

A Sport of Noble Minds

BOTH the detective story proper and the pure tale of horror are very ancient in origin. All native folk-lore has its ghost tales, while detective stories are to be found in the Jewish Apocrypha, Herodotus, and the *Æneid*. But, whereas the tale of horror has flourished in practically every age and country, the detective story has had a spasmodic history, appearing here and there in faint, tentative sketches and episodes, until it suddenly burst into magnificent flower in the middle of the last century.

Between 1840 and 1845 the wayward genius of Edgar Allan Poe (himself a past master of the horrible) produced five tales, in which the general principles of the detective story were laid down for ever. In "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and, with a certain repulsive facetiousness, in "Thou Art the Man" he achieved the fusion of the two distinct *genres* and created what we may call the story of mystery, as distinct from pure detection on the one hand and pure horror on the other. In this fused *genre*, the reader's blood is first curdled by some horrible and apparently inexplicable murder or portent; the machinery of detection is then brought in to solve the mystery and punish the murderer. Since Poe's time all three branches—detection, mystery, and horror—have flourished. We have such pleasant little puzzles as Conan Doyle's "Case of Identity," in which there is nothing to shock or horrify; we have mere fantasies of blood and terror—human, as in Conan Doyle's "The Case of Lady Sannox," or supernatural, as in Marion Crawford's "The Upper Berth"; most satisfactory of all, perhaps, we have such fusions as "The Speckled Band," or "The Hammer of God," in which the ghostly terror is invoked only to be dispelled.

It is rather puzzling that the detective story should have had to wait so long to find a serious exponent. Having started so well, why did it not develop earlier?

It may be, as Mr. E. M. Wrong has suggested in a brilliant little study, that throughout this early period "a faulty law of evidence was to blame, for detectives cannot flourish until the public has an idea of what constitutes proof, and while a common criminal procedure is arrest, torture, confession, and death." One may go further, and say that, though crime stories might, and did, flourish, the detective story proper could not do so until public sympathy had veered round to the side of law and order. It will be noticed that, on the whole, the tendency in early crime literature is to admire the cunning and astuteness of the criminal. This must be so while the law is arbitrary, oppressive, and brutally administered.

We may note that, even today, the full blossoming of the detective stories is found among the Anglo-Saxon races. It is notorious that an English crowd tends to side with the policeman in a row. The British legal code, with its tradition of "sportsmanship" and "fair play for the criminal," is particularly favorable to the production of detective fiction, allowing, as it does, sufficient rope to the quarry to provide a ding-dong chase, rich in up-and-down incident. In France, also, though the street policeman is less honored than in England, the detective force is admirably organized and greatly looked up to. France has a good output of detective stories, though considerably smaller than that of the English-speaking races. In the Southern States of Europe the law is less loved and the detective story less frequent. We may not unreasonably trace a connection here.

Before tracing further the history of detective fiction, let us look a little more closely at those five tales of Poe's, in which so much of the future development is anticipated. Probably the first thing that strikes us is that Poe has struck out at a blow the formal outline on which a large section of detective fiction has been built up. In the three Dupin stories we have the formula of the eccentric and brilliant private detective whose doings are chronicled by an admiring and thick-headed friend. From Dupin and his unnamed chronicler springs a long and distinguished line: Sherlock Holmes and his Watson; Martin Hewitt and his Brett; Raffles and his Bunny (on the criminal side of the business, but of the same

breed); Thorndyke and his various Jardines, Anstey, and Jervises; Hanaud and his Mr. Ricardo; Poirot and his Captain Hastings; Philo Vance and his Van Dine. It is not surprising that this formula should have been used so largely, for it is obviously a very convenient one for the writer. For one thing, the admiring satellite may utter expressions of eulogy which would be unbecoming in the mouth of the author, gaping at his own colossal intellect. Again, the reader, even if he is not, in R. L. Stevenson's phrase, "always a man of such vastly greater ingenuity than the writer," is usually a little more ingenious than Watson. He sees a little further through the brick wall; he pierces, to some extent, the cloud of mystification with which the detective envelops himself. "Aha!" he says to himself, "the average reader is supposed to see no further than Watson. But the author has not reckoned with me. I am one too many for him." He is deluded. It is all a device of the writer's for flattering him and putting him on good terms with himself. For though the reader likes to be mystified, he also likes to say, "I told you so," and "I spotted that." And this leads us to the third great advantage of the Holmes-Watson convention: by describing the clues as presented to the dim eyes and bemused mind of Watson, the author is enabled to preserve a spurious appearance of frankness, while keeping to himself the special knowledge on which the interpretation of those clues depends. This is a question of paramount importance, involving the whole artistic ethic of the detective story.

As regards plot also, Poe laid down a number of sound keels for the use of later adventurers. Putting aside his instructive excursions into the psychology of detection—instructive, because we can trace their influence in so many of Poe's successors down to the present day—putting these aside, and discounting that atmosphere of creepiness which Poe so successfully diffused about nearly all he wrote, we shall probably find that to us, sophisticated and trained on an intensive study of detective fiction, his plots are thin to transparency. But in Poe's day they represented a new technique. As a matter of fact, it is doubtful whether there are more than half a dozen deceptions in the mystery-monger's bag of tricks, and we shall find that Poe has got most of them, at any rate in embryo.

Now, with "The Gold Bug" at the one extreme and "Marie Rogêt" at the other, and the other three stories occupying intermediate places, Poe stands at the parting of the ways for detective fiction. From him go the two great lines of development—the Romantic and the Classic, or, to use terms less abraded by ill-usage, the purely Sensational and the purely Intellectual. In the former, thrill is piled on thrill and mystification on mystification; the reader is led on from bewilderment to bewilderment, till everything is explained in a lump in the last chapter. This school is strong in dramatic incident and atmosphere; its weakness is a tendency to confusion and a dropping of links—its explanations do not always explain; it is never dull, but it is sometimes nonsense. In the other—the purely intellectual type—the action mostly takes place in the first chapter or so; the detective then follows up quietly from clue to clue till the problem is solved, the reader accompanying the great man in his search and being allowed to try his own teeth on the material provided. The strength of this school is its analytical ingenuity; its weakness is its liability to dulness and pomposity, its mouthing over the infinitely little, and its lack of movement and emotion.

In 1887 "A Study in Scarlet" was flung like a bombshell into the field of detective fiction, to be followed within a few short and brilliant years by the marvellous series of Sherlock Holmes short stories. The effect was electric. Conan Doyle took up the Poe formula and galvanized it into life and popularity. He cut out the elaborate psychological introductions, or restated them in crisp dialogue. He brought into prominence what Poe had only lightly touched upon—the deduction of staggering conclusions from trifling indications in the Dumas-Cooper-Gaboriau manner. He was sparkling, surprising, and short. It was the triumph of the epigram.

So, with Sherlock Holmes, the ball—the original

nucleus deposited by Edgar Allan Poe nearly forty years earlier—was at last set rolling. As it went, it swelled into a vast mass—it set off others—it became a spate—a torrent—an avalanche of mystery fiction. It is impossible to keep track of all the detective stories produced today. Book upon book, magazine upon magazine pour out from the press crammed with murders, thefts, arsons, frauds, conspiracies, problems, puzzles, mysteries, thrills, maniacs, crooks, poisoners, forgers, garroters, police, spies, secret-service men, detectives, until it seems that half the world must be engaged in setting riddles for the other half to solve.

The uncritical are still catered for by the "thriller," in which nothing is explained, but connoisseurs have come, more and more, to call for a story which puts them on an equal footing with the detective himself, as regards all clues and discoveries.

Seeing that the demand for equal opportunities is coupled today with an insistence on strict technical accuracy in the smallest details of the story, it is obvious that the job of writing detective stories is by no means growing easier. The reader must be given every clue—but he must not be told, surely, all the detective's deductions, lest he should see the solution too far ahead. Worse still, supposing, even without the detective's help, he interprets all the clues accurately on his own account, what becomes of the surprise? How can we at the same time show the reader everything and yet legitimately obfuscate him as to its meaning?

Various devices are used to get over the difficulty. Frequently, the detective, while apparently displaying his clues openly, will keep up his sleeve some bit of special knowledge which the reader does not possess. Another method of misleading, is to tell the reader what the detective has observed and deduced—but to make the observations and deductions turn out to be incorrect, thus leading up to a carefully manufactured surprise packet in the last chapter.

Some writers, like Mrs. Agatha Christie, still cling to the Watson formula. The story is told through the mouth, or at least, through the eyes, of a Watson. Others, like A. A. Milne in his "Red House Mystery," adopt a mixed method. Mr. Milne begins by telling his tale from a position of a detached spectator; later on, we find that he has shifted round, and is telling it through the personality of Bill Beverley (a simple-minded but not unintelligent Watson); at another moment we find ourselves actually looking through the eyes of Anthony Gillingham, the detective himself.

In its severest form, the mystery story is a pure analytical exercise, and, as such, may be a highly finished work of art, within its highly artificial limits. There is one respect, at least, in which the detective story has an advantage over every other kind of novel. It possesses an Aristotelian perfection of beginning, middle, and end. A definite and single problem is set, worked out, and solved; its conclusion is not arbitrarily conditioned by marriage or death. It has the rounded (though limited) perfection of a triole. The farther it escapes from pure analysis, the more difficulty it has in achieving artistic unity.

It does not, and by hypothesis, never can, attain the loftiest level of literary achievement. Though it deals with the most desperate effects of rage, jealousy, and revenge, it rarely touches the heights and depths of human passion. It presents us only with the *fait accompli*, and looks upon death and mutilation with a dispassionate eye. It does not show us the inner workings of the murderer's mind—it must not; for the identity of the murderer is hidden until the end of the book. The victim is shown rather as a subject for the dissecting table than as husband and father. A too violent emotion flung into the glittering mechanism of the detective story jars the movement by disturbing its delicate balance. The most successful writers are those who contrive to keep the story running from beginning to end upon the same emotional level, and it is better to err in the direction of too little feeling than too much. Here, the writer whose detective is a member of the official force has an advantage; from him a detached attitude is correct; he can suitably retain the impersonal attitude of the surgeon. The sprightly amateur must not be sprightly all the time, lest at some point we should be reminded that this is, after

by Dorothy L. Sayers



all, a question of somebody's being foully murdered, and that flippancy is indecent. To make the transition from the detached to the human point of view in one of the writer's hardest tasks. It is especially hard when the murderer has been made human and sympathetic. A real person has then to be brought to the gallows, and this must not be done too lightly. Mr. G. K. Chesterton deals with the problem by merely refusing to face it. His Father Brown (who looks at sin and crime from the religious point of view) retires from the problem before the arrest is reached. He is satisfied with a confession. The sordid details take place "off." Other authors permit sympathetic villains to commit suicide. Monsters of villainy can, of course, be brought to a bad end without compunction; but modern taste rejects monsters, therefore, the modern detective story is compelled to achieve a higher level of writing, and a more competent delineation of character. As the villain is allowed more good streaks in his composition, so the detective must achieve a tenderer human feeling beneath his frivolity or machine-like efficiency.

One fettering convention from which detective fiction is only very slowly freeing itself, is that of the "love interest." Publishers and editors still labor under the delusion that all stories must have a nice young man and woman who have to be united in the last chapter. As a result, some of the finest detective stories are marred by a conventional love story, irrelevant to the action and perfunctorily worked in.

The instances in which the love story is an integral part of the plot are extremely rare. One very beautiful example occurs in "The Moonstone." Here the entire plot hangs on the love of two women for Franklin Blake. E. C. Bentley in "Trent's Last Case," has dealt finely with the still harder problem of the detective in love. Trent's love for Mrs. Manderson is a legitimate part of the plot; while it does not prevent him from drawing the proper conclusion from the evidence before him, it does prevent him from acting upon his conclusions, and so prepares the way for the real explanation. Incidentally, the love story is handled artistically and with persuasive emotion.

In the "House of the Arrow," and, still more strikingly, in "No Other Tiger," A. E. W. Mason has written stories of strong detective interest which at the same time have the convincing psychological structure of the novel of character. The characters are presented as a novelist presents them—romantically, it is true, but without that stark insistence on classifying and explaining which turns the persons of the ordinary detective story into a collection of museum exhibits.

Apart from such unusual instances as these, the less love in a detective story, the better. "*L'amour au théâtre*," says Racine, "*ne peut pas être en seconde place*," and this holds good of detective fiction. A casual and perfunctory love story is worse than no love story at all and, since the mystery must, by hypothesis, take the first place, the love is better left out.

Lynn Brock's "The Deductions of Colonel Gore" affords a curious illustration of this truth. Gore sets out, animated by an unselfish devotion to a woman, to recover some compromising letters for her, and, in so doing, becomes involved in unravelling an intricate murder plot. As the story goes on, the references to the beloved woman become chillier and more perfunctory; and not only does the author seem to have lost interest, but so does Colonel Gore. At length the author notices this, and explains it in a paragraph:

There were moments when Gore accused himself—or, rather, felt that he ought to accuse himself—of an undue coldbloodedness in these speculations of his. The business was a horrible business. One ought to have been decently shocked by it. One ought to have been horrified by the thought that three old friends were involved in such a business.

But the truth was—and his apologies to himself for that truth became feebler and feebler—that the thing had now so caught hold of him that he had come to regard the actors in it as merely pieces of a puzzle baffling and engrossing to the verge of monomania.

There is the whole difficulty about allowing real

human beings into a detective story. At some point or other, either their emotions make hay of the detective interest, or the detective interest gets hold of them and makes their emotions look like pasteboard. It is, of course, a fact that we all adopt a detached attitude towards "a good murder" in the newspaper. Like Betteredge in "The Moonstone," we get "detective fever," and forget the victim in the fun of tracking the criminal. For this reason, it is better not to pitch the emotional key too high at the start; the inevitable drop is thus made less jarring.

Just at present, therefore, the fashion in detective fiction is to have characters credible and lively; not conventional, but, on the other hand, not too profoundly studied—people who live more or less on the *Punch* level of emotion. A little more psychological complexity is allowed than formerly; the villain may not be a villain from every point of view; the heroine, if there is one, is not necessarily pure; the falsely accused innocent need not be a sympathetic character. The automata—embodied vices and virtues—the weeping fair-haired girl—the stupid but manly young man with the biceps—even the colossally evil scientist with the hypnotic eyes—are all disappearing from the intellectual branch of the art to be replaced by figures having more in common with humanity.

We are now in a position to ask ourselves the favorite question of modern times: What next? Where is the detective story going? Has it a future? Or will the present boom see the end of it?



In early mystery fiction, the problem tends to be, *who* did the crime? At first, while readers were still unsophisticated, the formula of the Most Unlikely Person had a good run but the reader soon learnt to see through this. If there was a single person in the story who appeared to have no motive for the crime and who was allowed to amble through to the penultimate chapter free from any shadow of suspicion, that character became a marked man or woman. "I knew he must be guilty, because nothing was said about him," said the cunning reader. Thus we came to a new axiom laid down by Mr. G. K. Chesterton in a brilliant essay in the *New Statesman*; the real criminal must be suspected at least once in the course of the story. Once he is suspected, and then (apparently), cleared, he is made safe from future suspicion. This is the principle behind Mr. Wills Crofts's impregnable alibis, which are eventually broken down by painstaking enquiry. Probably the most baffling form of detective story is still that in which suspicion is distributed equally among a number of candidates, one of whom turns out to be guilty. Other developments of The Most Unlikely Person formula make the guilty person a juror at the inquest or trial; the detective himself; the counsel for the prosecution, and, as a supreme effort of unlikeliness, the actual narrator of the story. Finally, resort has been made to the double-cross, and the person originally suspected turns out to be the right person after all.

There are signs however, that the possibilities of the formula are becoming exhausted, and of late years much has been done in exploring the solution by the unexpected means. With recent discoveries in medical and chemical science, this field has become exceedingly fruitful, particularly in the provision of new methods of murder. It is fortunate for the mystery-monger, that, whereas up to the present there is only one known way of getting born, there are endless ways of getting killed.



The mystery-monger's principal difficulty is that of varying his surprises. "You know my methods, Watson," says the detective, and it is only too painfully true. The beauty of Watson was, of course, that after thirty years he still did not know Holmes's methods; but the average reader is sharper witted. After reading half-a-dozen stories by one author he is sufficiently advanced in Dupin's psychological method to see with the author's eyes. He knows that when Mr. Austin Freeman drowns somebody in a pond full of water snails, there will be something odd and localized about those snails; he knows that, when one of Mr. Wills Crofts's characters has

a cast-iron alibi, the alibi will turn out to have holes in it; he knows that if Father Knox casts suspicion on a Papist the Papist will turn out to be innocent; instead of detecting the murderer, he is engaged in detecting the writer. That is why he gets the impression that the writer's later books are seldom or never "up to" his earlier efforts. He has become married to the writer's muse, and marriage has destroyed the mystery.

There certainly does seem a possibility that the detective story will sometime come to an end, simply because the public will have learnt all the tricks. But it has probably many years to go yet, and in the meantime, a new and less rigid formula will probably have developed, linking it more closely to the novel of manners and separating it more widely from the novel of adventure. The latter will, no doubt, last as long as humanity, and while crime exists, the crime thriller will hold its place. It is, as always, the higher type that is threatened with extinction.

At the present time the detective story is profiting by a reaction against novels of the static type. Mr. E. M. Forster is indeed left murmuring regretfully, "Yes, ah! Yes—the novel tells a story": but the majority of the public are rediscovering that fact with cries of triumph. Sexual abnormalities are suffering a slight slump at the moment; the novel of passion still holds the first place, especially among women, but even women seem to be growing out of the simple love story. Probably the cheerful cynicism of the detective tale suits better with the spirit of the times than the sentimentality which ends in wedding bells. For, make no mistake about it, the detective story is part of the literature of escape and not of expression. We read tales of domestic unhappiness because that is the kind of thing which happens to us; but when these things gall too close to the sore, we fly to mystery and adventure because they do not, as a rule, happen to us. "The detective story," says Philip Guedalla, "is the normal recreation of noble minds."

Dorothy L. Sayers, author of the foregoing article, is herself the writer of a number of popular detective stories. Her essay in slightly different form will serve as the introduction to her collection of great short stories of detection, mystery, and horror, shortly to be issued by Payson and Clarke under the title of "The Omnibus of Crime." Her tales include "The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club," "Lord Peter Views the Body," "Dawson Pedigree," and "Clouds of Witnesses."

Longmans, Green & Company announce a prize of \$7,500 for the best novel submitted under the following terms: 1. The contest is open to all authors who have never published a novel which has sold more than 5,000 copies. If the prize is won by an author who has had a previous novel published, a second prize of \$2,500 is offered for the best *first* novel. 2. The prize will be awarded only to unpublished novels written in English and of between 40,000 and 125,000 words in length. Translations from foreign languages will not be eligible, nor novels that have appeared in magazine form. No restrictions as to subject or nationality of author will be made. 3. All manuscripts must be submitted under pen names to Longmans, Green & Company before December 1, 1929. The author's name must be submitted in a sealed envelope accompanying the manuscript. Any author allowing his name to become known to a judge in the contest will thereby be automatically disqualified. 4. The \$7,500 will be paid the winner as follows: \$2,500 will be paid as an outright prize, independent of royalties, upon the announcement of the winner; the remaining \$5,000 as an advance on account of royalties, \$2,500 to be paid upon the publication of the manuscript and the remaining \$2,500 to be paid within four months thereafter. 5. The publishers shall have the privilege of accepting for publication on terms to be arranged between the author and publisher any novel not winning a prize. 6. If, in the opinion of the judges, no novel merits an award, none shall be made, but this shall be a matter for the decision of the judges solely.