

Strong Poison

D.Sayers

January 27-31, 2020

Harriet Vane, in many ways the alter ego of the author, is accused of murder through poisoning her lover by arsenic. The case against her seems water-tight, in fact a little bit too water-tight according to our friend Wimsey, who also just cannot believe that Vane did it. The jury is hung, one lady cannot believe it either, in spite of (or because of) the compelling indications. On the other hand they are but indications. It means that there is a reprieve, the trial has to be redone, and it is up to the defense to produce new evidence. It is now Wimsey enters the fry, desperately trying to find clues. He enlists the aid of two secretaries, who indeed perform almost impossible tasks aided by the kind of fortuitous circumstances only an author may invoke, but which seldom occur in real life. To disclose the end of the story is a no-no when detective fiction is concerned, after all the one charm in a crime story is the suspense that it evokes, and that is why that after a story is read you tend to forget about it. It provides entertainment for the moment, but once the release has passed one tends to forget about the plot and suspense, yet something remains, and what is that? Sherlock Holmes stories provide a good illustration of the phenomenon which reminds you of education being what remains after you have forgotten all the particulars. It is hard to recall their specific plots and resolutions, but the general atmosphere of *fin de siecle* London, with its fog and hansom cabs, not to forget the intriguing character of Holmes himself, with his cap, his pipe, and the occasional morphine injection. It evokes in the reader a strong nostalgia for times passed. It is sobering to realize that it is almost sixty years since I first read the stories, and going another sixty years back one lands almost at the period during which they supposedly took place. The character of Wimsey is not as strong or fascinating as that of Holmes, and has a far less iconic status. Everyone knows about Holmes, far fewer about Wimsey. While the Holmes stories were written with some serious intent, those of Sayers are more frivolous and in the nature of spoofs on a tradition which did not exist at the time of Doyle. So what remains in that case? What they evoke is an England during the interwar years, especially of the twenties. It is an England far more modern than that of Conan Doyle, with cars and telephones, which still in our days comprise inescapable components of daily life (the internet just being an extension of the telephone, just as the radio and the TV). It is also an England of class divisions, and in which aristocracy still carries an element of respect and fascination, and where servants are a natural part of life, at least for the rich. The Russian revolution casts a shadow, with Russian emigrants; and the horrors of the Great War have not yet been obliterated (Wimsey, who has participated in it still suffers from nightmares, at least in the earlier books).

I read the Holmes stories in my early sixties whole still a child, and Wimsey in my late teens, then in English, although I recall Swedish translations in paper backs as well, lying around at home, thus they are imprinted in my mind as no other crime fiction is, and thus for purely nostalgic reason I am drawn to revisit them. I also read a few Agatha

Christi's in the late sixties but they never made any impression being too focused on the plots to leave much residue, and as to modern writers such as P.D.James I have felt rather indifferent.

Now Sayers is a serious writer, with a somewhat wild and risqué early adulthood one surmises, anyway far wilder than portraits of her in a more mature age would suggest, and while the stories may have been written as spoofs, at least initially, they do abound in some interesting *obiter dicta* serving as spices to enliven narratives which otherwise you may find a bit too bland.

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