Two Who Dun It

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

REX STOUT
A Biography.

JUSTICE ENDS AT HOME

BY JULIAN SYMONS

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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-ness show that 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 1890 (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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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.