CRIME AND CHARACTER: Notes on Rex Stout's Early Fiction

By David R. Anderson

"Secrets" (1914), an early Rex Stout short story, opens with Moorfield, a New York lawyer renowned for his honesty and perspecacity, recalling his first interview with the beautiful but dangerous Lillian Markton. As he reconstructs that fateful exchange, Moorfield utters a very important remark:

> ...I stooped to pick it [a cigar] up. Thus I missed three or four valuable seconds which, however trifling they may seem to the average mind, will be recognized as all-important by the student of crime and character.[1]

"Crime and character" slip out together as if they were two matching terms of one proposition. And so, in effect, they are. To study one, Moorfield clearly assumes, one must study the other.

A moment's reflection will convince readers of the Nero Wolfe saga that Moorfield's assumption remained important to Rex Stout in later years. Those who have not yet seen Stout's posthumous *Justice Ends at Home and Other Stories*, however, will be interested to discover that an interest in "crime and character" runs throughout his earliest fiction. As early as twenty years before the publication of *Fer-de-Lance* (1934), Rex was, consciously or unconsciously, discovering the important connections between insight into human character and crime-solving.

Like Wolfe and Archie, Moorfield makes it a point "never to defend the confessedly or obviously guilty" (p. 153). Consequently, for him "one of the greatest handicaps under which an attorney labors" is "getting a line on the character of his client" (pp. 152-53). To solve this problem, Moorfield uses a painting which he props inside his roll-top desk where a prospective client cannot help but see it. After one look at the canvas, any mind is shocked into a revelation of its true character:

> By its very crudity, its primality, the thing was infallible, never failing to shock the mind into a betrayal of its most carefully hidden secrets (p. 154).

Such an obviously mechanical device as a painting that is a truth-gauge is just one sign that this story belongs to the early Rex Stout. Most detectives are forced to do without a painting like Moorfield's; nor do they have any better luck than Archie with Wolfe's borrowed maxim, *vultus est index animi*. Insight into character is, nevertheless, one of the hallmarks of the ratiocinative detective. Holmes, Poirot, Maigret, and Van der Valk all wield a hyper-sensitivity to personality. That same quality characterizes the detection done by Wolfe and Archie.

More than once the solution to a case in the Wolfe saga depends upon either Nero's or Archie's insight into character, for knowledge of a person's character leads to the ability to predict how he will act in given circumstances. Such is the method by which Wolfe and Archie conclude perhaps the most exciting story of their career, *In the Best Families* (1950). Confronting their arch-enemy Arnold Zeck, Wolfe and Archie leave a revolver open to the hand of Barry Rackham, over whom Zeck exercises a fearful hold. Then, attacking Zeck, they depend on Rackham to seize the opportunity to rid himself of Zeck by snatching the revolver and shooting him. When Rackham does exactly that, Archie and Wolfe are rid of their nemesis and of Rackham, who is gunned down immediately by Zeck's security men.

The careful reader of *Justice Ends at Home and Other Stories* will see Rex experimenting with narrators and other characters who succeed because of their ability to make snap judgments about others —judgments which are always vindicated by the event. When he is not showing the importance of

accurately judging character, Rex is often showing what kind of trouble a person can get into if he does not observe carefully, and sift thoughtfully, the behavior of those around him.

In "The Rope Dance" (1916), Rick Dugget loses his eight hundred dollar stake because he cannot tell a sharpie when he sees one:

> Rick liked the man from Kansas. He appeared to be an outspoken, blunt sort of fellow who liked to have a good time and knew where to go for it. Lucky thing to have met up with him. Mighty pleasant to have for a companion a chap from the right side of the Mississippi (p. 4).

When Rex wanted to teach a lesson, he was not above rubbing in a man's mistakes.

In "An Officer and a Lady" (1917), Bill Farden burglarizes the bedroom of a sleeping child. When sentimentality replaces "vigilant trepidation," he gets a nasty surprise:

> Expensive trinket, that. Absurd to trust a child with it. No doubt she was very proud of the thing. He put it down again, spared even the impulse to put it in his pocket. He knew it would be useless to debate the matter with himself. What burglar would take anything from a sweet helpless child like—
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> "*Hands up!*" (p. 26)

Lazy Garway Ross of "The Pay-Yeoman" (1914) entrusts his duties to James Martin. The result: Martin purloins eight thousand dollars of the Navy's money, and Ross has to come up with the balance himself. His discovery of the theft dumbfounds Ross, and Rex uses the incident as an excuse for a solemn lecture:

> He was conscious of an immense incredulity. This was not based on any real knowledge of Martin's character or belief in his honesty, but originated in and proceeded from the paymaster himself. His mind, limited by its own habits, was incapable of registering so sudden and complete a reversal of conception (p. 62).

The idea implicit in the passages quoted above becomes explicit here. A person who has "no real knowledge of. . . character" is likely to find himself in trouble.

Who can ascribe to coincidence the fact that all of these examples of bad judgment, the direct result of poor character analysis, occur in the context of a crime? Clearly, a relationship had begun to solidify in Rex Stout's mind between detection and perception. Victims of crime are those whose minds are limited by their own habits. Solvers of crimes, as other stories in this collection suggest, are those who understand other people's characters, and who apply that insight to the problems posed by the crime.

In "A Professional Recall" (1912), Dodd Bronson swindles two rapacious lawyers (lawyers in Stout are usually rapacious, Moorfield and Nathaniel Parker being two exceptions) because of his perceptive diagnosis of their ruling passion—greed. Here Bronson is legally the criminal, but morally, the story suggests, he is actually a Robin Hood. By pretending to be both himself and his brother, Dodd manages to receive damages out of one of the lawyers' pockets. To put the icing on an already elaborate cake, just as they are leaving the bank where the swindle has been completed, Dodd squeezes fifty dollars out of his prey:

> "Mr. Devlin," says I, "I'm a poor man. Whether I get that twelve hundred I don't know. But I got some friends in Pittsburgh what's got it, and if you'll let me have that fifty back for railroad fare I'll make it a hundred when I settle up."
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> Devlin blinked hard, and I thought he'd jumped it. But bein' a grafter, that hundred looked too good to lose. He pulls out a big black wallet, counts out five tens, and hands 'em to me careful-like (p. 150).

Dodd slowed down his getaway for an extra fifty, but his knowledge of a lawyer's character made it a safe bet.

The most striking instance in the early Stout of insight into character helping to solve a crime occurs in "The Heels of Fate" (1917). To emphasize the importance of psychological insight, Rex endows the hero of this story, Dal Willett, with a deep knowledge of both human nature and the nature of an animal—

the horse. The narrator's description of Dal singles out his most important quality:

> He was a tall, loose-jointed man, about forty then, with a red leathery countenance and keen little gray eyes; and as I gradually discovered, he was an extraordinarily observant fellow, with a sharp knowledge of humans and understanding of them . . . (p. 96).

Like Nero and Archie earlier in this essay, Willett finds himself confronted with the problem of how to dispose of an evil, predatory crook without committing legal murder. Dal's knowledge of human character makes him the first to see that Gruber is a villain, and his knowledge of equine character leads him to a Wolfeian solution to his dilemma. Willett knew horses, and he knew that Mac (short for Machiavelli) was in a foul mood the day Gruber wanted to rent a horse. To prevent Gruber from exposing John Hawkins and ruining his daughter, Dal sends Gruber himself into the stable to lead out Mac. The result: Gruber's skull is smashed by a kick from Mac's iron-shod heels, John Hawkins is safe from blackmail, and Dal is legally innocent of murder:

> "Of course I knew," he said with a certain grimness. "And I sent him back there. But somehow I don't feel responsible" (p. 110).

To solve a crime, the detective needs to meet his quarry, assess his character, predict how he will act under circumstances guaranteed to expose him, and then engineer those circumstances. This is often Wolfe's *modus operandi*, and it is foreshadowed here by a country horse-dealer.

By collecting Rex Stout's early short stories, John McAleer has done more than just tickle an enthusiast's fancy. These early pieces show Rex exploring the connections between crime and character, gradually working through to a conviction that crimes cannot be solved without a prior observation of, interest in, and speculation upon, human nature. Wolfe, with his fondness for Latin tags, might have explained it this way: *Homo sum. Humani nihil a me alienum puto.*

Note

1. Rex Stout, *Justice Ends at Home and Other Stories*, ed. John McAleer (New York: The Viking Press, 1977), p. 131. Further citations will be from this edition and will appear in the text.

Some of My Best Friends Are Books

By Mary Geoff

The San Francisco Mystery Bookshop is run by Bruce and Carol Taylor in the Noe Valley section of San Francisco. They are also the parents of a son (6) and a daughter (9), and Carol is one of those rare and unusual people—a native San Franciscan. Bruce was born in 1944, the year that one of his favorite authors published *Five Murders*, a collection of five pulp stories by Raymond Chandler, in an Avon paperback, for the fantastic price of 25¢.

Bruce's interest in mysteries originally began when he was about ten years old and read, for the first time, Ellery Queen and Sherlock Holmes. He was afflicted immediately with that incurable disease from which we all suffer in varying degrees. Sometimes this can be quite painful and can rarely be arrested, nor can antidotes be offered without causing deep offense. Bruce still remembers clearly his reaction to the damp gloom of Dartmoor and the fear-shrouded Baskerville Hall. The cheerful side of this was that his vocation was revealed to him, not in a blinding flash such as a Saint might receive but slowly, page by page.

When Carol returned to her native city in 1975, after some years of wandering around the United States, she mentioned that there was a tragic lack in San Francisco. Bruce, ever alert, realized at once what she meant, and in September of 1976 the shop opened with beautiful carpentry done by a relative. The place flourished from the very first moment and has always been awash with the goodwill and interest of Bay Area readers and collectors as they support this lifeline.

The first books were mainly composed of their own collections and some other low-priced reading copies and paperbacks. Bruce's top lip is inclined to quiver a bit as he mentions selling his Hammetts and Chandlers in first editions, as they all went within the first month. After a few weeks, they realized that they had started something important and more books must be found. Bruce and Carol say that the