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BOOK REVIEWS

THE UNKNOWN MURDERER. By Theodor Reik. Originally translated from the German by Katherine Jones. Prentice-Hall, Inc., New York. 1945. Pp. 260, \$3.00.

Dr. Theodor Reik's *The Unknown Murderer*, recently published (in translation) by Prentice-Hall, Inc., presents analysis and criticism of methods of criminal investigation, as well as of methods of "reasoning" involved therein. The present commentator is not competent to judge the ultimate values of the book. As a layman, he believes it likely that investigators, prosecutors and judges might read the book with profit to themselves and to all of us; he thinks that writers of detective fiction may learn a great deal from it; and he is sure that other laymen (detective story fans, in particular) will enjoy the brief sketches of the triumphs (and failures) of detective skill, as recounted in the book. In particular, one is impressed by the distinction between *logical* and *psychological* methods of "reasoning", and by the warnings against the dangers of the misuse of psychoanalysis in courts of law. One notes that the book could do with a bit of editing here and there, too; but beyond these things, this commentary confines itself to a more or less (but not entirely) frivolous discussion of certain references to the detective methods of one Sherlock Holmes.

Says the book, on page 13:

"Criminologists of our time have left Sherlock Holmes far behind; how poor his method, how primitive his technique of detection. He did not know the motor car, the telephone, the wireless, not even photography, let alone finger-prints and measurements."

Holmes used a motor car at least once—in *His Last Bow*—after his retirement; how often he used the telephone, one cannot easily tell—there *was* a telephone at 221 B Baker Street in the later days,¹ there was one "across the street" in *The Sign of the Four*, and there were some 55,000 instrument-connections in some 400 towns in England by 1890;² photography (not *micro*) was there to be used, had Holmes needed it or cared to use it—he encountered at least two characters whose common hobby was photography,³ and he used a snapshot for identification in *Six Napoleons*; he used a thumb-print (though not for identification) in *The Norwood Builder*, and he asked for (but did not find) "finger impressions" in *The Adventure of the Three Students*; he at least knew of Bertillon's famous system—Dr. Mortimer practically insulted Holmes by placing the latter second to the great Frenchman⁴ (though not as a "practical man of affairs"). But these things are in the main *instruments*, tools—not methods. This, of course, is trifling and but small-time carping on our part; but there is more.

Without pause after the passage just quoted, Dr. Reik continues:

"Let us compare the methods of Conan Doyle's detective with the ways and means⁵ used by modern criminology, the results he could

¹ *The Three Garridebs* (1902), *The Illustrious Client* (1902), and *The Retired Colourman* (1899). They are practically as modern as the Pfaff case cited. (Dates here given are the probable internal dates of the stories—not those of publication).

² *Ency. Brit.*, article: *Telephone*.

³ *The Red-Headed League* (1890) and *The Copper Beeches* (1890).

⁴ *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (c. 1897).

⁵ Does "ways and means" refer to methods, here; or to instruments; or to both? Maybe the translator left us this legacy.

obtain within a certain time with those we can reach now. In one of his stories a male corpse is found in a little house. Next to the corpse lies a gold ring; on the wall is the word *Rache*, written in blood. Holmes starts by saying that the murdered man entered the house accompanied by a tall man—the distance between his footprints shows the man's height—and that the tall man left the house alone. Then he sees that the murdered man had not been injured. He recognizes that he was poisoned. There are no indications of a struggle. The culprit also is probably uninjured. Where does the blood on the wall come from? Perhaps the culprit was bleeding from the nose. This presupposes that he is full-blooded and red-faced. The first provisional description of the murderer is a tall man with a red face.

"Let us compare this result with the one of the medical jurist Pfaff in a certain case. The culprit had left his cap behind; in it were two fair greyish hairs. The doctor found with the microscope several cells of pitch-black pigment. The section-planes were quite sharp, the roots atrophied. In the epithelial layer several warts, caused by sweating, could be observed. Dr. Pfaff could say: 'The culprit is a sturdy, fattish middle-aged man; his hair is getting grey, was cut recently and he is going bald'."

These illustrations do not seem to be the best which might have been selected for the purpose of comparing the *methods* of Sherlock Holmes with those of "modern" criminologists. In the first place, the instance of Dr. Pfaff is dated 1904. In the second place, Pfaff's exploit with the cap reminds the Sherlockian of the performance of Holmes with other hear-gear — the "battered billycock" hat of Mr. Henry Baker, in *The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle*, as of about 1890.

Holmes used no microscope in that case: probably he did not need it, though he used one at another time.⁶ In this case, he used only "a lense and a forceps".⁷ He said:

"It [the hat] is less suggestive than it might have been . . . and yet there are a few inferences which are very distinct and a few others which represent at least a strong balance of probability. That the man was highly intellectual is of course obvious on the face of it, and also that he was fairly well-to-do within the last three years, although he has now fallen upon evil days. He had foresight, but he has less now than formerly, pointing to a moral retrogression, which, taken with the decline of his fortunes, seems to indicate some evil influence, probably drink, at work upon him. This may account also for the obvious fact that his wife has ceased to love him.

"He has, however, retained some degree of self-respect . . . He is a man who leads a sedentary life, goes out little, is out of training entirely, is middle-aged, has grizzled hair which he has had cut within the last few days, and which he anoints with lime-cream. These are the most patent facts which are to be deduced from his hat. Also, by the way, that (*sic*) it is extremely improbable that he has had gas laid on at his house."

⁶ He used one in *Shoscombe Old Place* (probably c. 1883) Mr. H. W. Bell placed it in 1897). Holmes used a lens in about 25 instances. One could wish to know what was the significance of the "pitch-black pigment" found by Pfaff; possibly an expert would recognize this.

⁷ The laboratory *equipment* was crude—the hat hung upon the back of a wooden chair. But the method—ah, the method—observation and deduction—barring, of course, the assumption about the ratio of hat-size to intellect.

A few inferences," indeed! There is, of course, the absurd assumption which led to an inference from large hat to "cubical capacity" of the brain and *thence* to Baker's "highly intellectual" trait; but that assumption merely offered Dr. Reik a better illustration (as to *this* item) than the one which he chose. But Holmes's *results* need not hang their heads before Dr. Pfaff's. At this point, my real (though quite non-malicious) quarrel with Dr. Reik arises from the fact that he did not give us the comparison which he promised — a comparison of the *methods*; but I must pause a moment to note that Dr. Reik, in another place in the book, says:

"Sherlock Holmes is held up to young criminologists as an example of correct logical reasoning. It is true that this is literature, that the means employed are out of date, but the gifts of observation and deduction which he made his own are still en-
viable."⁸

Now, Doctor, you are talking! You said in the first place that his *methods* and *techniques* were poor and primitive. Why did you not say *then* that it is his *means* which are outdated? And why did you not finish your comparison? You never told us in what consisted the inferiority of Holmes's methods, or of his results; nor did you tell us why the method of Pfaff was superior. Was the microscope the difference? If it was, see note 6; and this was an instrument — a means.

What *was* wrong with Holmes's method in the *Study in Scarlet*? He caught the man; the man caught *was* tall and red-faced; Enoch Drebber *was* poisoned; and the tall-red-faced man *had* done it. You didn't tell us whether Dr. Pfaff's man was the right one or not — or even whether he ever apprehended any such man; we were just left to suppose that of course it came out all right, just like *Study in Scarlet* did.

To be sure, it might be answered that other facts might have explained the conditions found at the little house (or the marks and stains on Henry Baker's hat); but Jefferson Hope *did* fit Holmes's "provisional description" (and so did Henry Baker). At the same time, hundreds of men could have been found to conform to the description by Pfaff; was such a man found, and was he proved guilty; and did the proof stick, or was it one of those cases which was upset by later developments?⁹

Admirers of Sherlock Holmes know by this time that their hero was not infallible; they ought to know that methods of crime-detection have advanced in fifty years; but Holmes is at least as modern as 1904, and even the studious background and other values of this book do not convince us that Sherlock Holmes's methods (or even his techniques) were inferior to those of his contemporary *in the instance given*.

One ventures a suggestion, that in a later edition, discussion of the obsolescence of the methods of Sherlock Holmes might be deferred until after the book has laid down its valuable distinctions

⁸ *The Unknown Murderer*, p. 27. Footnote 212, in the book pays a tribute to Holmes's method, too. There it is Holmes's habit of not proceeding to inference until he has "data". The instance given is that one in *The Naval Treaty*, in which Holmes suspects himself . . . "Of coming to conclusions too rapidly." Incidentally this commentator dislikes the practice of putting footnotes at the end of books. Their remoteness from the text involves too much interruption of the trains of thought concerned.

⁹ The book cites several instances of the sort—mistakes discovered years after conviction.

between logical and psychological methods; then, with the use of "modern instances", Dr. Reik can show us even more than he has already shown us, how and how far the world has moved. Even the Baker Street Irregulars, I doubt not, will bless him for it.

On final consideration, it seems just possible that Sherlock Holmes and his methods should have been omitted entirely from a serious analytical work such as Dr. Reik's. Holmes is, as Dr. Reik says, "literature"; Dr. Watson always held the controlling hand; he gave us just enough instances in which Holmes "missed the boat", so that we can see that Watson's hero (and ours) was something less than super-human. It may be that Dr. Reik, in referring to Holmes, was only spoofing us — offering us a lighter touch — and so did not need to finish the comparison which he began. It is possible, too, that to an expert the comparison did not need elaboration; but if the latter be the case, the doctor might have remembered that not all of his readers (nor his pupils, perhaps) will be experts.

However any of these things may be, a layman ventures to commend *The Unknown Murderer* to the attention of all students of criminal activity.

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