

# MELVILLE DAVISSON POST AND THE USE OF PLOT

By Grant Overton

WHO that read in "The Saturday Evening Post" of July 18, 1914, a short story called "The Doomdorf Mystery"\* forgets it now? No one, I think; and it was a very short short story. The magazine which published it has published 2,500 short stories since. "The Doomdorf Mystery" is one in a thousand, literally.

The creature, Doomdorf, in his stone house on the rock brewed a hell brew. "The idle and the vicious came with their stone jugs, and violence and riot flowed out." On a certain day two men of the country rode "through the broken spine of the mountains" to have the thing out with Doomdorf. "Randolph was vain and pompous and given over to extravagance of words, but he was a gentleman beneath it, and fear was an alien and a stranger to him. And Abner was the right hand of the land."

About the place were two persons, a circuit rider who had been rousing the countryside against Doomdorf and who had called down fire from heaven for the creature's destruction. A little faded woman was the other.

In his chamber, the door bolted from the inside according to custom, Doomdorf lay shot to death.

The circuit rider asseverated that heaven had answered his prayer. The little, frightened, foreign woman showed a crude wax image with a

needle thrust through its heart. She had killed Doomdorf by sorcery.

Randolph exclaimed with incredulity. Murder had been done; he was an officer of justice. But Abner pointed out that when the shot was fired, by evidence of Doomdorf's watch, the circuit rider was on his way to the place, the woman on the mountain among the peach trees. The door was bolted from the inside, the dust on the casings of the two windows was undisturbed, and the windows gave on a hundred foot precipice as smooth as a sheet of glass. Had Doomdorf killed himself? And then got up and put the gun back carefully into the two dogwood forks that held it to the wall? Says Abner: "The murderer of Doomdorf not only climbed the face of that precipice and got in through the closed window, but he shot Doomdorf to death and got out again through the closed window without leaving a single track or trace behind, and without disturbing a grain of dust or a thread of cobweb. . . . Randolph, let us go and lay an ambush for this assassin. He is on the way here."

This masterly tale, so far as the explanation is concerned, could doubtless have been chanced upon by Melville Davisson Post in those old records which he, a lawyer, would need to consult. Its kernel or nubbin could spring from the simplest scientific knowledge, the acquisition of any boy in high school. Its marvelous art is

\* "The Doomdorf Mystery" is the opening story in *Uncle Abner, Master of Mysteries*.

another affair. One might have the explanatory fact and make no more of it than a curious coroner's case. One could narrate it without any use of imagination and the result would be a coincidence without meaning.

The manner of Doomdorf's assassination depends very greatly upon coincidence. But given the series of coincidences, it was due to the operation of a natural law. Mr. Post had, initially, two difficulties to overcome. The first was fiction's rule of plausibility. The second was art's demand for emotional significance, a more-than-meets-the-eye, a meaning.

Truth is stranger than fiction dares to be. Truth compels belief, fiction must court it. To overcome the handicap imposed by the manner of Doomdorf's killing, with its conspiracy of chances, Mr. Post plunges his reader at once into coincidences far more improbable — the presence on the scene of the circuit rider, the double confession of circuit rider and woman to having killed Doomdorf. He storms the reader's stronghold of unbelief, the wall is breached, and no Trojan Horse is necessary later to bring his secret into the city. In fiction, there is no plausibility of cause and effect outside human behavior. The implausible (because unmeaning) manner of Doomdorf's death is superbly supported by two flanks, the behavior of the evangelist and the behavior of a terrified, superstitious, and altogether childlike woman.

Art's demand for meaning requires much more than a certain plausibility of occurrence. The manner of Doomdorf's death need not have been dependent on his evil-doing; it must be made to seem so. The glass water bottle standing on the great oak table in the chamber where he slumbered and died could as easily have held water as his own raw and fiery liquor.

There are two kinds of chance or coincidence in the world. One kind is meaningless; our minds perceive no cause and effect. The other kind is that in which we see a desired cause and effect. The writer of fiction must avoid or overcome the first kind if he is to write plausibly and acceptably; but upon his ability or inability to discern and employ the second kind depends his fortune as an artist.

In other particulars "The Doomdorf Mystery" exemplifies the artistry of the author. If I have not emphasized them, it is because they are cunning of hand and brain, craftsmanship, things to be learned, technical excellences which embellish but do not disclose the secret of inspiring art. The story is compactly told; tension is established at once and is drawn more tightly with every sentence; and the element of drama is much enhanced by the forward movement. Doomdorf is dead; but — "Randolph," says Abner, "let us go and lay an ambush for this assassin. *He is on the way here.*" Not what has happened but what is to happen constitutes the true suspense. The prose style, by its brevity and by a somewhat Biblical diction, does its part to induce in the reader a sense of impending justice, of a divine retribution upon the evildoer. But it is also a prose that lends itself to little pictures, as of the circuit rider, sitting his big red-roan horse, bareheaded, in the court before the stone house; or of the woman, half a child, who thought that with Doomdorf's death evil must have passed out of the world; or of Doomdorf in his coffin with the red firelight from the fireplace "shining on the dead man's narrow, everlasting house". The comparative loneliness, the wildness, and the smiling beauty of these mountains of western Virginia are used subtly in the creation of that

thing in a story which we call "atmosphere" and the effect of which is to fix our mood. The tale is most economically told; the simplest and fewest means are made to produce an overwhelming effect. I have dwelt on it at length because it perfectly illustrates the art of Melville Davisson Post, so arrestingly different from that of any of his contemporaries — different, perhaps, from that of anyone who has ever written.

Mr. Post is one of the few who believe the plot's the thing. He has said:

The primary object of all fiction is to entertain the reader. If, while it entertains, it also ennobles him this fiction becomes a work of art; but its primary business must be to entertain and not to educate or instruct him. The writer who presents a problem to be solved or a mystery to be untangled will be offering those qualities in his fiction which are of the most nearly universal appeal. A story should be clean cut and with a single dominating germinal incident upon which it turns as a door upon a hinge, and not built up on a scaffolding of criss-cross stuff. Under the scheme of the universe it is the tragic things that seem the most real. "Tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action of life . . . the incidents and the plot are the end of a tragedy."\* The short story, like any work of art, is produced only by painstaking labor and according to certain structural rules. The laws that apply to mechanics and architecture are no more certain or established than those that apply to the construction of the short story. "All art does but consist in the removal of surplusage."\*\* And the short story is to our age what the drama was to the Greeks. The Greeks would have been astounded at the idea common to our age that the highest form of literary structure may omit the framework of the plot. Plot is first, character is second.\*\*\*

Mr. Post takes his stand thus definitely against what is probably the prevailing literary opinion. For there is a creed, cardinal with many if not

most of the best living writers, which says that the best art springs from characterization and not from a series of organized incidents, the plot; which says, further, that if the characters of a story be chosen with care and presented with conviction, they will make all the plot that is necessary or desirable by their interaction on each other. An excellent example of this is such a novel as Frank Swinnerton's "Nocturne" or Willa Cather's "A Lost Lady". Yet it is not possible to refute Mr. Post by citing such books, for he could easily point to other novels and stories, if modesty forbade him to name his own work. Though there cannot and should not be any decision in this matter — for both the novel of character and the novel of incident are proper vehicles — it is interesting to consider plot as a means to an end.

The Greeks used plot in a manner very different from our use today. At a certain stage toward the close of a Greek tragedy the heavens theoretically opened and a god or goddess intervened, to rescue some, to doom others of the human actors. The purpose was to show man's impotence before heaven but also to show his courage, rashness, dignity, and other qualities in the face and under the spell of overwhelming odds. The effect aimed at by the spectacle of Greek tragedy was one of emotional purification, a purging away in the minds of the beholders of all petty and little things, the celebrated *katharsis* as it was called.\* To the extent that modern fiction aims to show man's impotence in the hands of destiny or fate, his valiance or his weak cowering or his pitiful but ineffectual struggle, the use of plot in our day is identical with that of the

\* Aristotle in his *Poetics*.

\*\* Walter Pater.

\*\*\* The quotations from Mr. Post are collated from the chapter on him in Blanche Colton Williams's *Our Short Story Writers* (Dodd, Mead).

\* See Gilbert Murray's *Euripides and His Age* in the Home University Library (Holt).

Greeks. One may easily think of examples in the work of Thomas Hardy, Joseph Conrad, and others. The trend has been toward pessimism, since an inscrutable destiny has replaced a set of scrutable, jealous, all too human deities in the Olympian pantheon.

With Edgar Allan Poe the attempt was begun — indeed, was successfully made, for the time being, at least — to replace the divine with a human agency. Although the Greek drama had perished, all through the Middle Ages and afterward the effort had kept up to preserve the essence of miracle as an invaluable element in human drama. There were both miracles and miracle plays. In place of the Greek *deus ex machina*, “the god from the machine” with his interventions in human affairs, the world had its Francis of Assisi and its Joan of France. But for whatever reason the divine agency was gradually discredited, the force called providence or destiny came increasingly to be ignored, and even so great a dramatist poet as Shakespeare, unable or unwilling to open the heavens to defeat Shylock, would only open a lawbook instead.

What men do not feel as a force in their lives cannot safely be invoked in an appeal to their feelings; and Poe, a genius, knew it. In some of his stories he used in place of the Greek *deus ex machina* the vaguely supernatural, impressive because vague. In other stories he took the human intelligence, sharpened it, and in the person of Monsieur Dupin made it serve his purpose. M. Dupin, not being a god, could not be omniscient; as the next best thing, Poe made his detective omniscient after the event. If the emotional effect of a Dupin remorselessly exposing the criminal is not so ennobling as retributive justice ad-

ministered by a god from Olympus, or wrought by Christian miracle, the fault is not Poe's. It is we who limit the terms of an appeal.

Mr. Post has himself commented on the flood of detective stories that followed Poe's “until the stomach of the reader failed”. Disregarding merely imitative work, let us have a look at such substitutes as have been managed for divinity and fate. We commonly call one type of story a detective story simply because the solution of the mystery is assigned to some one person. He may be amateur or professional; from the standpoint of fictional plausibility he had, in most cases, better be a professional. Poe had his M. Dupin; Gaboriau, his M. Lecoq; Conan Doyle, his Sherlock Holmes. Mr. Post has Abner; his M. Jonquelle, prefect of police of Paris; his Sir Henry Marquis of Scotland Yard; his Captain Walker, chief of the United States Secret Service. If we are looking for Mr. Post's difference from Poe and others we shall not find it here. The use of a detective is not inevitable; when there is none we call the tale a mystery story. The method of telling is not fixed; and it is doubtful if anyone will surpass the extreme ingenuity and plausibility of Wilkie Collins in a book like “The Moonstone”, where successive contributed accounts by the actors unfold the mystery at last. One of the few American writers whose economy of words suggests a comparison with Mr. Post was O. Henry. And O. Henry was also a believer in plots, even if the plot consisted, as sometimes it did, in little more than a few minutes of mystification.

Poe had replaced the god from the machine with the man from the detective bureau, but further progress seemed for some time to be blocked. All that anyone was able to do was to

produce a crime and then solve it, to build up a mystery and then explain it. This procedure inevitably caused repetition. The weakness was so marked that many writers tried to withhold the solution or explanation until the very end, even at the cost of making it confused, hurried, improbable. Even so, no real quality of drama characterized the period between the crime at the commencement and the disclosure at the finish of the tale. I do not know who was the first to discover that the way to achieve drama was to have the crime going on, to make the tale a race between the detective and the criminal. The method can, however, be very well observed in Mary Roberts Rinehart's first novel, "The Circular Staircase" (1908); and of course it is somewhat implied in the operations of Count Fosco in Wilkie Collins's "The Woman in White", many years earlier. But this discovery constituted the only technical advance of any importance since Poe. As a noticeable refinement upon this discovery Melville Davisson Post has invented the type of mystery or detective-mystery tale in which the mysteriousness and the solution are developed together. Not suitable for the novel, which must have action, this formula of Mr. Post's is admirable for the short story, in which there is no room for a race with crime but only for a few moments of breathlessness before a dénouement.

This refinement of Mr. Post's whereby repetition is avoided, the development of the mystery and its solution side by side, is usually hailed as his greatest achievement. I happen to think that he has in certain of his tales achieved something very much greater. It seems to me that in some of his work Mr. Post has put the *deus ex machina* back in place; has by a little

lifted the mere detective story to the dignity of something like the old Greek tragedy, and in so doing has at least partially restored to the people the purge of pity and the cleansing of a reverent terror.

For, whatever tribute one may pay him on the technical side — and every book of his increases the tribute that is his due — the thing that has remained unremarked is his use of plot for ennobling the heart and mind of the reader. He is right, of course, when he says that the primary business of the writer must be to entertain; but more rightly right when he adds that it is possible to do the something more in a work which may aspire to be called a work of art. Anna Katharine Green once wrote: "Crime must touch our imagination by showing people like ourselves but incredibly transformed by some overwhelming motive." The author of "The Leavenworth Case", and all those other novels which have entertained their hundreds of thousands, despite appalling technical shortcomings which she has never ceased to struggle with but is unable to overcome, is one of the terribly few to command our respect and our admiration in this crucial affair. She is one of the few with whom plot is never anything but a means to an end, and that end, the highest. Of others, it is easy to think at once of O. Henry; it is in this respect that I would compare him with Mr. Post, and not in any lesser detail such as the power to tell a story with the fewest possible words. All the emphasis that has been put on short story construction in America, all the trumpeting that has proclaimed American writers as the masters of the short story on the technical side, will ultimately go for nothing if the fact is lost sight of that a short story is a cup to be brimmed

with feeling. And as to the feelings poured into these slender chalices, by their effects shall ye know them.

There is a curious parallel between Mr. Post and another contemporary American writer, Arthur Train. Both began as lawyers, and both showed unusual ability in the practice of the law. Both are the authors of books in which the underlying attitude toward the law is one of that peculiar disdain which, perhaps, only an experienced lawyer can feel. Mr. Train's stories of Ephraim Tutt display an indignation that is hot enough under their surface of weathered philosophy and levity and spirit of farce. But as long ago as 1896 Mr. Post had published "The Strange Schemes of Randolph Mason", his first book of all, and one that must detain us a moment.

His career up to that time may be dealt with briefly.\* Born in Harrison County, West Virginia, April 19, 1871, the son of Ira Carper Post and Florence May Davisson Post, he was graduated (A.B.) from West Virginia University in 1891 and received his LL.B. from the same institution the year following. He was very shortly admitted to the bar of the Supreme Court of West Virginia, of the United States Circuit Court of Appeals, and of the Supreme Court of the United States. He served as a presidential elector and secretary of the Electoral College in 1892. A young man not yet twenty

\* To an interviewer (by letter) who asked for the principal events of his life, Mr. Post once made a suitably whimsical answer:

"I was born like the sons of Atreus in the pasture land of horses. I was reared by a black woman who remembered her grandmother boiling a warrior's head in a pot. I was given a degree by a college of unbeautiful nonsense. I have eaten dinner with a god. And I have kissed a princess in a land where men grind their wheat in the sky."

five, he conceived that "the high ground of the field of crime has not been explored; it has not even been entered. The book stalls have been filled to weariness with tales based upon plans whereby the detective or ferreting power of the State might be baffled. But, prodigious marvel! No writer has attempted to construct tales based upon plans whereby the punishing power of the State might be baffled." And he reflected that the true drama would lie in a duel with the law. He thereupon created the figure of Randolph Mason, a skilled, unscrupulous lawyer who uses the law to defeat the ends of justice. Of these stories the masterpiece is probably "The Corpus Delicti". Well constructed, powerful, immensely entertaining, surely these dramas are of the essence of tragedy, surely they replace Poe's detective with somebody far more nearly approaching the Greek god from the machine. In considering the effects of these remarkable tales we can hardly lose sight of their moral purge of pity and terror, their sense of the law man makes as a web which man may slip through or break or brush aside. Why, a true god from the machine, Mr. Post implies, is not necessary to us; we can destroy ourselves; heaven has only to leave us alone. This circumstance, in its turn, produces the much stronger secondary effect: the cry for a true god to order and reward and punish us.

"Uncle Abner" (1918) has been well contrasted with "The Strange Schemes of Randolph Mason". "He has demonstrated that wrong may triumph over man-made laws, which are imperfect after all the centuries; but that right must win under the timeless Providence of God."\* In

\* Blanche Colton Williams in *Our Short Story Writers*.

"Uncle Abner" the *deus ex machina* is fully restored. When it was known how Doomdorf had died, "Randolph made a great gesture, with his arm extended. 'It is a world', he said, 'filled with the mysterious joinder of accident!' 'It is a world', replied Abner, 'filled with the mysterious justice of God!'"

Mr. Post married, in 1903, Ann Bloomfield Gamble, of Roanoke, Virginia. Mrs. Post died in 1919. The political career which seemed possibly to be opening before him in his twenties has been neglected for one more fascinating as an author; although he has served as a member of the board of regents of State Normal schools, as chairman of the Democratic Congressional Committee for West Virginia in 1898, and as a member of the advisory committee of the National Economic League on the question of efficiency in the administration of justice (1914-15). He lives at Lost Creek, West Virginia, rides horseback and enjoys the company of his dog, and reads the classics. He is the author of other books besides "Uncle Abner" which reveal his love for the West Virginia countryside and his power to make his stories take root and grow in that setting. Of his "Dwellers in the Hills" (1901) Blanche Colton Williams says:

To read it is to ride in memory along a country road bordered by sedge and ragweed; to note the hickories trembling in their yellow leaves; to hear the partridges' call, the woodpecker's tap, and the "golden belted bee booming past"; to cross the stream fringed with bulrushes; to hear men's voices "reaching half a mile to the grazing steers on the sodded knobs"; to meet a neighbor's boy astride a bag of corn, on his way to the grist mill; to stop at the blacksmith's, there to watch the forging of a horseshoe; or at the wagoner's to assist in the making of a wheel; to taste sweet corn pone and the striped bacon, and to roast potatoes in the ashes. . . .

With the exchange of West Virginia for Kentucky, a region of the sort is also the background and the mood of "The Mountain School-Teacher" (1922). This short novel is an allegory of the life of Christ. A young school-teacher appears in a mountain village. We first see him striding up a trail on the mountain, helping a little boy who is having trouble with an ox laden with a bag of corn. In the village the schoolteacher finds men and women of varied character. Some welcome him, and they are for the most part the poor and lowly; some regard him with suspicion and hate. The action parallels the life of Christ and is lived among people who are, despite nineteen centuries, singularly like the people of Christ's time. In the end comes the trial of the schoolteacher on trumped up charges. "If He came again," the author seems to say, "it would happen as before."

Such fiction does not come from a man who is primarily interested in railroads and coal, education and politics, nor from one whose final interest is to provide entertaining fiction.

In recent books Mr. Post has allowed his fiction to follow him on his travels about the earth. "The Mystery at the Blue Villa" (1919) has settings in Paris, Nice, Cairo, Ostend, London, New York, and Washington; the war of 1914-18 is used with discretion as an occasional background. Mr. Post's mysticism can be quickly perceived in certain stories; the tragic quality is ascendant in such tales as "The Stolen Life" and "The Baron Starkheim"; and humor is not absent from "Lord Winton's Adventure" and "The Witch of Lecca". A story of retributive justice will be found in "The New Administration". The scenes of most of the episodes in "The Sleuth of St. James's Square" (1920)

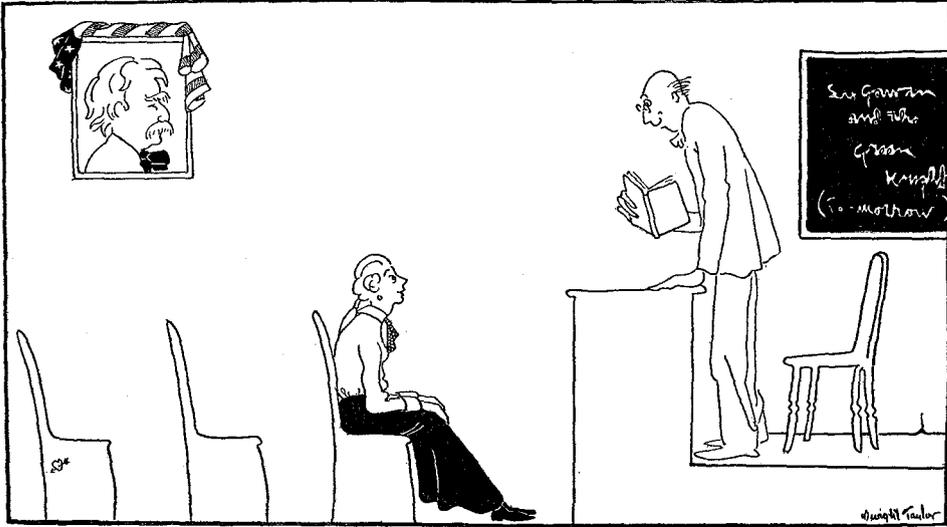
are in America; the central figure about whom all the cases turn is Sir Henry Marquis, chief of the investigation department of Scotland Yard. The material is extremely colorful — from all over the world, in fact. "Monsieur Jonquelle, Prefect of Police of Paris" (1923) has the same characteristics, with the difference of the central figure and with various settings. The reader will observe in these books that the narrative standpoint is altered from story to story; to take "Monsieur Jonquelle", some of the tales are related by the chief character, some by a third person, some by the author. The reason for the selection inheres in each affair and is worth some contemplation as you go on. "Walker of the Secret Service" (1924) is pivoted

upon a character who appears in "The Reward", one of the episodes in "The Sleuth of St. James's Square".

The general method has been said, correctly, to combine the ratiocination of Poe's stories with the dramatic method of the best French tellers of tales. The details of technique will bear and repay the closest scrutiny. But in certain stories Melville Davisson Post has put his high skill to a larger use than skill can accomplish; for *those* of his accomplishments an endowment and not an acquisition was requisite. When one says that of the relatively few American writers with that endowment in mind and heart, he was able to bring to the enterprise in hand a skill greater than any of the others, one has indeed said all.

#### Bibliography

- 1896 *The Strange Schemes of Randolph Mason.*  
 1897 *The Man of Last Resort.*  
 1901 *Dwellers in the Hills.*  
 1909 *The Corrector of Destinies.*  
 1910 *The Gilded Chair.*  
 1912 *The Nameless Thing.*  
 1918 *Uncle Abner, Master of Mysteries.*  
 1919 *The Mystery at the Blue Villa.*  
 1920 *The Sleuth of St. James's Square.*  
 1922 *The Mountain School-Teacher.*  
 1923 *Monsieur Jonquelle, Prefect of Police of Paris.*  
 1924 *Walker of the Secret Service.*



## A LITERARY ENTHUSIAST

By Ernest Boyd

*With Sketches by Dwight Taylor*

**S**HE is the mainstay of the republic of letters, the hand that rocks the literary cradle and rules the world. Hers is a career open to the talents of Everywoman; no feminist propaganda has been necessary to prepare the way for her, she dates her ancestry back to the night beneath the stars in Eden, when Eve's bright eyes pleaded with Adam to show her what he had written, to recite his verses to her. Down through the ages she has existed. She was Egeria in ancient Rome and the Marquise de Rambouillet in the days of the *Précieuses*, the autographs which she wrested from coy Egyptian poetasters doubtless slumber amongst the papyri of Tut-ankh-amen, and I sus-

pect that Moses presented her with an original signed tablet on which he had engraved the ten commandments. She is outside of time and space, as it were, for she can be herself in the obese years of maturity and in the querulous last days of old age, no less effectively — sometimes even more so — than in the springtime of youth. The literary enthusiast's is not a seasonal occupation. It is the work of a lifetime.

In this Land of Opportunity, needless to say, her opportunities are infinite, and as infinite is the variety of her incarnations. Her first intimations of this particular form of immortality came to her in college, when what seemed to her a comparatively human