

# DETECTIVE FICTION

SISTER MAURA\*

WHEN the curtain of history rises on a civilization, one of the scenes it shows is a storyteller charming his audience. When or written, factual or imagined, the story has retained power to charm. Chesterton makes a prodigious claim for it. He writes:

A story is the highest mark,  
For the world is a story and every part of it:  
There is nothing that can touch the world or any part of it  
That is not a story.

This is so in the sense that everything in the world has its own story.

For ages, the fate of star-crossed lovers was the staple of fiction, and one still hesitates to give the name "novel" to any but a love story; however, test it where you will, public taste is changing. It has changed. Nowadays, the learned and the literary, as well as the unlearned, read detective stories. Woodrow Wilson, the scholar President, relished them. The keen-minded Evelyn Waugh finds pleasure in them and he has his favorites: Erle Stanley Gardner's finely wrought stories. Margery Allingham, who writes detective stories herself, says that Gardner's plots are like a huge, complicated bow, which he unknots completely by pulling a single string.

All narrative tells of events: history, of actual events; fiction, of those imagined, altogether or in part. A prejudice prevails against the latter form on the ground of its not being intellectual and true to fact. Although not factual, the fiction that rates as literature serves truth; it is true to human nature and human life, true to the eternal verities. Much that is written and makes its way into print under the name of fiction does not belong to literature. It is trivial or, perhaps, evil, according as it contains a less or greater element of falseness.

Whether the course of true love run smooth or ruffled, concerns detective fiction very little; it concentrates on the discovery, and punishment, of crime. Strictly speaking, since detection is its essence, the form includes tales of horror like Graham Greene's *Brighton Rock* (1938), of the preternatural like de Maupassant's *La Main* (later nineteenth century), and of preternatural horror like Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). The first is a realistic story of sordid horror. In *La Main*,

\*Professor of English, Mt. St. Vincent College, Rockingham, N. S.

Maupassant leaves the riddle in a state of suspension, but the macabre crime cannot be naturally explained. *Dracula* frankly accepts the existence of werewolves, of glamorous vampires ready to set their sharp white teeth in a victim's jugular vein and of a fearsome being who can assume the shape of a wolf or bat and climb like a gigantic lizard.

In theory, the present day condemns any appearance of the supernatural that cannot be explained away; but in practice, in the hands of a gifted writer, the supernatural still fascinates readers. In *Gabriel-Ernest*, for instance, (1914), Hector Hugh Munro presents the werewolf theme with a cheerful conviction that is not without moments of horror. The first chill strikes after Van Cheele has warned the wild boy off his property, his foot slips and "he finds himself almost prostrate on a weed-grown bank, with those tigerish yellow eyes not very far from his own". Another comes when he watches the boy standing on a hillcrest at sunset, like "some wild faun of pagan myth". The sun drops below the skyline and the boy vanishes, but his place stands "a large wolf, blackish in colour, with gleaming fangs and cruel, yellow eyes."

The detective story is a plot narrative; it traces the logical pursuit of clue after clue, and finally reverts to the original crime by reconstructing it. Since it starts with the catastrophe, which is ordinarily the climax of a novel or a play, the form has developed a technique of its own. Its principles are aptly summarized by Ronald A. Knox in this Decalogue:

1. The criminal must be someone mentioned in the early part of the story, but must not be anyone whose thoughts the reader has been allowed to follow.

2. All supernatural or preternatural agencies are ruled out as a matter of course. To solve a detective problem by such means would be like winning a race on the river by the use of a concealed motor-engine.

3. Not more than one secret room or passage is allowable.

4. No hitherto undiscovered poisons may be used, nor any appliance that will need a long scientific explanation at the end.

5. No Chinaman must figure in the story. Why this should be so I do not know . . . The only exception which occurs in my mind—there are probably others—is Lord Ernest Hamilton's *Four Tragedies of Memworth*.

6. No accident must ever help the detective, nor must he ever have an unaccountable intuition that proves to be right.

7. The detective must not himself have committed the crime.

8. The detective must not light on any clues that are not instantly produced for the inspection of the reader.

9. The stupid friend of the detective, the Watson, must not conceal any thoughts that pass through his mind; his intelligence must be slightly, but very slightly, below that of the average reader.

10. Twin brothers, and doubles generally, must not appear unless we have been duly prepared for them.

Another exception to Rule V is worth noting. It is the beaming Charlie Chan, Earl Biggers' detective, who is at his best in *The Black Camel*. A still more succinct summary of these principles is the oath of the Detection Club, founded in 1928. It makes this important addition to the Decalogue:

THE RULER: Will you honor the King's English?

CANDIDATE: I will.

An American critic, Willard Huntington Wright (S. S. Van Dine), says:

The reason for the 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 . . . labors under the delusion that a detective novel is an easy and casual kind of literary composition.

Stephen Leacock, "a lifelong devotee of detective stories," offers jovial comment on the subject, and as is usual with him, gives his criticism in the concrete. Discussing the ordinary plot development, he writes:

At this point in comes the heroine—the heroine! who has no real place in a murder story but is just left over from the love story. In she comes, Margaret Althorpe, wild and all dishevelled. No wonder she's wild! Who wouldn't be? And dishevelled—oh yes, the best writers always dishevel them. In she comes, almost fainting! And with that, you see, the story drifts off sideways so as to work up a love story interest in the heroine.

It does happen that the introduction of a heroine causes the plot to fall apart into a love story and a detective story, but it need not be so. *The Lady in Number 4*, for instance, by Richard Keverne, knits the detection and love interests so closely that the chestnut-haired heroine plays an essential part in the plot. This is a pleasant book. The mellow atmosphere of an old country inn prevails over the murk of murder and blackmail.

Fiction is an interpretation of reality. The first official police force did not appear till 1829, established by Sir

Robert Peel, and the first detective in fiction did not follow twelve years later. He was C. Auguste Dupin: in 1841, Edgar Allan Poe inserted a new type of short story in the April issue of *Graham's*, a Philadelphia magazine that he was editing. It was the gripping and gruesome "Murders in the Rue Morgue." As Dorothy Sayers points out, Dupin's mode of procedure owes something to the deductive methods of Cooper's Indian heroes. In 1842, Poe's genius produced another kind of story. He took the newspaper accounts of the murder of Mary Cecilia Rogers in New York and wove them into the compact "Mystery of Marie Roget", with Paris as a setting. The greatest achievement in this sort of story is probably "The Lodger" by Mrs. Belloc-Lowndes (1913). She takes the record of Jack the Ripper's horrible crimes and transmutes it into a quiet story of steadily mounting fear. She handles the horror with exceptional taste and treats the criminal with a certain compassion. There is nothing crude and gory about *The Lodger*. In 1845, M. Dupin cleverly solved another crime, "The Purloined Letter." These Dupin stories, like Poe's other short stories, are marked by inexorable logic, economy of material, and a concentrated effect of climax.

The first of detective novels appeared some years later. It is *The Woman in White* (1860) by Wilkie Collins. This has a masterly plot entanglement and presents two major character creations: the natural detective, Count Fosco, who is a unique personage, and Marian Halcombe, the strong-minded girl with the beautiful figure and the plain face. In 1868, Collins published another crime story, complete with a fascinating plot and two professional detectives, Seegrave and the admiral Cuff, who is equally successful in the pursuit of criminals as in the cultivation of roses. Both books are full-bodied novels. *Bleak House*, which is a novel of detection though not of a detective, came out in 1853, and Gaboriau's well constructed *L'Affaire Lerouge* in 1866.

Though still very readable, Poe and Collins recall the past in style and technique; Poe's stories contain elaborate expositions, *The Moonstone* and *The Woman in White* are the voluminous novels beloved of the nineteenth century. Life is more hurried today, and novels are shorter. The first modern detective story, *A Study in Scarlet* by Conan Doyle, took captive the reading public in 1887. In its pages appeared the most popular character in literature since Hamlet: Sherlock Holmes. Years later, when his creator, in sheer weariness, killed him off

young men in London wore crape armbands to their clubs, and there was such general mourning that Sir Conan had to bring him back to life. Holmes has been imitated, analyzed, parodied as none other has, and his popularity shows no sign of waning. Why, it is hard to tell. Perhaps because these Holmes stories, in their genial matter-of-factness, come close to the average person; they have warmth of human kindness and pervasive humor.

Sherlock Holmes is a professional. The most popular amateur detective in fiction is, no doubt, Chesterton's Father Brown. His insignificant figure, moon face, and air of inefficiency are the comic disguise of a strong and forthright spirit. G. K. has created another surprising amateur in the paradoxical Mr. Pond, who appears to special advantage in *The Three Horsemen of the Apocalypse*.

Chesterton's is the highest flight in detective fiction. He rises at a level of unusual literary excellence and sometimes in the more serene of philosophy or even of theology. For instance, Father Brown says to the elusive Flambeau, who thinks that he has stolen a valuable sapphire cross:

Reason and justice grip the remotest and the loneliest star. Look at those stars. Don't they look as if they were single diamonds and sapphires? Well, you can imagine any mad botany and geology you please. Think of forests of adamant with leaves of brilliants. Think of the moon as a blue moon, a single elephantine sapphire. But don't fancy that all that frantic astronomy would make the smallest difference to the reason and justice of conduct. On plains of opal, under cliffs cut out of pearl, you would still find a notice-board, "Thou shalt not steal."

Chesterton's prose can glow and gleam and scintillate and flash. Occasionally, the detective does not detect the crime. In Ronald Knox's *Viaduct Murder*, the culprit himself offers the solution by confessing, rather than let an innocent man suffer. This is rare. Clever detectives, professional and amateur, swarm the library shelves. Here are a few of the more recurrent names: Philip Trent, Hercule Poirot, Perry Mason, Sir Peter Wimsey, Ellery Queen, Reggie Fortune, Malcolm Sage, Nick Carter, Philo Vance, Mr. and Mrs. North, Philip Marlowe. Harvey Higgins creates an unusual "sleuth" in Barney Cook, a brewer's boy detective with an engaging grin. The present taste is for a particularly sleek and streamlined plot. Agatha Christie excels in this type. She is most conscientious in furnishing clues to the reader, but they are not readily recognized; her pieces fit together with invisible dovetailing.

A special kind of detective fiction that has been developing since the first world war is the spy story. Very striking in this field is *The Great Impersonation* by E. Phillips Oppenheim (1920), with its melodramatic love scenes, strong climax, and well sustained identity puzzle. Eric Ambler's *Journey Into Fear* (1940) justifies its title. Graham his hero travels west from Turkey deeper and deeper into danger, and finally saves his life just when it seems lost, by a sudden, fierce attack. Probably the very best among these stories is Lord Tweedsmuir's *Thirty-nine Steps* (1915). Written against the background of varied experience in Great Britain, South Africa, and wartime Europe, the action moves with swift intensity to a highly dramatic climax. The land and people that Buchan loved so well live in these pages; the style is free and colorful, the dialogue racy.

Detective fiction, as it is written today, has the mental stimulus of a puzzle. It speaks primarily to the intellect, while the love story appeals rather to the feelings. Though, like the Elizabethan "tragedy of blood", it sometimes presents serious crimes, at its best it can purify the soul by the emotions of sympathy and fear. No better word can be said in its favor than Chesterton's genial and clever tribute:

A rude, popular literature of the romantic possibilities of the modern city was bound to arise. It has arisen in the popular detective stories, as rough and refreshing as the ballads of Robin Hood.

There is, however, another good work that is done by detective stories. While it is the tendency of the Old Adam to rebel against so universal and automatic a thing as civilization, to preach departure and rebellion, the romance of police activity keeps in some sense before the mind the fact that civilization itself is the most sensational of departures and the most romantic of rebellions. By dealing with the unsleeping sentinels who guard the outposts of society, it tends to remind us that we live in an armed camp, making war with a chaotic world, and that the criminals, the children of chaos, are nothing but the traitors within our own gates . . . The romance of the police force is thus the whole romance of man. It is based on the fact that morality is the most dark and daring of conspiracies. It reminds us that the whole noiseless and unnoticeable police management by which we are ruled and protected is only a successful knight errantry.