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September 4, 2003

THE DETECTIVE STORY

My interest in the detective story goes back to the time when I was nine or ten years old and was introduced to the Hardy Boys books. After reading most of them I moved on to Ellery Queen, Philo Vance, and Perry Mason. I learned a lot from reading detective stories. From the Hardy Boys I learned the meaning of the word "duress" when a character who was being abducted cleverly signed his name, "Duress Scott", to a note the villains made him write. From Philo Vance I first heard of the artist Paul Cezanne, and from Perry Mason I first learned the word "motel". I thought it was a misprint, but I asked my friend Tom Soyars about it and he explained that it was what we called a tourist court. Sure enough it wasn't long before motels appeared in Hopkinsville.

Tom was another detective story buff, and we used to discuss our favorite sleuths. We both liked Ellery Queen, so we decided that we would form a writing team like the two men who wrote the Ellery Queen stories. The first thing to do was to decide on the right name for our detective. We noticed that all the detectives we liked had names consisting of three or four syllables – Sherlock Holmes, Philo Vance, Hercule Poirot, Peter Wimsey. We spent weeks trying out different names, but we never did come up with one. Perhaps this was our way of putting off actually writing a story. Trying to write made us realize how much art and skill is required to induce the reader to suspend his disbelief and enter into the world of the story.

According to Gertrude Stein the detective story is "the only really modern novel form". Stein was one of many intellectuals and literary figures who have been interested in the detective story. Another critic called the detective story "the child of the Century,"-meaning the Twentieth. However the roots of the detective story are found in the early Nineteenth Century, and the detective story is even foreshadowed in the Eighteenth .

Edgar Allen Poe wrote the first real detective story in 1842- *The Murders in the Rue Morgue.* A year or so later he wrote *The Mystery of Marie Roget*, a fictionalized tale of the disappearance of a woman named Mary Rogers in New York City. Poe set the story in Paris and had his detective offer a solution which may well have been the correct explanation of the actual murder. Poe next wrote *The Purloined Letter,* which, though it is not about a murder, is the best of them all. These stories were set in Paris and featured Auguste Dupin, the original armchair detective, and his anonymous aide and admirer who narrates the tales. Poe here set the pattern followed by many later writers: Conan Doyle with Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson; Agatha Christie with Hercule Poirot and Capt. Hastings; Rex Stout with Nero Wolfe and Archie Goodwin.

In 1749 Voltaire wrote a story with a hero named Zadig , a man whose study of nature has enabled him to see "a thousand differences where other men see nothing but uniformity". Zadig describes a horse he has never seen and is nearly charged with sorcery for his trouble. The king of France has lost a favorite horse, and Zadig tells the grooms who are searching for it that "the horse is five feet high, with very small hoofs, and a tail three feet and a half in length; the studs on its bit

are gold, of twenty-three carats and his shoes are of silver of eleven penny-weights." The grooms think he is a sorcerer, but Zadig explains: "I observed the marks of a horse's shoes, all at equal distances…The dust on the trees in a narrow road that was but seven feet wide was a little brushed off, at the distance of three feet and a half from the middle of the road. This horse, said I, has a tail three feet and a half long, which being whisked to the right and left has swept away the dust. I observed under the trees that formed an arbor five feet in height, that the leaves of the branches were newly fallen, from whence I inferred that the horse had touched them and that he must therefore be five feet high. As to his bit, it must be gold of twenty-three carats for he had rubbed its bosses against a stone …In a word, from a mark made by his shoes on flints…,I concluded that he was shod with silver. Such a horse could only belong to the king." I don't know if Poe or Doyle ever read Zadig, but the analysis certainly anticipates Dupin and Holmes.

Poe may have been more directly influenced by the memoirs of Francoise Eugene Vidocq, the first installment of which appeared in 1828. Vidocq was the first chief of the famed Surete, the Paris detective bureau. Vidocq had been a thief in his early life and had been imprisoned more than once. Mending his ways, he became first a police informer, than a detective, and finally the organizer of the Surete. His memoirs told in flamboyant detail about his detecting methods and his success in catching criminals. Much has been written about the affinities between criminals and those who are supposed to prevent crime and certainly the adage, "It takes a thief to catch a thief" has enough truth in it to be uncomfortable.

Poe's stories influenced and encouraged other writers. In the 1860s Wilkie Collins wrote *The Moonstone,* which featured Sgt. Cuff of Scotland Yard. Charles Dickens wrote several novels involving murder and investigation, including *Bleak House*, which featured Inspector Bucket, who rivals Sgt. Cuff for the title of First Important English Detective and at his death Dickens left an unfinished novel *The Mystery of Edwin Drood.*. In fact, Collins and Dickens collaborated in writing mysteries which were serialized in magazines. In 1878 an American woman, Anna Katherine Green, wrote the first significant mystery by a woman writer, *The Leavenworth Case*, in which her detective Inspector Ebenezer Gryce solves a baffling murder. In 1886 a man named Fergus Hume published *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab*, which sold more than a half-million copies. That is astonishing considering that many best-sellers today never approach such numbers.

Obviously the world was ready for the detective story and in 1887 Arthur Conan Doyle introduced the greatest fictional detective, Sherlock Holmes, in *A Study in Scarlet*. This work was followed by a string of stories in the 1890s featuring Holmes and his faithful friend and amanuensis, Dr. John Watson. Doyle peopled his stories with characters who come alive in their own right: Inspectors Gregson and Lestrade of Scotland Yard, always wrong but never in doubt; Holmes's elder brother Mycroft, who is said to be smarter than Sherlock but who is too lazy to be a detective; Irene Adler, whom Holmes always called "The Woman"; Professor Moriarty, the criminal genius; and The Baker Street Irregulars, street urchins who ran errands and shadowed suspects.

In 1893, only six years after *A Study in Scarlet*, Doyle tried to kill off Holmes by having him and Professor Moriarty fall to their deaths in a struggle at the Reichenbach Falls in Switzerland in the story, *The Final Problem.* It is frequently asserted that Doyle was unhappy because Holmes's popularity detracted from his historical novels and more serious writing, but I'm not sure I agree. It might have been a shrewd ploy to maintain interest in Holmes because the Holmes stories were prodigious money makers. The public clamored for more stories and Doyle produced them. Many of Doyle's best stories, including *Silver Blaze,* my favorite, and *The Hound of the Baskervilles,* were written after Holmes' supposed demise. Indeed the story, *The Adventure of the Empty House*, in which Holmes's reappearance is explained, is one of the best.

In Auguste Dupin Poe created the first neurotic, omniscient detective, but neither Dupin nor the other know-it-all sleuths ever had quite the blend of omniscience, eccentricity, and self-absorption of Holmes. Yet Holmes is still a marvelously sympathetic character, and Dr John Watson as his foil is perfectly portrayed.

The adulation of Holmes almost passes belief. There are enthusiasts who still come to London looking for 221b Baker Street, although that address never existed. (I must confess that I couldn't resist going to see Baker Street myself.) Dyed-in-the-wool Holmes fans delight in trying to stump each other with trivial details about the stories. "Whose gold watch was so badly mishandled? How was it Dr. Watson cherished a portrait of Henry Ward Beecher but never had it framed? "These questions were asked by the writer Christopher Morley, in an essay on

Holmes, and I do not know the answers though I have read all the stories several times. But somewhere, you may be sure; there is an enthusiast who does know.

The period from 1900 to 1940 is often called the Golden Age of the Detective Story. During these years most of the great detectives were created, and most of the classic situations were devised: the locked room, the least likely suspect, the red herring, the airtight alibi, the mysterious murder method, and the dramatic confrontation where the detective unmasks the killer. Cleverness, puzzles, and imagination were highly valued in the detective story in the Golden Age.

After Holmes came Father Brown, the creation of G. K. Chesterton. Father Brown was a priest who not only solved crimes but also agonized over the souls of both the victim and the murderer. Chesterton devised the most ingenious crimes, but the premises on which many of his stories were based require considerable suspension of disbelief. For example, in the story *The Secret Garden*, the victim's head is cut off with a cavalry saber. The victim appears to be a stranger who has somehow entered a garden enclosed with unscalable walls while a dinner party is going on in the house. Then it appears that one of the guests at the party has disappeared. Obviously he must be the killer. Next, a second head, so badly disfigured as to be unrecognizable, is discovered outside the garden wall. Father Brown, however, knows that the victim is actually the missing guest. The head in the garden is that of a criminal guillotined that day and brought home by the host, the chief of detectives of Paris, who is the murderer. When Father Brown goes to confront him, it is found that he has committed suicide in his study. The motive?

The victim was about to donate millions to the Church, and the murderer was an anticlerical atheist.

Chesterton had a close friend and former schoolmate, E. C. Bentley, who, in 1913, wrote a classic mystery called *Trent's Last Case*, which had great influence upon subsequent authors. Trent was the first sleuth to be portrayed as having normal human traits - he actually falls in love with the chief suspect. The book also introduced a clever twist in which two equally plausible solutions to the murder are presented, a technique which was much copied. Bentley wrote that while he was in the process of plotting he "drew up a list of things absolutely necessary to an up-to-date detective story: a millionaire – murdered, of course; a police detective who fails where the gifted amateur succeeds; an apparently perfect alibi….besides these indispensables there had, of course, to be a crew of regulation suspects, to include the victim's widow, his secretary…and a person who had quarreled openly with him. I decided, too, that there had better be a love interest, because there was supposed to be a demand for this in a full-length novel. I made this decision with reluctance, because to me love-interest in novels of plot was very tiresome". Bentley's reluctance was ill-founded. Making Philip Trent a normal man added immensely to the book's appeal.

Shortly before the First World War a new kind of sleuth appeared, the scientific detective, who relied on physical evidence and investigation to solve crimes. This was a reaction to the so-called "intuitive" detective like Dupin, Holmes, and Father Brown, who were also called "thinking machines" and "armchair Detectives". Actually there was no "armchair" detective. Dupin

personally found the purloined letter; Holmes inspected many crime scenes with the help of his magnifying glass and measuring tape, not to mention the work he put into his famous monograph on the different kinds of cigar ash. Nevertheless it came to seem more authentic if the detective was a police inspector or scientist. In 1910 Baroness Orczy, who had a large following for her historical romances – she was the creator of the Scarlet Pimpernel – introduced the first female police detective in the person of Lady Molly of Scotland Yard. Her connection with the Yard is somewhat vague, but Lady Molly is frequently asked to look into crimes which her male counterparts cannot solve. She too has her faithful companion, a woman named Mary, who recounts her adventures. I have not been able to determine if Lady Molly and Mary had last names. Indeed I have only read one Lady Molly story. Baroness Orczy also wrote a number of stories featuring a nameless detective called the "Old Man in the Corner" which are quite good..

The 1920s saw the appearance of three more of my favorites. In 1920 Agatha Christie published *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, which introduced Hercule Poirot, the diminutive Belgian with the formidable mustache and the "little grey cells". Christie's genius was to combine the methods of the intuitionists and the scientists to produce stories with inventive plots, unusual motives, multiple suspects, exotic poisons, and tricky red herrings. In fact Christie created a furor in the world of mystery devotees with her 1926 novel, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, in which the narrator, Dr. Shepperd, is the murderer. The doctor commits suicide and leaves a note explaining all when he realizes that Poirot has found him out. Mystery fans cried foul. The noise was so loud and so

long-lasting that in 1945 Edmund Wilson, who hated mystery fiction anyway, wrote a famous essay entitled *Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd.* Wilson was almost alone among literary figures in not liking detective stories. Wilson also blasted Dorothy Sayers the creator, in 1923, of another of my favorites, Lord Peter Wimsey. Wilson said something to the effect that compared to Ngaio Marsh she was a good writer.

There was something about Dorothy Sayers that interested other writers. It might have been that she was very attractive as well as one of the first women to graduate from Oxford. E. C. Bentley wrote a little verse which came to be called a clerihew about her detective:

> Lord Peter Wimsey
> May look a little flimsy
> But he's simply sublime
> When nosing out a crime.

. I think that the first Wimsey story I read was called *A Matter of Taste,* which hinged on Wimsey's extraordinary palate for wine. Wimsey is sent by the British War Office to buy a chemical formula from a French scientist. When he arrives at the chateau he finds two impostors claiming to be he. The scientist, who happens to be a French nobleman and has a renowned cellar, decides to hold a blind tasting to identify the real Wimsey. All three recognize a Chablis Moutonne , a Chevalier Montrachet , a Schloss Johannisberger, a Chateau Lafitte, a Clos- Vougeot, and an Imperial Tokay, but only Wimsey knows the brandy: "This is *the* brandy – the brandy of brandies – the superb – the incomparable – the true Napoleon." Wimsey is then accepted by the Frenchman. He proceeds to shoot the gun out of the hand of one of the impostors, while the

other is too much overcome by the wine to do more than smile. Wimsey doesn't get the formula, however. The scientist decides that he must give it to the French government despite his need of money. Wimsey, gentleman that he is, heartily approves.

I first read this story when I was fourteen in an anthology of detective stories my mother gave me for Christmas. Most of the significance went over my head, but now I seldom drink a good wine without thinking of it.

Still another favorite was Philo Vance, but I must confess that he hasn't held up quite as well as I would have liked. Vance was the creation of Willard Huntington Wright, using the penname S. S. Van Dine. Wright was an art critic, one of the earliest American critics to champion modern art. He wrote books on painting and wrote the Vance stories for relaxation. The appeal of the Vance stories was in the plot and in the infuriating character of Vance. (Ogden Nash said that "Philo Vance needs a kick in the *pance.*") Incidentally many writers of the period were intellectuals and men-of-letters who wrote detective fiction for pleasure while doing their major work in other fields. For example, H. C. Bailey was a classical scholar and drama critic, and E. C. Bentley was an editor and editorial page writer for London newspapers. C. Day Lewis, who wrote as Nicholas Blake, was poet-laureate of England.

Dashiell Hammett in 1927 wrote a devastating criticism for *The Saturday Review of Literature* of *The Benson Murder Case*, one of the best Vance mysteries. Here is part of it: "Alvin Benson is found sitting in a wicker chair in his living room, a book still in his hand, his legs crossed, and his body

comfortably relaxed in a life-like position. He is dead. A bullet from an Army model Colt .45 automatic pistol, held some six feet away when the trigger was pulled, has passed completely through his head. That his position should have been so slightly disturbed by the impact of such a bullet at such a range is preposterous, but the phenomenon hasn't anything to do with the plot, so don't, as I did, waste time trying to figure it out. ....Vance manages always, and usually ridiculously, to be wrong. His exposition of the technique employed by a gentleman shooting another gentleman who sits six feet in front of him deserves a place in a *How to be a Detective by Mail* course". Hammett also found the emphasis on art to be "boring".

To be fair to Van Dine we must remember that Hammett was the first of a new school of mystery writers - the so-called "hard boiled" school which had no patience with writers like Doyle, Bentley, and Van Dine. Hammett had been a detective for the Pinkerton agency for several years before starting to send stories to the pulp magazines. These magazines with names like *Black Mask* and *Spicy Detective,* had a large readership and they paid their writers at the then going rate of a penny a word

Hammett's classic, *The Maltese Falcon,* published in 1930, is one of my favorites and is one of the few good books to have been made into a good movie. The hero, Sam Spade, is Hammett's best realized protagonist. He is the antithesis of the classical detective. He doesn't regard murder as a puzzle to be solved nor does he inhabit country houses. He is familiar with mean streets where murder is

commonplace, and he knows the underworld where murders are committed as a matter of course.

Hammett wrote books featuring other detectives, namely The Continental Op and The Thin Man. The latter became a popular movie series in the 30's and 40's starring William Powell, Myrna Loy, and a poodle named Asta. These stories were all glitz and glamour in New York penthouses and were totally untrue to the real Hammett, who considered himself a proletarian social critic as much as a novelist.

Hammett describes Spade as a "blond Satan" and the reader, as well as the other characters in the book, is never sure of Spade's motives. The plot revolves around a statuette of a falcon said to be made of gold and encrusted with gems. It is sought by several rivals and has been the cause of several murders. Spade too seems to be tempted by the falcon. When the statuette proves to be a fake, the searchers decide it must still be in Istanbul and rush away on their mad quest - all but Brigid O'Shaughnessy, who has killed Spade's partner and to whom Spade is seriously attracted. Spade turns her over to the police, telling her that he doesn't believe she will be executed for the murder, but if she is, he will always miss her. The relationship between the detective and a suspect has changed diametrically from *Trent's Last Case.*

The paradigmatic figure of the hard boiled school was Raymond Chandler, who followed Hammett by a few years and who acknowledged Hammett as his master. He was a polemicist, and his famous essay, "The Simple Art of Murder", influenced Ross MacDonald and practically all mystery writers

since. Chandler was a better writer than Hammett, but he was equally suffused with class resentment. His hero Philip Marlow says he "hates the rich".

Chandler was famous for his wisecracks and outrageous similes. Marlow sees a piece of modern sculpture, and its owner "negligently" identifies it as "Asta Fial's *Spirit of the Dawn.* "I thought it as Klepstein's *Two Warts on a Fanny,*" Marlow replies. Marlow must never admit to being impressed by his wealthy clients. One of these clients is described as "wearing a white-straw garden hat with a brim the size of a spare tire."

Chandler is really a moralist, and in one place he calls Philip Marlow a knight-errant, who though tested and battered wins through at the end. W. H. Auden thought that Chandler's books should be read "not as escapist literature, but as works of art."

The third of the hard boiled trio is Ross MacDonald, who endued the crime story with high-minded seriousness unknown before him. In many ways a MacDonald novel is a retelling of the Oedipus myth. His detective Lew Archer is another knight-errant, but the monsters he slays are all found in his client's family. In his books all the characters seem to be related to everyone else. In *The Chill* a man's wife is actually his mother. In *The Goodbye Look* a boy shoots a tramp in self defense, and the tramp is revealed many years hence to have been the boy's father. In MacDonald's books every murder is found to be the consequence of another murder, and misfortune seems to dog a family The murder of Laius by Oedipus at the junction of three roads and his subsequent marriage to Jocasta as well as the troubles which follow are all suggested in

MacDonald's plots. There is a heavy sense of doom and foreordination, and the solution at the end is a kind of catharsis.

With Hammett, Chandler, and MacDonald the detective story has come a long way from *The Murders in the Rue Morgue.*

Obviously I like detective stories, and I am certainly not alone. Why are detective stories so popular and so enduring? I think it is because they can be read on several levels. They are fun. They are escapist. They are harmless tranquilizers for sleepless nights. But on a deeper level they are really about heroes who face seemingly impossible challenges. They are about knights-errant who go about righting wrongs. The detectives we like are, in their ways, wise, good, moral and strong – just what we want heroes to be and what we so seldom find in contemporary novels. In the world we live in we can only hope that there are real heroes (men and women) who believe that murderers must be caught so that people may live free from fear, for such freedom is the basis of civilized life.