

Introduction

THE Bible insists on it. Luke says, "Let us eat, and be merry." Also in Luke: "Take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry." Ecclesiastes emphasizes it: "A man hath no better thing under the sun than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry." And the Old Testament and the New join in capping it, for Isaiah and Corinthians I both advise, "Let us eat, and drink, for tomorrow we die."

So the title of this anthology, *Eat, Drink, and Be Buried*, is a quite accurate paraphrase of an ancient text, but its application here is rather special. Most of the twenty stories herein are tales of murder and the exposure of the culprit, and what got them thus together in one cover is a feature they have in common: the route of murder is the gullet. That is the feature on which the collection was based, but a few exceptions have been admitted. In Lawrence G. Blochman's "Red Wine," which is included in spite of its many previous appearances, both in print and on the air, because of its perfect fit to the theme, the wine is used on the culprit instead of by him; but still, he drank and tomorrow he died. And Stanley Ellin's "Specialty of the House," which has also been frequently reprinted, is included because of its unique variation on the theme. In that story there is indeed an intimate association between gullets and murders, but it is highly and horribly unconventional. Those two are mentioned only to explain why strict adherence to the formula was not insisted on.

I shouldn't have written "formula," for there is not really a formula; there is only a theme. These twenty stories were collected for your entertainment, not to prove a point, but they do adventitiously prove one: that the indictment of mystery stories as "formula stuff" is poppycock. You might as well call Petrarchan sonnets "formula stuff" because they adhere to a prescribed rhyming scheme. John Milton and Edna St. Vincent Millay both faithfully held to the scheme; and the

writers of the stories in this cover faithfully held to the theme, but observe the wide variety in approach, treatment, development, and emphasis. It might be added that, just as modern poets have more or less abandoned the sonnet and adopted less restrictive and demanding schemes, so many of today's mystery writers have abandoned the classic detective design in favor of looser and freer constructions; and some of them are represented herein.

By the way, I am not comparing mystery writers to Milton and Millay. I am not comparing them to anybody. I only suggest that your enjoyment of these tales should not be hobbled by nonsense about "formula stuff."

You might like to know how the collection was made for this eighth annual Mystery Writers of America anthology. The Board of Directors of MWA selected the theme and the editor. I was inaugurated without ceremony, and Dorothy Gardiner, Executive Secretary of MWA, invited all members to submit stories, on the understanding that the royalties would go to the MWA treasury, which is not Fort Knox. Seventy-eight tales were offered, and from these twenty were chosen; and on behalf of MWA I convey warm thanks to all, the fifty-eight as well as the twenty.

In previous MWA anthologies each story has been either preceded or followed by comments by its author, and, writing the contributors whose works were chosen for inclusion, I asked them to put this double question to themselves and answer it: "In my opinion now (not at the time I wrote it), what is this story's strongest point—or element or characteristic—and why? And what is its weakest, and why?"

Of course I ran a risk. They might have all replied, "All points, elements, and characteristics of my story are strong, and it has no weakness"; but they didn't. They responded nobly and possibly even candidly, and you will find the author's comments following almost every story—not preceding it, since that might have disclosed the plot—and I think you will find them interesting. I know I did.

REX STOUT

High Meadow
July 10, 1956