HAMMETT IN HOLLYWOOD

BY MARK DAWIDZIAK

To Raymond Chandler, he was the writer who "took murder out of the Venetian vase and dropped it into the alley." To Ross Macdonald, he was "the first American writer to use the detective story for the purposes of a major novelist to present a vision, blazing if disenchanted, of our lives."

You don't have to be Philip Marlowe or Lew Archer to figure out that mystery masters Chandler and Macdonald are talking about the spiritual leader of their hard-boiled school of detective fiction: Samuel Dashiell Hammett. In just five novels and fewer than 70 short stories, Dashiell Hammett crystallized American mystery writing with a two-fisted clarity and raw honesty that set it apart from its genteel British cousin. The tough and tenacious private detective took his rightful place next to such cerebral sleuths as Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, Chesterton's Father Brown, and Christie's Hercule Poirot.

Hammett's influence cannot be understated. Macdonald was not exaggerating when he called him "the great innovator who invented the hard-boiled detective novel." True, and Hammett also invented seminal detective characters. Sam Spade, the private eye prototype introduced in *The Maltese Falcon* (Knopf, 1930), is the literary ancestor of Chandler's Marlowe, Macdonald's Archer, and generations of gumshoes who tried to follow in his footsteps. Nick and Nora Charles, the husband-and-wife team featured in *The Thin Man* (Knopf, 1934), were endlessly imitated in movies and television series.

But those five novels not only gave us such classic mystery figures as Spade and the Continental Op, they set the stage for the film noir. Peter Wolfe, in his *Beams Falling: The Art of Dashiell Hammett* (Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1980), credits *The Glass Key* (Knopf, 1931) with having the most impact on this moody style of filmmaking: "This grimness of tone and coloring might have influenced and even helped create the genre of film noir in the 1930s and 1940s."

So mystery fans had reason to celebrate this past May 27th. The date marked the 100th anniversary of Dashiell Hammett's birth in St. Mary's County, Maryland.

Though the Hammett centennial is certain to have inspired comment and celebration in San Francisco, the city most associated with his fiction, the author's association with another California town is equally intriguing. Any study of Dashiell Hammett must take you through Hollywood, not once, not twice, but at least three times.

First, you must consider Hammett in Hollywood as a detective, a screenwriter, an organizer of the Writers Guild, a recruiter for anti-Nazi rallies, a spokesman for liberal causes, and, most tragically, a lost literary soul who swallowed the vast sums of money Tinseltown threw at him while drinking away his will to write.

Photo courtesy of the Bettman Archive

LEFT: CITY STREETS (1931) starred an unlikely candidate for a Dashiell Hammett story: Gary Cooper as a Westerner in love with a gangster's stepdaughter (played by Sylvia Sidney). RIGHT: The first MALTESE FALCON (1931) featured Ricardo Cortez as Sam Spade and Bebe Daniels as Ruth Wonderly.

Second, you must look at Hammett in Hollywood as a rich source of material for movies, radio shows, and TV programs. Although Hammett's collected works do not make much of a stack, the pile was thoroughly exploited by Hollywood. An author is fortunate if just one of his books is treated well and wisely by filmmakers. In a span of less than 10 years, three of Hammett's five novels were turned into films cherished as screen classics: THE THIN MAN (1934), director John Huston's 1941 version of THE MALTESE FALCON, and the second movie adaptation of THE GLASS KEY (1942).

Finally, we can look at Hammett in Hollywood as a literary figure so fascinating that he jumps onto the screen as a heroic character played by the likes of Jason Robards, Frederic Forrest, and James Coburn.

"I was born in St. Mary's County, Maryland, between the Potomac and Patuxent rivers on May 27, 1894," Hammett wrote in a 1924 letter published in *Black Mask* magazine. "I was a very fat baby, but grew up tall and thin."

In 1915, at the age of 21, the tall, thin Hammett joined the Pinkerton Detective Agency, first as a clerk, then as a field operative. He stayed with the agency's Baltimore office until June 1918, when he enlisted in the U. S. Army. Discharged honorably at the rank of sergeant, Hammett returned to detective work with Pinkerton's in Spokane and San Francisco.

His career as a Pinkerton op gave him the background to write realistic detective fiction, and it provided him with his first brush with Hollywood. In 1921, Hammett was one of the Pinkerton detectives helping lawyers defend silent-screen comedian Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle. After a party at a San Francisco hotel, an actress named Virginia Rappe died of peritonitis caused by a ruptured urinary bladder. The immediate assumption, cemented by a frenzy of yellow journalism, was that Arbuckle had raped the young woman, his 300-pounds-plus weight causing the rupture. Though eventually acquitted, Arbuckle had already been found guilty in the court of public opinion. The scandal ended his career.

Hammett, one of the agency's best shadow men, was assigned to follow key witnesses. Later, Hammett would remember Arbuckle emerging from an elevator in the

LEFT: WOMAN IN THE DARK (1934) teamed a post-Kong Fay Wray with a pre-Ninotchka Melvyn Douglas. RIGHT: The first film version of *The Glass Key* (released in 1935) suffered from a typically-stiff George Raft performance.

lobby of San Francisco's Plaza Hotel. They stared at each other. "Arbuckle's eyes were those of a man who expected to be regarded as a monster, but was not yet inured to it," Hammett recalled. "He glared at me . . . It was amusing. I was working for his attorneys at the time, gathering information for his defense."

The ravages of tuberculosis forced Hammett out of detective work. In the fall of 1922, he began writing for publication. A year later, the pulp magazine *Black Mask* published "Arson Plus," his first story featuring a chubby and nameless operative for the Continental Detective Agency. Certainly partly based on James Wright, a Baltimore Pinkerton detective, the Continental Op trudged his way through the pages of *Black Mask* for the rest of the Roaring Twenties. "Mainly, of course," wrote William F. Nolan in *Hammett: A Life at the Edge* (Congdon & Weed, 1983), "the Op was Hammett himself, and many of the Op's cases were thinly fictionalized versions of real cases Hammett had worked on as a Pinkerton."

Hammett had been a reader of *Black Mask*, and he was certain that he could write better detective stories than what the low-paying pulp had to offer. Crackling with authenticity, the Op stories became Hammett's hard-boiled answer to the fanciful mystery plots constructed without research, without logic, without even a basic understanding of how a detective operates.

"A fellow who takes detective stories seriously," Hammett wrote, "I am annoyed by the stupid recurrence of these same blunders in book after book. It would be silly to insist that nobody who has not been a detective should write detective stories, but it is certainly not unreasonable to ask anyone who is going to write a book of any sort to make some effort at least to learn something about his subject. Most writers do. Only detective story writers seem to be free from a sense of obligation in this direction, and, curiously, the more established and prolific detective story writers seem to be the worst offenders."

The Op was the opposite of Sherlock Holmes. "I didn't deliberately keep him nameless." Hammett explained, "but he got through 'Arson Plus' and 'Slippery Fingers' [the first Op stories] without needing a name, so I suppose I may as well let him run along that way. I'm not sure he's entitled to a name, anyhow. He's more or less of a type: the private detective who oftenest is successful: neither the derby-hatted and broad-toed blockhead of one school of fiction, nor the all-knowing, infallible genius of another. I've worked with several of him."

Through the Op, Hammett explained his approach to writing and his devotion to the *Black Mask* detective story: "I like being a detective, like the work. And liking work makes you want to do it as well as you can. Otherwise there'd be no sense to it. That's the fix I am in. I don't know anything else, don't enjoy anything else, don't want to know or enjoy anything else. You can't weigh that against any sum of money."

Through *Black Mask*, Hammett started a new line in detective fiction. "As Dostoevsky said about Gogol (I think)," Ross Macdonald said, "we all came out from under Hammett's black mask."

The Op is the hero of Hammett's first two novels, *Red Harvest* (Knopf, 1929) and *The Dain Curse* (Knopf, 1929). Even before these books were published, the mystery writer was being courted by Hollywood. In April 1928, the William Fox Studios planned to film several of Hammett's stories. He made the trip to Hollywood and suggested an original screenplay, but the plans fell through.

In 1930, there were more overtures from Hollywood. Warner Bros. shelled out $8,500 for the film rights to *The Maltese Falcon*, Hammett's third novel. And Paramount producer David O. Selznick asked his boss, B. P. Schulberg, if he could place Hammett under contract. Schulberg agreed. Paramount also purchased the film rights to *Red Harvest*. Novelist/journalist/playwright Ben Hecht was given the assignment of turning Hammett's gritty story into an action/comedy with musical interludes. The final screenplay was credited to Garrett Fort, and the film, ROADHOUSE NIGHTS (1930), bears little resemblance to *Red Harvest*. Actually, two more faithful adaptations are Japanese director Akira Kurosawa's YOJIMBO (a 1961 samurai reworking) and Italian director Sergio Leone's A FISTFUL OF DOLLARS (a 1964 spaghetti Western). Though neither film credits Hammett's story about the Op playing two rival factions against each other, Kurosawa has acknowledged the writer's influence.

THE THIN MAN (1934)

ROADHOUSE NIGHTS, however, was best remembered (if at all) as the film debut of Jimmy Durante, who performed a few numbers with comedy partners Lou Clayton and Eddie Jackson. The nominal stars were Charles Ruggles and the tragic Helen Morgan (the 20s torch singer who died 11 years later, at age 41, of cirrhosis of the liver caused by alcoholism).

But Hammett did complete his original story for Paramount, a seven-page treatment he called "After School." Max Marcin and Oliver H. P. Garrett fleshed out this concept into a screenplay, which was handed over to director Rouben Mamoulian. Titled CITY STREETS and released in 1931, the Hammett story became a stylish vehicle for Paramount star Gary Cooper, who portrayed a lanky Westerner lured into the rackets by his love for a gangster's stepdaughter (winningly played by Sylvia Sidney, a last-minute replacement for Clara Bow).

A sophisticated and innovative gangster film, CITY STREETS is nothing like the violent crime dramas made by Warner Bros. at the time. "You know, there are

Hammett goes to the dogs! Nick and Nora Charles popped up on television in the persons of Phyllis Kirk and Peter Lawford (LEFT) and Jo Ann Pflug and Craig Stevens (RIGHT). OPPOSITE PAGE: William Powell and Myrna Loy, who sparkled like fine wine in six Thin Man movies, were a hard act to follow. The original Asta (real name: Skippy) also played Mr. Smith in THE AWFUL TRUTH (1937), George in BRINGING UP BABY (1938), and the ghostly Mr. Atlas in TOPPER TAKES A TRIP (1939).

10 killings in this film," Mamoulian pointed out with pride, "and you don't actually see one of them."

CITY STREETS was not, as widely reported, Sidney's film debut, but it was her first starring role. "Sylvia is a smash hit," *Screenland* wrote in its review, "by far the finest actress of the new ingenue crop." The sentiment was echoed by most critics, including Mordaunt Hall of the *New York Times*.

Hammett left Paramount at the end of 1930. Though he worked on several films, CITY STREETS was his only screen credit at the studio. Living at the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel and the Knickerbocker, he worked on the proofs of *The Glass Key* and on getting drunk most every night. Coming off a bad drunk in November 1930, he met aspiring playwright Lillian Hellman at Musso and Frank's, the famous Hollywood Boulevard restaurant.

"We met when I was 24 and he was 36 in a restaurant in Hollywood," Hellman wrote in her introduction to *The Big Knockover*, a posthumous collection of Hammett stories. "The five-day drunk had left the wonderful face looking rumpled, and the very tall thin figure was tired and sagged. We talked of T. S. Eliot, although I no longer remember what we said, and then went and sat in his car and talked at each other and over each other until it was daylight."

The on-again-off-again Hammett/Hellman relationship lasted 30 years.

Hammett resolved to leave Hollywood in 1931, yet it was difficult to quit the party scene. A regular at the Brown Derby, he was having a swell time with such pals as humorist S. J. Perelman, Harpo Marx, and Ben Hecht's writing partner, Charles MacArthur. He finally broke away for New York in the fall.

Before he left, though, Warner Bros. released the first of its three film versions of *The Maltese Falcon*. Known as DANGEROUS FEMALE when shown on TV today, the May 1931 release stars Ricardo Cortez as Spade, Bebe Daniels as Ruth Wonderly, Dudley Digges as Gutman, Una Merkel as Effie, and Dwight Frye (the mad Renfield in the same year's DRACULA) as gunsel Wilmer Cook.

There is a tendency among film scholars to curtly dismiss the two earlier screen adaptations of *The Maltese Falcon* and skip happily on to Huston's 1941 masterpiece. The standard technique is to merely mention that there were two unsuccessful attempts to film the novel, and then drop the subject like a lead falcon. They are not, after all, the stuff that dreams are made of.

But, of the two, the Cortez/Daniels effort deserves some attention and rehabilitation. It's not a bad movie. It certainly suffers in comparison with the Huston version—most films do—yet it's interesting from more than just an archaeological standpoint. Although Cortez's Spade is a bit too suave and Roy Del Ruth's direction is a bit too slick, the 1931 MALTESE FALCON remains miles ahead of the second version, SATAN MET A LADY (1936).

Yes, Cortez lacks fire, and his performance is obvious enough to make you appreciate Humphrey Bogart's Spade all the more, but he merits close attention if for *no other reason than he is the first*. SATAN MET A LADY, however, is every bit as dismissable as film historians maintain. A star turn for Bette Davis, the movie claims to be "based on a novel by Dashiell Hammett," yet it never states which one. It's just as well.

Directed by William Dieterle, SATAN MET A LADY comes off as a misguided attempt to film *The Maltese Falcon* in the lighthearted style of Hammett's *The Thin*

Man. Warren William plays Ted Shayne, the Spade substitute, in the manner of a vaudeville magician—a little too loud, a little too smarmy. Gutman has been transformed into Mrs. Barabbas (played by Alison Skipworth), who is searching for a ram's horn crammed full of jewels.

Huston's 1941 film is so faithful to the source material that you're shocked by the few times it deviates from Hammett's book. SATAN MET A LADY reverses the equation. It strays so ludicrously far afield that you're positively shocked when someone utters an original line.

Back in New York, Hammett struggled to finish his fifth novel, *The Thin Man*. It was the only novel Hellman saw in the writing process. The title, of course, did not refer to the book's detective hero, Nick Charles. A dapper jacket photo of the extremely thin Hammett, though, planted that notion in the public mind. It was assumed that Hammett was Nick, and Nick was the Thin Man.

Drinking and wisecracking their way through the book, Nick and Nora were not the average married couple depicted in detective stories or, for that matter, in most literature of the day. They actually liked being with each other. They had fun.

"Maybe there are better writers in the world," Hammett wrote after creating Nick and Nora Charles, "but nobody ever invented a more insufferably smug pair of characters."

The evaluation is unfair and overly harsh. Okay, the marathon drinking looks bad in the 90s, and, as a novel, *The Thin Man* may not be prized by mystery fans—but the beguiling characters of Nick and Nora are. "As sleuths they were a refreshing change of pace from the hard-boiled private eye Hammett himself had introduced a decade earlier," Dennis Dooley wrote in his *Dashiell Hammett* (Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1984), a study of the author's fiction.

"It was a happy day when I was given half the manuscript to read and was told that I was Nora." Hellman recalled. "It was nice to be Nora, married to Nick Charles, maybe one of the few marriages in modern literature where the man and woman like each other and have a fine time together."

Hammett couldn't let her euphoria last. In true Nick style, he teasingly told Hellman that she was also the model for "the silly girl" and "the villainess." She didn't know if he was joking.

Hot on the heels of the novel's publication, MGM released a film version with William Powell and Myrna Loy as Nick and Nora. With Skippy, a wire-hair terrier, playing Asta, Powell and Loy sleuthed their way into America's Depression-laden hearts.

Making his film debut as gigolo Chris Jorgenson was a young Cuban-American actor named Cesar Romero.

"I showed up on the set the first day, and it was just a blur of activity," Romero recalled during a 1992 interview. "Everybody was running in different directions. There was Myrna Loy. There was William Powell. There was Maureen O'Sullivan. Nobody stopped to talk to me. Nobody said anything to me. Nobody said hi. I didn't know what to do. So I went up to Bill Powell and introduced myself. He smiled at me and said, 'We'll be doing things, won't we?' Then he was off and running.

Considered one of the rare perfectly-cast motion pictures, 1941's THE MALTESE FALCON is also one of the greatest detective movies—perhaps the greatest. LEFT: Effie Perrine and Sam Spade (played by Lee Patrick and Humphrey Bogart discuss business with client Brigid O'Shaughnessy (Mary Astor). RIGHT: Joel Cairo (Peter Lorre) temporarily has the upper hand. OPPOSITE PAGE: Humphrey Bogart as Sam Spade ponders the cause of all the trouble: the Black Bird.

"An old character actor came up to me and said, 'Don't let it get to you. It's always crazy at first.' But Bill Powell and I got to be very good friends. He was a charming man with a brilliant sense of humor.

"But things never did slow down on that set. The director was Woody Van Dyke, who shot movies so fast he was known as One-take Woody. If you can believe it, we shot that movie in only 18 days."

Speed proved to be an ally of quality for this frantic filming. The pace of shooting is reflected in the breathless pace of the film. And the screenplay by husband-and-wife team Albert Hackett and Frances Goodrich stayed very close to the spirit and structure of Hammett's novel. The formula was so successful that it spawned five sequels with Powell and Loy. AFTER THE THIN MAN (1936), also directed by Van Dyke, was based on a story by Hammett. ANOTHER THIN MAN (1939) was a Goodrich and Hackett script based on a concept cooked up by Hammett. After the third movie, Hammett had no input into the series, which breezed along with SHADOW OF THE THIN MAN (1941), THE THIN MAN GOES HOME (1944), and SONG OF THE THIN MAN (1947).

The public couldn't get enough of Mr. and Mrs. Charles. In 1941, NBC started THE THIN MAN on a long radio run with Lester Damon and Claudia Morgan as Nick and Nora. The series ran long enough for Morgan to be teamed with three more Nicks: Les Tremayne, Joseph Curtin, and David Gothard. For a while, the program was sponsored by Pabst Blue Ribbon beer, so the martini-swilling Nick and Nora were forced to quench their considerable thirsts with tall glasses of Pabst.

In 1957, THE THIN MAN began a two-season run as a half-hour TV series with Peter Lawford and Phyllis Kirk as Nick and Nora. "It wasn't as bad as it sounds," said author and mystery historian Ric Meyers. "By the time Lawford and Kirk came along, there wasn't much life left in the formula, but the show managed to be lively and entertaining. One problem was that you obviously didn't have Powell and Loy. Another was that you couldn't work up much of a mystery in 30 minutes."

In *The Peter Lawford Story* (Carroll & Graf, 1988), the bio she wrote with Ted Schwarz, Patricia Seaton Lawford claims that Lawford hated Kirk and suggested to producer Sam Marx that they kill Nora so that he could carry the series alone. Make of it what you will. The gracious Kirk always received high praise from coworkers.

Two more attempts to revive *The Thin Man* ended in disaster. NICK AND NORA, the 1975 TV movie starring Craig Stevens and Jo Ann Pflug, was as bad as it sounds. NICK & NORA, the Broadway musical version starring Barry Bostwick and Joanna Gleason, closed after only nine performances in 1991.

The box-office returns of the first Thin Man movie, though, kept alive Hollywood's appetite for Hammett material in the 30s. *Woman in the Dark*, Hammett's 1933 novella published by *Liberty* magazine, was turned into a mediocre 1934 film by RKO. Fay Wray, Ralph Bellamy, and Melvyn Douglas starred. A sturdy version of *The Glass Key* appeared in 1935. George Raft, Claire Dodd, and Edward Arnold starred. MR. DYNAMITE, a 1935 Universal film starring Edmund Lowe and Jean Dixon, was based on Hammett's story "On the Make."

It was all building to something as close to perfect as Hollywood gets—Huston's THE MALTESE FALCON. It took three times, but Hollywood finally got it right.

Making his directorial debut, Huston realized that there was an ideal screenplay lurking in Hammett's book. If he didn't try to improve on the original, the third time would be the charm.

"The previous screenplays had been products of writers who sought to put their own stamp on the story by writing new, uncalled-for scenes," Huston said.

George Raft was offered the role of Sam Spade. He turned it down because he didn't want to work with a first-time director. So Huston was able to use his first choice for the role, Humphrey Bogart. Again and again, the director struck gold in the casting department: Mary Astor as Brigid O'Shaughnessy, Peter Lorre as Joel Cairo, Sydney Greenstreet as Casper Gutman, Elisha Cook, Jr., as Wilmer Cook, Lee Patrick as ever-faithful Effie Perrine.

"We were an unusually close company," Astor said of the filming. "Players usually like to get away from each other at lunch time, but we would all go together across to the Lakeside Golf Club, where a big table was set on the patio for us."

If THE THIN MAN and THE MALTESE FALCON are the best movies made from Hammett's books, the reason may be because they are the most faithful (with allowances for a line or scene sacrificed to the Hollywood Production Code).

It's "next to impossible" for anyone who has seen Huston's FALCON not to go back to the novel "without hearing the voices of Bogart and the others delivering the lines," Dooley maintains in his book. "The astonishing thing is how vividly—and distinctively—those characters are already there in Hammett's prose."

In 1942, Paramount released a second and better version of THE GLASS KEY. Alan Ladd played Beaumont, the loyal friend of political boss Paul Madvig (Brian Donlevy). Slinky Veronica Lake and brutish William Bendix added to the atmosphere. A year later, Warner Bros. released WATCH ON THE RHINE, Hammett's adaptation of Hellman's play. The 1943 picture won an Oscar for Paul Lukas.

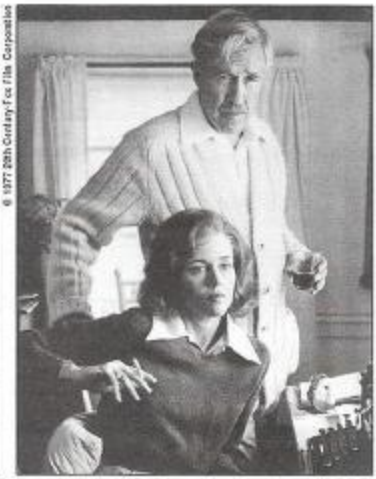
Hammett also was all over the radio in the 40s. In addition to THE THIN MAN, there were two other radio series starring Hammett detectives: THE ADVENTURES OF SAM SPADE (See *Scarlet Street* #13) with Howard Duff (1946–51) and THE FAT MAN (1946–50) with J. Scott Smart as Brad Runyon (a character with elements of both the Op and Casper Gutman). Smart unsuccessfully tried to take his character to movies. Universal's THE FAT MAN (1951), though a flop, provided early film roles for Rock Hudson and singer Julie London.

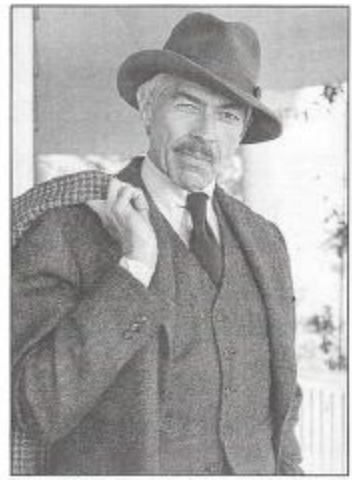
"THE FAT MAN wasn't a bad radio series," said William Link, co-creator of COLUMBO and MURDER, SHE WROTE. "It just wasn't up to SAM SPADE, which was very innovative and clever. But I still remember the opening." And he starts to hum the tuba music and rattle off the announcer's introduction: "There he goes—across the street—into the drugstore. Steps on the scale. Height: six feet. Weight: 290 pounds. Fortune: Danger! Whoooo is it? The Fat Man!"

Between 1936 and 1950, there were no less then 14 radio productions of Hammett stories on such programs as LUX RADIO THEATER, SUSPENSE, and MOLLE MYSTERY THEATRE. Still, the sad truth was that Hammett had stopped writing. He didn't need to write. The checks kept pouring in from Hollywood.

Ann Clark, an artist living in Greenwich Village when she met Hammett in 1946, paints a picture of the mystery writer in these flush times: "I met Hammett through my friend Paul Monash [the writer and later TV producer of such series as PEYTON PLACE]. Paul asked me if he could bring Hammett by for dinner at my little apartment. I was 23. Hammett was 52. He was stunning. His white hair was clipped short. His skin was clear pink. He was immaculately groomed and elegantly dressed. He was smooth. He belonged in *Vogue*. He was smooth and graceful and elegant.

"But, looking back on it, I think he'd been drinking. It was hard to tell with Hammett because he never slurred his words. Paul and Hammett got into a very nasty argument, and, when dinner was over, they went out to a bar. A couple of days later, he asked me out to





In the 70s and early 80s, Dashiell Hammetts turned up in Spades. LEFT to RIGHT: Frederic Forrest in 1983's HAMMETT, Jason Robards as Hammett (with Jane Fonda as Lillian Hellman) in 1977's JULIA, and James Coburn as the Hammettesque Hamilton Nash in 1978's THE DAIN CURSE.

dinner. He was a completely different man. He was polite and pleasant. That's how you'd know if he had been drinking. He was charming, old-fashioned, and gentlemanly when he was sober. He was nasty, insulting, and sneering when he was drinking. As his drinking increased, so did his nasty streak. Yet he was always nice to me."

There were several dinner dates. "He never mentioned Lillian Hellman," Clark said. "Hammett wasn't writing at the time. He was drinking. The last time I saw him, he was very drunk and abusive to the people we encountered. He called a few weeks later to ask me to dinner, but I said no. I never saw him again."

The drinking stopped in the late 40s. He promised a doctor he would stop. His word was important. He always tried to keep it.

The money stopped in the early 50s when the Communist witch-hunts closed in on Hammett. Refusing to name names for the United States District Court in New York City, the mystery writer was sentenced to six months in prison.

But the writing itself had stopped in the mid-30s. In a 1957 interview, Hammett said he had "stopped writing because I found I was repeating myself. It is the beginning of the end when you discover you have style." He added that "the thing that ruined me was the writing of the last third of *The Glass Key* in one sitting of 30 hours . . . Ever since then I have told myself: 'I could do it again if I had to.' And, of course, I couldn't."

The visitor to Hammett's cramped cottage noticed three dusty typewriters on a table. "I keep them to remind myself I was once a writer," Hammett explained.

Hellman believed that, when Hammett wanted to start a new literary life, he "was just too ill to care, too worn out to listen to plans or read contracts." In their biographies of Hammett, both Richard Layman and Julian Symons blame the Hollywood high life—liquor, women, parties, money, the lure of celebrity—for ruining Hammett as a writer. "The hard-boiled novelist grew soft," says Layman in *Shadow Man: The Life of Dashiell Hammett* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981).

It was a terrible yet mutually profitable bargain. Hollywood embraced Dashiell Hammett. He allowed himself to be embraced. Hollywood threw money at Dashiell Hammett. He held out his hands. Hollywood gave Dashiell Hammett the good life. He let that good life keep him from the typewriter. Hollywood grabbed everything Hammett wrote. He grabbed the money and wrote almost nothing during his Hollywood tenure.

On a small scale, it would seem that Hammett got the best of the relationship. Hollywood, after all, got very little in return for the mountains of studio money that subsidized Hammett's high style. Hammett wins. Hollywood loses.

On the scale of posterity, though, Hollywood wins. The movie industry was the beneficiary of a wealth of influential material. Hollywood was indeed richer for having mined this rich source of originality. Yes, Hollywood is artistically richer for having known Hammett the writer, but Hammett, while financially richer, is artistically poorer for having known Hollywood.

The sad fact is that the beginning of Hammett's Hollywood years marks the beginning of the end of the writer. The triumph of Dashiell Hammett's work is reflected in the best Hollywood adaptations of his books. The tragedy of Dashiell Hammett's career is embodied in the years he spent in Hollywood.

But the influence—that profound influence—lived on after his death on January 10, 1961. Critic John Crosby wrote in the *New York Herald Tribune* that television was crowded with "imitations of imitation Sam Spade." In her biography, *Dashiell Hammett: A Life* (Random House, 1983), Diane Johnson reminds us that we take the hard-boiled hero so much for granted that "we have nearly lost sight of the extent to which he was Hammett's creation."

Hammett, though, emerged again in our consciousness, this time as a hero—and Hollywood had a lot to do with the process. In 1975, Joe Gores, himself a detective-

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turned-novelist, published *Hammett*, a novel that cleverly blended fact and fiction. "I wanted to paint a fictionalized, yet honest portrait of the man who created an authentic and original voice in American literature," Gores said.

That book was followed by JULIA, the 1977 film based on one of Hellman's memoirs. Jason Robards won an Oscar playing Hammett to Jane Fonda's Hellman.

"I've played a lot of writers and been associated with several writers who have a dark side: Eugene O'Neill, Mark Twain, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and, of course, Dashiell Hammett," Robards said. "I imagine there is some kind of insight that gets built up in the subconscious from playing these types. There must be some type of residual effect. These parts tend to stir up the subconscious and you say, 'Yes, I know this man.' But I don't know if I'd actually call that preparing. I'm not a method actor. I wasn't trained that way. Whatever works, I suppose, but I don't go for that.

"So I didn't tear myself to pieces playing Dashiell Hammett. I suppose there were similarities between Hammett and me, but I don't dwell much on that kind of thing. That can put a dent in the imagination, and we are, after all, primarily in the imagination business. You can't get too far away from it being make-believe. If you don't have the words, you can't play it. In that case, the words were there, so it was a pleasure reacting to the situations Hammett was put in."

A year after JULIA, CBS aired a miniseries version of *The Dain Curse*, the only Hammett novel not made into a movie. The detective hero, however, was not the Op. He was a tall, thin man named Hamilton Nash. And James Coburn was made up to look like Dashiell Hammett.

"It was supposed to be Hammett," Coburn confirmed. "We called him Hamilton Nash in case anyone missed the point. I enjoyed making it. We shot most of it on Shelter Island in New York, which helped catch the mood of the 20s. But we were hampered by the budget. We didn't have enough money to do all the things in a realistic way. Still, I thought a lot of it worked."

The Hammett revival was in full force. In 1982, PBS aired THE CASE OF DASHIELL HAMMETT, a documentary produced by San Francisco station KOED (narrated by Paul Frees and Lyle Talbot). In 1983, director Wim Wenders' film version of Gores' *Hammett* was released. Frederic Forrest had the title role. Peter Boyle played the Op-like Jimmy Ryan.

Although the film received mostly good reviews, it was a troubled production taken out of Wenders' hands and reportedly reshot by executive producer Francis Ford Coppola.

"Sure, there were plenty of problems on the film," Boyle said, "but, personally, I liked working with Wim Wenders a lot. He's a very soulful guy, very introverted. He's a beautiful guy. The project was crazy, though, and there's a whole book in the making of that film. I don't even know the whole story, and I was there. We filmed one version; then, two weeks before completion, the plug was pulled. It was rewritten and refilmed with a whole new approach. It's one of the wackiest stories in Hollywood. Wim struggled valiantly to keep it together. I suppose it was a miracle it was any good at all.

"The idea of the book and the movie is terrific. It was a comment on the whole film noir genre. Where does the writer begin and his stories end? Hammett himself is a fascinating character. My character was partly based on the Op, who was based on people Hammett knew. So he should have been a better-developed character, which was one of the frustrations of the film. But Wim was wonderful."

George Segal got THE BLACK BIRD as Sam Spade, Jr., in the 1975 followup.

Then there were the inevitable parodies. George Segal played Sam Spade, Jr. in THE BLACK BIRD (a 1975 comedy with Elisha Cook and Lee Patrick reviving their roles from the Huston film). David Niven and Maggie Smith were suave Dick and Dora Charleston in Neil Simon's MURDER BY DEATH, a 1976 mystery satire with Peter Falk as the Spade-like Sam Diamond. In 1978, Falk returned as the Spade/Marlowe parody, Lou Peckinpaugh, in Simon's THE CHEAP DETECTIVE.

Hammett's place as a literary hero was enhanced in the 80s by the appearance in quick succession of the biographies by Laymen, Nolan, Johnson, and Symons. Hammett had become a figure as heroic as Sam Spade and Nick Charles. He had burned out his talent and desire to write in Hollywood; yet, after his death, he emerged from the ashes as a bigger-than-life character on the screen.

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