



# Tragedy at Law

*Cyril Hare*

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When an anonymous letter arrives for Mr Justice Barber, the High Court judge, warning of imminent revenge, he dismisses it as the work of a harmless lunatic.

But then a second letter appears, followed by a poisoned box of the judge's favourite chocolates, and he begins to fear for his life.

## Tragedy at Law Details

Date :

ISBN : 9780330377386

Author : Cyril Hare

Format :

Genre : Mystery, Fiction, Crime, European Literature, British Literature, Golden Age Mystery, Thriller, Mystery Thriller

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# From Reader Review *Tragedy at Law* for online ebook

## Susan says

There's bad blood between marginally unsuccessful barrister Francis Pettigrew and Judge Barber, and the mere fact that Barber's life seems to be unwinding doesn't mean he'll ease up on Pettigrew. But can the mild attorney really be the one making Barber's life a misery? Inspector Mallett thinks he knows who is responsible for the attacks on Barber, but his theory doesn't make psychological sense. This book features a fascinating look at how the assize courts in England worked at the start of the Second World War, at least for an American whose courts operate very differently.

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## Katrin V says

This was a disappointing ending. Tension built well, great character development, but an unraveling that only a legal specialist could appreciate. Definitely not my favorite genre.

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## Dfordoom says

Cyril Hare drew on his own legal experience (he ended up as a county court judge) for his delightful 1942 crime novel *Tragedy at Law*. It's both a crime story and a very amusing satirical look at the legal profession. It follows the progress of a circuit judge, Mr Justice Barber, through the various towns on the Southern Circuit during the early war years, dispensing justice whilst contriving to get himself into an extraordinarily embarrassing position for a judge.

It has the rather contrived and unlikely, but extremely clever, plot you expect in a golden age English mystery. And in a nice touch the solution to the mystery hinges on a rather obscure point of law. But *Tragedy at Law* has a great deal more going for it as well. It has a cast of eccentric and colourful characters, all of them flawed but flawed in interesting and entertaining ways. It has an unusual structure, but I can't say any more about that without risking spoilers. And it offers a fascinating and witty insight into the strange travelling world of the circuit court.

It's an enormous amount of fun, and I can't recommend it too highly.

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## Ian Brydon says

My first job after graduating from university saw me joining the Civil Service (for the first of three separate careers as humble functionary), and being assigned to Bloomsbury Tax Office. Despite its name, the office was neither situated in, nor presided over, Bloomsbury. Instead, it was located in a particularly shabby office on the corner of Euston Road and Melton Street (reminiscent of one of the more rundown buildings that housed the peripheral branches of the intelligence services in John le Carré's books) and covered the Inns of Court. As a consequence, the overwhelming majority of its taxpayers were either barristers or solicitors, spanning both the knights of the legal profession in the form of immensely successful QCs whose exploits

featured regularly in the Times Law Reports, and also the waifs and strays of the Bar, perpetually struggling to survive from one dock brief to the next, often going months without ever seeing the inside of a court, or receiving even a sniff of a client. I found the traditions of the Bar and its archaic working practices mystifying, yet also utterly captivating, and I have nurtured a fascination for them ever since, and have always loved any literature that touches on the intricacies and vagaries of the legal world.

This book sates that appetite comprehensively, offering a glorious perspective on the pomposities of the Southern Assize Court Circuit. Set in October 1939, as the country gradually subsided into war but before the subsequent privations became apparent, this novel tells of the tribulations of Frank Pettigrew, a down-at-heel barrister (perhaps an early forerunner of John Mortimer's Rumpole) and Mr Justice Barber. Shrouded in pomposity, as in an armour of triple steel, the Judge stumbles through the proceedings, dependent upon the ministrations of his youthful and far more intelligent wife to preserve him from embarrassment. To add a little savour the reader subsequently discovers that before she married the Judge Lady Barber had previously been engaged to Pettigrew.

However, Lady Barber is not on hand to prevent her husband from deciding to drive home after a lawyers' mess dinner in the blackout and knocking over a stranger who suffers damage to his hand and may have to lose a finger. Distressing enough for anyone, this injury is particularly awkward for the victim as he is a fêted classical pianist. Meanwhile the Judge has been receiving threatening but anonymous letters.

The pianist consults his own lawyers who threaten to sue the Judge if a satisfactory settlement cannot be reached out of court. This would, of course, signal the end of his career on the Bench. With all these elements Cyril Hare concocts a fairly heady brew, which eventually culminates with the murder of the Judge outside the Central Criminal Court. Hare, himself a successful barrister, manages his plot masterfully, with a deft lightness of touch. One feels great empathy for Pettigrew, and shudders at the occasional loathsomeness of Barber.

This blend of traditional whodunit and 'legal procedural' is an all round success and reads as well today as it did on its original publication more than seventy years ago.

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## **Jan says**

An entertaining read. A good old fashioned mystery, nicely written with an entertaining observation of people. Got a bit confused towards the end with the big reveal but will forgive it that.

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## **Sam Reaves says**

Published in 1942 and set in the early months of the Second World War, this unusual mystery is probably Cyril Hare's best known book. Hare (the pseudonym for real-life judge Gordon Clark) wrote legal thrillers before they were a genre; this one illuminates the peculiar English institution of the Assizes, the ancient system whereby touring judges traveled a regular circuit from town to town, presiding over whatever cases had been referred for trial. The book introduces a not very successful lawyer named Francis Pettigrew who went on to appear in several succeeding novels. In this one, the itinerant judge at the center of the story is plagued by a series of mishaps and mysterious threatening letters as he and his staff travel the circuit. The

judge's much younger wife, a competent lawyer in her own right who "had never succeeded in acquiring a practice," comes along to watch over her husband while feuding with his retinue. The wife is an interesting touch; Hare was perhaps ahead of his time in noting "the prejudice which has kept the Bar an essentially masculine profession." The wife has history with Pettigrew. There is intrigue and minor skulduggery, but no murder occurs until late in the book. The solution to the mystery, as in most of Hare's books, hinges on a point of law.

All quite fascinating if you have an interest in the peculiarities of the English legal system; not a pulse-pounder, but elegantly written and justly regarded as a minor classic.

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### **Kiran says**

Once again a rather slow meandering novel from Cyril Hare (as with *Suicide Excepted*), in which there is very little "action" and it's written in a genteel style that's very much of its time. Inspector Mallet barely features so there's no central "detective figure" and this just barely rates being tagged as a crime novel (based on modern standards). In fact it's surely no spoiler to reveal that pretty much nothing happens in this novel. Apart from a handful of threatening letters and one or two pranks. But suddenly right at the absolute end it all suddenly tumbles out. And then there's a very abrupt end as though Hare just ran out of steam after 'the big reveal'. But it was still enjoyable as a weekend read.

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### **DeAnna Knippling says**

A judge commits a crime of negligence after receiving a death threat...a crime that might completely derail his career, if the person writing the death threats doesn't get him first!

I liked this but called it pretty early, then spent the rest of the book paranoid that my solution was a red herring. It's a nice twisty legal mystery written by someone in the law profession. My only gripes are a) a bit slow, even for me, in places, and b) the POVs were arranged such that I didn't know who the main character was until the end of the book, which was more unsettling than I would have thought--not as bad as having a POV character die and the book passed on to someone else, but similarly WHAAA??? But, given the plot, it was probably the right way to do it. One of those compromises that you just end up having to make. Anyway, a solid read if not magnificent.

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### **Leslie says**

Review pending

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### **Bev says**

Judge William Hereward Barber's tour of England's Southern Circuit begins as normally as possible in wartime--true there are no trumpets (as Judge Barber mentions many times), but there is still plenty of pop and circumstance and the scarlet and wig to wear. The court calendar is full of the usual cases ranging from civil complaints to criminal charges. It looks to be a normal run--and a normal run-in with his long-time rival

Francis Pettigrew. Pettigrew and Barber were once rivals in love--with Barber winning the hand of the lovely Hilda--and now Barber loves to use his position on the bench to put Pettigrew in his place as often as possible. And he settles in to enjoy another round.

But then the odd things start happening. Anonymous letters and poisoned chocolates. Midnight attacks on Barber's wife and a loose stair railing. An attempt to do the judge in with gas. A man that Barber sentenced rather severely in the past has recently been let out of prison and the Barbers wonder if perhaps Heppenstall is behind the ominous notes and life-threatening attempts. Added to the mix, the judge unadvisedly drives home one evening after consuming a bit too much brandy and manages to run down a famous pianist--who isn't shy about threatening to take the judge to court over the matter. Things begin to look rather bleak for the judge and his lady--at the very least financial ruin in a settlement and quite possibly the loss of his position on the bench if the case can't be settled out of court. Through all of the attacks and a final suicide attempt by the judge (who doesn't want to face public ruin), his wife Hilda manages to save him from the unknown assailant and himself. Until the judge's last court appearance when he is murdered on the court steps under the watchful eyes of his wife and the City Police. Inspector Mallett is presented with several suspects....including Pettigrew himself. But Pettigrew produces an obscure point of law that will direct the way to the solution.

Cyril Hare was the pseudonym for Alfred Gordon Clark, an English judge, who used his legal experiences to good effect in his crime fiction. When he was a young man, he served as a judge's marshal--an experience that gives breath and life to his descriptions of such a young man, Derek Marshall, who serves as marshal to Judge Barber. *Tragedy at Law* gives us a very detailed look at the legal life in Britain during World War II and manages to do so without boring the reader with the details. Hare's characters are interesting and fleshed out--with flaws and all--and Judge Barber soon becomes a man we love to hate--and yet we're still sorry when he's killed. There are plenty of subplots and red herrings in the path to keep the reader guessing. And even though this was a reread, I still wasn't sure of myself on who did it. Excellent reread--four stars.

This was first posted on my blog *My Reader's Block*. Please request permission before reposting. Thanks!

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## **Eustacia Tan says**

I enjoyed *An English Murder* so much that I borrowed another one of Cyril Hare's mysteries! *A Tragedy at Law* is supposed to be his most famous work so I was really excited to begin it.

Drawing on his legal experience (or so I'm assuming), *A Tragedy at Law* is a mystery that deals with the finer points of the law. Mr Justice Barber is a self-important judge who's making his rounds on the 'circuit', which basically means he's moving from town to town judging cases. It should be uneventful, but then he gets a threatening letter. That shouldn't be a cause of worry, but a box of poisoned chocolates comes. And the threats just keep escalating from there.

Thrown into this mix are Derek Marshall, the Marshal, and Francis Pettigrew, a lawyer who is unsuccessful in profession and love (the love of his life having married Justice Barber). Can they find out what is happening?

The book uses a variety of POVs, but the dominant one is Derek. I suppose that as the 'newbie', he's in a good position to wonder at (and try to understand) what's going on, plus he's easily convinced to help by Hilda, Justice Barber's incredibly smart and charming wife.

Hilda, by the way, is an amazing person. You don't normally see such strong personalities in fiction. Here's a woman who was called to the bar and is clearly more intelligent and charming than her husband. She's also got some fears of her own which she's hiding and deserves all the page time she has (I would love to read about her earlier years). Sheila, the woman Derek falls in love with and the only other woman with a significant amount of attention devoted to her, seems almost dull in comparison. She seems to be more plot device than character.

That said, there is one other female character with a pretty strong presence, but she never directly appears or speaks. She's very closely tied to Hilda, so I didn't consider her a primary/lead character.

What I really liked about this book was its tone. There's a wry humour that's present throughout the book, and I enjoyed it very much. Clearly, Cyril Hare isn't above poking fun at the pompousness his profession is sometimes filled with. The humour also fits in with the cynicism of Pettigrew, which works because Pettigrew's the 'detective' of the novel.

That said, the ending of the book was a little hard to understand. There isn't a grand denouncement like in the Christie novels, but instead, there's a not-really-clear explanation by Pettigrew towards the end. I had to read that last chapter a couple of times before I understood it.

Overall, I enjoyed this novel, although I personally prefer *An English Murder*. I liked the humour present in the book and the use of Derek as the main POV character, although the ending does detract from the story a little.

This review was first posted at [Inside the mind of a Bibliophile](#)

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## **Pat Dedert says**

I really enjoyed this book chiefly because I was enchanted by the language, reminding me of the precision and wit of Dorothy L. Sayers, and also for the endearing and well-rounded character studies.

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## **Graham Powell says**

In late 1939, just weeks after WWII has begun, Mr. Justice Barber and his entourage set out for the courts of the Southern Circuit. The judge is a man a bit beyond middle years, somewhat objectionable, but a good lawyer. But one evening, after receiving a threatening letter, he drinks too much and knocks a man down with his car. It seems quite likely that he'll be on the wrong end of the majesty of the law, leading to professional disgrace and financial ruin. His brilliant and ambitious wife Hilda will do whatever is necessary to prevent that.

A series of curious events indicate that someone may have a more permanent fate in mind for the judge.

This is an absolutely hilarious book, all the more remarkable because the author never stoops to anything so crude as a joke. It's essentially a comedy of manners as it follows the rather pompous judge, his somewhat crude clerk, the young marshal, and the rest from town to fictional town throughout the south of England. The mystery mostly lurks in the background, only coming to the fore in the last few pages, and the solution

is very well done indeed.

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## **Calum Reed says**

B+

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## **Derek Collett says**

On the back cover of this book, P. D. James remarks that ‘Tragedy at Law is regarded by many lawyers as the best English detective story set in the legal world’. A pretty narrow genre I would have thought but there we are.

Tragedy at Law describes what happens when a High Court judge, Mr Justice Barber, embarks upon a tour of duty on the ‘Southern Circuit’ during the early days of World War Two. As someone almost totally ignorant of the old Assizes procedure, I found the nuts and bolts of this facet of the legal profession very interesting, although a little more detail wouldn’t have gone amiss.

The book starts slowly (there is a long, scene-setting opening chapter wherein we are introduced to most of the principal players in the story) but picks up pace when Barber receives firstly an anonymous threatening letter and then a box of his favourite chocolates that have been unconventionally ‘spiked’. At this point the book changes tack from a ‘court procedural’ to an old-fashioned murder mystery and that’s all to the good in my opinion. The judge also has the misfortune to run over a famous concert pianist, whose hand is badly damaged as a result, and the prospect of career-threatening legal action hangs over the rest of the book.

Much of the action in Tragedy at Law is seen through the eyes of Derek Marshall, a young man unfit for war service who is therefore acting as the judge’s right-hand man or Marshal (‘Marshall by name and Marshal by occupation!’—a little too much is made of this rather feeble jest). But in the later chapters the perspective shifts as we see events unfold instead from the point of view of the police officers investigating an attempt on Barber’s life. (I found this sudden lurch a bit disorientating.) Marshall is a relatively anodyne central character but the self-important Barber, his overbearing wife Hilda and the laconic barrister Francis Pettigrew provide adequate compensation.

Given that this novel was written in 1942 and set during the Second World War, I was disappointed by the lack of period detail (blackout curtains are mentioned a few times but the war never impinges on the narrative in any meaningful way). From this standpoint, I kept comparing the book negatively with Nigel Balchin’s *Darkness Falls from the Air*, written in the same year as Tragedy at Law. Also, Hare’s somewhat arch and twitty dialogue cannot stand comparison with the terse, sardonic prose of Balchin’s Blitz-era masterpiece.

In summary, this is a striking and absorbing novel that reads like a cross between Agatha Christie and one of Henry Cecil’s legal novels (*Friends at Court* for example). There are several plot twists towards the end that I didn’t see coming, and the book has an ingenious conclusion. I will probably have to read it again sometime to see exactly how the crime was enacted and then solved. Cyril Hare is an interesting discovery and I can see myself reading another of his stories before too much longer.



