



The Maltese Falcon

The Maltese Falcon was John Huston's first directorial effort and it went on to become an early Film Noir classic. It also provided Humphrey Bogart with his first significant role as a leading man, and he is matchless as the inimitable Sam Spade.

FALCON INTRODUCED

The film begins as a mystery within a mystery. Following the credits, a legend rolls up: "In 1539 the Knights Templar of Malta paid tribute to Charles V of Spain by sending him a Golden Falcon encrusted from beak to claw with rarest jewels. But pirates seized the galley carrying this

priceless token, and the fate of the Maltese Falcon remains a mystery to this day."

Exterior shots of San Francisco flood the screen—the Golden Gate Bridge, the Ferry Building, skyscrapers (as they were in 1941). The film then cuts to an office window with the names Spade and Archer painted on the window, and then to Spade (Bogart), sitting at his desk rolling a cigarette.

A new case. Loyal secretary Effie Perine (Lee Patrick) announces a new client, Ruth Wonderly (Mary Astor), who asks Bogart to locate her missing sister, a helpless young woman who is somewhere in San Francisco with a mysterious man named Floyd Thursby. Astor says she has a date to meet Thursby that night and is hoping her wayward sister will be with him. All of this Bogart quickly explains to his partner, Miles Archer (Jerome Cowan), when he enters the office. After receiving a substantial retainer, Bogart instructs Cowan to follow Astor that night and help her free her sister from the clutches of Thursby.

PARTNER KILLED

When Cowan shows up at the end of Bush Street, he is startled to find someone holding a gun on him. The gun goes off, and Cowan is blown backward over a barrier and down a hill. After receiving a call informing him of his partner's sudden demise, Bogart hurries to Bush and Stockton streets, where a plainclothes detective Tom Polhaus (Ward Bond) shows him the murder weapon. He tells Bond that Cowan was tailing a guy named Thursby, but refuses to give him any more information. Bogart then calls Astor's hotel, but finds that she's checked out.

SPADE SUSPECTED

Returning to his modest apartment, Bogart is soon visited by Bond and his superior, Lt. Dundy (Barton MacLane), a tough, uncompromising cop. They grill Bogart about the case he and Cowan were working on, but Bogart refuses to identify his client and flares up when they suggest he killed his partner. Then he learns that Thursby (never seen on-camera) has been killed in front of his hotel. Bogart, however, has an alibi, and the cops back off.

The next morning Bogart is visited by Iva (Gladys George), Cowan's widow, who embraces him passionately, but Bogart brushes her off. Astor telephones—now calling herself Brigid O'Shaughnessy—and asks him to come to see her. When he does, Bogart assures her that he hasn't told the police that she's his client but says he knows she made up the story about her sister. She explains that Thursby was her

companion, carried a gun, and probably killed Cowan, but claims to have no idea who killed Thursby. Bogart agrees to find out who's behind the killings, but he makes sure she pays him most of the money she has on hand.

JOEL CAIRO

When he returns to his office, Bogart finds a perfumed Joel Cairo (Peter Lorre) waiting to offer him \$5,000 to find a "black figure of a bird." Then, inexplicably, Lorre pulls a gun on Bogart and insists on searching the office. But Bogart is too fast for him; he knocks the gun out of his hand and cold-cocks him.

While Lorre is out, Bogart goes through his things, inspecting his French and British passports, money, and an orchestra seat to the Geary Theatre. When Lorre comes to, he asks if Bogart has the figure, but Bogart doesn't know what he's talking about. They haggle until Lorre gets his gun back; then the detective looks on in amusement while Lorre searches the office.

Later, Bogart sees that he is being followed, loses the man, and visits Astor, telling her that Lorre has offered him \$5,000 for "the black bird." He then kisses her but demands she tell him what it's all about. Together they go to Bogart's apartment, where they are later joined by Lorre. Astor and Lorre grill each other about the black bird's whereabouts, and Lorre gets excited when Astor mentions that "the Fat Man" is in San Francisco.

The conversation is interrupted by a loud knock at the door. Bogart opens it, and detectives Bond and MacLane barge inside, where Lorre whines that Astor attacked him. After an argument, MacLane says he is going to run them all into the police station, but Bogart tells the cops they were merely pulling their legs and, rather than go to jail, Lorre and Astor back him up. The police leave empty-handed and disgusted.

TAIL LOST

Lorre goes back to his hotel, and Bogart asks, "What's this bird, this falcon, that everybody's all steamed up about?" When Astor gives him a line about following the bird, Bogart calls her a liar. A few moments later Bogart glances out the window to see the man who had earlier followed him watching his apartment.

Bogart goes to the Hotel Belvedere and asks to speak to Lorre on the desk phone. Again he spots the man who has been following him, puts down the phone, and sits next to him. But when Bogart asks him where Lorre has gone, Wilmer (Elisha Cook, Jr.) pretends ignorance and tells him to "shove off." Bogart hails the house detective (James Burke), a friend of his, who runs Cook out of the hotel.

THE FAT MAN

When Bogart returns to his office, he learns that Kasper Gutman (Sydney Greenstreet), the Fat Man, has been calling him. After sending Astor off with Patrick for safekeeping, and diverting George, who shows up vexed that Bogart hasn't called her, the detective gets a call from Greenstreet and goes to his hotel suite, where he is greeted by Cook, the Fat Man's gunslinger. Greenstreet greets Bogart warmly, gives him a drink, and invites him to sit down. Bogart pumps him about the black bird. Greenstreet begins to tell Bogart about the falcon but then becomes evasive and Bogart explodes, smashing his glass and walking out, giving Greenstreet a deadline to explain the mystery.

Later Cook, one hand stuck in his pocket where a pistol bulges, stops Bogart on the street, telling him that Greenstreet wants to see him. Before they get to Greenstreet's suite, Bogart takes Cook's guns away from him and embarrasses the gunman in front of his boss by handing the weapons over to Greenstreet. He and Bogart sit down to more drinks while Greenstreet relates the history of the Maltese Falcon from the days of the Order of the Hospital of Saint John of Jerusalem.

BIRD'S HISTORY EXPLAINED

Greenstreet explains that pirates stole the jewel-encrusted, priceless falcon when it was sent to King Charles and that, centuries later, it was discovered in Paris, where it was painted with black enamel. Then, in 1923, a Greek antique dealer found the falcon and gave it another coat of paint. But the dealer was murdered and the falcon stolen again. Greenstreet says that he traced the falcon to the home of a Russian general in Istanbul, but that when he visited the Russian, the falcon was gone.

Believing now that it is in San Francisco and may even be in Bogart's hands, Greenstreet offers him \$25,000 for the bird. He also promises to give Bogart one-fourth of the proceeds from the sale of the falcon. Bogart tries to leave, but his vision begins to blur and he passes out; he's been drugged by Greenstreet. Greenstreet leaves the room and returns wearing his jacket; Lorre appears; and, after Cook kicks Bogart in the face, the sinister trio leaves.

A PACKAGE RECEIVED

Bogart regains consciousness and calls Patrick, learning that Astor is not with her. He searches Greenstreet's apartment and finds a newspaper. Under a column on ship arrivals he sees that one item has been circled, the time of arrival of the La Paloma from Hong Kong. He is soon at the docks but finds that the ship is on fire. However, a dock officer (Emory Parnell) tells him that the crew and passengers have gotten off safely, and Bogart returns to his office, where Patrick gives him a shave.

Then a man with a black hat pulled low over his face (Walter Huston) bursts into the office, staggers toward Bogart clutching a package, drops it, murmuring, "You know...falcon," and collapses on the couch, dead. Bogart inspects the dead man's wallet and tells the panic-stricken Patrick that the dead man, who has been shot, is the captain of the La Paloma. After inspecting the package, he grins and says, "We've got it, angel. We've got it."

The phone rings, and Patrick hears Astor give the address of 26 Ancho Street and then scream before the line goes dead. Bogart directs Patrick to call the police after he's gone and tell them how the captain died but not to mention the package. He takes the package to a baggage room and checks it, then mails the claim check to himself at a postal box.

BIRD A FAKE

Although a taxi ride to 26 Ancho Street reveals the address to be an empty lot, Bogart locates Astor at her old apartment. When he takes her to his apartment, he finds Greenstreet, Lorre, and Cook waiting there. Greenstreet gives Bogart \$10,000 and asks him to get the falcon. Bogart calls Patrick and tells her to pick up the package and bring it to him. Bogart inspects the money Greenstreet has given him, discovers a \$1,000 bill is missing, and accuses Greenstreet of palming it; the Fat Man jokingly admits as much and turns over the bill. Then Patrick appears and turns over the package to Bogart. Astor, Greenstreet, and Lorre jump up, grab the package, and tear away its wrappings, revealing a black statuette of a falcon.

As Greenstreet inspects the bird, turning it around and around, he grows frantic, produces a penknife, and begins to cut away the black enamel. He cuts faster and faster, carving in a frenzy but finds no jewels encrusted in the falcon's body, finally shouting, "It's a fake...it's a phony...it's lead...it's lead...it's a fake." Bogart confronts Astor, but she denies substituting the bird, insisting that this is the statuette she got from the Russian general. Greenstreet is close to nervous collapse, while Lorre explodes at him: "You, it's you who bungled it, you and your stupid attempt to buy it, you, you imbecile, you bloated idiot, you stupid fathead, you."

SCORES SETTLED

Lorre breaks down and weeps while Greenstreet tries to regain control. Greenstreet then decides to go on the quest again for the elusive falcon, and Lorre happily agrees to join him. Holding a gun on Bogart, the Fat Man demands he return the money; Bogart gives it back to Greenstreet but keeps \$1,000 for his "time and expenses." Greenstreet shrugs and waddles out with Lorre trailing him.

When they are gone, Bogart calls the police and tells them to pick up Greenstreet, Lorre, and Cook. He next turns his attention to the frightened Astor, telling her he knows she killed his partner to implicate her unwanted lover and accomplice, Thursby, and then killed Thursby. "Well," he adds, "if you get a good break, you'll be out of Tahatchapi in 20 years and you can come back to me then. I hope they don't hang you, precious, by that sweet neck."

Astor doesn't believe Bogart is going to turn her over to the police. "Don't be silly," he says, "you're taking the fall." She appeals to him and the love she knows he has for her. Bogart doesn't argue. He sits down glumly, staring downward, saying: "Listen. This won't do any good. You'll never understand me, but I'll try once and then give it up. When a man's partner's killed he's supposed to do something about it. It doesn't make any difference what you thought of him. He was your partner and you're supposed to do something about it."

THE STUFF OF DREAMS

Bogart lets in the police and turns over the falcon, the money Greenstreet left as a bribe for his silence, and Astor, explaining that she killed Cowan. Resigned, Astor goes out with MacLane. Bond picks up the statuette, saying, "It's heavy. What is it?" Taking the falcon, Bogart replies, "The...er...stuff that dreams are made of." Puzzled, Bond can only grunt "huh?"

Bogart steps into the hallway to see Astor tearfully enter the elevator, the gate, looking like the bars on a cell, closing in front of her as she stares blankly ahead. The outer glass door of the elevator then closes, obstructing Bogart's vision, and the light behind the glass begins to descend as Bogart, still carrying the falcon, walks down the stairs and out of sight.

T H E P R O D U C T I O N

CRITIQUE

Jack Warner, head of Warner Bros., received a scene-for-scene breakdown of *The Maltese Falcon* from John Huston (then a contract writer assigned to Warner's biographical film department) and, thinking it to be the final draft of the screenplay, approved it instantly. (Warner was never one to read anything but a contract very closely.) Believing that the flavor of Dashiell Hammett's novel had been retained completely by Huston, Warner sanctioned the production but warned the novice director that his schedule was limited to six weeks and that if he went over his \$300,000 budget he would be looking for a job.

CAREFULLY PLANNED

Huston took no chances, tailoring the screenplay with instructions to himself for a shot-for-shot setup, doing his own sketches for every scene, so that he would not take up time instructing the crew members and cast with last-minute, hurried directions. (This method is exactly how Alfred Hitchcock shot every one of his movies, so that he was always on schedule and never went over budget.) Huston called rehearsals and let his actors work out their scenes while he stood by, but he gave them no instructions; all they had to do was follow his minutely detailed script.

Not a line of dialog from Huston's original screenplay was dropped, and he cut only one brief scene when he realized that Bogart could achieve the same effect by making a quick phone call. Except for some exterior night shots, Huston shot the entire film in sequence, which greatly helped his actors. The shooting went so smoothly that there was actually extra time for the cast to enjoy themselves, and Huston led Bogart, Astor, Bond, Lorre, and others to the Lakeside Golf Club near the Warner lot to frolic in the pool, dine, drink, and talk until midnight about anything other than the black bird.

BRILLIANTLY PHOTOGRAPHED

Huston was not completely hamstrung by his detailed script, however, and filmed some scenes spontaneously. In one of them he had specified many cutaways but then allowed his brilliant cameraman Arthur Edeson to shoot the whole scene fluidly with some 26 dolly moves. With its low-key lighting and inventive and arresting angles, the photography is one of the film's great assets. Huston used ceilings to create images of confinement, and the sets, except for the hotel and the dock scene, are almost claustrophobic, suggesting that Spade's investigation is extremely limited, that he has just so much space in which to search for that elusive black bird.

Moreover, unusual camera angles are cleverly utilized to emphasize the nature of the characters. Some of the most striking technical scenes involve the Fat Man, Greenstreet, especially the scene where he slowly explains the history of the falcon to Bogart, purposely drawing out his story so that the knockout drops he has slipped into Bogart's drink will take effect. As the seated Greenstreet growls out the black tale of the bird, the camera, from floor angle, shoots up at him, so that his gigantic girth fills the entire screen, dominating the scene so completely that it invests the leader of the conniving, greedy gang with evil authority. His expanse of belly, crossed by a gold watch chain, is marvelous to behold, symbolically enforcing the enormity of the tale of dark conspiracy surrounding the falcon.

Very nearly as visually evocative are the scenes involving Astor, almost all of which suggest prison: In one scene she wears striped pajamas, the furniture in the room is striped, and the slivers of light coming through the Venetian blinds suggest cell bars, as do the bars on the elevator cage at the end of the film when she takes her slow ride downward with the police, apparently on her way to execution. Huston and Edeson coddled each scene to make sure the images, action, and dialog blended effectively, sometimes shooting closeups of characters with other cast members acting with them off camera.

CAREFULLY PACED

The brilliant director was no less careful with the film's pacing, which is leisurely to begin with but picks up speed as the involved plot unravels. Further increasing the film's tempo is Huston's incisive editing. Watching the film with composer Adolph Deutsch, Huston indicated just where and when music would help certain scenes.

BACKGROUND

Based on Hammett novel. This third film version of Hammett's novel (the first, released in 1931, starred Ricardo Cortez; while the second, titled *Satan Met a Lady*, hit the screens in 1936 with Bette Davis) was not seen by author Hammett until some six months after its release, when he reported that it was boring, though allegedly he was half-drunk at the time. He saw it again sober some years later and told friends that it not only pleased him but that it was probably the best version of the work.

Of course, Sam Spade-the wry, witty antihero who drinks his whiskey "neat"-is based upon Hammett himself, who for many years was employed as a private detective for the Pinkerton Detective Agency in San Francisco. Hammett not only invested Spade with characteristics drawn from his own personality, but also gave him his own first name, Samuel (which Hammett discarded when he launched his career as a writer).

Hammett also drew upon his detective years in creating many of the characters for *The Maltese Falcon*, which he pieced together from two of his stories that were published in *Black Mask* magazine in 1925, "The Whosis Kid," and "The Gutting of Couffignal." The novel itself was serialized in five parts in *Black Mask* in 1930 before being published as a whole by Alfred A. Knopf.

SELECTING THE RIGHT SPADE

Huston was equally judicious in selecting his cast, yet, surprisingly, Bogart was not the first choice to play the legendary Sam Spade. Producer Hal Wallis initially offered the role to George Raft, who turned it down because he didn't want to work with an inexperienced director. The 42-year-old Bogart was delighted with Sam Spade, a complex character who is both honorable and greedy, world-weary yet ready for new adventure, and still capable of deep love. Bogart accepted the role with alacrity, and Huston was forever grateful. It was this film that cemented their lifelong friendship and set the stage for their extraordinary collaboration on such films as *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948); *Key Largo* (1948); and *The African Queen* (1951). Ironically, Raft had also turned down the role in *High Sierra* (1941) that made Bogart a star.

Raft would go on turning down roles that Bogart would play and make famous, including the cynical and unforgettable hero of *Casablanca* (1942). Interestingly, it was *The Maltese Falcon* that Ingrid Bergman watched over and over again while preparing to make *Casablanca*, so she would know how to interact with Bogart.

FINDING THE FAT MAN

Based upon real-life rascal A. Maundy Gregory (an overweight British detective-turned-entrepreneur who was involved in many sophisticated intrigues, including a spectacular search for a long-lost treasure not unlike the jewel-encrusted *Maltese Falcon*), the sinister Fat Man Gutman was not so easily cast. Producer Wallis solved that dilemma by suggesting that Huston test Greenstreet, a character actor who had had a long career in the legitimate theater but had never appeared in a film.

Greenstreet, who was then 61 years old and weighed between 280 and 350 pounds, is simply wonderful, waddling about with his penguinlike torso jutting forth, his soft, round features belying his sinister character. Moreover, his unique, hiccupy laugh, bulbous eyes, and distinctive bass were perfect for the role. Indeed, so well did Greenstreet enact Kasper Gutman that he would be forever typecast as an overweight villain, though one of the first rank, in such films as *The Verdict* (1946); *Three Strangers* (1946); and *The Mask of Dimitrios* (1944).

The many “by gads” Greenstreet utters in the movie were purposely inserted by the censors, replacing the words “by God.” In addition to these changes to the original script, Huston was also warned not to show excessive drinking by the characters. The director bristled at this instruction, averring that Spade was a man who put away a half bottle of hard liquor a day and that to show him abstaining would be to falsify his character.

DOWNPLAYING CAIRO

Based on a criminal Hammett captured for Pinkerton’s in 1920 in Washington, Joel Cairo is blatantly homosexual in the novel, but to avoid problems with the censors, Warner Bros. downplayed this element of the character. Still, Lorre’s portrayal of Cairo is decidedly effeminate, as he fusses about his clothes (he becomes hysterical when blood from a scratch ruins his shirt), while his calling cards and handkerchiefs have the overpowering smell of gardenias, which Spade makes a point of noting to Effie before she shows him into his office. (In the novel, by contrast, Effie simply refers to Cairo as queer.)

The 1931 version of the film also hints at Cairo’s homosexuality, with Otto Matieson, who performs the role, introduced to Ricardo Cortez’s Spade by his secretary, Una Merkel, as if he were a lovely lady. But in the second film version, *Satan Met a Lady*, Cairo’s sexual orientation is no longer significant, as he is transformed into an eccentric British killer played by Arthur Treacher. Lorre, of course, is superb as Cairo and was the only person Huston considered for the part.

CASTING BRIGID AND WILMER

Matching the sterling performances of other cast members was Astor as the deceitful Brigid, a role originally intended for Geraldine Fitzgerald, who decided to appear in a play instead.

The role of Wilmer, who (like Gutman) has also been seen by some as homosexual, was also cast immediately, with the strange but fascinating character actor Elisha Cook, Jr., Huston’s first choice. According to Huston, Cook “lived alone up in the High Sierra, tied flies, and caught golden trout between films. When he was wanted in Hollywood, they sent word up to his mountain cabin by courier. He would come down, do a picture, and then withdraw again to his retreat.”

PROVIDING GOOD LUCK

The unbilled appearance of the great character actor Walter Huston, disguised in his small cameo role as the merchant marine captain who delivers the falcon to Spade’s office, was done as a good luck gesture for his son. Significantly, the elder Huston had to promise Jack Warner that he would not demand a dime for his little role before he was allowed to stagger into Spade’s office.