FROM EERIE CASES TO EARLY GRAVES

5 Short-Lived
Occult Detective Series

Edited by Tim Prasil

BROM BONES BOOKS

From Eerie Cases to Early Graves: 5 Short-Lived Occult Detective Series is the sixth volume of the Phantom Traditions Library series, published by Brom Bones Books. These anthologies feature "forgotten" genres or sub-genres of popular fiction—from supernatural and fantasy tales to detective mysteries and science fiction—written primarily during the 1800s and early 1900s. Edited by Tim Prasil, each volume has a well-researched introduction, helpful and interesting footnotes, and an appendix that spotlights a work or two of relevant non-fiction from the same period. Learn more about the Phantom Traditions Library at BromBonesBooks.com.

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Introduction

Let's begin by getting a couple of things straight—specifically, the terms "short series" and "occult detective." A fiction series is comprised of two or more works of imaginative storytelling that feature a single character. Unlike an archetype, this character is clearly intended to be the *same* individual figure, each separate story being another adventure in that character's life or career. Television—drawing from radio, which drew from magazine fiction and novels—brims with series characters. However, in prose fiction, well-known series characters include Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes and Robert Ludlum's Jason Bourne; L. Frank Baum's Dorothy Gale in his books set in the Land of Oz and J.K. Rowling's title character from the *Harry Potter* saga; and Sax Rohmer's master villain Fu Manchu and Thomas Harris's criminal genius Hannibal Lecter. None of the series associated with these examples is *short,* though, because I reserve that term for series that never lasted long enough to fill even one book. The short series in the collection before you, for instance, are limited to two, three, four, or five short stories. There is certainly enough material to fill a book when such series are *put together,* but probably not enough *by themselves*. (Maybe ebooks have changed all this.)

Before speculating on why Harry Escott, Dyson, and the other characters featured in this anthology only survived long enough to form short series, a glance at the history of series narratives in general can help to introduce the term "occult detective." It's probably impossible to say definitively when series characters begin. Do we go back to, say, the chronicles written about King Arthur and Merlin? Do we go back even further in the misty realm of folklore and myth to identify series characters such as Thor, Hercules, Coyote, or Anansi? What about Jesus, a single persona who reappears in narratives told by different chroniclers, collected into a book-length anthology called the New Testament? If villains such as Fu Manchu and Hannibal Lecter are series characters, is Satan?

Luckily, to understand occult detectives, we only need to look back as far as Edgar Allan Poe's founding crime-solver, C. Auguste Dupin. Poe had at least a few precedents for his own series character, even on his native soil. James Fenimore Cooper's Natty

Bumppo had appeared in five *Leatherstocking* novels, published from 1823 through 1841. From 1838 to 1839, the Philadelphia-based *Gentleman's Magazine* ran a nine-installment series spotlighting real-life detective Eugène-François Vidocq handling cases that are almost certainly fictional. Poe wrote only three Dupin mysteries, and they appeared between 1841 and 1844.[1] Why no more? Maybe he simply lost interest in the series. It could be he stopped there because the notion of publishing a book of short stories featuring a single character had not yet solidified as a viable publishing venture.

And Poe's three Dupin tales begin to explain why Fitz-James O'Brien stopped after only *two* Harry Escott stories, one published in 1855 and the other in 1859. There simply wasn't much artistic or financial incentive to take things further. However, O'Brien—who has been described more than once as Poe's literary successor—added a fundamental twist to his detective. Dupin grapples with violations of *criminal* law, bluntly dismissing any supernatural solutions in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue."[2] In contrast, Escott wrestles with aberrations of *natural* law. He has studied the occult, and fully accepting so-called "supernatural" phenomena as being possible in the physical world, he then uses methods similar to conventional fictional detectives to resolve his two cases. The first story involves a ghost, and the second introduces an invisible yet entirely physical "Something." Both ghost and Something prove to be as *real* as Escott himself. In other words, he is an *occult* detective.

Escott is also very likely the first occult detective character to appear in a series. One might trace such figures in *individual* stories back as far as the letters of Pliny the Younger. Written in the first century, Pliny related a legend of a philosopher who courageously and cleverly figures out why a chain-dragging ghost haunts a particular house in Athens and then rights a wrong that allows that spirit to finally rest. However, if we assume that occult detectives must mirror conventional, crime-solving detectives to really count, then E.T.A. Hoffmann's Doctor K., from "Das öde Haus" (1817) stands next to the same author's more earthbound amateur detective, the title character in *Das Frälein von Scuderi* (1819). Hoffmann's doctor stands near the front of a long line of medical occult detectives and uses both standard investigative footwork and his own clairvoyant powers to save a client from the thrall of a witchy specter. Across the Atlantic a couple of decades later, an 1837 issue of the *Gentleman's Magazine* introduced a police detective known only as L— in William Evans Burton's "The Secret Cell." This detective solves a kidnapping with no whiff of the supernatural

anywhere. Three years later, though, another American journal called the *Ladies' Companion and Literary Expositor* ran Henry William Herbert's "The Haunted Homestead." Here, Dirk Ericson shrewdly triumphs in his investigation of both spectral manifestations and a related murder. Interestingly, at the formation of modern mystery fiction, occult detectives stood beside their more secular colleagues. However, as I say, these detectives exist only in single stories, making O'Brien's series character an important development in the tradition of crossing mystery and supernatural fiction.

Toward the end of the 1800s, series detectives were making their mark. In 1878, Anna Katherine Green's Ebenezer Gryce was introduced in *The Leavenworth Case*, and this police detective reappears in over a dozen subsequent works, mostly novels. In 1887, Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes debuted in *A Study in Scarlet,* and he then became an international sensation in novels, magazine short stories, and bound collections of those stories. Unfortunately, serial *occult* detectives lagged behind. In 1894, Arthur Machen's Dyson was introduced in "The Inmost Light," and the following year, he returned in two more magazine-length investigations and in Machen's weird and winding novel *The Three Impostors*. The three shorter tales—though closer in length to novellas than short stories—still might not have been long enough to collect into a single book, and chances are Machen never conceived of Dyson as following the footsteps of Holmes. The same can be said of other authors exploring occult detective series. From 1896 to 1897, the adventures of Arabella Kenealy's Lord Syfret ran in *Ludgate Magazine*. There were eleven Syfret tales, mixing supernatural mysteries with criminal and psychological ones. This inconsistency might be why only seven of Syfret's adventures appear—with unrelated tales—in Kenealy's collection *Belinda's Beaux and Other Stories* (1897). The next year saw the introduction of E. and H. Heron's Flaxman Low, whose twelve cases ran in *Pearson's Magazine* before being collected in *Ghosts: Being the Experiences of Flaxman Low* (1899).[3] In other words, not until the very end of the century did authors envision occult detectives as something that might be profitable as both a magazine series *and* a book.

Nonetheless, Dyson remains noteworthy for other reasons. First, his cases involve occult *science* rather than mysteries traditionally deemed supernatural. If you're familiar with the television series *The X-Files,* you know that Agents Mulder and Scully similarly handle cases that are rooted in fringe, if not pseudo,

science on occasion. Dyson is interesting in a second way, too. In "The Shining Pyramid," he is convinced by a "client" to come spearhead an investigation—pretty typical detective procedure—but in the other two tales, he's more of an inquisitive wanderer who stumbles upon a mystery. Harry Escott and Lord Syfret are somewhat the same in that neither is *sought* to solve mysteries, but these characters are ready and able to do so when they arise. While it's easy to explain how and why criminal detectives get involved in multiple cases, this is tougher to do with an *occult* detective.

Now, why Algernon Blackwood wrote only four Jim Shorthouse tales is more difficult to explain. As I say, by 1900—when the Shorthouse files were opened, so to speak—authors were finding a market for longer occult-detective series. This change in the wind blew open the creaky door for Blackwood's *John Silence, Physician Extraordinary* (1908) and William Hope Hodgson's *Carnacki, the Ghost Finder* (1913). Mike Ashley points out that Jim Shorthouse has the same initials as John Silence and is even described as looking something like Silence.[4] One way to read the Shorthouse series, then, is as a few pencil sketches of an occult detective, done prior to painting John Silence in oil. Certainly, the popularity and quality of the latter character's collection brought the book-length "casebook" of an occult detective to a height at which many other authors would aim.

But does this sell short the Shorthouse tales? "A Case of Eavesdropping" was published in a 1900 issue of *Pall Mall,* and I've found no publishing history for the other three stories prior to being included with the first in Blackwood's *The Empty House and Other Stories* (1906). All four pieces are spread across this collection, separated by other stories and seemingly placed in random order.[5] Certain clues, though, convince me that the stories belong in the sequence I present them here. "A Case of Eavesdropping" portrays Shorthouse at around twenty-two years old and poorly prepared to confront the supernatural. He moves into a rooming house, where strange occurrences next door rattle him deeply—and so he promptly moves away. There's not much occult detection here, but Shorthouse learns he can perceive ghosts when others cannot, a major step toward his becoming a ghost hunter. Next, in "The Strange Adventure of a Private Secretary in New York," the character has settled into a new, more stable career. He confronts a situation that, if not occult, certainly intensifies in creepiness. Building on the challenge of the previous tale, he comes prepared and carefully *controls* his fear to escape the danger. "The Empty House" then takes his mastery over fright to the next level. He must

control his own fear along with that of his companion in a haunted house that, unlike the first story, he knowingly enters. The companion is his wrinkle-cheeked "elderly spinster aunt," only one generation older than himself, so we might guess that Shorthouse has reached his forties or so. We also see that his occult detective skills have gelled when he keeps records in a notebook and instructs his aunt on proper investigative procedure. "With Intent to Steal" introduces a mature, worldly Shorthouse, fully committed to the investigation of a haunted barn. This is possibly the character's toughest case, and he's now learned the benefits of having a companion, perhaps from that experience with his aunt. When read in this order, the series shows Shorthouse's growth as an occult detective along with his evolution in managing fear, a character arc readers *don't* see in John Silence.

Why did L.T. Meade and Robert Eustace stop collaborating on their Diana Marburg stories after only three cases? Earlier, the writing duo had filled a book with the investigations of John Bell, a detective who specializes in *debunking* hauntings. It's titled *A Master of Mysteries* (1898). They had done the same with a series criminal named Madame Kalouchy, whose exploits are collected in *The Brotherhood of the Seven Kings* (1898). However, Marburg does not serve otherworldly clients or chase unhuman monsters. Instead, she uses a form of divination to solve conventional crimes. Her skill at identifying wrongdoers via palm-reading and then pursuing the evidence needed to convict them is certainly unique—but perhaps *too* unique. Asking readers to believe that a veritable parade of villains would just so happen to get their palms read by the "Oracle of Maddox Street" is asking a lot. It was probably best to keep the series a short one, but the trio of tales sparkles as illustrations of well-crafted *howdunits* (as opposed to whodunits).

Of the occult detectives gathered in this anthology, Allen Upward's team of Jack Hargreaves and Alwyne Sargent had the longest lifespan, long enough to appear in five stories. Their cases match the number appearing in the *first* edition of Blackwood's *John Silence, Physician Extraordinary*. (A sixth Silence story, "A Victim of Higher Space," was added to subsequent editions.) There were only six stories in the first edition of Hodson's *Carnacki, the Ghost Finder* (and, again, additional stories were added to later editions).[6] Who knows why the Hargreaves and Sargent tales were never similarly reprinted or why their creator never wrote a sixth? Upward had a range of ambitious writing interests, from imagist poetry to analysis of Christian myth. Perhaps, when Hargreaves ends the series by saying he has "now given up dealing in haunted

property," he was also speaking for Upward.

In making these short series more accommodating to pleasure reading in the 21st century, I have de-hyphenated words such as "tomorrow," joined once separated words such as "any one," tweaked punctuation here and there, and tinkered slightly with some of the paragraphing. I also added footnotes to clarify or enhance references that might have become obscure to many readers or, in some cases, might have been so when first published. On the other hand, I have reverently retained all of the haunted houses, rickety staircases, sinister histories, and occult mysteries screaming to be solved. I have properly preserved the various investigative methods, be they scientific or supernatural, those six detectives utilize to unveil dark truths.

It's time now. Join Harry Escott, Dyson, Jim Shorthouse, Diane Marburg, and co-investigators Jack Hargreaves and Alwyne Sargent on their respective ghostly and criminal cases.

Yes, their careers were cut short.

But detective work—especially, *occult* detective work—is a perilous business.

— Tim Prasil

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[1] Natty Bumppo appears in Cooper's *The Pioneers* (Charles Wiley, 1823), *The Last of the Mohicans* (H.C. Carey & I. Lea, 1826), *The Prairie* (Carey, Lea & Carey, 1827), *The Pathfinder* (Lea & Blanchard, 1840),and *The Deerslayer* (Lea & Blanchard, 1841). Attributed to J.M.B., *Unpublished Passages in the Life of Vidocq, the French Minister of Police* is comprised of the following independent "cases," each printed in *Gentlemen's:* "No. I: Marie Larent," 3.3 (September, 1838) pp. 174-176; "No. II: Doctor D'Arsac," 3.4 (October, 1838) pp. 246-248; "No. III: The Seducer," 3.5 (November, 1838) pp. 318-30; "No. IV: The Bill of Exchange," 3.6 (December, 1838) pp. 389-391 "No. V: The Strange Discovery," 4.1 (January, 1839) pp. 39-41; "No. VI: The Gambler's Death," 4.2 (February, 1839) pp. 87-89; "No. VII: Pierre Louvois," 4.3 (March, 1839) pp. 146-148; "No. VIII: Jean Monette," 4.4 (April, 1839) pp. 230-232; and "No. IX: The Conscript's Revenge," 4.5 (May, 1839) pp. 282-286. Poe's Dupin mysteries are: "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," *Graham's* 18.4 (April, 1841) pp. 166-179; "The Mystery of Marie Roget," *Ladies' Companion* 18.1 (November, 1842) pp. 15-20, 18.2 (December, 1842) pp. 93-99, and 18.4 (February, 1843) pp. 162-167; and "The Purloined Letter," in *The Gift for 1845* (Cary & Hart, 1844) pp. 39-41.

[2] On O'Brien being the next Poe, see Joseph J. Reilly's "A Keltic Poe." *Catholic World* (March, 1820) pp. 751-762. In Poe's mystery story, Dupin pooh-poohs supernatural solutions when he says to his companion: "It is

not too much to say that neither of us believe in præternatural events. Madame and Mademoiselle L'Espanaye were not destroyed by spirits." "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," p. 173.

[3] American readers first met Gryce in Green's *The Leavenworth Case* (G.P. Putnam, 1878). British readers first visited Baker Street in the 1887 issue of *Beeton's Christmas Annual,* where *A Study in Scarlet* was printed. It was quickly rereleased as a book (Ward, Lock, and Co., 1888). In 1891, Conan Doyle's shorter tales of the great detective began appearing in *The Strand,* and these were collected in books starting with *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (George Newnes, 1892). Kenealy's eleven Lord Syfret begin with "The Haunted Child," *Ludgate* 2.2 (June, 1896) pp. 172-80. The collection is *Belinda's Beaux and Other Stories* (Bliss, Sands & Co., 1897). E. and H. Heron's twelve Flaxman Low begin with "The Story of the Spainards, Hammersmith," *Pearson's* [UK version] 5.25 (January, 1898) pp. 60-69. The collection is *Ghosts: Being the Experiences of Flaxman Low* (C.A. Pearson, 1899).

[4] *Algernon Blackwood: An Extraordinary Life* (Carroll & Graf, 2001) p. 114.

[5] *Pall Mall* 22.92 (Dec., 1900) pp. 558-568. The 1906 edition of the collection is very difficult to find, but the order of its contents very likely matches the same publisher's 1916 edition, where the Shorthouse tales are presented in this sequence: "The Empty House," pp. 1-31; "A Case of Eavesdropping," pp. 63-90; "With Intent to Steal," pp. 119-160; and "The Strange Adventures of a Secretary in New York," pp. 239-300. *The Empty House and Other Ghost Stories* (Eveleigh Nash, 1916).

[6] Those first editions are Blackwood's *John Silence, Physician Extraordinary* (Eveleigh Nash, 1908) and Hodgson's *Carnacki, the Ghost Finder* (Eveleigh Nash, 1913). One story was added to *The Complete John Silence Stories* (Dover, 1997), and three stories to *Carnacki, the Ghost Finder* (Mycroft & Moran, 1947).