

The Club of Queer Trades: Detective or Defective Stories?

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Abstract: It is generally believed by most readers of detective fiction that all fictional detectives are based on Poe's creation, Dupin. But we have discovered that Chesterton is not indebted either to Dupin or to Holmes in his portrayal of Father Brown. Brown as a matter of fact, is modeled after Basil and Rupert Grant, Chesterton's own earlier character in his collection of six crime stories 'The Club of Queer Trades'. Even though this collection presents Chesterton at the heights of storytelling, it does not project him as a writer of detective fiction. These narratives are somewhat 'defective' when read as 'detective'. In this research paper, we have highlighted the shortcomings of these stories which lack the systematic pattern of logical detection expected from detective genre.

Key Words: detective, defective, Queer, inquisitive, crime.

G.K. Chesterton, one of the celebrated literary personalities of the last century, has composed an extensive amount of literature in diverse fields such as criticism, fiction, poetry, essays, journalism, biography, etc. Most acclaimed among his works of fiction is the collection of stories featuring Father Brown as priest investigator. The germinal stage of Chesterton's detective inventiveness, however, can be found in *The Club of Queer Trades* published in 1905. It is a collection of six "crime stories" where no serious 'crimes' are committed. Although Chesterton designed these stories to be 'detective', they are not so. They are, on the contrary, impressive tales delineating the lives of eccentric Londoners. Chesterton seems to have had an abiding interest in human frailty manifestations of which he dilated upon in whatever he wrote.

There are quite a few things which people may like to do but abstain from doing because of the unpleasantness and disgrace involved in them. But Chesterton not only did some ridiculous things himself, but recorded them in his essays. He runs after his hat once amid speeding traffic. Watching him in trouble, a passer-by retrieves the hat for him with great effort. But Chesterton is disinclined to take it back. He explains that he had run after that hat because it was his old friend and that he wanted to be with it until its very end.¹ Apparently insubstantial objects such as a bed post, a lamp post, a window curtain, etc, have become themes for some of Chesterton's essays.²

We propose to study *The Club of Queer Trades* in order to fathom how Chesterton's attending to the commonplace feelings and passions of his characters is not of much help in making these stories investigative in nature. We shall also examine how the investigator, Basil Grant, evades facts for physiognomical details, deduction for intuition, method for madness and formulates certain striking conclusions. In the course of this non-conforming process of investigation, Chesterton comes across as an ardent observer of human nature, occasionally over emphasizing certain whims and fancies which we tend to dismiss as trifles. In *The Club of Queer Trades*, he treats us to a series of wonderful stories that may be read as such without even being struck by the impact of crimes and their 'systematic' detection. At any rate, the 'crimes', such as they are, comical in nature and are usually followed by weird pursuits. These are unrelated stories, each complete in itself, but they seem to have been linked together by the common thread of the Club of Queer Trades. Either the main character of each story is a member of the club or he would enroll himself as a member in the end. One aspect which makes this Bohemian club worthy of its name is its manner of selecting its aspiring members. Only such people who have innovated a new kind of livelihood are considered here for enrolment as members. The criteria for selection thus excludes those who have merely romanticized the existing preoccupations. The Club pays great attention to the quality of the trade. Care is taken that it should not only be novel and queer but at the same time should earn much for its 'inventor', Charles Swinburne, the narrator of the stories, happens to be a man of bizarre taste. He has a mania for belonging to as many societies as possible. The present club was, in Swinburne's opinion, discovered by his friend Basil Grant. Basil and his brother Rupert, as we shall see later, are sleuths, the prototypes of Chesterton's famous Father Brown.

Basil is a judge whose moral and ethical disposition makes him quite inappropriate for his profession. Basil holds that a kiss or a thrashing is more helpful in reforming a person than penalty and imprisonment. Chesterton succeeds in his attempt at making Basil an unusually inept detective, a detective with a difference.

As readers we are used to expecting from a detective, a brilliant investigation leading to a proper solution and relief. What we have, instead, in *The Club of Queer Trades* is a number of mad chases ending in desperation. Even the explanation offered by the narrator justifying these tiresome pursuits is not quite convincing. These stories are appreciable, however, as stories of caricature involving the queer behavior and eccentricities of some people. But they do not appear what Chesterton wanted them to be, that is, stories of 'detection'. His conception of a detective is rather novel in nature. He infuses the romantic idea of a detective with moral dignity.

Chesterton tries to invest the first story 'The Tremendous Adventures of Major Brown' with some necessary aspects of detective fiction, such as suspense, action, tracking down an address and a curious letter from unknown persons in order to sustain our interest. But the story somewhat fails in impressing us. Here Basil is introduced to us by his friend Swinburne as a mystic and a star gazer. Basil appears to leave behind Dupin and Holmes in his eccentricities but lags far behind these sleuths, in his inquisitive reasoning. Basil, however, utilizes his inadequate powers of ratiocination and helps out his brother Rupert in solving the cases. Rupert is a jack of all trades but master of none. After trying his hand at diverse professions such as journalism, house-agency, teaching, publishing and so on, he ends up being a professional detective. His client Major Brown, who is perhaps his first client, suddenly finds himself surrounded by horrible incidents and finally finds himself in a coal-cellar engaged in deadly combat with a 'man of gigantic stature'. One positive aspect of this nightmarish adventure for the Major is that he could, at least, snatch a signed note from his opponent which mentions an address. It is only after barging into the suspicious address that Basil clears everyone's misunderstanding about the whole muddled affair. Basil draws our attention to the similarity in the names which makes Major Brown a victim of the adventure designed for man whose name also ended with 'Brown'.

A subconscious desire characteristic of modern busy people is effectively played upon by Chesterton in this story. Most of us are sometimes drawn towards strange happenings, things removed from the reality of daily routine. This desire is partially fulfilled by 'The Adventure and Romance Agency' invented by Mr. P.G. Northover. To become a member of this Agency one has to pay a certain amount and the Agency, in return, "under takes to surround him with startling and weird events" (TCQT,26). We wonder how, after becoming a member of an Adventure and Romance Agency, someone can be enthralled by a 'fake' adventure as if it were a real one. Chesterton, however, weaves an interesting story out of a simple human wish for novelty, a desire for adventure. 'The Tremendous Adventures of Major Brown', although well narrated, is not a good detective story. The inconsistency in the story poses a challenge to Chesterton's effort in trying his hand at this difficult genre. In the beginning of the story itself, for instance, the narrator emphatically asserts the nature of the queer club. Trying to drive home the point about the conditions required for enrolment, he gives us a number of examples. But he does not bother to mention his own profession which has made it possible for him to get associated with the Club. Another instance of Chesterton's inconsistent writing is available in the portrayal of Major Brown. He is introduced to us a queer person 'talking like a telegram'. He utters only a quarter of the sentence which we have to interpret in order to arrive at its meaning. There are remarkable sentences such as " '..... Friends. Remain. Assistance. Possibly ' or 'Yellow pancies. Coal cellar. P.G. Northover' " (TCQT, 11). But as the story reaches its climax, Chesterton seems to forget this initial trait of the Major and we see him talking as any normal person. Introducing something in the beginning in a certain manner and presenting it in a contradictory fashion at the end, makes these stories somewhat 'defective' rather than 'detective'.

Readers have high hopes while reading stories dealing with crime and detection. Every incident and episode raises expectations and curiosity. In this story, for instance, we come across an exciting message from people who are supposedly criminals. But the whole thrill is over when they turn out to be the employees of a harmless organization. The inadequate expression of Basil Grant that the letter is 'not' from a criminal is not enough to quench our thirst for curiosity and explanation. Our hopes are further shattered if we try to imagine what Sherlock Holmes might have done under similar circumstances. A comparison here with Holmes is inevitable because Chesterton wanted Basil to surpass this legendary sleuth par excellence. For example, let us take the case of 'The Reigate Puzzle' in which Holmes fathoms the dark conspiracy, the identity of the conspirators, their age, knows who the murderer is, the motive and manner of death, and a lot of other details, by merely examining a small 'corner' of the letter found in the victim's fist. Holmes very systematically peels, layer by layer, his observations:

[T]here cannot be least doubt in
the world that it has been written
by two persons doing alternate words.
When I draw your attention to the
strong t's of 'at' and 'to' and ask you to
compare them with the weak ones of
'quarter' and 'twelve' you will
instantly recognize the fact
Now, of the two men, it is clear that

the one who wrote the 'at' and
'to' was the ringleader

(SHCNS, 557-59)

Holmes deduces from the handwriting that the man with the stronger t's has written first leaving inadequate space for the other conspirator to fill in the words. The one who wrote first is surely the master behind the whole affair. The bold and strong writing of one, and the rather broken handwriting of the other person suggests that the former is probably a young man and the latter an older person, well advanced in years. The minute similarities in both the hands lead Holmes to deduce rightly that the two men are 'blood-relations'.

No activity of Holmes do we find in either Basil or Rupert, who boasts of himself as a great detective. He could do nothing remarkable in this case except showing enthusiasm and mad rage. The 'mystic star-gazer' who senses some 'spiritual atmosphere' about the letter accepts his helplessness in explaining his own thoughts about the matter. Basil has only one answer when quizzed about the letter, " ' I haven't the vaguest idea'" is his terse reply (TCQT,19). We feel amused at this silly comment because Basil ought to have a clear idea about the whole incident. Being the President of the club, it is he who has enrolled P.G. Northover as its member for his novel profession of providing people with thrilling adventures.

The other stories of this set too suffer from such lapses as 'detective' fiction. 'The painful Fall of a Great Reputation' starts with a wonderful chase so characteristic of a typical detective story. But the apparent reason for Basil and Swinburne shadowing a person sounds quite comic. Interestingly, it is the shape of the eyebrows, moustache and the style of the hair and hat which has made Basil jump from the top of the car they are travelling 'on'. The mad chase ends in a house where the pursued turns out to be a certain Wimpole who claims to have added a new chapter to the history of the English language by his witty repartees. Chesterton holds that wit should be pointed and profound. It is a great error, according to him, to underrate wit as a trivial. What we find in 'The painful Fall of a Great Reputation' is a mere play upon words. Here Chesterton seems to be witty without being profound. The following conversation between two characters in the story is a good enough sample of the trivia that gets circulated in a genteel gathering:

"I agree with Miss Beaumont", said Sir
Walter, suddenly exploding with indignation.

"If I had thought of anything so futile, I
should find it difficult to keep my
countenance".

"Difficult to keep your countenance",
cried Mr. Wimpole, with an air of alarm,
"Oh, do keep your countenance! Keep it
in the British Museum".

Everyone laughed uproariously Sir Walter,
turning suddenly purple shouted out:

"Do you know who you are talking to, with
your confounded tomfooleries?"

"I never talk tomfooleries", said the other,
"without first knowing my audience".

(TCQT,39)

The seemingly 'witty' observations are neither clever, nor intelligent by sophisticated standards of fine wit.

Inadequate explanation also figures in "The Awful Reason of the Vicar's Visit". We are enthralled by the singular adventure of the Vicar which makes him dress as a woman. The events in which the old clergyman finds himself are so arresting that they make Swinburne give up his desire to attend a dinner party. To soothe the excited old man, he takes him to Basil. But even Basil startles us by trying to snatch the old Vicar's eyebrows and hair. We have an intense feeling of being cheated, as we are nothing but the silent spectators of this bedlam. This ultimately turns out to be a storm in a teacup because Basil and the Vicar start "leaping, dodging and fighting" for the whiskers and the bald head in a congested room. To add to this pandemonium, another Vicar appears in the room. Basil tries to clarify the situation by disclosing the real identity of the both Vicars who are 'Professional Detainers'. They are hired by a person to stall Basil and Swinburne from attending a dinner party. Chesterton has elaborated the aspect of getting late for scheduled meetings due to various reasons in 'The Awful Reason of the Vicar's Visit. Chesterton makes this commonplace experience very interesting with the Vicar's imaginary thrilling adventure. Basil, however, tears the mask of the two adventurers. He does not reveal how he discovers the Vicar's false appearance. We are thus left with no other choice but to accept whatever he says or does, without a reasonable explanation. The inconsistency in presenting details as seen in the earlier story is more remarkable here. 'The Singular Speculation of the House Agent' is a better story, but there is very little detection here. It is Basil's knowledge about his friend's nature which saves

the situation. Rupert who is featured as professional detective, fails here both in understanding the situation from the beginning and also in seriously investigating the case. He simply follows his brother to a lonely heath and climbs a tree after him. But our disappointment with this uninteresting portrayal of detectives is a bit compensated when Basil successfully interprets the sign language invented by his friend in the following story 'The Noticeable Conduct of Professor Chadd'. But this story might have been more detective if Chesterton had opted for some cryptographic language rather than the absurd sign language of which we can make out nothing unless practically watching someone conversing in it.

The last story of this set, however, provides us with thrill and suspense. 'The Eccentric Seclusion of the Old Lady' starts with Rupert blotting the image of a detective by following a milkman because of the silly reason that the poor fellow was carrying a small milk can, was splashing milk on the road and was walking unevenly. This frivolous chase, however, ends on a reasonable note. The two friends come to a house where they suspect that an old woman is locked up. They compel Basil to assist them in knocking down and tying up the fellows they think are responsible for this illegal imprisonment. But the lady's resentment to come out of her confinement leaves them stunned. The strange and stubborn attitude of the woman and Basil's pointless conversation with her become intelligible to us when we know who Basil really is. It was he who had sentenced the lady to solitary confinement to prevent her from backbiting. It was Basil who had formed the insane brotherhood of the queer traders, and what more he is the President of the club. His claim to be associated with the club is his own queer position. He opens a 'moral court' and acts as its judge. He tries people for strict moral offences such as backbiting, pride, and so on.

'The Club of Queer Trades' presents Chesterton at the heights of storytelling. But it could not project him as a writer of 'detective' stories. His trying hand at this genre is, thus, not wholly successful. His detectives are neither trained nor serious. A man who can't even understand what is happening in front of him is not suitable to take up a career as a detective. Rupert is over-enthusiastic. What is required of a detective is not enthusiasm but patient understanding of the events.

Nevertheless, 'The Club of Queer Trades' stands out chiefly as a set of stories of caricature. A touch of verbal comedy offers refreshment to readers whenever they need it most. More striking than the verbal comedy is the situational comedy. This assigns Chesterton the place of literary photographer and cartoonist of men and manners. We find him sharing some of his ordinary observations with the readers by exaggerating certain human peculiarities. He extracts pleasing experiences from the minor inconveniences we face in life. But by recalling the original aim of Chesterton in writing these stories we can say that the narratives are to some extent 'defective' when read as 'detective'. Nevertheless, Chesterton's effort to produce effective detective fiction in 'The Club of Queer Trades' is, to some extent, promising. The fulfillment and finality, however, come later with the Father Brown Saga.

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