

A mystery within a mystery in turn-of-the-century England



Laura Stevenson

Sally Smith, "A Case of Mice and Murder. Raven Books, 2024.

Every once in a while, a mystery novel appears that is notable not only for its wit and intricate plot, but for its portrait of a historical place and people. Sally Smith's "A Case of Mice and Murder" is one of those mysteries. The time it portrays is 1901, four months after the death of Queen Victoria. The place is one of England's four Inns of Court, the Inner Temple, which Smith describes as "that cloistered fifteen-acre London bubble in which lawyers have worked undisturbed since the 1300s." Its central character is Sir Gabriel Ward, KC, whose legal brilliance is a byword in the Temple, but whose hyper-regular hours, private compulsions, and shyness

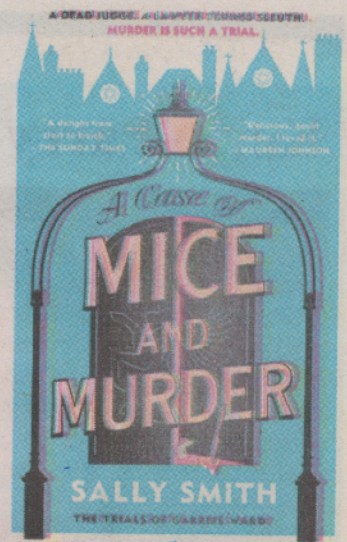
make him an oddity. It's said that in the 30 years he has lived and practiced law in the Inner Temple, he has rarely left its gates.

One early morning, Gabriel is jolted out of his quiet life by stumbling over the body – immaculate in evening dress but barefoot – of the Lord Chief Justice of England, who has been stabbed with the Temple's finest carving knife. The police are called, but they are not empowered to investigate the case; the Inner Temple is a "liberty" in which metropolitan London has no jurisdiction. Therefore, the Temple treasurer insists that the Temple perform its own investigation. And he appoints Gabriel as the investigator.

Gabriel is horrified; he is deeply involved in a case of the disputed authorship of "Millie the Temple Church Mouse," a children's book published on a whim by the distinguished legal publisher Herbert Moore. Unexpectedly, the book has become a runaway best seller, but despite Moore's queries, its author has remained undiscovered (and thus uncompensated) for four years. Suddenly, however, a woman has claimed to be that author, and she has sued Moore for the press's immense profits. The legal, financial, and

reputational issues are so complex that Gabriel, who is defending Moore, has no time for anything else. He cannot, however, refuse to investigate the murder of the Lord Chief Justice, and so, with the unexpectedly tactful assistance of Constable Wright, a young London policeman, he becomes a detective.

Gabriel and Wright interview the family of the murdered judge, then turn to the people known to have been seen within the Temple gates on the night of the murder. Not entirely to Gabriel's surprise, they encounter ambition, defenses, peculiar half-truths, and omissions at all levels of the Inner Temple's hierarchy. The judges and barristers have attended the Treasurer's Little Dinner to discuss a matter suspiciously shrouded in secrecy; two of them eagerly anticipate becoming Lord Chief Justice themselves. The Temple porters, accused of admitting strangers, insist that nobody could possibly have entered the gates, which were closed at midnight – but a vagrant claims to have spent that night in Temple Church. A teenaged scullery maid and an older cleaning lady (ironically, the only Temple residents who are personally distressed by the Lord Chief



Justice's death), provide what seems to be important evidence, but both of them, Gabriel instinctively senses, are hiding the truth. Gabriel treats all the suspects, not to mention the alleged author of "Millie," with the same gentle detachment and extraordinary perceptiveness that have made him famous. Constable Wright politely ignores the snobbery he encounters inside and outside the gates and hunts up some conclusive evidence beyond Gabriel's scope. Will the verdict be a triumph of justice in the larger sense that makes Gabriel love the law? Or will it instead be tinged with the unnoticed injustice that has affected the Inner Temple's legal assumptions since the 1300s?

Don't skip to the end.