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*Brno Studies in English*. 2025, vol. 51, iss. 2, pp. 111-131

ISSN 0524-6881 (print); ISSN 1805-0867 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5817/BSE2025-2-6>

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.83804>

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Access Date: 13. 03. 2026

Version: 20260306

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# THE RURAL SOCIAL DIVIDE IN EDWARDIAN DETECTIVE FICTION

*Brno Studies in English*  
Volume 51, No. 2, 2025

ISSN 0524-6881 | e-ISSN 1805-0867  
<https://doi.org/10.5817/BSE2025-2-6>

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## Abstract

When the Victorian era became the twentieth century, a process of transformation was evident in the popular genre of detective fiction, especially in the depiction of different social classes. Essentially, one view is of the upper classes and their lifestyle as a prerequisite for the preservation of what was most valuable in Britain, while the rest of the population, lesser in various ways, show the deference due to their betters. In contrast, other writers, to a greater or lesser extent, portray the aristocracy and landed gentry as corrupted and their less fortunate neighbours as victims. For all the writers, their stories set in the countryside present a world where alternative paradigms and social mobility are unreal expectations. Although these aspects are of considerable relevance to an understanding of the era, from my reading, critics routinely choose either to barely acknowledge or wholly ignore depictions of social class in crime fiction from this era, accepted as so natural an aspect it is unworthy of analysis.

## Key words

*Social class; dichotomy; submissiveness; entitlement; village; infallible detective*

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## 1. Introduction

The resolute strata of the Victorian class system were both affirmed and contested in the literature of the new century. Prominent among these presumptions were inveterate attitudes about the supposed innate characteristics, vastly different experiences and imagined contributions of the various classes. In the popular mainstream genre of detective fiction, a dichotomy is evident between portrayals of an immutable social hierarchy as a national attribute and rejections of those notions, and in Britain paradigms of the established order were most resistant to change in the countryside, as in William Empson's description of the "trick of the old pastoral [literature], which was felt to imply a beautiful relation between rich and poor" (11). Writers like Crabbe and Hardy had rejected this tradition, instead showing rural England to be a place where most villagers could look on the local mansion as "a visible stamping of power, of displayed wealth and command: a social disproportion that was meant to impress and overawe." Now we can "know what many generations of countrymen bitterly learned and were consciously taught: that these were the families, this the shape of the society. And will you then think of community?" (Williams 1973: 106). In contrast, in many of

these stories the village is a similar location to the countryside that was sought out by visitors on day-trips: generally serene, with nature domesticated, and the social order validated (Howkins 2003: 26). However, the social order as depicted is largely overlooked in literary reviews of Edwardian 'country-house' crime fiction. While critics might acknowledge that entrenched class prejudice exists, its fictional manifestation can be dismissed with cursory generalisations, as when those belonging to the servant, peasant class are described as nothing beyond an "unofficial Greek chorus" (Bartell 1997: 184). In one of the few references to the topic in *Edwardian Detective Fiction*, Joseph Kestner remarks that

[t]he issues of social class and its repercussions, so emphasized by Sackville-West in *The Edwardians*, is (sic.) a central focus of such texts as Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, Bennett's *The Loot of Cities*, Orczy's *Lady Molly of Scotland Yard* and Mason's *At the Villa Rose*" (2000: 375).

That is his final word on the subject. It is as though the notion of a literature in which people are defined from birth by their social status is too *de rigueur* to be questioned.

## 2. The Noble Cause

Because of their role within the story as uniquely able to identify truth, so that their opinions and volition assume a primary significance, the detectives have the *hauteur* of patricians, which is also often their social status, as with Lady Molly Robertson-Kirk, the creation of Baroness Emmuska Orczy. Until the final pages of *Lady Molly of Scotland Yard*, it is left in doubt as to whether "Lady" is a genuine aristocratic title or honorific. Instead, throughout the stories a recurring theme is how natural the denomination is for one of her grace, intelligence and attractiveness. Her innately elevated status is evident in her amanuensis' admiration – "my sweet, womanly, ultra-feminine, beautiful lady" (1910: 193) – and in the attitude of the socially less fortunate she meets, for example, of a gardener's wife who is averse to showing Lady Molly her cottage: "her home was most unlikely to be in a fit state for a lady's visit. However, she could, of course, do nothing but obey" (180). When it is revealed that Molly is the Earl of Flintshire's daughter (293), so her title is hereditary, a syllogism can be inferred: that having this abundance of qualities, it is inevitable her title is genuine; or alternatively, that a woman of aristocratic birth will have innate and conspicuous superiority, and therefore the self-assurance to achieve a senior position in what was decidedly a man's career, a still unimaginable possibility for most aspiring women.

Lady Molly is drawn to cases involving people with property, titles or military rank, and wealth. The opening story, "The Ninescore Mystery", involves Lord Edbooke in the brutal murder of a young woman (2-3). He is the local ne'er-do-well aristocrat, an example of a malignant exception that must be expunged. Because of her dress and jewellery, the villagers and the police wrongly presume the victim is the scandalous Mary Nicholls (5-6), though it is in fact her respected

sister, Susan (26). Their high regard for Susan is also misplaced. She has been blackmailing Edbrooke, the father of Mary's baby (25). While he is a "scoundrel" (18), the family is redeemed by his brother, Lionel. He demonstrates *noblesse oblige* by trying to protect Mary's honour, but in so doing has become a suspect. As a "pleasing specimen of English cricket-, golf-, football-loving manhood", his convincing alibi leaves everyone "relieved at the thought that the handsome young athlete was not a murderer, after all. To look at him it certainly seemed preposterous" (18–19). After being discovered, the wicked brother does his duty by jumping in front of a train (28), meaning Lady Molly has cleansed the noble family.

After Lord Edbrooke, Lady Molly resolves cases involving a lord, lady and baroness (82); a countess (119); a marquise (139); a propertied army major (168) and a captain, heir to an earldom (174); a lord (236); a lady (264); and an army captain and society favourite (293). A conspicuous feature of many of these aristocrats and officers is their good looks and charm, an implicit appeal to value their existence. The bourgeois Mr. Frewin, a Jewish art collector in "The Frewin Miniatures", is simply described as a wealthy invalid (29 and 31), but his wife, a peer's daughter, "is an exceptionally beautiful woman, [who] has a glorious voice" and various artistic abilities. Her son has inherited looks and charm from his mother, and presumably also a title (29–30). In "A Christmas Tragedy", Major Ceely's daughter Margaret is "a singularly beautiful girl". As her father is wealthy, "[m]ammas of marriageable young men vied with one another in their welcome to Miss Ceely ... Margaret had been surrounded with admirers ever since she had come out of the schoolroom" (173–4). Likewise, Lady Molly's husband, a captain and possible heir to a castle, is "such a good-looking young soldier ... [he was] at the late Queen's funeral – one of the tallest men in the British army, and with that peculiar charm of manner" (292–3).

The detective's frequent resolving of crimes through which she rescues noble families, implicitly stems from a belief in their worth, a conviction that, despite aberrant individuals, the institution must be protected and preserved. This was a fictional representation of concerns that the Edwardian aristocracy was in peril. From 1899, British governments enacted laws, which increased taxes and put curbs on landowners' rights that some thought threatened the inviolability of the landed gentry (Howkins 2003: 13). Changes in British society such as the extension of the franchise, the ascent of the bourgeoisie, and more effective local government, also inspired laments about the future (22), for example, from the 11<sup>th</sup> Duke of Bedford (1858-1940), in *A Great Agricultural Estate: Being the Story of the Origin and Administration of Woburn and Thorney* (1897), a book about his travails as owner of two estates. He warned about the supposed unsustainability of this way of life (Spring 1984: 18-19). The Liberal George Russell suggested that the duke's other estates and 119 acres in Central London might stave off ruin, and in 1895 the duke's gross income was £264,000 (19–20) (equivalent to roughly £43,000,000 now) (Bank of England).

Although it was a society where one-third of the national income was earned by one-thirtieth of its subjects and ninety-two percent of the wealth was owned by one in ten of the population (Searle 2004: 83), some landowners were forced

to sell property or marry into the *nouveau riche* (180–2). The resolution of many fictional crimes serves to defend this class from such hazards, often determining what is a ‘just’ inheritance, safeguarding the future for the next generation by removing malign individuals so that the rightful heir can preserve their legacy. It is a weeding of the nobility, analogous to the Edwardian manipulation of nature: tamed and disciplined by human intervention, in the “delineated English countryside, the garden ... limited in extent and defined in function, there could be few unforeseen threats” (Hunter 1982: 165). One threat is Philip Baddock, Lady Molly’s brother-in-law (Orczy 1910: 296). He takes over the family castle in place of his father and brother (Molly’s husband). From his appearance and behaviour as lord and master, he is obviously unsuitable, possibly nefarious. He is short and dark, has “manners suggestive of an upbringing in a country parsonage” – whatever they are, they are incompatible with his new position – he sacks the staff, sells most of the horses and carriages, and buys a car (296). The ominous signs are borne out when he murders a solicitor and frames his brother (336–8), before he is inevitably exposed by Lady Molly, ending with his suicide (343).

Another motivated guardian of the landed rich is Eugène Valmont, a French emigré with conceit, flair and a far from perfect detection record. With *The Triumphs of Eugène Valmont*, Robert Barr (1906) wrote a collection of stories that satirise the genre and its hegemonic assumptions. Lord Chizelrigg begins the short story, “O my prophetic soul, my uncle!”, with 27,000 acres, a long pedigree, no money, and an unusual uncle. Suspiciously, the uncle is unlike any predecessor – atavism is a key attribute in these fictional aristocratic families – works with his hands, and has sacked all the servants (136–9), all clear signs he does not belong. In contrast, his nephew is very well fitted for his role, being “the most useless man who ever lived ... well-dressed, and of most charming manners” (134). The late uncle’s bad taste proves to be the lord’s salvation. As well as putting cheap pictures from weekly journals on the library walls (150), the uncle covered the “most exquisite oak panelling” with wallpaper (158). By removing the wallpaper and exposing the original walls, Valmont finds enough gold leaf for the lord to live according to his station (163–4). In the other three stories, Valmont comes to the aid of a typist who hopes to become a countess through marriage (237), an ancient unnamed family (269), and Lady Alicia, niece of a marquis (300). Valmont admits that he does not want “to waste time in commissions from the poor”, though he regrets that he once rejected the Duke of Ventnor because he looked like a beggar (226).

The caricatures frequently focus on the significance of heritage and tradition, indicative that age is particularly important for upper-class buildings and genealogy. “The sad case of Sophia Brooks” has three Lord Rantremlys, one dead, the dead man’s son, and the third a distant relative (229), who has become the heir. Rantremly Castle is Norman, but the new lord wants it demolished and replaced with a new building (227–8). It is a natural consequence of his family being “engaged in commerce” (230), which has made him an “abrupt, ill-mannered, dapper business man” who, in conversation, sits uninvited and does not remove his hat, making him neither “a genuine nobleman or a courteous business man” (239–41). However, the other Lord Rantremlys have a mark of authenticity as

they both have their ancestors' club foot (231). "The Fascinating Lady Alicia" involves a similarly unpleasant head of the house, the Marquis of Blair, and this is reflected in his manor, that is "very ugly and somewhat modern" (300). It does have a church, though, which dates from Henry II's time and Alicia regrets her father does not visit it, not because of Christian virtue, but in honour of the religious ancestor who must have had the church built (300). As with some of his counterparts, superficial aristocratic charm convinces the detective to take the case. Despite dressing "like a cottager's daughter" (300) and admitting to "cupidity" (307), Alicia is dangerously attractive: "her eyes sparkled more dazzlingly than any emerald that ever tempted man to wickedness" (319).

Beyond antique architecture, the aristocracy was also portrayed as a guarantor of pastoral Britain, an appeal emoted in Conan Doyle's stories and in those of his friend, Bertram Fletcher Robinson, credited with inspiring *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902: [7]). Robinson wrote the Addington Peace tales, about a very astute but modest and diminutive detective from London, drawn to cases involving the wealthy. When Sir Andrew Cheyne is shot at Airlie Hall (1905: 127) in the "The Mystery of the Causeway", Addington Peace's assistant goes to the property and sees

a lovely view, unmolested by the centuries. As it was so it had been three hundred years before, when some courtier of Elizabeth, in tightly fitting hose and immaculate ruffles, chose it as the outlook from the windows of his dining-room (129).

In the image is a country, in both senses of the word, conserved and admirable thanks to an arbitrary but enduring social hierarchy. Likewise, in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* Sir Henry, as heir to Baskerville Hall, faces great danger while, according to the local doctor, "the prosperity of the whole, bleak countryside depends upon his presence" (Doyle 1902: 32-3): it prospered during the tenure of his uncle, who wished "the whole countryside should, within his own lifetime, profit by his good fortune" (19). An alternative historical view of accommodating such a way of life is of the cost to the local communities: think of the

labour and see how long and systematic the exploitation and seizure must have been, to rear that many houses, on that scale ... looking at the land and then at the house, how much robbery and fraud there must have been, for so long, to produce that degree of disparity, that barbarous disproportion of scale. (Williams 1973: 105)

Although Sir Charles made money in South Africa (19) and Sir Henry was a farmer in Canada (31), their right to be lords of all they survey in Devon is also urged through their antecedence, the family living in the same location for centuries. Their welcome return from the colonies is consistent with what Yumna Siddiqi notes as Doyle's positive attitude to ex-colonials if, significantly, they have money and are prepared to live according to the local norms (2006: 236-7), in contrast to the "impoverished" returnees (238), and those "alienated from the

culture of the mother country” (242). However, if their antecedence is alien, as with the recently arrived “Tiger of San Pedro” in “Wisteria Lodge”, his treasure and former (Central American) supremacy count for naught (52–3). While he has a noble’s retinue, they are incompatible with an Edwardian English village. His staff include the “mulatto” cook who practises voodoo (36), and a secretary who is “chocolate brown, wily, suave and cat-like with a poisonous gentleness of speech” (46), and her master has “the step of a deer and the air of an emperor” (45), conspicuously socially superior but not a product of the home counties. Naturally, he is a temporary resident, and he meets his end in Madrid, the corpse identifiable through having “masterful features, magnetic black eyes” (59).

Sir Henry, however, is profoundly a Baskerville through his lineage and entitled to the family’s property and seigneurial rights. When he first arrives in Dartmoor, Dr. Watson (as narrator) projects a symbiotic topography and genealogy on to the recent arrival to validate Henry’s claim and privilege. The description subsumes the local geography under the gaze of Henry Baskerville:

I read upon his eager face how much it meant to him, this first sight of that strange spot where the men of his blood had held sway so long and left their mark so deep. There he sat, with his tweed suit and his American accent, in the corner of a prosaic railway-carriage, and yet as I looked at his dark and expressive face I felt more than ever how true a descendant he was of that long line of high-blooded, fiery, and masterful men (Doyle 1902: 79).

In a later Holmes story, “The Adventure of the Dancing Men”, the purported beneficial link is by association. The families, being long-established, are still integral to the place and any threat to that way of life is consequently more serious. When Holmes and Watson go to Norfolk to investigate murders in the Cubitt family, the station master laments that two members of the family have been shot, “one of the oldest families in the County of Norfolk, and one of the most honoured”. A few lines later, Watson describes his view of disparate buildings in the “singular” countryside which are “the glory and prosperity of old East Anglia” (Doyle 1905: 74–5), as though what threatens the family threatens the landscape.

However, in the coeval “The Adventure of the Priory School”, Holmes’ attitude, at least, has become cynical. When told the Duke of Holderness is in trouble, Holmes reads the duke’s entry in an encyclopaedia and sees the awards and titles as trivia: “Holderness, 6th Duke, K.G., P.C.” – half the alphabet! “Baron Beverley, Earl of Carston” – dear me, what a list!” He agrees to investigate when he is offered £5,000 (121), a lack of reverence particularly evident in another author’s detective stories. Acerbic critiques of the social elite were integral to G. K. Chesterton’s Edwardian fiction. In the Father Brown story “The Hammer of God”, the Bohuns have a heritage that goes back to the crusades, but, rather than inspiring admiration, “like more than one of the really ancient houses, they had rotted in the last two centuries into mere drunkards and dandy degenerates” (1911: 232–3). In “Queer Feet” Chesterton compares the nobility to an exclusive club, the Twelve Fishers, in that the club “had a vast number of ceremonies and observances, but it had no history and no object; that was where it was so very

aristocratic". Father Brown's presence in such a group is a form of Christian revolution, led by "a very aged rioter and demagogue who breaks into the most refined retreats with the dreadful information that all men are brothers", and the priest must follow this "leveller" (68). Calling Christ a "leveller" presumably alludes to the 17<sup>th</sup> century 'Levellers' who rejected the authority of monarch and parliament, and believed that all men being born equal, none should be favoured or victimised by the state (Crowcroft 2015). In accord with the Levellers, Chesterton believed the plutocracy that governed Britain should not be tolerated, and in *What's Wrong with the World* protested that the system was "a crapulous tyranny [that] crushes men down into the dirt" (1910: 280–1); "there should not be an usurious landlord, there should be a redistribution of property" (283). In Chesterton's earlier surreal novel, *The Man Who Was Thursday: A Nightmare*, the idea (for example, in Doyle's fiction) of wealthy landowners as intrinsic to the continuation of local harmony is dismissed. Instead, Inspector Ratcliffe, also called the Marquis de St. Eustache, pours scorn on any hope of a beneficial local or national aristocracy. The wealthy do not value good government and are hazards to the nation's welfare; "[t]he rich man ... can go away to New Guinea in a yacht ... the rich have always objected to being governed at all. Aristocrats were always anarchists" (1908: 189).

### 3. The Servant Class

Chesterton's solution was something he called "peasant proprietorship" (also "distributism"), to correct a situation in which

the Englishman is almost the only man in Europe whose house is not his castle. Nearly everywhere else exists the assumption of peasant proprietorship; that a poor man may be a landlord, though he is only lord of his own land (1910: 64–5).

An example of ownership through occupation occurs with the death of the Earl of Glengyle, in the Father Brown story "The Honour of Israel Gow". The earl's decease is a blessing: "[f]or many centuries there had never been a decent lord in Glengyle Castle" (1911: 148). The heir, at least to his gold, is not a descendant but his servant, Israel Gow, rewarded for his extraordinary honesty, who, as a boy, was mistakenly given a sovereign instead of a farthing and so returned the difference to Glengyle (168–9). Israel Gow, a crude caricature of a Scottish skinflint, takes all of the castle's gold, including from paintings and the earl's tooth (169–70). His desecration of the earl's corpse is his only crime, and it will not be punished because Gow will put the skull back (179), for the same rationale he returned the earl's change. Although no heir to the castle and land is mentioned, the property is implicitly Gow's: he lives there (as the only servant), and by "the energy with which he dug potatoes" shows he is using the land in a useful and productive manner (149), that he is more of a rightful successor than if he had gained it by accident of birth.

Reactionary suppositions about servants and their titled masters collapse in another Father Brown story, “The Sins of Prince Saradine”, in which the priest doubts whatever he hears, sees and thinks. The house is on a remote island in Norfolk, so only accessible by boat, and in the attempt to reach it, Brown warns that as a “fairyland”, it will be dangerous (204). The voyage into an alternative reality makes him feel as though “he had not seen the real story, but some game or masque” and “I, for one, don’t know whether I’m in this world or the next” (224). This is exemplified by a room in the prince’s house with five mirrors, an environment Jessica Dooley describes as “staggering the character’s confidence in his own understanding of the reality around him” (2012: 3). In this room Brown is haunted by seeing the butler reflected five times (1911: 211), and by recurring *déjà vu* (213). Predictably, the butler in the many simultaneous reflections is not what he seems, and neither is the housekeeper, given away by being “a dark, handsome lady, of no little majesty, and rather like a plutonic Madonna” (208). Her venerable nature steeped in sin, indicated in the oxymoron of “plutonic Madonna”, is particularly notable from a Catholic writer. She has fallen socially, from being a “woman of high rank” (202) to a servant and, likewise, the butler was once a prince (225). Father Brown suddenly realises that the prince has eloped with another’s wife (the “plutonic Madonna”) and murdered her husband. In this context, their deception equates serving with innocence and a royal title with sin and criminality: they appear innocent until exposed as upper class. The prince then boasts with the candour typical of characters in this form of fiction, of managing to dispose of his blackmailing brother and his mistress’ murderous son by having them fight over the family property, To Brown and his associate, Flambeau, it is “a house of hell”, and the prince, the reverse of admirably noble, is linked with Satan, the Prince of Darkness (226–9).

The fake housekeeper and butler may have expected to remain undiscovered because such positions required inconspicuous humility. As Chesterton lamented, it was an accepted norm for “superiors” not to recognise the existence of the poor, which included their servants (Gill 2006: 18), and for their views and experiences to be disregarded (25). The two recurring fictional archetypes are, in turn, what their oblivious employers would expect, or what they would fear: servants who cannot imagine any situation preferable to a lifetime working at the behest of the same master or master’s family; or conniving scoundrels, whose desire for a better life inevitably involves crime. In Lady Molly’s and Addington Peace’s encounters with servants they witness both the unquestioningly loyal and the devious. When Peace investigates the disappearance of Silas J. Ford in “The Vanished Millionaire”, the valet is described as “hatchet-faced” with “a most respectful attitude” (Robinson 1905: 207). The jarring combination reveals his duplicitous villainy: the valet has hidden Ford in a priest hole in the house to extort money (224), so that the “fine old [rented] Hampshire mansion” (198) aids in the plutocrat’s kidnapping. In “Terror in the Snow” another valet is revealed by Peace to be untrustworthy. Despite having “that mixture of respect and dignity that marks the well-trained British manservant”, he too is “hatchet-faced” as well as “a very clever fellow by all accounts” (58). Whether because of his visage or his intelligence, this valet also tries to gain from his master’s misfortune. When

the valet's baron flees (to escape retribution for ruining his secretary's father) the valet uses the opportunity to steal some gold plates (84). In both cases the two valets have given the appearance of contentment with their situation in life, while being constantly aware of the very different experiences of the men they serve, and so have attempted a little redistribution of wealth, an inherently pernicious act in this subgenre.

However, Peace also comes across servants who are as delighted with their positions as they look. After Sir Andrew Cheyne is found dead in "The Mystery of the Causeway", Peace and his assistant meet the victim's butler, who gives them detailed information about his master. He "had not previously honoured us with his presence" for six months and his arrival caused "a flutter of excitement" among the staff (130). Both the butler's manner of speaking – in "a soft, oily voice" – and his contentment are obsequious, a degree of attachment to the household and its owner that Lady Molly also witnesses among retainers. When the art collector, Lionel Frewin, owner of a series of near priceless ivory miniatures (29), dies, his miniatures disappear, and the effect on his servants is purportedly cataclysmic: "The poor old butler was in despair; the cook was in hysterics, and consternation reigned throughout the house. The disappearance of the miniatures caused almost a greater excitement than the death of the master" (36). Their concern for these ornaments stretches credulity. The objects' value, possibly £10,000 each then (29), approximately £1,000,000 now (Bank of England), to prosperous collectors and institutions (including the Louvre) (Robinson 1905: 29-30), means that they are unimaginable possessions for a butler or cook, and that so much money, relative to a servant's wage, could be spent on objects with no use, instead of being a source of pride, would surely be demeaning to the staff.

In fact, it is no longer being in service that causes resentment, at least on the part of a dismissed gardener's wife. When looking into the death of a major in "A Christmas Tragedy" (see section 2), Lady Molly and Mary, her assistant, meet a woman "of the servant class" who "might have been called good-looking", except that "her entire appearance was distinctly repellent. It suggested slatternliness in an unusual degree" due to dishevelled clothing and "very red and very coarse-looking hands" (Orczy 1910: 129–30). This story exemplifies an upper-class condescension and antagonism that critics like Joseph Kestner barely acknowledge, limited to "A number of the texts cover the ramifications of class ... There are several snobbish observations about servants" (2000: 210). From the narrator's perspective, the woman is to blame for her poverty, her humble social status and, presumably, for doing manual work, reinforced by her shame when the sleuth and Mary visit her home (Orczy 1910: 180), where they see "grinding poverty" (194). Rather than sympathy, to extract information Lady Molly instead threatens the couple with the workhouse, and reminds Mrs. Haggett her husband will be unable to find another job, so they will lose their home because of the major's impromptu dismissal (195), ironically to an extent justifying the murder. In keeping with his wife and house, the ex-gardener is "uncared-for, dirty, and unkempt" (194), referred to as "almost an imbecile, in fact, with but a few lucid intervals" (181), and as a "weird, half-witted creature" (198). The description of

the couple and their home is a view from the other socio-economic extreme, an encounter that exposes the visitors to unsanitary alarms – “[w]e sat down on two of the cleanest-looking chairs” (194) – and shows their contempt for the Haggetts and their poverty – after introducing him, the narrator repeatedly refers to Mr. Haggett simply as an “imbecile” (181, 193, 196, 197, 198 and 199). Beyond the visitors implicitly placing blame, or at least lacking any sympathy, for the couple’s predicament, what they discover is puzzling for a few reasons. The Haggetts are enduring “grinding poverty” to the extent that they cannot afford decent clothes or adequate furniture for their house, yet the husband has only just lost his job after working for the major for twelve years (195), so his wages must have been insufficient for a childless couple to escape poverty. It is also mystifying how Haggett, as an “imbecile”, could have done his job, unless you believe that gardening does not require even minimal intelligence. Finally, bearing in mind these problems, why did a woman choose to marry the “half-witted creature” to become Mrs. Haggett? There is a stark contrast in the same story with the major’s daughter, who is courted by an M.P.’s son and by a captain who will inherit an earldom and £40,000 a year (174), “a brilliant marriage” (190). Strangely, Kestner sees an equivalence between Haggett’s murder and Ceely’s dalliances, as if they are comparable: “Whether of the lower classes, such as Annie Haggett, or an heiress, such as Magaret Ceely, women in “A Christmas Tragedy” are revealed as treacherous across class lines” (2001: 45). That one acts from existential desperation as opposed to capricious self-indulgence, is not thought relevant.

The gardener in Godfrey Benson’s novel *Tracks in the Snow* is quite the reverse of Mr. Haggett. Reuben Trethewy is admired for being “multifarious”, and because of doing “all sorts of things in all sorts of places ... was emphatically a handy man” (1906: 10). However, being Cornish, and so Celtic, he is a bad-tempered drinker, and the main effect alcohol has on him is to give “him a touch of fierceness” (11). This tendency makes him the chief suspect in his master’s murder, after Trethewy is overheard speaking with “surly insolence ... exploding for a moment into wild anger” (36), though a motive is not given. Paradoxically, the sober Trethewy is a devout Methodist (11), and the narrator and detective, an Anglican rector, Robert Driver, shows grudging admiration for this aspect of the gardener. The clergyman is a conformist and Trethewy a non-conformist, for whom he claims to have no sympathy (60), yet Driver shows a lot of interest in him and, though he is one of the staff, he receives a lot of narrative attention, which reveals that, despite his stereotypical Celtic temperament, he is a complex and enigmatic character. The two sides in Trethewy’s “inward warfare”, his apparently contradictory drunken rage and his sober piety, are, from the rector’s viewpoint, manifestations of the same defiant resolve. What moves him to attack his would-be master after a few drinks, the narrator believes is the same form of rebellion that informs his religious faith:

it was very hard to gather how much of it was sincere, impossible to gather whether or not something worse lay concealed behind that which was so strangely confessed. Self-abasement and self-righteousness, the genuine stuff of Puritan enthusiasm, the adulterated stuff of morbid religious-

ness, sheer cant, manly straightforwardness, pleasure in the opportunity of preaching and that to the parson, – all these things seemed blended together in Trethewy's talk (56).

If this is a complaint, it is against non-conformity, about someone who is faithful to not conforming. His behaviour, from the Anglican's perspective, is very Puritan and outspoken, and in preaching to the parson, he does not recognise authority or his "betters".

As a servant with a rebellious spirit, Trethewy is an exception in *Tracks in the Snow*, and compared to the norm in Conan Doyle's stories he is revolutionary. Insofar as the domestic staff that Holmes meets are of any narrative interest, in general they show unquestioning devotion to the property, the owner and his family. When the kidnapped son of the Duke of Holderness is found and a servant informed, he is described as a "rejoicing lackey" (1905: 157), both servile and delighted. For the butler at Baskerville Hall, loyalty is an inheritance, as his family have taken care of the property for four generations, though the new owner is more concerned that while he is absent, the butler and his wife will "have a mighty fine home and nothing to do" (64), as if they may forget their place and imagine an unwarranted social ascent. Later, Barrymore, the butler, "with the subdued manner of a well-trained servant" (85), tells Henry Baskerville he will need "a considerable staff", and that the Barrymore's will not stay due to the pain of Sir Henry's uncle's death. When Sir Henry expresses his disappointment that their family's long-standing attachment to the Baskervilles will be severed, the butler's reply hints at discontent with serving life: because Sir Charles has left them money, the Barrymores will go into business (86), preferable to living according to the orders of a master by birthright. However, the couple's behaviour remains meek and dutiful, which includes the butler teaching Sir Henry the names of his relatives in the family portraits (205), indicative of a life educated by and about his superiors, with the result that he knows more than the new heir about the heir's family.

There are, though, circumstances when the established order should not be respected. The behaviour of Lord Brackenstall in "The Adventure of the Abbey Grange" is so intolerable it excuses his murder, which a servant assists. Conan Doyle was a campaigner against the British legal system's tolerance of domestic violence and the related difficulty for women to divorce abusive husbands (Wingert 2007: 60). The Brackenstalls' marriage serves as an example of the need for change. Hopkins of Scotland Yard describes the lord as "a perfect fiend when he was drunk" who once set fire to his wife's dog, and threw a decanter at a maid: "in spite of all his wealth and his title, he very nearly came our way once or twice" (Doyle 1905: 328). Consequently, his wife believes it "a sacrilege, a crime, a villainy to hold that such a marriage is binding" (323). It is the maid who enables Lady Brackenstall's rescue by informing a chivalrous admirer about the lady's demonic husband (344). The "white knight" is a sailor, appropriately a captain rather than of the lower ranks, who enters the door at Baker Street, "as fine a specimen of manhood as ever passed through it ... a very tall young man, golden-moustached, blue-eyed, with a skin which had been burned by tropical suns" (342). Watson's

exultation is an indication that the captain is an appropriate partner for the widow who, despite injuries, is similarly sublime and Anglo Saxon: "Seldom have I seen so graceful a figure, so womanly a presence, and so beautiful a face. She was a blonde, golden-haired, blue-eyed" (322). The captain had to murder Brackenstall and so risk execution, not only because the police were unwilling to act, presumably due to "all his wealth and his title", but also because his servants could only be submissive witnesses and victims of his rages, powerless to respond.

In the extraordinary spiritualist tales of John Silence, the servants can be similarly feckless. In "The Nemesis of Fire", Silence, who has trained in communicating with the world of spirits that is said to be omnipresent (Blackwood 1909: 3–5), goes to the aid of Colonel Wragge because of preternatural heat and spontaneous combustion in Wragge's manor house (146–7). While Silence is there, a fire starts in the laundry and the staff are thrown into confusion: "the portly butler ... getting more and more mixed in his addresses to God and the devil ... the frightened women-servants and grooms running hither and thither." Fortunately, the colonel is present: "The arrival of the master restored order instantly, and this retired soldier, poor thinker perhaps, but capable man of action, had the matter in hand from the start" (191). The colonel is commended by the narrator (Silence's assistant) for, "in an excellently matter-of-fact voice, scolding some one roundly for making such a big fire ... and paying no heed to the stammering reply that no fire had been lit there for several days" (192). It was actually caused by an Egyptian mummy buried in the garden (225–6).

#### 4. The Ignorant Masses

Being of independent means, Silence can choose his clients and does not charge, for which reason he supposedly helps neither the rich, who can pay, nor the poor, who "could avail themselves of organised charity" (2–3). If his just causes are not wealthy, they are mostly tantalisingly close to that status – for example, Colonel Wragge with his retinue of servants – while the one genuinely average Briton who pleads for help is a satire on the middle classes. Arthur Vezin, the subject of "Ancient Sorceries", is from Surbiton, south-west London (78), i.e. respectable, uninspiring suburbia, whose "whole scheme of life seemed utterly remote from anything more exciting than missing a train or losing an umbrella on an omnibus" (77). When he reports that he travelled back in time by getting off a train, instead of the sympathetic reaction shown to the other victims of the paranormal, Vezin is mocked: "dull, ordinary folk have no right to out-of-the-way experiences" (76). As for those who are poorer still, Silence is scrupulous in avoiding them. Even communicating with them is often superfluous. When Silence asks Colonel Wragge to describe the extraordinary heat that is disturbing the household, the detective insists that even the smallest details are important (164). Wragge reports what a gardener and woodman saw (163–4), yet the investigator has no interest in hearing their accounts first-hand.

Colonel Wragge also explains the local aversion to working for him, which is in keeping with a largely disparaging attitude to the more socially humble villagers

in this and stories by other authors: “the people here are as superstitious as Irish peasantry” (161). The irony is that the derided superstition, which presumably is supposed to stem from a lack of education or an excess of credulity, means they know the truth of a world the stories claim exists and that Silence is eulogised for perceiving. Lady Molly also encounters villagers in “The End” who avoid a wood because they believe it is haunted and that the scream of a murder victim can be heard, but the investigator is dismissive: “these superstitious fancies never disturbed Lady Molly” (330). The contrast mocks the simple folk and the idea of the supernatural, while elevating the detective and her faith in detached rationale. There is a similar fear of an imagined monster in the Addington Peace story, “The Terror in the Snow”. Around 100 years before, an earl shot a wolf in Russia and brought one of its albino cubs back to England (Robinson 1905: 56). The animal became bad-tempered with age, and one Christmas Eve, tore the earl’s son’s throat out, so the earl killed the wolf bare-handed (57). As a result, “[t]here’s not a labourer in Norfolk who would go into the lower gardens on any night of the year, much less on Christmas Eve”. Even the story-teller, an artist called Talman, expresses aversion: “Think of it, Phillips, the white shape with the bloody jaws lurking in the shadows!” (58). If Talman’s reluctance through association with a memory is more reasonable than the labourers’ credence in a fantastical monster, showing them to be devoid of reasoning and level-headedness, then most reasonable of all, naturally, is Peace who scoffs at the myth of the beast (76).

The feared wolf is reminiscent of the hound thought to be threatening the Baskervilles, bearing in mind that the author of “The Terror in the Snow” gave Conan Doyle the original idea (see section 2). The large canine that terrorises the local population and is believed to threaten the local landowning family is actually a collective figment. The differing reactions again show a reciprocal scale of credulity and scepticism, contrasting the villagers and Holmes, an implicit indication of his sagacity. Examples of those who think they have seen the creature are a farrier and a farmer, while the local doctor, Mortimer, says he does not know what to believe, for which Holmes accuses him of having “quite gone over to the supernaturalists” (1902: 30–1). He later marvels at “how credulous the peasants are” (94). It may appear incongruous to compare Dr. Mortimer with manual labourers in this segregated environment, but he has moved from London to Devon, and to the detective it is a sign of resignation: it is “only an unambitious one who abandons a London career for the country” (6). Holmes has no doubts about the hound’s existence due to its limited range – “[a] devil with merely local powers like a parish vestry would be too inconceivable a thing” (33) – and also Sir Henry, the target of the hoax, has known of the legend but has never taken it seriously and, regardless, nothing will keep him from “the home of my own people” (51–2). However, when Sir Henry is with Watson on the moor at night, a noise like a hound alarms him – both an illustration of how exposure to nature unfiltered can make such ideas more credible, and that he is becoming rusticated – and Watson reassures him that to believe it was a supernatural animal “would descend to the level of these poor peasants” (148). As Watson is hoping to rescue Sir Henry from credulity, the more obvious meaning of “poor” is in terms of acuity or reason, but their financial hardship is related and significant. They are

simple-minded and gullible, homogenous and where they belong socially because they are without money and far from town or city. For people of Watson's and Sir Henry's social class to have the same beliefs would be a descent. It is consistent with a view in the novel of this part of Devon as an intellectual wilderness.

By lamenting that there are only two educated men "within many miles" (23), the village doctor also believes that the local population "are ignorant people" (141). As a representation of England as it was, it is a plausible claim. Late Victorian and Edwardian rural education was inadequate in various respects. Although, after the 1899 Education Act, schooling was compulsory until 12 years old (Searle 2004: 50), the challenges of remoteness remained. For example, a Devon schoolmaster complained that he had to teach arithmetic to 40 children at four different levels in the same class (Horn 1989: 38). One Devon master indicated the difficulty of teaching children who had never seen a train or telephone (44), and a farmer told another Devon teacher not to ask boys to attend school when they were working (117). At a time when secondary school attendance was highly unlikely for the rural poor – due to a lack of scholarships (awarded to one in 270 pupils in the mid-1890s) (65), of transportation and of money – and when an understanding of academic subjects required a university education (Searle 2004: 558-60), peasants had virtually no hope of becoming genuinely educated.

In the fictional countryside, their naiveté is evident in their failure to respect a crime scene. After Charles Baskerville is murdered, the spot is "defaced by the clogs of curious peasants" (Doyle 1902: 30), simultaneously reckless and ponderous (wearing clogs) creatures, rather like cattle, and especially reprehensible because it hampers the investigation. Curious neighbours, likewise, hinder the investigation in *Tracks in the Snow* (see section 2), by "wandering about" the area. Their depiction, again, is of people so simple-minded they could be livestock: "[t]hey had no more harmful intention than that of gazing and gaping" (Benson 1906: 18). They are also the narrator's neighbours, as he is a country parson, and they undermine his intellectual life. He grudgingly admits to living among "wise men and good men, [but] none ever showed intellectual interests or talked with any readiness of high things" (2). To the pastor, life among a pastoral population, save for one or two exceptions, means the starvation of an enquiring mind.

For Thorpe Hazell, an idiosyncratic detective who is a strict vegan with a specialist knowledge of trains, and who likes to exercise while conversing, crimes involving plutocrats have more interest, while villagers who have pretensions to education are derisory. A woman who mistakes Hazell for a doctor, tells him about a tenant who "is, seemingly, a furriner, which I could never a-bear, sir, though he do speak the King's English quite as good as you nor me.' Hazell smiled at her idea of grammar". Even the death of her son is apparently humorous because of how she relates it: "I lost a boy of my own with conjecture of the lungs and browntitis" (Whitechurch 1912: 22-3). The paradigm of the detective's worldly understanding confronting parochial ignorance also defines Lady Molly's encounters. Because the villagers wrongly suspect the heir to the d'Alboukirk estate (82-3) of killing her sister's maid (93), if they pass the heir and her grandmother, Lady d'Alboukirk, "no one doffed a cap to salute them" (100), so the villagers compound their mistaken conclusion by not showing due deference to

their social superiors, in this regimen another form of ignorance. Lady Molly, however, has known from the beginning the heir is innocent (105), so she can ensure the preservation of the noble family, and her perspicacity in this case stems from her supposed insights into religion and the Indian psyche. The heir's sister was trying to commit a fraud, but the sister's maid, formerly a Parsee "with a dog-like devotion to the girl whom she had nursed as a baby", was a Catholic convert and as a "poor, ignorant, superstitious" woman with a profound dread of hell, was incapable of lying (106). What passes for an understanding of the behaviour of a colonial subject, that someone could go from being overawed by one Western influence (the "dog-like devotion to the girl") to being mesmerised by an imposed religion, is obvious to the detective and inconceivable to the villagers. In 'The End', when Molly and her assistant return at night to the woods where Molly's husband was framed for murdering a solicitor, the metropolitan detective repudiates a local belief:

[t]he villagers declared that Mr. Steadman's ghost haunted the clearing, and that the cry of the murdered man, as he was being foully struck from behind, could be distinctly heard echoing through the trees. Needless to say, these superstitious fancies never disturbed Lady Molly (Orczy 1910: 330).

Thanks to her acute intelligence and *sang froid*, Molly enjoys walking there. In contrast, the local population are inculcated by their proximity to each other and the lack of humanity beyond, breeding a fear of idle fantasies, a contrast to the historical view that villages could be dynamic centres of self-sufficiency (Howkins 2003: 20).

Father Brown is no more in thrall than Lady Molly to fears of woods at night, even one where the "hollows between the trunks of the trees looked like bottomless, black caverns of that Scandinavian hell" (Chesterton 1911: 285). However, his view of the disadvantaged in society is markedly different to Lady Molly's. The social dichotomy in the short story "The Hammer of God" (see section 2) is between a decadent privileged class and the local people, powerless to do other than tolerate the aristocratic depravity. The nobility is represented by two brothers who are superficially opposites – one is a sybaritic ex-colonel, the other a reserved curate – but the cleric's interest in Gothic architecture is said (for example, by the blacksmith) to be simply a variation of the "morbid thirst for beauty which sent his brother raging after women and wine" (234). Whether or not the brothers' indulgences stem from the same source, the result for the humbler inhabitants is that in both cases their patrician status is unassailable. While pursuing the blacksmith's beautiful wife, the colonel jokes he is also wearing a Japanese helmet: "always the nearest hat – and the nearest woman" (236). The libidinous officer, then, does not expect either the blacksmith, the strongest man in the village, or the wife to stop him, and the only person who can is his only social peer. The unlikely murder involves the curate throwing a hammer from the church tower so accurately that it hits his brother's head and kills him (256). It is a judgement from above but "no miracle" (252): Brown accuses the curate of delusions of grandeur, a result of being so far above his neighbours,

physically and metaphorically. To the priest, “[o]ne sees great things from the valley; only small things from the peak”, and because “he saw all men walking about like insects”, the curate believed himself to be God (255-6). More than a warning about the psychological dangers of frequenting tall structures, Father Brown describes a community in which one sector is so much more elevated than the other as not to see them as human. The curate is redeemed by descending the tower and confessing to the police (258).

## 5. The Local Constabulary

The most obvious suspect in the colonel’s murder is the blacksmith, due to his strength and grievance, but when he is arrested he is so confident of release thanks to his Christian faith (he was at a Revival meeting) that his only concern is for the police inspector’s reputation (244). The feckless inspector humiliates himself further by later asking the blacksmith to help discover who the culprit might be (249). The use of the hapless professional detective to accentuate the brilliance of his private counterpart is an obvious trope, though alternative representations of the sleuth’s salaried homologue occur. More often, the lower ranks, in particular of the pastoral police, are the objects of scorn. As Shpayer-Makov indicates, the low regard with which the police were often portrayed was symptomatic of class prejudice: the private detectives were mostly patrician and did not need a salary, while the wage-earners were working- or lower-middle-class (2011: 179).

In accordance with the idea that for crime detection, the higher the social rank the more admirable the investigator, the village constables or sergeants are the most consistently risible figures. Admirers of the hero of *The Red Triangle*, Martin Hewitt, may believe he is “democratic”, in contrast to Holmes, and have a collegiate attitude to the police in other stories (Knight 2021), but in “The Case of the Burnt Barn” he undermines a self-important and disdainful constable with condescension. The titular barn is where a dead body was discovered, but when Hewitt arrives a policeman is blocking the entrance. The solution is to impress the “rather stupid countryman” with Hewitt’s celebrity which, naturally, awes the constable: “Hewitt was so extremely lofty and so very peremptory and official, that the inferior intelligence capitulated feebly” (Morrison 1903: 180–1). The “half-pleasant-faced young constable” (Benson 1906: 15) who fails to keep curious locals away from a murder scene in *Tracks in the Snow* (18–19, see section 2), redeems himself later with salient observations (264 and 266). However, for two other members of the police force, the hierarchy is analogous to class division, with the sergeant and superintendent as, respectively, contented proletariat and *petite bourgeois*. Sergeant Speke is “burly, steady, slow-speaking, heavy” but surprises the narrator with a humble degree of competence (15, 17 and 19), until the superintendent arrives. The “keen, and as I guessed, ambitious” inspector admonishes the discomfited sergeant for shortcomings in the investigation (31–2), and when the superintendent sees that a window is unlatched, he reprimands Speke for failing to notice it: “Poor Sergeant Speke, already crestfallen, had no answer” (33). In contrast to Sergeant Speke, the superintendent is in a hurry –

he arrives “in hot haste” (31), “rapidly gathered nearly all that the Sergeant had to tell” (32), returns later “in haste to search the garden” (33), finds footprints “before his companions had begun seeking” (37), and following the tracks, “sped on the trail” (39) – a constant urgency that signifies his restless ambition.

There is a similar contrast in Sherlock Holmes’ encounters, from inspectors eager to show initiative and ripeness for promotion, to “stalwart” (Doyle 1905: 22) and “stolid” (77), constables, without imagination or ambition. The way the prying Mr Frankland (in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*) says that a solution is obvious, “even a county constable could guess” (Doyle 1902: 175–6), is not countered in Holmes’ stories from this decade. As a result, the constables are not equipped to deal with the unexpected. When a policeman is told to keep watch on a house in “The Adventure of Wisteria Lodge”, he suffers a nervous fit because he has seen a big face that is neither black nor white (Doyle 1917: 33–4). It is in fact the face of a very big mixed-race man (40), and the inspector on the case, Baynes, is disappointed at the constable’s failure to do his duty (34) and seize the “huge and hideous mulatto” (40). It is exemplary of Inspector Baynes’ very different attitude to his job. At his introduction, the description of “a stout, puffy, red man, whose face was only redeemed from grossness by two extraordinarily bright eyes, almost hidden behind the heavy creases of cheek and brow” (22), might anticipate hubris before a fall, apparently confirmed when Baynes arrests the wrong man (39–40), and even dares to compare himself to Holmes: “we all have our own systems, Mr. Holmes. You have yours, and maybe I have mine” (42). However, the “extraordinarily bright eyes” are significant. Baynes arrests the wrong man so that the real suspect will relax, and Holmes predicts great career prospects for the inspector (51–2). If, as a well-fed, professionally aspirant detective, Baynes is bourgeois, originally meaning someone from town, then Holmes’ praise of the inspector, that working in the country his “powers ... seem superior to your opportunities”, implies he is in a form of exile. Baynes agrees: “You’re right, Mr. Holmes. We stagnate in the provinces” (37).

When Eugene Valmont and Addington Peace are called to the countryside, they have to deal with the lower ranks of the police and are predictably overwhelmed. After the death of Sir Andrew Cheyne (see section 2), Peace’s assistant tries to enter Airlie Hall but is prevented by a policeman, “massive, red-faced, pompous with his present importance” (Robinson 1905: 128). However, the situation is transformed at the mention of Peace of the C.I.D.: “His manner changed with a celerity which was the greatest compliment he could have paid to the little detective” (129). The description of the constable is vitriolic, about someone who, to the narrator, should be humble because of his place in the police hierarchy and, by extension, in the social order, who presumably feels “present importance” because the corpse was his social opposite, and who vindicates this view by his instant servility at the mention of the renowned detective. For Valmont’s investigation at Rantremly Castle in “The Ghost with the Club Foot” (see section 2), he is assisted by the local chief constable, described as “a stolid, taciturn person”, who is nevertheless apprehensive about visiting the castle at night because he believes it has a ghost, and who disagrees with Lord Rantremly’s opinions but respects aristocracy too much to discuss the topic (250). Valmont is later able to

exploit the constable's deference for titles to open a secret room. Valmont tells the policeman that kings have hidden there, and his "head bent low at the mention of royalty". The constable is reminded that he will help a "lord paramount", at which the policeman worked "with an enthusiasm for which I was not prepared ... I found the constable's brawn much superior to his brain" (261-2). The constable is a pastiche of working-class credulity – too superstitious to visit a castle in the dark, awestruck by any reference to nobility.

## 6. Local Knowledge

Although some contemporaries, like American emigré Price Collier, believed that though an "Englishman may have a house in London ... his home is in the country" (Kestner 2000: 368), in the contemporary fiction the detective newly arrived in the country is often an alien, and the esteemed investigators depend on the villagers for local information, though they are an inevitable source, having lived in that location all their lives. While their use directly contradicts the repeated idea of peasants as ignorant and given to flights of fancy, that they are the consultants in turn signals this knowledge as strictly contingent and, for the detectives, ephemeral. The best-known example of a remote investigation must be Holmes's and Watson's journey to Dartmoor to rescue the Baskerville house. While he is living between moor and village, the normally autonomous Holmes admits that a "little fellow" called Cartwright has been indispensable thanks to his "pair of eyes on a pair of very active feet" (Doyle 1902: 184), and the detective "was dependent upon him for food and clean linen" (245). Holmes, provided with a map of the area (36) and wearing tweed and a cloth cap, looks to Watson "like any other tourist upon the moor" (181), an area so remote the doctor believes the visitor has "left all traces of modern England behind" (110). In "The Adventure of the Devil's Foot", they travel further, to Poldhu in South Cornwall, and it is even less like their *patria*. Presumably in reference to the tradition of smuggling, Watson claims a "sinister atmosphere of forgotten nations" pervades, while Holmes theorises that the local language is similar to Chaldean (pre-Christian Babylonian) and derived from Phoenician (Doyle 1917: 242), and so has no resemblance to English. For Martin Hewitt in *The Red Triangle*, villages twenty miles from London are the most remote from contemporary English life, being a transport hinterland, beyond the suburbs but not distant enough for good railway links. The obstacles to coming and going mean that the villages are "far more rural, far sleepier, far less influenced by the great city" (Morrison 1903: 162) than places further away. In such locales, Hewitt welcomes assistance to compensate for the possibility "the resources of civilisation" will be out of reach (161).

Therefore, a crucial task for an investigator going to a village as an outsider is the overnight acquisition of local knowledge. In general, in the coeval detective fiction, the previously unknown villagers are conveniently both forthcoming and ingenuously honest. Martin Hewitt is able to begin his research as soon as he gets off the train. The coachman who drives him from the station relates "all he knew of the case with perfect clearness", including the victim's Caribbean origins,

that he had “a trifle, well – of dark blood”, descriptions of the victim’s wife and daughter, a lengthy narrative about an argument on the night of the murder, and a detailed report of a suspicious fire (163–9). Two of Holmes’ main sources are the local gossips and “discharged servants with a grievance” (Doyle 1917: 47). Although it is credible that the latter might feel no loyalty to their ex-employers, it is striking that, despite their resentment, they can be trusted not to embellish or invent out of retribution. In “The Adventure of Wisteria Lodge”, an ex-gardener proves to be very reliable, perhaps because, in Watson’s phrase, he is “an excited rustic” (1917: 50), and too simple to connive. Holmes shows his implicit trust in the appropriately named Warner by making him his “agent” (49). Holmes also believes in public-house gossip as a fount of reliable information. He reprimands Watson for asking London house agents to identify the eponymous “Solitary Cyclist” instead of going to the local pub, which Holmes visits the next day, where a “garrulous landlord” tells the detective about the mysterious cyclist’s lifestyle, domestic staff and suspicious visitors (Doyle 1905: 104–5).

Addington Peace as a resident of London (Robinson 1905: 17), needs to become quickly informed while investigating a death in a Surrey village (“The Mystery of the Causeway”), and he also talks to the landlord of an inn. He is as forthcoming and sincere as Holmes’ landlord but less helpful: his description of a mysterious botanist (151) is actually of the victim in disguise (152). There is, too, a servant with a grievance, another Warner, a gamekeeper who wants to protect ducks from foxes (141). Warner has “the dumb agony of a wild thing in a trap” and though blameless, makes a very sincere confession. His ingenuousness is such that, unable to prove his innocence, he starts by requesting his own arrest, before narrating his meeting with a stranger who encouraged him to kill the foxes with a spring gun (the gun is triggered when the animal approaches) (140-1). Warner continues that the stranger (having used one before) sent instructions for the contraption and, unbeknownst to Warner, adjusted it to kill the gamekeeper’s master (142–3). They are the revelations of a man completely unequipped to live in adult society, patently a duck among foxes. Beyond his verbal prostration before the law, Warner is so guileless that he conspired in arranging a trap for himself.

## **7. Conclusion**

The prevalent reactionary form of Edwardian detective fiction in its depiction of different levels of the social scale is so recurrent that it has become if not invisible, at least for the most part treated as not worthy of comment. The striking feature of these stories when they are set in the country, is the degree to which a character’s social background determines their behaviour, intelligence, satisfaction with and attitude to the status quo. However, the manner in which Chesterton and Barr challenged the established order has not been mirrored by critics of this genre. That these portrayals – of a world of penniless, clueless and unworldly villagers living in harmony with a landed elite, cherished for their inherited privilege – have gone unchallenged suggests sympathy for such attitudes remains.

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1 Note that though the book was first published in 1915, the stories featured in this article appeared in the *Strand* magazine earlier: ‘The Adventure of Wisteria Lodge’, first pub.d 1908; ‘The Adventure of the Devil’s Foot’, first pub.d 1910.

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