

# Two Who Dun It

## AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

By Agatha Christie.

Illustrated, 529 pp. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co. \$15.

## REX STOUT

A Biography.

By John McAleer. Foreword by P. G. Wodehouse.

Illustrated, 621 pp. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. \$15.

## JUSTICE ENDS AT HOME

And Other Stories. By Rex Stout. Edited by John McAleer. 267 pp. New York: The Viking Press. \$8.95.

BY JULIAN SYMONS

**S**EVERAL years ago Agatha Christie reluctantly agreed that we should have a long discussion about her life and work for newspaper publication.

"I cannot say that I look forward to it," she wrote to me. "But I suppose as it is you it will be all right." At first, however, it was far from all right. I dare say my questions were awkwardly put. Certainly her answers were brief and uninformative. In addition to this I was afraid that the recorder was not working properly, and I was too nervous to play it back in case I should erase what was on the tape. When she understood that I was nervous, too, Agatha Christie was delighted. She relaxed, we both relaxed, and the conversation flowed. She agreed afterwards that the operation had been painless.

The incident has its relevance to her autobiography. What she calls "my revulsion against the press, my dislike of journalists," dated from her disappearance in 1926. At that time she vanished for nine days. Her car was found tipped over an embankment with a shoe and scarf nearby, and the case was treated by Scotland Yard as one of suspected murder. When she was found, living at a hotel in a spa, she had changed her hair style, was wearing spectacles and had registered in the name of her husband's lover. The press suspected a publicity stunt. In fact her mother's recent death, the responsibility of clearing up everything in a house filled with memories of her childhood, and her husband's unfaithfulness, had combined to cause a mental breakdown. The affair was a central event in her life, but those who look for an account of it here will be disappointed. She writes about the wretchedness she felt in the weeks before the disappearance, but does not say a word about those nine days.

This is not, then, an autobiography in the usual sense. Writing in the intervals between books, over a period between 1950 and 1965, she set down what she wished to remember, particularly of childhood and youth, and ignored things she did not care to put down. There is not much about her life and skills as a detective story writer. We are nearly halfway through the book when "The Mysterious Affair at Styles," her first detective story, is published, and the remarks she makes about her fantastically ingenious plots make them sound haphazardly conceived when their balance and subtle deceptive-

Julian Symons succeeded Agatha Christie as president of England's famous Detection Club.



*Dame Agatha Christie*

ness show that this this cannot have been so. We learn that Gaston LeRoux's "The Mystery of the Yellow Room," first made her think that she might write a detective story, and that Poirot was a Belgian because there was a colony of Belgian refugees living in her parish at home during World War I. Most of what she says about her crime stories has been told, and told often before. There are no spectacular revelations, personal or literary, in this book.

And yet it does tell us a good deal about the kind of woman who wrote her books, and it is a work of unaffected charm. Agatha Mary Clarissa Miller was born in 1891 (a date she omitted from her entry in Who's Who), the youngest child of a reckless American father who died when she was 11, and a characterful mother. The Millers were not

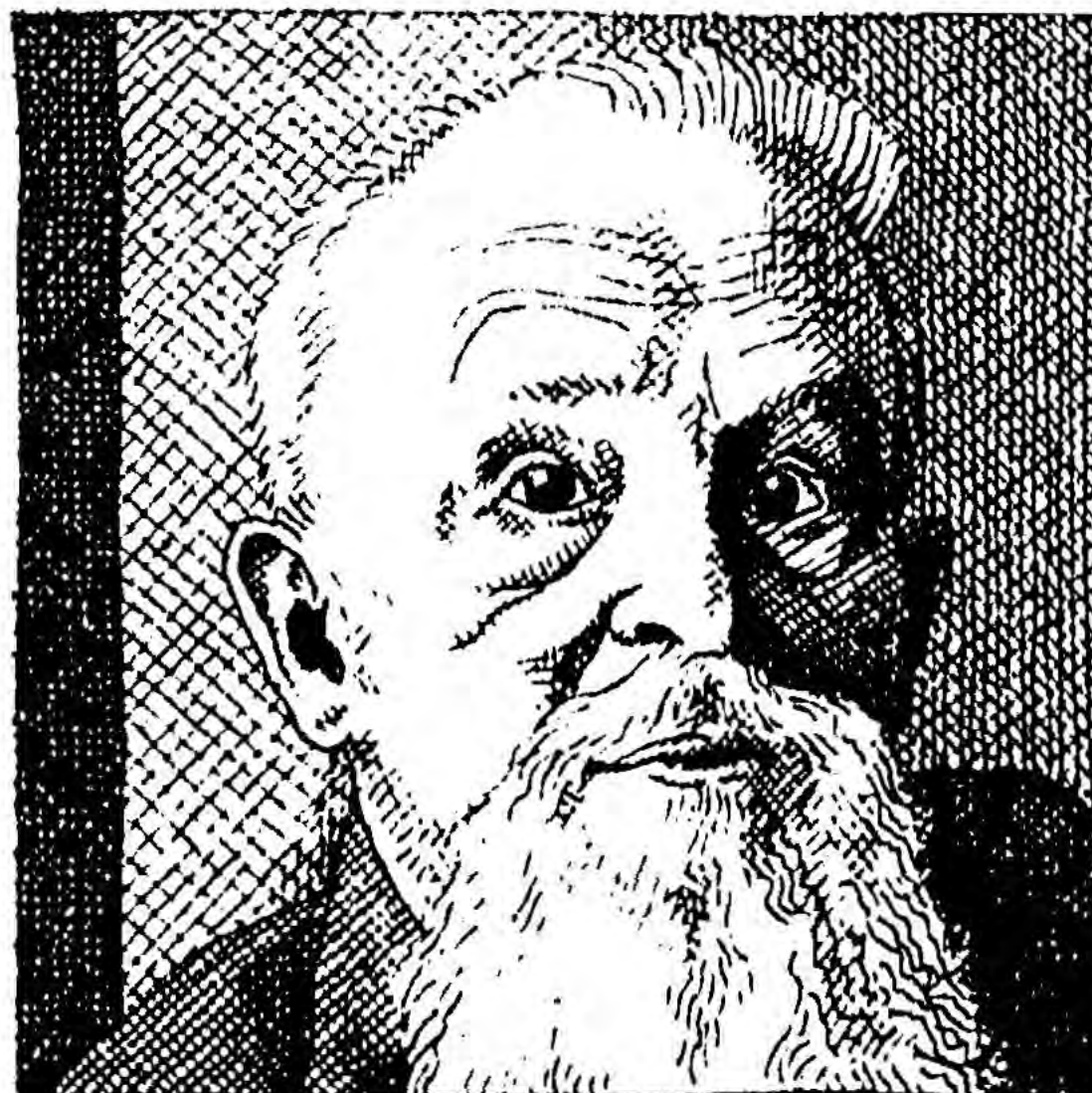
rich but well-to-do. There were servants, and "a wise and patient nanny." Agatha was not sent to school but educated at home, rather casually it seems.

She grew up an exceedingly innocent girl who remained in many ways a naive and innocent woman. With this innocence went a strong vein of romantic fantasy. This extended much further than having imaginary friends named the Kittens, inventing families for her dolls, and turning her metal hoop into a white palfrey. She imagined in her Devon garden three railway systems, and made plans of them with all their stations and the points at which they intersected. There are a dozen instances of the intensity with which she played her solitary games, and the intricacies with which she embellished them. The kind of imagination that devised them, and that found so much pleasure in putting them down on paper, was later to play the same sort of games with plots. There is a graphic account here of seeing some of the characters in "Styles" in a tram. "I took them all off the tram with me to work upon—and walked up Barton Road muttering to myself just as in the the days of the Kittens."

These fantasies were indulged by a respectable, middle class and extremely shy woman, one who thought that in another life she might have been a dog because she possessed the dog's simple virtues of faithfulness and sincerity, felt that steam train engines were like personal friends, was shocked by the idea of divorce and always felt guilty because she had agreed to divorce her first husband, and in 1933 was astonished when she met her first anti-Semitic Nazi because she had not known that such people existed.

The opinions she expressed about life and society are never original, often banal. She was both conservative and Conservative in the most conventional way. Yet there runs through the book a vein of great sweetness, a kindness, lack of malice, and vul-

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*Rex Stout*

Drawings by Pierre LeTan



# Who Dun It

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nerable diffidence, that are altogether touching. And the middle class conventional English Lady endured, and sometimes seems to have positively relished, the inconveniences and discomforts of travel, the bedbugs in trains that made her legs swell like balloons, the primitive Persian rest house, nights spent on bare boards in the car and sea sickness. Travel itself was almost enough compensation, and then "nowhere in the world is there such a good breakfast as tinned sausages cooked on a Primus stove in the desert in the early morning." She was lucky to find in her second husband, the archeologist Max Mallon, a personality tenderly protective and imbued with a sort of realism that happily complemented her own capacity for fantasy.

Agatha Christie was not, as she says here, a good conversationalist, nor was she a vivid personality. The person one met and talked with was the conventional English Lady. The interest of this book is that it shows the struggles and complexities and contradictions that made this English lady the creator of the most cunningly deceptive fictional plots of the half-century in which she reigned.

Rex Stout was a remarkable and forceful personality. He is known outside his own country almost wholly as the writer of detective stories about Nero Wolfe and Archie Goodwin, but his volcanic energy flowed into dozens of different activities.

At school in Kansas he was regarded as a mathematical prodigy, and he remained throughout his life a brilliant financial administrator and a competent bookkeeper. In his early 20's he was briefly a plumber's assistant, pueblo guide, bellhop, cook, book

salesman, ledger clerk and hotel manager. A few years later he made a living by writing pulp fiction. He gave this up in 1917 at the age of 34, and made a fortune by running with one of his brothers the Educational Thrift Service, a savings plan for school children. Nine years later he retired, settling for a share of the profits amounting to \$30,000 a year. When the profits dried up in the Depression, he turned to crime fiction. He was 48 when the first Nero Wolfe book, "Fer de Lance," appeared.



Many other activities could be mentioned — his constant and time-consuming support of radical causes, his work through the Authors' Guild to improve the position and income of authors, his activities as a propagandist during World War II. It may sound as though McAleer needed even more space than the 500-odd pages he has taken, but that isn't so. No livelier man has been the subject of a duller book. The art of biography rests in selection, and what you omit may be as significant as what you include. This biography gives the impression of omitting nothing. Childhood and adolescence in the admittedly unusual Stout family get a hundred pages, the plots of the early pulp novels and stories are detailed at inordinate length (McAleer has dragged out from the files and dusted off 16 of them to make "Justice Ends at Home," and they are as effi-

ciently commonplace as might be expected), every fragment of propaganda activity is recounted in detail. The biographer's own comments are almost always jejune or banal. His comment on a letter written by a piano dealer to the young Stout, asking for a check and Stout's witty notes explaining why he couldn't send one, is typical. "Thus, hidden from posterity, the name of an anonymous dealer in installment plan furniture stands first on the rolls of Rex Stout's admiring readership."

We learn little of Rex Stout's personality as we trudge through this forest of fact. He married twice, was neat, intensely practical, a liberal opposed to any kind of censorship, a boisterous back-slapping extrovert with a ready and eloquent turn of phrase—yes, we can hardly fail to learn these things. But that was not the whole of Rex Stout, as even Mr. McAleer senses. What was the other Rex Stout like, the one who published four novels in the late 20's and early 30's, one of which a reviewer described as containing "practically nothing else but . . . the mechanics of copulation" and another characterized as "a drama of contorted psychology, of strange, dark impulses." The latter novel dealt with homosexuality. Can there have been some truth in those stories about Nero and Archie?

Those four novels, if youthful memory serves, were very good books, among the best work being produced in the United States at that time. But they required something that Stout was not prepared, or not able, to give. Talking about them in old age, he said that if you were making serious comment on people and behavior in a book, you had to put part of your soul into it. "I thought, if you're merely good and not great, what's the use of putting all that agony into it?" It was easier, more comfortable and more profitable to settle for Nero and Archie, and to forget

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the Rex Stout of whom a friend said that he was so careful and covered up his real self was unknowable.

There is, naturally enough, a lot about Nero and Archie in this book. It is plausibly suggested that they were two sides of their creator's personality, and those curious about their backgrounds and personalities will find answers to most of their questions. Why was Wolfe a Montenegrin (something I've always wanted to know)? Because Louis Adamic said that Montenegrin men were famous for being lazy. Does Lily Rowan sleep with Archie? Yes. Where did Archie's idiom come from? "The source . . . was and is everything I have heard people say." Etc. etc.

At the risk of outraging an

accepted American myth it must be said that McAlpeer absurdly inflates the stories' merit. On the evidence of the Wolfe saga, Stout was simply not in the same stylistic league as Hammett, Chandler or Ross Macdonald. His prose is energetic and efficient, nothing more. His plots lack the metronomic precision of Ellery Queen's. The books survive through Nero's personality and the Nero-Archie relationship, but to say that Nero embodies the values of Western civilization, or to suggest that he is a brother under the skin to Dr. Johnson, is ludicrous. The truth is that Stout wrote too much too easily, and that like all crime writers writing a series of stories dependent on repeated introduction of the same

characters — including Doyle and Simenon — his work was subject to a law of diminishing returns. The early Wolfe books, those produced up to 1950, are infinitely better than those that followed, with "The Doorbell Rang" and "Death of a Doxy" offering exceptions to this rule.

Rex Stout lived five or six lives, and only one of them was given to literature. In all of those lives he was a generous, talented and mostly admirable man. His achievement as a writer was to create a Superman detective who will be remembered as long as people read crime stories; his limitation was that this figure operates in the context of books that are consistently entertaining, but for the most part just as consistently forgettable. ■

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