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THE DOMESTICITY OF DETECTIVES

I HAVE just been entertaining myself with the last sensational story by the author of *The Yellow Room*, which was probably the best detective tale of our time, except Mr. Bentley's admirable novel, *Trent's Last Case*. The name of the author of *The Yellow Room* is Gaston Leroux; I have sometimes wondered whether it is the alternative nom de plume of the writer called Maurice Leblanc who gives us the stories about Arsène Lupin, the gentleman burglar. There would be something very symmetrical in the inversion by which the red gentleman always writes about a detective, and the white gentleman always writes about a criminal. But I have no serious reason to suppose the red and white combination to be anything but a coincidence; and the tales are of two rather different types. Those of Gaston the Red are more strictly of the type of the mystery story, in the sense of resolving a single and central mystery. Those of Maurice the White are more properly adventure stories, in the sense of resolving a rapid succession of immediate difficulties. This is inherent in the position of the hero; the detective is always outside the event, while the criminal is inside the event. Some would express it by saying that the policeman is always outside the house when the burglar is inside the house. But there is one very French quality which both these French writers share, even when their writing is very far from their best. It is a spirit of definition which is itself not easy to define. To say it is scientific will only suggest that it is slow. It is much truer to say it is military; that is, it is something that has to be both scientific and swift. It can be seen in much greater Frenchmen, as compared with men still greater who were not Frenchmen. Jules Verne and H. G. Wells, for instance, both wrote fairy-tales of science; Mr. Wells has much the larger mind and interest in life; but he often lacks one power which Jules Verne possesses supremely—the power of going to the point. Verne is very French in his rigid relevancy; Wells is very English in his rich irrelevance. He is there as English as Dickens, the best passages in whose stories are the stoppages, and even stopgaps. In a truly French tale there are no stoppages; every word, however dull, is deliberate, or directed towards the end. The comparison could be carried further back among the classics. The romance of Dumas may seem a mere riot of swords and feathers; it is often spoken of as a mere revel in adventure and variety; the madness of romance. But it is not a mere riot,

but rather a military revolution, and even a disciplined revolution; certainly, a very French revolution. It is not a mere mad revel, but a very gorgeous and elaborate banquet planned by a great cook; a very French cook. Scott was a greater man than Dumas; and a greater novelist on the note of the serious humours of humanity. But he was not so great a storyteller, because he had less of something that can only be called the strategy of the soldier. The Three Musketeers advance like an army; with their three servants and their one ally, they march, manoeuvre, deploy, wheeling into positions and almost making patterns. They are always present wherever their author wants them; which is by no means true of all the characters of all the novelists. Dumas, and not Scott, ought to have written the life of Napoleon; Dumas was much nearer to Napoleon, in the fact that there was most emphatically method in his madness. Nobody ever called Scott mad; and certainly nobody could ever call him methodical. He was as incapable of the conspiracy which carried off General Monk in a box as Dumas was incapable of the curse of Meg Merrilies or the benediction of Di Vernon. But there is eternally present in the Frenchman something which may truly be called presence of mind. There to be an artist is not to be absent-minded, however harmless or happy the holidays of the mind may be. Art is to have the intellect and all its instruments on the spot and ready to go to the point; as when, but a little while ago, a great artist stood by the banks of the Marne and saved the world with one gesture of living logic—the sword-thrust of the Latin.

But though the strategy of the French story is allied to the strategy by which the French army has always affected the larger matters of mankind, I doubt whether such a story ought to deal with such matters. I mentioned at the beginning M. Gaston Leroux's last mystery story because I think I know why it is not anything like so good as his first mystery story. The truth is that there are two types of sensational romance between which our wilder sensationalists seem to waver; and I think they are generally at their strongest in dealing with the first type, and at their weakest in dealing with the second. For the sake of a convenient symbol, I may call them respectively the romance of the Yellow Room and the romance of the Yellow Peril. We might say that the great detective story deals with small things; while the small or silly detective story generally deals with great things. It deals with diabolical diplomatists darting about between Vienna and Paris and Petrograd; with vast cosmopolitan conspiracies ramifying through all the cellars of Europe; or worse and most widespread of all, occult and mystical secret societies from China or Tibet; the vast and vague Oriental terrorism

which I call for convenience here the Yellow Peril.

On the other hand, the good detective story is in its nature a good domestic story. It is steeped in the sentiment that an Englishman's house is his castle; even if, like other castles, it is the scene of a few quiet tortures or assassinations. In other words, it is concerned with an enclosure, a plan or problem set within certain defined limits. And that is where the French writer's first story was a model for all such writers; and where it ought to have been, but has not been a model for himself. The point about the Yellow Room is that it was a room; that is, it was a box, like the box in which Dumas kidnapped General Monk. The writer dealt with the quadrangle or square which Mrs. Battle loved; the very plan of the problem looked like a problem in the Fourth Book of Euclid. He posted four men on four sides of a space and a murder was done in the middle of them; to all appearance, in spite of them; in reality, by one of them. Now a sensational novelist of the more cosmopolitan sort could, of course, have filled the story with a swarm of Chinese magicians who had the power of walking through brick walls, or of Indian mesmerists who could murder a man merely by meditating about him on the peaks of the Himalayas; or merely by so human and humdrum a trifle as a secret society of German spies which had made a labyrinth of secret tunnels under all the private houses in the world. These romantic possibilities are infinite; and because they are infinite they are really unromantic. The real romance of detection works inwards towards the household gods, even if they are household devils. One of the best of the Sherlock Holmes stories turns entirely on a trivial point of housekeeping: the provision of curry for the domestic dinner. Curry is, I believe, connected with the East; and could have been made the excuse for infinities of sham occultism and Oriental torments. The author could have brought in a million yellow cooks to poison a yellow condiment. But the author knew his business much better; and did not let what is called infinity, and should rather be called anarchy, invade the quiet seclusion of the British criminal's home. He did not let the logic of the Yellow Room be destroyed by the philosophy of the Yellow Peril. That is why I lament the fact that the ingenious French architect of the original Yellow Room seems to have made an outward step in this direction; not, indeed, towards the plains of Tibet, but towards the hardly less barbaric plains of Germany. His last book, *Rouletabille Chez Krupp*, concerns the manufacture of a torpedo big enough to smash a town; and an object of that size may be a sensation, but will not long be a secret. It may be inevitable that a French patriot should now write even his detective stories about the war; but I do

not think this method will ever make the French mystery story what the war itself has been—a French masterpiece; Gesta Dei per Francos.

[1920]

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