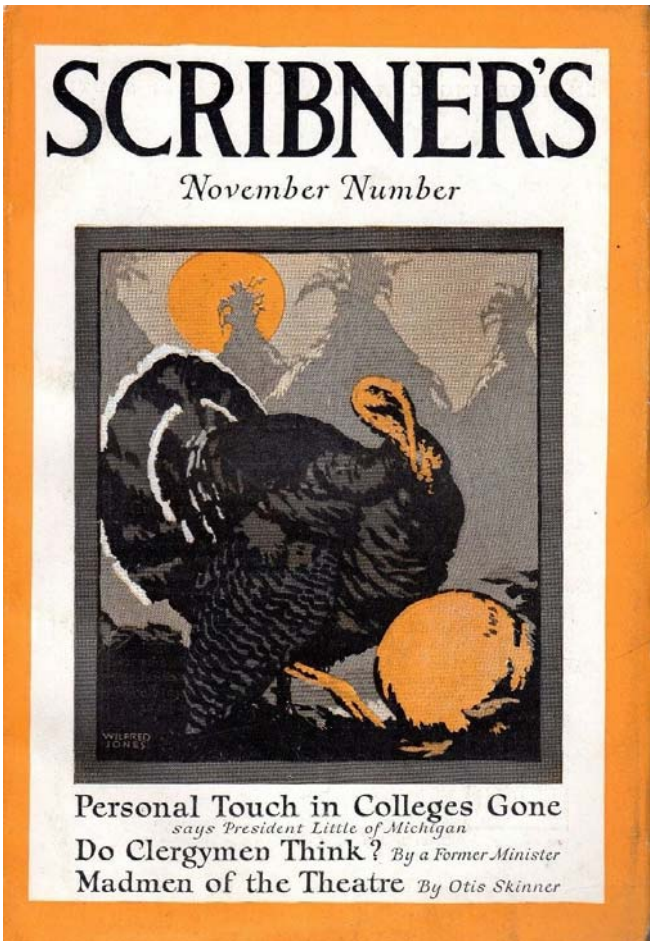

Scribners Magazine
November 1926

The Detective Novel

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Sweet Analytics, 'tis thou hast ravished me.—*Doctor Faustus.*

THERE is a tendency among modern book-reviewers to gauge all novels by a single literary standard—a standard, in fact, which should be applied only to novels that patently seek a niche among the enduring works of imaginative letters. That all novels do not aspire to such exalted company is obvious; and it is manifestly unfair to judge them by a standard their creators deliberately ignored. Novels of sheer entertainment belong in a different category from those written for purposes of intellectual and æsthetic stimulation; for they are fabricated in a spirit of evanescent diversion, and avoid all the deeper concerns of art. The novel designed purely for entertainment and the literary novel spring, in the main, from quite different impulses. Their objectives have almost nothing in common. The mental attitudes underlying them are antipathetic: one is frankly superficial, the other sedulously profound. They achieve diametrically opposed results; and their appeals are psychologically unrelated: in fact, they are unable to fulfil each other's function; and the reader who, at different times, can enjoy both without intellectual conflict, can never substitute the one for the other. Any attempt to measure them by the same rules is as inconsistent as to criticise a vaudeville performance and the plays of Shakespeare from the same point of view, or to hold a musical comedy to the standards by which we estimate the foremost grand opera. Even Schnitzler's "Anatol" may not be approached in the same critical frame of mind that one brings to Hauptmann's "The Weavers"; and if "The Mikado" or "Pinafore" were held strictly to the musical canons of "Parsifal" or "Die Meistersinger," they would suffer unjustly. In the graphic arts the same principle holds. Forain and Degas are not to be judged by the æsthetic criteria we apply to Michelangelo's drawings and the paintings of Rubens.

There are four distinct varieties of the "popular," or "light," novel—to wit: the romantic novel (dealing with young love, and ending generally either at the hymeneal altar or with a prenuptial embrace); the novel of adventure (in which physical action and danger are the chief constituents: sea stories, Wild-West yarns, odysseys of the African wilds, etc.); the mystery novel (wherein much of the dramatic

suspense is produced by hidden forces that are not revealed until the *dénouement:* novels of diplomatic intrigue, international plottings, secret societies, crime, pseudoscience, and the like); and the detective novel. These types often overlap in content, and at times become so intermingled in subject-matter that one is not quite sure in which category they primarily belong. But though they may borrow devices and appeals from one another, and usurp one another's distinctive material, they follow, in the main, their own special subject, and evolve within their own boundaries.

Of these four kinds of literary entertainment the detective novel is the youngest, the most complicated, the most difficult of construction, and the most distinct. It is, in fact, almost *sui generis*, and, except in its more general structural characteristics, has little in common with its fellows—the romantic, the adventurous, and the mystery novel. In one sense, to be sure, it is a highly specialized offshoot of the last named; but the relationship is far more distant than the average reader imagines.

The origin of the detective novel need not concern us. It would be possible, no doubt, to find indications of it in many books during the first few decades of the nineteenth century, or perhaps even earlier. Like all species of popular art, its beginnings were probably obscure and confused. Poe, however, is the authentic father of the detective novel as we know it to-day; and the evolution of this literary *genre* began with "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt" (1842), "The Gold-Bug" (1843), and "The Purloined Letter" (1845). In these four tales was born a new and original type of fictional entertainment; and though their structure has been modified, their method altered, their subject-matter expanded, and their craftsmanship developed, they remain to-day almost perfect models of their kind; and they will always so remain, because their fundamental psychological qualities—the very essence of their appeal—embody the animating and motivating forces in this branch of fiction. One can no more ignore their basic form when writing a detective novel to-day than one can ignore the form of Haydn when composing a symphony, or the experimental researches of Monet and Pissarro when painting an impressionist painting.

After Poe there were twenty years of desultory and ineffectual detective-story writing, chiefly in France, where Poe's influence was very great; and it was not until the appearance of Gaboriau's "L'Affaire Lerouge," in 1866, that the first great stride in the detective novel's development was taken. This book was the first of a series of detective novels by Gaboriau, in which the protagonist, *Monsieur Lecoq*, proved himself a worthy successor to Poe's *Auguste Dupin*. If we call Poe the father of detective fiction, Gaboriau was certainly its first influential tutor. He lengthened its form, and complicated and elaborated its content. With "L'Argent des Autres," published posthumously in 1874 (Gaboriau died in 1873), the detective novel was permanently launched; and during the past fifty years it has taken a conspicuous and highly popular place in the fictional field. In 1878 came Anna Katharine Green's "The Leavenworth Case," the importance of which lay in its influence toward popularizing this *genre* rather than in any inherent contribution made by it to the *genre's* evolution. "The Leavenworth Case" and the numerous other detective novels written by Mrs. Rohlfs were verbose, badly conceived stories, whose large sales resulted chiefly from the paucity of this kind of fiction on the English market (France at that time being its fertilizing ground), and from the lack of public familiarity with its form.

Not until the appearance of "A Study in Scarlet," in 1887, and "The Sign of the Four," in 1889, did the detective novel take any definite forward step over Gaboriau. In these books and the later *Sherlock Holmes* vehicles Conan Doyle brought detective fiction into full-blown maturity. He adhered to the documentary and psychological scaffolding that had been erected by Poe and strengthened by Gaboriau, but clothed it in a new exterior, eliminating much of the old decoration, and designing various new architectural devices. In Doyle the detective story reached what might be termed a purified fruition; and the numerous changes and

developments during the past two decades have had to do largely with detail, with the substitution of methods, and with variations in documentary treatment—in short, with current modes.

But in as vital, intimate, and exigent a type of entertainment as detective fiction, these modes are of great importance: they mark the distinction between that which is modern and up-to-date and that which is old-fashioned, just as do the short skirt and the long skirt in sartorial styles. The *Sherlock Holmes* stories are now obsolescent: they have been superseded by more advanced and contemporaneously alive productions in their own realm. And the modern detective-story enthusiast would find it hard sledding to read Gaboriau to-day—even "Monsieur Lecoq" and "Le Dossier No. 113," the two purest examples of the *roman policier* by that pioneer. Even Poe's four analytic tales are a treasure-trove for the student rather than a source of diversion for the general reader. The romantic and adventurous atmosphere we find in "The Gold-Bug" has now been eliminated from the detective tale; and the long introduction to "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (really an *apologia*), and the unnecessary documentation in "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt," act only as irritating encumbrances to the modern reader of detective fiction. Even in "The Purloined Letter"—the best and surest of the four stories—there is a sesquipedalian and somewhat ponderous analysis of philosophy and mathematics, which is much too *ritenendo* and *grandioso* for the devotees of this type of fiction to-day.

If we are to understand the unique place held in modern letters by the detective novel, we must first endeavor to determine its peculiar appeal; for this appeal is fundamentally unrelated to that of any other variety of fictional entertainment. What, then, constitutes the hold that the detective novel has on all classes of people—even those who would not stoop to read any other kind of "popular" fiction? Why do we find men like Woodrow Wilson, Roosevelt—college professors, statesmen, scientists, philosophers, and other men concerned with the graver, more advanced, more intellectual problems of life—passing by all other varieties of best-seller novels, and going to the detective story for diversion and relaxation?

The answer, I believe, is simply this: the detective novel does not fall under the head of fiction in the ordinary sense, but belongs rather in the category of riddles: it is, in fact, a complicated and extended puzzle cast in fictional form. Its widespread popularity and interest are due, at bottom and in essence, to the same factors that give popularity and interest to the cross-word puzzle. Indeed, the structure and mechanism of the cross-word puzzle and of the detective novel are very similar. In each there is a problem to be solved; and the solution depends wholly on mental processes—on analysis, on the fitting together of apparently unrelated parts, on a knowledge of the ingredients, and, in some measure, on guessing. Each is supplied with a series of overlapping clews to guide the solver; and these clews, when fitted into place, blaze the path for future progress. In each, when the final solution is achieved, all the details are found to be woven into a complete, interrelated, and closely knitted fabric.

There is confirmatory evidence of the mechanical impulse that inspires the true detective novel when we consider what might almost be called the dominant intellectual *penchant* of its inventor. Poe was obsessed with the idea of scientific experimentation. His faculty for analysis manifested itself in his reviews and in the technicalities of his poetry; it produced "Maelzel's Chess-Player"; it led him into the speculative ramifications of handwriting idiosyncrasies in "A Chapter on Autography"; it brought forth his exposition of cryptograms and code-writing in "Cryptography"; and it gave birth to his acrostic verses. The four analytic stories already mentioned were but a literary development, or application, of the ideas and problems which always fascinated him. "The Gold-Bug," in fact, was merely a fictional presentation of "Cryptography." (Incidentally, the number of detective stories since Poe's day that have hid their solutions in cipher messages is legion.)

There is no more stimulating activity than that of the mind; and there is no more exciting adventure than that of the intellect. Mankind has always received

keen enjoyment from the mental gymnastics required in solving a riddle; and puzzles have been its chief toy throughout the ages. But there is a great difference between waiting placidly for the solution of a problem, and the swift and exhilarating participation in the succeeding steps that lead to the solution. In the average light novel of romance, adventure, or mystery, the reader merely awaits the author's unravelling of the tangled skein of events. True, during the waiting period he is given emotion, wonder, suspense, sentiment and description, with which to occupy himself; and the average novel depends in large measure on these addenda to furnish his enjoyment. But in the detective novel, as we shall see, these qualities are either subordinated to ineffectuality, or else eliminated entirely. The reader is immediately put to work, and kept busy in every chapter, at the task of solving the book's mystery. He shares in the unfoldment of the problem in precisely the same way he participates in the solution of any riddle to which he applies himself.

Because of this singularity of appeal the detective novel has gone its own way irrespective of the *progressus* of all other fictional types. It has set its own standards, drawn up its own rules, adhered to its own heritages, advanced along its own narrow-gauge track, and created its own ingredients as well as its own form and technic. And all these considerations have had to do with its own isolated purpose, with its own special destiny. In the process of this evolution it has withdrawn further and further from its literary fellows, until today it has practically reversed the principles on which the ordinary popular novel is based.

A sense of reality is essential to the detective novel. The few attempts that have been made to lift the detective-story plot out of its naturalistic environment and confer on it an air of fancifulness have been failures. A castles-in-Spain atmosphere, wherein the reader may escape from the materiality of every day, often gives the average popular novel its charm and readability; but the objective of a detective novel—the mental reward attending its solution—would be lost unless a sense of verisimilitude was consistently maintained—a feeling of triviality would attach to its problem, and the reader would experience a sense of wasted effort. This is why in cross-word puzzles the words are all genuine: their correct determination achieves a certain educational, or at least serious, result. The "trick" cross-word puzzle with coined words and purely logomachic inventions (such as filling four boxes with e's—e-e-e-e—for the word "ease," or with i's—i-i-i-i—for the word "eyes," or making u-u-u-u stand for the word "use") has never been popular. The philologic realism, so to speak, is dissipated. A. E. W. Mason, whose "The House of the Arrow" is one of the best and most competent examples of the detective novel in English, has said somewhere that Defoe would have written the perfect detective story. He was referring to Defoe's surpassing ability to create a realistic environment.

This rule of realism suggests the common literary practice of endowing *mises en scène* with varying emotional pressures. And here again the detective novel differs from its fictional *confrères;* for, aside from the primary achievement of a sense of reality, atmospheres, in the descriptive and psychic sense, have no place in this type of story. Once the reader has accepted the pseudoactuality of the plot, his energies are directed (like those of the detective himself) to the working out of the puzzle; and his mood, being an intellectual one, is only distracted by atmospheric invasions. Atmospheres belong to the romantic and the adventurous tale, such as Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" and Scott's "Ivanhoe," and to the novel of mystery—Henry James's "The Turn of the Screw" and Bram Stoker's "Dracula," for instance.

The setting of a detective story, however, is of cardinal importance. The plot must appear to be an actual record of events springing from the terrane of its operations; and a familiarity with this terrane and a belief in its existence are what give the reader his feeling of ease and freedom in manipulating the factors of the plot to his own (which are also the author's) ends. Hampered by strange conditions and modes of action, his personal participation in the story's solution becomes restricted and his interest in its

sequiturs wanes. A detective novel is nearly always more popular in the country in which it is laid than in a foreign country where the conditions, both human and topographic, are unfamiliar. The variations between English and American customs and police methods, and mental and temperamental attributes, are, of course, not nearly so marked as between those of America and France; and no sharp distinction is now drawn between the English and the American detective tale. But many of the best French novels of this type have had indifferent sales in the United States. Gaston Leroux's "The Mystery of the Yellow Room," "The Perfume of the Lady in Black," and "The Secret of the Night," though among the finest examples of detective stories we possess, have never had their deserved popularity in this country because of their foreign *locales;* but "The Phantom of the Opera," by the same author, which is a sheer mystery story, has been a great success here, due largely to that very unfamiliarity of setting that has worked against the success of his detective novels.

In the matter of character-drawing the detective novel also stands outside the rules governing ordinary fiction. Characters in detective stories may not be too neutral and colorless, nor yet too fully and intimately delineated. They should merely fulfil the requirements of plausibility, so that their actions will not appear to spring entirely from the author's preconceived scheme. Any closely drawn character analysis, any undue lingering over details of temperament, will act only as a clog in the narrative machinery. The automaton of the cheap detective thriller detracts from the reader's eagerness to rectify the confusion of the plot; and the subtly limned personality of the "literary" detective novel shunts the analytic operations of the reader's mind to extraneous considerations. Think back over all the good detective stories you may have read, and try to recall a single memorable personality (aside from the detective himself). And yet these characters were of sufficient color and rotundity to enlist your sympathetic emotions at the time, and to drive you on to a solution of their problems.

The style of a detective story must be direct, simple, smooth, and unencumbered. A "literary" style, replete with descriptive passages, metaphors, and word pictures, which might give viability and beauty to a novel of romance or adventure, would, in a detective yarn, produce sluggishness in the actional current by diverting the reader's mind from the mere record of facts (which is what he is concerned with), and focussing it on irrelevant æsthetic appeals. I do not mean that the style of the detective novel must be bald and legalistic, or cast in the stark language of commercial documentary exposition; but it must, like the style of Defoe, subjugate itself to the function of producing unadorned verisimilitude. No more is gained by stylizing a detective novel than by printing a cross-word puzzle in Garamond Italic, or Cloister Cursive, or the Swash characters of Caslon Old-style.

The material for the plot of a detective novel must be commonplace. Indeed, there are a dozen adequate plots for this kind of story on the front page of almost any metropolitan daily paper. Unusualness, *bizarrerie*, fantasy, or strangeness in subject-matter is rarely desirable; and herein we find another striking reversal of the general rules applying to popular fiction; for originality and eccentricity of plot may give a novel of adventure or mystery its main interest. The task confronting the writer of detective fiction is again the same confronting the cross-word-puzzle manufacturer—namely, the working of familiar materials into a difficult riddle. The skill of a detective story's craftsmanship is revealed in the way these materials are fitted together, the subtlety with which the clews are presented, and the legitimate manner in which the final solution is withheld.

Furthermore, there is a strict ethical course of conduct imposed upon the author. He must never once deliberately fool the reader: he must succeed by ingenuity alone. The habit of inferior writers of bringing forward false clews whose purpose is to mislead is as much a form of cheating as if the cross-word-puzzle maker should print false definitions to his words. The truth must at all times be in the printed word, so that if the reader should go back over the book he

would find that the solution had been there all the time if he had had sufficient shrewdness to grasp it. There was a time when all manner of tricks, deceits, and far-fetched devices were employed for the reader's befuddlement; but as the detective novel developed and the demand for straightforward puzzle stories increased, all such methods were abrogated, and today we find them only in the cheapest and most inconsequential examples of this type of fiction.

In the central character of the detective novel—the detective himself—we have, perhaps, the most important and original element of the criminal-problem story. It is difficult to describe his exact literary status, for he has no counterpart in any other fictional *genre*. He is, at one and the same time, the outstanding personality of the story (though he is concerned in it only in an *ex-parte* capacity), the projection of the author, the embodiment of the reader, the *deus ex machina* of the plot, the propounder of the problem, the supplier of the clews, and the eventual solver of the mystery. The life of the book takes place in him, yet the life of the narrative has its being outside of him. In a lesser sense, he is the Greek chorus of the drama. All good detective novels have had for their protagonist a character of attractiveness and interest, of high and fascinating attainments—a man at once human and unusual, colorful and gifted. The buffoon, the bungler, the prig, the automaton—all such have failed. And sometimes in an endeavor to be original an otherwise competent writer, misjudging the psychology of the situation, has presented us with a blind detective or a lady investigator, only to wonder, later on, why these innovations failed. The more successful detective stories have invariably given us such personalities as *C. Auguste Dupin*, *Monsieur Lecoq*, *Sherlock Holmes*, *Dr. Thorndyke*, *Rouletabille*, *Dr. Bentiron*, *Furneaux*, *Father Brown*, *Uncle Abner*, *Richard Hannay*, *Arsène Lupin*, *Dr. Priestley*, and *Jefferson Hastings*—to name but a few that come readily to mind. All the books in which these characters appear do not fall unqualifiedly into the true detective-story category; but in each tale there are sufficient elements to permit broadly of the detective classification. Furthermore, these Œdipuses themselves are not, in every instance, authentic sleuths: some are doctors of medicine, some professors of astronomy, some soldiers, and some reformed crooks. But their vocations do not matter, for in this style of book the designation "detective" is used generically.

We come now to what is perhaps the outstanding characteristic of the detective novel: its unity of mood. To be sure, this is a desideratum of all fiction; but the various moods of the ordinary novel—such as love, romance, adventure, wonder, mystery—are so closely related that they may be intermingled or alternated without breaking the thread of interest; whereas, in the detective novel, the chief interest being that of mental analysis and the overcoming of difficulties, any interpolation of purely emotional moods produces the effect of irrelevancy—unless, of course, they are integers of the equation and are subordinated to the main theme. For instance, in none of the best detective novels will you find a love interest—*Sherlock Holmes* in mellow mood, holding a lady's hand and murmuring amorous platitudes, would be unthinkable. And when a detective is sent scurrying on a long-drawn-out adventure beset with physical dangers, the reader fumes and frets until his hero is again in his armchair analyzing clews and inquiring into motives.

In this connection it is significant that the cinematograph has never been able to project a detective story. The detective story, in fact, is the only type of fiction that cannot be filmed. The test of popular fiction—namely, its presentation in visual pictures, or, let us say, the visualizing of its word-pictures—goes to pieces when applied to detective stories. The difficulties confronting a motion-picture director in the screening of a detective tale are very much the same as those he would encounter if he strove to film a cross-word puzzle. The only serious attempt to transcribe a detective story onto the screen was the case of "Sherlock Holmes"; and the effort was made possible only by reducing the actual detective elements to a minimum, and emphasizing all manner of irrelevant dramatic and adventurous factors; for there is neither

drama nor adventure nor romance, in the conventional sense, in a good detective novel.

Though an American invented this type of fiction, its principal development has taken place in France. The Gallic temperament seems particularly well adapted to the subtleties and intricacies of the detective novel. But England, curiously, has of late years taken an important place in the evolution; and America is now coming to the front. The other European countries, however, are far behind both France and England in the production of this kind of entertainment, although detective novels are read extensively on the Continent. Germany's efforts at detective fiction are abortive and ponderous. Russia is too deeply sunk in Zolaesque naturalism to be interested in sheer literary artifice. And Italy's creative spirit is not sufficiently mentalized and detached to maintain the detective-story mood. But there are certain indications that the Scandinavian countries may soon enter the field as competitors of France and England. A Swedish writer, under the *nom de guerre* of Frank Heller, has had a tremendous success in Europe with a series of novels setting forth the exploits of a *Mr. Collin*—a kind of Continental *Raffles*—and several of his books have been translated into English. They are not, however, true detective novels; but the germ of the species is in them, and they indicate an unmistakable tendency toward the Poe-Gaboriau-Doyle tradition.

The reason for the decided superiority of English detective stories over American detective stories lies in the fact that the English novelist takes this type of fiction more seriously than we do. The best of the current writers in England will turn their hand occasionally to this *genre*, and perform their task with the same conscientious care that they confer on their more serious books. The American novelist, when he essays to write this kind of story, does so with contempt and carelessness, and rarely takes the time to acquaint himself with his subject. He labors under the delusion that a detective novel is an easy and casual kind of literary composition; and the result is a complete failure. In this country we have no detective novels of the superior order of such books as A. A. Milne's "The Red House," A. E. W. Mason's "The House of the Arrow," G. K. Chesterton's *Father Brown* stories, Harrington Hext's "Who Killed Cock Robin?" and "The Thing at Their Heels," Eden Phillpotts's "The Red Redmaynes" (are not Harrington Hext and Eden Phillpotts the same writer, by the way?), Freeman Wills Crofts's "The Cask," E. C. Bentley's "Trent's Last Case," and Philip MacDonald's "The Rasp," to mention but a few of the more recent additions to England's rapidly increasing detective library.

The habitual reader of the detective novel has, during the past quarter of a century, become a shrewd critic of its technic and means. He is something of an expert, and, like the motion-picture enthusiast, is thoroughly familiar with all the devices and methods of his favorite craft. He knows immediately if a story is old-fashioned, if its tricks are hackneyed, or if its approach to its problem contains elements of originality. And he judges it by its ever shifting and developing rules. Because of this perspicacious attitude on his part a stricter form and a greater ingenuity have been imposed on the writer; and the fashions and inventions of yesterday are no longer used except by the inept and uninformed author.

G. K. Chesterton, in his introduction to one of the worst of modern detective stories, "The Wrong Letter," by Walter S. Masterman, gives a list of many of the devices that have now come to be regarded as antiquated. He says: "The things he [Mr. Masterman] does not do are the things being done everywhere to-day to the destruction of true detective fiction and the loss of this legitimate and delightful form of art. He does not introduce into the story a vast but invisible secret society with branches in every part of the world, with ruffians who can be brought in to do anything or underground cellars that can be used to hide anybody. He does not mar the pure and lovely outlines of a classical murder or burglary by wreathing it round and round with the dirty and dingy red tape of international diplomacy; he does not lower our lofty ideals of crime to the level of foreign politics. He does not introduce suddenly at the end somebody's brother from New

Zealand, who is exactly like him. He does not trace the crime hurriedly in the last page or two to some totally insignificant character, whom we never suspected because we never remembered. He does not get over the difficulty of choosing between the hero and the villain by falling back on the hero's cabman or the villain's valet. He does not introduce a professional criminal to take the blame of a private crime; a thoroughly unsportsmanlike course of action, and another proof of how professionalism is ruining our national sense of sport. He does not introduce about six people in succession to do little bits of the same small murder; one man to bring the dagger, and another to point it, and another to stick it in properly. He does not say it was all a mistake, and that nobody ever meant to murder anybody at all, to the serious disappointment of all humane and sympathetic readers. . . ." But, strangely enough, the author of "The Wrong Letter" does something much worse and more inexcusable than any of the things Mr. Chesterton enumerates—he traces the crime to the detective himself! Such a trick is neither new nor legitimate, and the reader feels not that he has been deceived fairly by a more skilful mind than his own, but deliberately lied to by an inferior.

A word in parting should be said in regard to the subject-matter of the detective novel, for herein lies one of its most important elements of interest. Crime has always exerted a profound fascination over humanity, and the more serious the crime the greater has been that appeal. Murder, therefore, has always been an absorbing public topic. The psychological reasons for this morbid and elemental curiosity need not be gone into here; but the fact itself supplies us with the explanation of why a murder mystery furnishes a far more fascinating *raison d'être* in a detective novel than does any lesser crime. All the best and most popular books of this type deal with mysteries involving human life. Murder would appear to give added zest to the solution of the problem, and to render the satisfaction of the solution just so much greater. The reader feels, no doubt, that his efforts have achieved something worth while—something commensurate with the amount of mental energy which a good detective novel compels him to expend.