

## The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club

*D.L.Sayers*

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The series of detective stories starring P.D:Wimsey were conceived shortly after the demise of Sherlock Holmes, the phenomenon which spurred a spate of emulations. Sayers being a contemporary of Agatha Christie belonged to the first generations of descendants . Her novels featuring the aristocratic private eye are far fewer than those that issued by the pen of the latter and are generally considered to be of a higher class. Christie being thought of as a hack, while Sayers had impeccable academic and literary credentials, among other things producing a standard translation of Dante's Divine Comedy. Thus dipping into her Wimsey stories, gives the reader with high-brow pretensions the ideal alibi to enjoy light and undemanding reading. So what is so charming about them?

Much of the charm is retroactive, namely that of a period piece. The novel in case takes place a few years after the end of the First World War, an event that looms darkly. The scene is set at a posh club, frequented mostly by military men of no intellectual distinction. The author loves to point out over and over again that the library is never used by its members, and hence provides an excellent place to be left undisturbed, in particular for the concluding suicide. An old general, who earned his initial spurs in the Crimean War is discovered dead in his regular chair at the club, but no one knows when he died, the plot is constructed to hinge on the exact moment of death, due to some more or less contrived conditions concerning a will. More precisely the old general had a sister who married rich and who decided to leave her fortune to her brother, would she pre-decease him, but the bulk to her young companion, would he die before her. As it turned out their respective death were more or less simultaneous.

Now a clever plot has many layers. The first layer of the plot concerns the time of death and has a rather unexpected solution, as it turns out that one of the descendants of the deceased, and the executor of his will too boot, willfully concealed the time of death, through some rather elaborate measures involving the temporary removal of the body. So far so good, the novel could have ended right then and there. But the emerging convention post the Holmes era is that there should be a murder, while many of the cases in Doyle's stories did not concern murder at all, so the plot needs an extra twist. After an exhumation of the body, one which had been urged by Wimsey on the executor, it transpires that the old man had actually been poisoned. Many false leads are presented and at the end a most unlikely person turns out to have committed the murder, implicating the young woman. It is no clear whether she would be cleared would the whole matter go to court, evidence being fragmentary and inclusive, too risky to leave to the discretion of a jury, typically made up of simpletons. The murderer is confronted by Wimsey, in the library of the club, together with a witness. Urged to write down a complete confession, and then handed a pistol to provide a dignified exit, and thus supposedly closing the case, avoiding the uncertainties of a trial.

The special pleasure of a novel of this kind is not only to find out 'whodunit' but

perhaps even more to reveal how the different leads make up a coherent picture, and how the hero after a few false leads actually figured out how it all fits together. In this respect the pleasure is very much akin to what is going on in scientific and mathematical activity, where one is confronted with mysteries to be resolved. It is remarkable though that the public is so much more attuned to the resolutions of very contrived mysteries and so relatively blind to the real ones. In a good story the reader should have a fair chance to resolve the mystery before the end, and if not find it it all inevitable once presented with the solution. This is seldom the case, and readers seem not to mind. The cards are stacked solidly in the favor of the author, whose construction, incidentally, of the plot may actually provide more exciting reading than the plot itself, and who always has the option of retroactive modifications to fit a predefined conclusion. What the reader is treated to is actually the appearance of the real thing. He or she is a mere spectator, she or he cannot ask their own questions to test their tentative theories, thus the reading does not entail any real exertion, only the semblance of one, just as the viewing of athletes in competition may raise the heartbeat and bring sweat to the brow, but more out of sympathy than out of anything more tangible. Thus after having finished a story, the intellectual excitement leaves no residue, and the novel is promptly forgotten having only served its purpose for the moment.

The puzzle-solving component of a detective story is hence not enough to attract the readers attention. Maybe necessary but definitely not sufficient. The great success of the Sherlock Holmes stories, especially as to their enduring attraction, is due to their evocations of a bygone era. An era of hansom cabs and cobbled streets. And not to forget the intriguing character of Sherlock Holmes himself, faded copies of whom to litter the genre in the years to come. In the Wimsey stories we are treated to the sophistication of an aristocratic man of the world, who knows to despise the vulgarity of lobster and champagne, eminently knowledgeable about the culinary delights of the esoteric taste. We are also becoming privy to the concerns of the time, feminism, the allure of the bohemian life-style, which Wimsey knows to see through. The forensic setting also gives great opportunities for the author to show off arcane knowledge, as everything is food for the investigating eye. In particular we learn about the subtle ways drugs can work on the human heart.

The book was reissued in 1935 and the author found it fit to provide a thumbnail biographical sketch of her chief protagonist, ostensibly written by his maternal uncle and supposed to indicate that the brilliance and charm of the Lord is not due to his English ancestry but to the fresh blood infused by the French artistic commoners on his mother side, a rejuvenation passing by his staid older brother carrying on the line.

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