
THE HISTORY OF THEIR BOOKS

VI. S. S. VAN DINE

by Arthur Bartlett Maurice

HAROUN-AL-RASCHID, in the Bagdad of the *Thousand and One Nights*, was no more in his golden prime than is the detective of fiction today, who traces his literary ancestry back through Sherlock Holmes to the Monsieur Lecoq and Père Tiraclair of Emile Gaboriau, the C. Auguste Dupin of Edgar Allan Poe and beyond that through the mists to the Zadig of M. Arouet de Voltaire. In the genealogical scheme Sherlock Holmes, now a venerable gentleman in his mid-seventies engaged in bee cultivation on a farm in the Sussex Downs, may be regarded as the nearest ancestor of a numerous progeny that has enlivened the first quarter of the Twentieth Century. It is only fair to say that no one of his sons has attained to anything like the eminence of the father who is now rather in the shadow, but who was for a decade or two the most widely known character in all fiction—even accepted by many as a real personage. There is food for thought in the celebrity that yesterday was Sherlock's, when ten persons knew of him to one who had ever heard of *Hamlet* or *Robinson Crusoe* or *Pickwick Papers*.

Contemplating his numerous literary offspring, Sherlock Holmes probably has a sense of general satisfaction and a particular pride in the achievements of a selected few. Favored sons are likely to be Jacques Futrelle's Professor Augustus S.F.X. Van Dusen, Ph.D., F.R.S., M.D., etc., better known as *The*

Thinking Machine; G. K. Chesterton's Father Brown; H. C. Bailey's Reginald Fortune; A. E. W. Mason's Hanaud of the French Sûreté; Ernest Bramah's Max Carrados; Lynn Brock's Colonel Gore; Arthur B. Reeve's Craig Kennedy; Gaston Leroux's Rouletabille; Melville Davisson Post's Uncle Abner; Agatha Christie's Hector Poirot; R. Austin Freeman's Dr. Thorndyke; and S. S. Van Dine's Philo Vance. Mingled with the sentiment of admiration for the last named, there is perhaps a touch of envy, for Sherlock Holmes has seen his last recorded adventures, *The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes*, comparatively neglected, while Philo Vance, riding high on the crest of popularity, has attained with four books, *The Benson Murder Case*, *The "Canary" Murder Case*, *The Greene Murder Case* and *The Bishop Murder Case*, a total sale of more than 600,000 copies.

Who is Philo Vance? In one sense he is a purely imaginary and invented character; in another sense he is a gentleman by the name of Willard Huntington Wright, a product of Harvard and Oxford, a dilettante who has written books on painting, philosophy and esthetics. He lives in an apartment on New York's upper west side near the Hudson River and from his windows can look down upon the scenes associated with the tragedies recorded in *The Bishop Murder Case*. When Philo Vance's conversation is particularly "high-brow", the reader is listening to Mr. Wright in a whimsical and ironic mood.

Worldly success sometimes comes in strange ways. S. S. Van Dine was born of a nervous breakdown that Willard Huntington Wright suffered in 1923—the result of working for years under tremendous pressure as the editor of several magazines, carrying monthly articles on painting, drama and music in other publications. In addition to these routine labors, he wrote nine books on a variety of cultural subjects. When the World War broke out he was living in Paris, writing fourteen hours a day. One morning, early in 1923, he jumped out of bed and his knees gave way under him. For over two years, until the middle of 1925, he was confined to his bed, depressed and nervous, often unable to sleep and, worst of all, forbidden by his physician to read. Finally, that restriction was withdrawn, with the reservation that the reading be confined to the reading of detective stories. For two years Mr. Wright devoured detective mystery fiction. He set to work to discover the reason for its almost universal appeal, to trace its evolution, to define its laws. He co-ordinated and systematized his reading. He began with the works of Gaboriau and Poe and gradually came down, in chronological order, to the present day. The services of book dealers in New York, London, Paris and Berlin were enlisted, and at the end of the two years he had accumulated a library of nearly two thousand volumes.

In September, 1925, he was informed by his doctor that he might begin to write again after January first of the following year. In the four months that intervened he outlined a series of detective stories, created his Philo Vance and worked out the plots for three books, making a thirty-thousand word synopsis of each story. The first to be written was *The Benson Murder Case*. The idea has been generally prevalent that the suggestion for that story came from the events surrounding the Elwell murder of 1920. Actually that case was never in mind, and it was not until the book was finished and published that Mr.

Wright realized that there was any resemblance between the two cases.

Again, contrary to popular belief, *The "Canary" Murder Case* had nothing whatever to do with the Dot King murder. The underlying theme of the book was night life on Broadway. For material, the author went, not to the Dot King case, but to the Budapest case of the woman known as La Belle Bohémienne, a reigning night life queen who was found murdered in her apartment. In the early drafts of the story the title was "The Whippoor-will Murder Case". But one day Mr. Wright's secretary paused in the course of taking dictation to remark: "You would choose the hardest word in the language to type. Do you mind if, in this draft, I simply put down a *W*?" Thereupon Mr. Wright decided that a word that puzzled his secretary would be likely to puzzle readers and the whippoor-will became a canary.

The Greene Murder Case was originally without the final *e*. That was added to ensure that people should not be under the mistaken impression that the story had to do with a color. One of the main ingredients that went into the making of that book was the atmosphere of Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*, a feudal house imagined as perched up on a cliff overlooking the river, a *locale* that Mr. Wright studied with great care and in detail before putting pen to paper. But the volume that Mr. Wright considers the greatest of mines for the writer of detective fiction is *The Handbook for Examining Magistrates*, by Hans Gross, Professor of Criminology at the University of Graz. Besides clarifying the story, the addition of the final *e* in the word, Greene, conforms to the unintentional plan of having the distinctive word of each title six letters in length.

The feudal setting in the heart of ultra-modern New York was the underlying idea of *The Greene Murder Case*; higher mathematics, that of *The Bishop Murder Case*. When the latter story was still in embryo form, Mr. Wright had luncheon one day

with the editor of the magazine in which it eventually appeared. The talk turned to the subject of methods of murder. The editor maintained, for example, that for the purposes of fiction a murder by bow and arrow was impossible. Mr. Wright agreed with him but later, thinking it over in the light of his own considerable study of the subject of archery, he accepted the editor's dictum as a challenge. Bow and arrow would play their part, and the title would be "The Cock Robin Murder Case". That was changed to "The Mother Goose Murder Case" and the book was first announced under that title. The eventual "Bishop" was adopted not so much because it conformed to the six-letter rule, as because it served a double purpose in heightening the mystery. But, again, there is the six-letter aspect to the forthcoming book, *The Scarab Murder Case*, of which the underlying idea is Egyptology.

Mr. Wright has his own credo as to the devices whose usefulness has been outlived and are, therefore, taboo to any self-respecting writer of detective fiction. These forsworn devices are as follows:

(a) Determining the identity of the culprit by comparing the butt of a cigarette left at the scene of the crime with the brand smoked by the suspect.

(b) The bogus spiritualistic séance to frighten the culprit into giving himself away.

(c) Forged finger prints.

(d) The dummy figure alibi.

(e) The dog that does not bark and thereby reveals the fact that the intruder is familiar.

(f) The final pinning of the crime on a twin or a relative who looks exactly like the suspected, but innocent person.

(g) The hypodermic syringe and the knockout drops.

(h) The commission of the murder in a locked room after the police have actually broken in.

(i) The word association test for guilt.

(j) The cipher, or code letter, which is eventually unravelled by the sleuth.

As the utterance of Mr. Wright, the list of forbidden devices is fair enough. Regarded as coming from Philo Vance, it is disrespectfully unfilial, for most of the devices were familiar weapons in the arsenal of Sherlock Holmes.

A LONDON LETTER

by Rebecca West

"Porgy" in London—Mr. Beerbohm and the Literary Ladies—Departed elegance—English books and American critics

London, April.

I HAVE come back from a week in the country to find London altered by the introduction of a certain American factor. That factor is *Porgy*. I do not know how long *Porgy* will run, for it is housed in one of the largest theatres in town, which can hardly be filled for more than a few weeks unless Shakespeare and the more decorous forms of spectacular drama (real camels but not much pectoral exposure) draw to it the vast hordes of the tame-minded. But in any case it has left an ineffaceable impression on the intelligent Londoner. It has given people who have never crossed the Atlantic a sense, which people like myself have labored in vain to give them, of the inexhaustible richness of life in the United States. That there should be embedded in the pallor of an English-speaking civilization the dark primitive stuff which is the subject matter of *Porgy*; that there should come into play at the point of embedment (though not, one would think, specially relevant to it) the peculiar Southern poetic sensitivity, languid and graceful, of which Du Bose Heyward is an exquisite example; that there exists an organization like the Theatre Guild which has devised ways and means by which anything so serious and novel can be put before the public, which can lay hands on talents as exotic and fiery as that of the director, Mr. Reuben Mamouli-

an, and which confidently allows Mr. Heyward and Mr. Mamoulian the time and money to experiment with untaught material and weave it into the harmony of forces which is sweeping English audiences off their feet—these facts have profoundly impressed London. Such richness is exactly what we have not got. The only good thing about the English theatre is the acting, which is superb. But there is a deep affection on the part of all persons concerned for threadbare material, and complexity of production is simply unknown. The teamwork you see in *Journey's End* is superb, but unfortunately that is as far as we can go, and it is chamber music. A full orchestra is beyond us. So London is taking off its hat to New York for *Porgy*, and well it may.

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Impressed though I am by these phenomena, the Du Bose Heywards nevertheless slipped out of my mind very early during proceedings at the dinner which was given in their honor by Mr. Theodore Byard (of Heinemann's) and Mr. Russell Doubleday. Charming as they were (and Mrs. Heyward was looking very beautiful indeed, like a picture by Alfred Stevens, the Belgian, with her dark curling hair which restrains itself from curling so much that it spoils the shape of her head, and her pallor which is like an