 3-D video screen, and we blasted into a real story about the president of an alien planet visiting Earth and landing in the middle of a detective mystery. "Villains from Vega IV" was the first of our real collaborations, and it didn't stop there.

Our next job was to turn out a script for *Star Trek*. Horace had received a call from his friend Gene Roddenberry:

"Horace? I've done all sorts of *Star Trek* stories, some from fantasy writers like Robert Bloch, but none from really hardcore, well-known sci-fi writers, and I'd like to see a script from you if you're interested."

"Science fiction, not sci-fi," Horace returned. He hated the term "sci-fi," which had been coined by his and my friend and agent Forrest J. Ackerman (aka Forry). "What kind of story do you want?"

"What comes to mind?" Gene answered. None came to mind, but I happened to be there when the call came in.

"How about 'Problem in Murder,' adapted to TV?" I prompted in a hoarse whisper.

"I have an idea that might work," Horace said into the phone. They concluded the conversation alone while I went into the kitchen to make some hot tea, which I poured over ice, the way Horace liked it. I drank a cold root beer and waited until he was ready to talk about it.

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"Problem in Murder" was a story about a detective who gets changed into a dog. My first thought was that it should be Captain Kirk or Spock who gets morphed. Horace had no thoughts whatsoever on the subject. He hated space opera and especially hated space opera on pop television, so he was entirely unaware of the format or slant of *Star Trek*. (This spilled over to *Star Wars* as well. The only reason he accepted tickets for the premiere of *Star Wars* was to bring the grandkids to an event. He hated the movie and told George Lucas as much after the show.) I did my best to explain *Star Trek* to Horace, but he was disinterested. He wanted to concentrate on the characterization and to develop the tensions in the plot as a screenplay, so we went into writing mode and came up with a tentative script.

Horace never actually wrote scripts. He didn't have the training for it, but luckily I did. I put in the camera angles, long shots, close-ups, transitions, and some light directorial indications, knowing full well they'd end up in the round file (meaning wastebasket), but at that time you couldn't turn in a script without some camera work and some scene indications.

I still have the original script and three rewrites of that unmade *Star Trek* episode. It was returned by Gene with the comment that neither Bill Shatner nor Leonard Nimoy would surrender screen time for the part of the dog, nor would any of the other primary actors, so we went back to the drawing board. It couldn't be a minor character—using the usual yeoman fall-guy for the dog

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part would lack any sense of urgency, therefore the show would fall flat. Who cares if a yeoman gets turned into a dog and has to work out a way to communicate his plight to his fellow shipmates?

Later, "Spock's Brain" showed me how we might have handled it differently, in such a way that egos would not be bruised, but we didn't handle it differently. We had no chance to. By the time we worked out the problems in the script, *Star Trek* had been canceled. We didn't get a notification that this had happened. I got a phone call from Bjo Trimble, who was devastated by the event.

In the meantime, Horace and I churned out stories and articles for magazines, including one hilarious spoof on camera technique for *Photo Magazine* that offered such advice to pro photographers as: "Never have your nude model wait for a photo shoot in a basket-weave chair" and "Checking a camera for light leaks is easy—merely immerse it in a barrel of water and look for the bubbles." We made anywhere from a quarter a word to a walloping dollar a word, and we were both thankful for the extra income, but we really wanted to turn out a script, for a TV show if we couldn't break into theatrical releases.

Our next opportunity came when we sent the script in, rewritten, for *I Dream of Jeannie* . . . Darrin gets the dog part. They seemed on the verge of accepting it, but the show got canceled. Same thing happened with several more hit shows. The script would be tentatively accepted then the show would be canceled within a matter of weeks. Our script became known as the "Kiss of Death"

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(as a matter of fact, I believe there was a *Star Trek* episode by that name, no relation to our script at all).

The final insult was when Screen Gems flatly refused to allow Davy Jones to get turned into a dog, and Chip Douglas recommended we try to sell the script to *Get Smart*. We'd already done that, and, true to form, the show was canceled. I called my friend Bob Crane and asked if he thought he'd like to get turned into a dog by some mad Nazi scientist. He laughed and said he'd already heard about the script from Forry, who'd told him the whole story.

So I still have the script here in my filing cabinet, in case there's a producer out there who is tired of the television game and needs to get a show canceled without taking the blame for it directly.

Horace got a number of offers to write stories, one from our friend Hugh Hefner. I couldn't help him with it because at the time I was totally immersed in making rock music at RCA with my friend Harry Nilsson. The story went out to Hef, who accepted it and wrote a check to Horace. Forry got the check and went out to Horace's house in La Canada to give it to him. By this time the aging process had taken its toll on Horace, and he refused the check, saying he didn't want his name to be associated with *Playboy*.

I tried several times to bail him out of writer's block, and we did succeed in writing a few more stories. We met at Disneyland several times for story conferences—I'm not entirely sure why he insisted on meeting there, but

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that's where he wanted to work out the stories. We came up with several corkers, including my favorite, "Shmuck-Slayer," about a genie who only slays shmucks, so if you are one, you can consider yourself as good as dead.

We were just on the verge of sending out a historical manuscript of "The Book of Irony," in which we explored a number of very strange events, and had reworked "The Old Die Rich" into a full-blown novel with time travel and all sorts of interesting items requiring me to investigate the lives of Mozart, Newton, and Ben Franklin and the oddities surrounding them, when Horace passed away quietly in his sleep on his living room couch. We had a great time collaborating, and everything I ever learned about writing, editing, and selling words I learned at his side. He was a hell of a writer and a hellion of an editor, and his legacy will surely live on for the benefit of readers and authors alike.

We talked many times about combining these stories into a single novelized format, but he didn't live to see its fruition. I offer the collection now as a tribute to his skill and ingenuity and his immeasurable and bountiful outpourings of fiction ideas.

I hope you enjoy these stories as much as I do and that they provide you with a larger glimpse into the expanded world of science fiction, fantasy, and horror, which knows no bounds, no limits, and is, by definition, "Out of the Box."

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