**The Decline and Fall of the Detective Story**

W. Somerset Maugham

I

WHEN, after a hard day’s work, you are spending the evening alone and you look at your bookshelves for something to read, do you take down *War and Peace, L’Education Sentimentale, Middlemarch* or *Du Coté de chez Swann?* If you do I admire you. Or if, wishing to keep up with modern fiction, you take up a novel the pub­lisher has sent you, a harrowing story of displaced persons in Central Europe, or one that a review has induced you to buy, a ruthless picture of the lives of poor white trash in Louisiana, you have my hearty approval. But that is not the sort of person I am. For one thing, I have read all the great novels three or four times already and they have nothing more to tell me; for another, when I look at the four hundred and fifty closely printed pages which according to the jacket are going to lay bare to me the secrets of a woman’s soul or wring my withers with the horrors of life in the slums of Glasgow (all the characters speaking broad Scots) my heart sinks; and I choose a detective story.

At the outbreak of the last war I found myself imprisoned at Bandol, a seaside resort on the Riviera, imprisoned, I should add, not by the police but by circumstances. I was in fact in a sailing-boat. She was in peace-time berthed at Villefranche, but the naval authorities ordered us to leave, so we set sail for Marseilles. We were caught in a storm and took refuge at Bandol, where there was something of a harbour. The movements of private individuals were restricted and one could not even go as far as Toulon, but a few miles away, without a permit which could only be obtained after an intolerable delay by filling in a number of forms and producing a number of photographs. I was obliged to stay put.

The summer visitors had fled incontinently and the resort had a surprised and forlorn look. The casino, most of the hotels and many of the shops were closed. The days, however, passed pleasantly enough. There were the *Petit Marseillais* and the *Petit Var* to buy at the stationer’s every morning, one’s *café au lait* to drink and the marketing to do. I learnt where you could get the best butter for the money and which baker made the best bread. I exerted all my charm to wheedle an old peasant-woman to keep me half a dozen fresh eggs. I found out to my shame that a huge, an enormous mass of spinach had when cooked a very stingy look. I was confounded once more by my ignorance of human nature when I discovered that the keeper of a stall in the market whose honest face attracted my custom had sold me a melon which was too ripe to eat or a camem­bert (though in a voice tremulous with sincerity she had assured me it was *à point)* which was as hard as a brick. There was always a sporting chance that at ten the English papers would come in, and though they were a week old it was no matter; I read them with eagerness.

At twelve there was the wireless news from Marseilles. Then luncheon and a nap. In the afternoon I walked for exercise up and down the front or stood watching the boys and old men (all the rest had gone) playing their interminable games of *boule.* At five there was the *Soleil* from Marseilles and I read once more what I had read in the morning in the *Petit Marseillais* and the *Petit Var.* After that there was nothing but the wireless news again at half-past seven. At dusk we had to shut ourselves in, and if a chink of light showed, menacing shouts came from the air-wardens who patrolled the quay and we were sternly bidden to screen it. There was nothing to do then but to read detective stories.

With so much leisure it would have been fitting if I had improved my mind by reading one of the great monuments of English literature. 1 have never read more than a chapter here and there of the *Decline and Fall,* and I have always promised myself that some day I would read it right through from the first page of the first volume to the last page of the last. Here was a heaven-sent opportunity. But life in a forty-five-ton sailing-boat, though sufficiently comfortable, lacks quiet. Next door to the cabin is the galley and there the sailors arc cooking their evening meal, with a rattle of pots and pans, and vociferously discussing their private affairs. One of them comes in to fetch a tin of soup or a box of sardines; then he remembers that the motor must be set going or the electricity will fail. Presently the cabin boy clatters down the companion to say he has caught a fish, and will you have it for dinner. Then he comes in to lay the table. The skipper of the boat next to yours gives a hail and a sailor tramps over your head to find out what he wants. The pair have an animated conversation which you cannot help listening to because they both shout at the top of their voices. It is difficult to read with attention. I think it would have been doing an injustice to Gibbon’s great work to set about it in such conditions and I must admit that my aloofness of spirit did not extend so far as to have enabled me just then to read it with interest. In fact I should have had difficulty to think of a book I less wanted to read at that time than *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,* and this was lucky because I hadn’t got it. On the other hand I had a number of detective stories, which I could always exchange for others belonging to the owners of other boats similarly swinging to their anchors, and there were any number for sale at the stationer’s where I bought my papers. During the four weeks I spent at Bandol I read two a day.

This, of course, was not the first occasion on which I had read this class of fiction, but it is the first on which I read it in the mass. Part of the First World War I spent in a sanatorium for the tuberculous in the North of Scotland and there I learnt how pleasant it is to lie in bed, what a delicious sense of liberation it affords from the responsibilities of life and how conducive it is to profitable reflection and aimless reverie. Since then whenever I can square it with my conscience I go to bed. A cold in the head is a distressing ailment for which you get no sympathy. The persons with whom you are brought in contact regard you with anxiety, not because they fear it may turn to pneumonia and result in your demise, but because they fear they will catch it. They scarcely trouble to conceal their irritation that you should expose them to this danger. For my part when thus afflicted I promptly take to my bed. With aspirin, a hot-water bottle, rum toddy at night and half a dozen detective stories I am prepared to make an ambiguous virtue of an equivocal necessity.

I have read hundreds of detective stories, good and bad, and they have to be very bad indeed for me to cast them aside unfinished, but I do not pretend to be more than a dilettante. If I present the reader with the reflections that have occurred to me on this variety of fiction it is with a proper sense of my fallibility.

First of all I should like to distinguish between the shocker and the detective story. I read shockers only by accident, when I have been misled by the title or the wrapper into believing that I was about to engage in a story of crime. They are the bastard descendants of the boys’ books, Henty and Ballantyne, which amused our youth, and their vogue is due, one can only suppose, to the fact that there is a large class of adult readers whose minds have remained puerile. I have no patience with these gallant heroes who perform acts of derring-do and those dauntless heroines who after incurring incredible adventures are united to them on the last page. I hate the stiff upper lip of the first and I shudder at the archness of the second. I sometimes wonder idly about their writers. Are they seized with a divine afflatus and do they write because they must with the anguish of spirit with which Flaubert wrote *Madame Bovary?* 1 refuse to believe that they sit down deliberately to write, tongue in cheek, something that will bring them in a tidy sum of money.

If they did I would not blame them, for evidently this is a pleasanter way of earning a living than by selling matches in the street, which exposes you to the inclemency of the weather, or being an attendant in a public lavatory, which affords but a narrow view of human nature. I prefer to think that they are lovers of their species who are deeply moved by the thought of this vast mass of readers that has been created by compulsory education, and by their tales of fire and shipwreck, train accidents, forced landings in the Sahara, smugglers’ caves, opium dens, sinister orientals, hope to win their readers to an appreciation of Jane Austen.

It is with the stories of crime that I wish to concern myself, and especially with that of murder. Theft and fraud are crimes too, and they may give rise to some pretty work in detection, but they arouse in me an interest which is no more than languid. From the standpoint of the Absolute, which is the proper stand­point from which to consider this kind of fiction, it does not matter whether the string of pearls that has been stolen is worth twenty thousand pounds or was bought at Woolworth’s for a few shillings; and fraud, whether it entails a cool million or three pounds seven and six, is an equally sordid business. The writer of crime stories cannot say like that rather tiresome old Roman that nothing human is alien to him; everything human is alien to him but murder. It is, of course, the most human of crimes, for I suppose we have all at one time or another contemplated it and have been held back from it either from dread of the penalty or from the fear (probably groundless) of our own remorse. But

the murderer has taken the risk at which we hesitated and the prospect of the gallows invests his action with a grim impressiveness.

I think authors should be chary of their murders. One is the perfect number, two are permissible, especially when the second is a direct consequence of the first, but it is an unpardonable error to introduce a second murder to enliven an investigation which the author fears is growing tedious. When you have more than two it becomes a massacre and as one violent death follows another you are more inclined to laugh than to quiver. It is a fault of the American authors of crime stories that they are seldom satisfied with one, or even two murders; they shoot, stab, poison or black­jack *en masse;* they are apt to turn their pages into a shambles and the reader is left with the uncomfortable feeling that they have been playing the fool with him. It is a pity, for America with its mixed population and the multifarious cross-currents of its life, with its vitality, ruthlessness and adventurous temper, offers the novelist a far more diverse and inspiring field of action than our own settled, humdrum and on the whole law-abiding country.

II

The theory of the detective story of deduction is simple. Someone is murdered, there is an investigation, suspicion falls on a number of persons, the culprit is discovered and pays the penalty of his crime. This is the classic formula and it contains in itself all the elements of a good story, for it has a beginning, a middle and an end. It was laid down by Edgar Allan Poe in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* and for many years was scrupulously followed. For long *Trent’s Last Case* has been considered the perfect story constructed on these lines. It is written in a more leisurely manner than is now usual, but it is written with an agreeable lightness in good English. The characters are well-drawn and plausible. The humour is unobtrusive. It is a bit of bad luck for Mr. E. C. Bentley that finger-prints, about which at the time he wrote little was known, have now become part of the usual police procedure. They have since then been used by innumerable writers and the elaboration with which Mr. Bentley describes the process has lost its point. Readers of detective stories have now grown crafty, and when a gentle, kindly old man who has apparently no motive to commit a murder is presented to them, they have no hesitation in deciding that it was he who committed it. You cannot read many pages of *Trent's Last Case* without being sure that Mr. Cupples is the guilty party. But you can still read the book with interest to find out why he should have killed Mander­son. Mr. Bentley has deliberately neglected to conform to the canon that the crime should be brought home to the culprit by the detective. The mystery would never have been solved if Mr. Cupples had not obligingly revealed the truth. It must be admitted that it is by a most improbable coincidence that he found himself concealed in a place in circumstances which obliged him to shoot Manderson in self-defence. Nor are these circumstances credible. It is asking us to believe too much that a hard-headed business man will plot his own suicide to get his secretary hanged and it is futile to adduce the well-known Campden Case in which John Perry accused his mother, brother and himself of murdering a man, afterwards discovered to be alive, in order to get them hanged even though, as happened, it meant that he would be hanged himself. That some­thing has occurred in real life does not make it a fitting subject of fiction. Life is full of improbabilities which fiction does not admit of.

To me the greatest mystery, never explained, of *Trent's Last Case* is why a man of enormous wealth, with a country house of at least fourteen rooms and an indoor staff of six servants, should have had a garden so small that it needed no more attention than could be given it on two days a week by a man from the village.

But though, as I have said, the theory of the detective story is simple, it is astonishing how many pitfalls beset the author. His aim is to prevent you from discovering who the murderer is till you have reached the end of his book, and he is justified in using every wile he can think of to achieve it. But he must play fair with you. The murderer must be a person who takes a prominent part in the story, and it will not do to make him a shadowy character or one who has figured so slightly that your attention has never been drawn to him. But if he has loomed large in your narrative there is the danger that he will have excited your interest and perhaps your sympathy, so that you will be displeased if he is arrested and put to death. Sympathy is a very ticklish thing. It often attaches itself to a character contrary to the author’s intention. (I believe Jane Austen meant Henry and Mary Crawford to be trashy creatures whom the reader was to condemn for their levity and heartlessness, but she has made them so gay and so charming that you like them much better than prim Fanny Price and pompous Edmund Bertram.) There is one curious thing about sympathy which I do not think everyone is aware of. The reader’s sympathy goes to those characters who are first presented to him; and not only in crime stories, but in other stories as well, he will be left with the feeling that he has been imposed upon if the persons for whom his interest has been aroused during the first ten pages do not turn out to be those with whom he is afterwards to concern himself. I think it would be worth the while of the writers of detective stories to remember this law and introduce their murderer only after several other characters.

It is evident that if the murderer is from the beginning made odious, with whatever red herrings the ingenious author strews your path, your suspicions will fall on him and the story will be finished before it is begun. Authors sometimes try to evade the quandary by making all or most of the characters odious, so that you have a choice among them. I am not convinced that this is successful. For one thing, it is hard to believe now, as the Victorians did, in unrelieved villainy. We know that people are a mixture of good and bad; we do not believe in them when they are represented as all good or all bad, and as soon as we no longer do that, the author has lost us. We do not care what happens to his puppets. He has got then to make his murderer that same mixture of good and bad that we know human beings are, but he has so to load the dice that when his guilt is brought home to him we are content to see him hanged. One way of loading the dice is to make the crime a very mean and brutal one. Of course we may jib at the notion that such a crime can have been committed by someone who has at least certain engaging traits; but that is the least of the difficulties that here confront the author. No one (in a detective story) has any sympathy for the victim. Either he has been killed before the book starts, or is killed so soon after that, since you know little about him, you can take no interest in him on his own account, his death means no more to you than a chicken’s, and however barbarous the method, his decease leaves you cold. Moreover, if suspicion is to be thrown on a number of persons, there must be a number of motives for his murder. He must, by his own crimes, follies, bad temper, brutality, avarice or what not, have made himself so objectionable that his death perturbs you but little. He would presumably not have been killed without good reason, and if we come to the conclusion that he is just as well out of the way we are not too well pleased to see his murderer hanged. Some authors avoid the dilemma by making the murderer commit suicide when he is discovered. This justifies the canon that a life should be paid for a life, but spares the susceptibilities of the reader to whom the circum­stances of the hangman’s rope are repellent. The murderer then should be bad, but not too bad to be obvious and not too bad to be incredible; his motive should be compelling and he should be sufficiently unsympathetic so that when his crime is brought home to him we should feel that he richly deserves the gallows.

I should like to dwell for a little on this matter of motive. I once visited the penal colony of French Guiana. I have told elsewhere of this experience, but I do not expect anyone to have read all I have written, and since it is to the point I make no apology for repeating myself. There were then at least three establishments to which convicts were sent according to the nature of their crimes and at St. Laurent de Maroni all were murderers. Since the jury had in their verdict allowed that there were extenuating circum­stances they had been sentenced not to death, but to a long term of imprisonment. I spent one whole day enquiring into the reasons that had led them to commit their crime. They were quite willing to talk. On the surface many of them seemed to have murdered for love’s sake or from jealousy. They had killed their wives, or their wife’s lover, or their mistress. But I didn’t have to ask much further to discover that the ulterior motive was financial. One man killed his wife because she was spending his money on a lover, another killed his mistress because she stood in the way of his making a rich marriage, a third because she black­mailed him into giving her money by threatening to divulge their relations to his wife. Even when sex had nothing to do with the murder money was still the compelling incentive. One man killed to rob, another killed his brother in a quarrel over the division of an inheritance, a third killed his partner because he did not receive his proper share on the sale of stolen motor­cars. One *apache* killed the woman he was living with because she had betrayed him to the police, another killed a member of a rival gang in revenge for the killing in a drunken brawl of a member of his own gang.

I came across no murder that could justly be des­cribed as a crime of passion. Perhaps of course those who had committed one were acquitted by a lenient jury or sentenced to so short a term of imprisonment that they were not sent to Guiana. Another common motive was fear. There was a young shepherd boy who had raped a little girl in a field and when she screamed grew frightened and strangled her. One man, in a good position, killed a woman who discovered that he had once been in prison for fraud and he was afraid that she would tell his employers.

It looks then as though the most plausible motives for murder that the detective-story writer can use are money, fear and revenge. Murder is a horrible thing and the murderer takes a great risk. It is hard to make your reader believe that he will take it because the girl he loves has given her affection to somebody else or because a colleague in a bank has been promoted over his head. The stakes he plays for must be high. The author’s business is to persuade you that they are worth playing for.

III

At least equal in importance with the murderer is the detective. Every assiduous reader of crime stories can trip off a list of eminent sleuths, but the most famous is certainly Sherlock Holmes. For an anthology of short stories that I was preparing several years ago I re-read the collected stories of Conan Doyle. I was surprised to find how poor they were. The introduction is effective, the scene well set, but the anecdote is thin and you finish the tale with a sense of dissatisfaction. Great cry and little wool. I thought it necessary, however, to have one of these stories in an anthology that purported to be representative, but I had difficulty in finding even one that I thought the intelligent reader would be content to read. The fact remains that Sherlock Holmes caught and has held the public fancy. His name is a household word in every country in the civilised world. People know it who have never heard of Sir Willoughby Patterne, Monsieur Bergeret or Madame Verdurin. He was drawn in broad and telling lines, a melodramatic figure, with marked idiosyncrasies which Conan Doyle hammered into the minds of his readers with the same pertinacity as the great advertisers use to proclaim the merits of their soap, beer or cigarettes, and the results were as remunerative. You know no more of Sherlock Holmes after you have read fifty stories than you did after reading one, but the constant reiteration has broken down your resistance; and this lay figure, decked out with theatrical properties, has acquired the same sort of life in your imagination as is held by Vautrin or Mr. Micawber. No detective stories have had the popularity of Conan Doyle’s, and because of the invention of Sherlock Holmes I think it may be admitted that none has so well deserved it.

Detectives are of three kinds. There is the police officer, the ‘private eye’, known also, I believe, as a shamus, and the amateur. The amateur has for long been very popular and the writers of this class of fiction have exerted their invention to devise a character that they could use again and again. The police officer is generally a conventional figure with little individuality; at best he is astute, pains taking and logical; but for the most part he is unimaginative and obtuse. Then of course he serves as a convenient foil to the amateur’s brilliance. The amateur may be endowed with a number of distinctive features which give him some semblance of a human being. By discovering things that had escaped the inspector from Scotland Yard he can prove that the amateur is more intelligent and more competent than the professional, and this is naturally gratifying to the readers of a country in which the expert is always regarded with suspicion. The conflict between the two has a dramatic quality and, law-abiding as we may be, it does not displease us to see authority in the end made ridiculous. The most important of the traits which the writer takes care to attribute to his amateur detective is humour; and this not, as you might suppose, because by making your reader laugh you induce in him an emotional instability which will make him react more violently to your thrills; but for a much more important reason. It is very necessary that your amateur detective should by his wit or some absurd mannerism of speech arouse laughter, for if you can laugh at or with a character you cannot but have a certain sympathy with him; and to enlist your sympathy is here essential to the writer.

For he has to use every means he can think of to conceal from you the patent fact that the amateur detective is a dirty dog.

He makes some show of working disinterestedly in the cause of justice, or if that is too much even for the readers of detective stories to swallow, that he is possessed by a passion for the chase; but the truth is that he is a busybody and a nosey-parker who from sheer love of interfering in what does not concern him engages in work which any decent person would leave to the officers of the law whose duty it is to do it. It is only by endowing him with engaging planners, an agreeable physique and lovable eccentricities that he can be made palatable to the reader. Above all he must have a line of amusing chatter. Unfortunately few of the writers of detective stories count a very delicate sense of humour among their accomplishments. Too many of them suppose that a joke can be repeated a hundred times and still amuse. Is it enough to make a character use English which is a literal, and often inaccurate, translation from the French to cause laughter? Is it enough to make him constantly quote or misquote hackneyed lines of verse or express himself in language of extravagant pomposity? Is it enough to use a Yorkshire dialect or reproduce an Irish brogue to make you split your sides? If it were, humorists would be two a penny, and neither Mr. P. G. Wode­house nor Mr. S. J. Perelman would earn a living. I am still waiting for the story in which the amateur detective is shown as the despicable creature he really is and in the end gets his deserts.

I look upon the introduction of humour in a detective story as mistaken, but I see the reason for it and with a sigh accept it; on the other hand I have no patience with love interest. It may be that love makes the world go round, but not the world of detective stories; it makes it go very much askew. I do not care if it is the gentleman-like sleuth, the chief inspector or the wrongly accused hero who wins the girl in the end. In a detective story I want detection. The line is indicated —murder, inquiry, suspicion, discovery and punish­ment; and the philandering of young women, however charming, with young gentlemen, however lantern- jawed, is a tiresome diversion from the theme. Love of course is one of the springs of human action, and when it gives rise to jealousy, fear or wounded vanity may well serve the author’s purpose, but it narrows the field of investigation; for presumably not more than two or three of the persons in your story are affected by its power; and when it is indeed the motive for murder this becomes a *crime passionnel* and the murderer ceases to be an object of unmitigated horror. But to introduce a pretty little love story in the unravelling of a mystery is an error of taste for which there is no excuse. Marriage bells have no place in a detective story.

I think another error that these writers often commit is to make the method of murder too far-fetched. Con­sidering how vast is the output of these stories it is natural enough that they should seek to tempt the reader’s jaded appetite by murders of an extraordinary character. I remember reading one in which several murders were perpetrated by means of poisonous fish introduced into a swimming pool. To my mind such ingenuities are mistaken. The probable, as we know, is relative, and only the fact that we accept it as such is the test of it. In detective fiction we will accept a great deal; we will accept it that the murderer should leave on the scene of the crime a cigarette-end of an unusual make, muddy his shoes with a particular mould or scatter his finger-prints on my lady’s chamber. We may all have our roof burnt over our heads and perish in the flames, be run over by an enemy’s car, or pushed over a precipice; but we cannot believe that we shall ever be tom to pieces by a crocodile cunningly introduced into our sitting-room at the Dorchester or that when we are visiting the Louvre a villain by some fiendish machination will cause the Venus of Milo to fall and crush us as flat as a Dover sole. I think the classical methods still remain the best; the knife, the fire-arm, poison retain the advantages of probability. We may all fall victim to them or have occasion to use them.

The best writers of detective stories are those who give you the facts and the inferences to be drawn from them in readable English, but without any graces of style. Fine writing is here out of place. We do not want a purple passage to distract us when we hanker to know the meaning of that bruise on the butler’s chin, nor do we want a description of scenery when the only thing that matters to us is to decide exactly how long it takes us to walk from the boat-house above the mill-race to the gamekeeper’s cottage on the other side of the coppice. Nothing to us is the primrose by the river’s brim. And in passing I may remark that I find it tedious to be asked by the aid of a map or a plan to make myself acquainted with the topography of the district or the lay-out of a house. Nor do we want erudition. The display of this has to my mind caused a sad falling off in one of the most ingenious and inventive of our contemporary masters of the detective story. She is a woman, I am told, of academic dis­tinction and she has a remarkable knowledge of matters about which most of us are ignorant; but she would do better to keep it to herself. Of course it is galling to the writers of these clever books, which are read by every­body, high-brows, middle-brows and low-brows, that they should bring them so little credit. Are they invited to luncheon parties in Chelsea, or in Blooms­bury, or even in Mayfair? When publishers give their literary soirées do excited guests point them out to one another? Not more than a few of them are even known by name. The rest are enveloped in a vast anonymity of indifference.

It is natural that they should resent the patronising attitude which the very people who voraciously read their books adopt towards them, and should not be averse, when they have the chance, from drawing your attention to the fact that they are more refined and more cultivated than you appear to think. It is only human that they should wish to show the supercilious that they can be as learned as any Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and as lyrical as any member of the Council of the Authors’ Society. But it is a mistake. Let them be as strong as their own inspectors. It is very well that they should have wide information on all sorts of subjects, indeed they need it, but let them remark that the well-dressed man is he whose clothes you never notice; the culture of the detective-story writer should never distract attention from his proper business, which is to elucidate the mystery of a murder.

But let them have patience. It may well be that when the historians of literature come to discourse upon the fiction produced by the English-speaking peoples during the first half of this century they will pass some­what lightly over the compositions of the ‘serious’ novelists and turn their attention to the immense and varied achievement of the detective writers. They will have to account first for the enormous popularity of this particular variety of fiction. They will be mistaken if they ascribe it to the increase of literacy which has created a huge body of avid but uneducated readers, for the ‘whodunit’, they will have to admit, was read also by men of learning and women of taste. My explanation is simple. The detective writers have a story to tell and they tell it briefly. They must capture and hold the reader’s attention and so must get into their story with dispatch. They must arouse curiosity, excite suspense and by the invention of incident main­tain the reader’s interest. They must enlist his sympathy for the right characters, and the ingenuity with which they do this is not the least of their accomplishments. Finally they must work up to a satisfactory climax. They must in short follow the natural rules of story­telling that have been followed ever since some nimble­witted fellow told the story of Joseph in the tents of Israel.

Now, the ‘serious’ novelists of today have often little or no story to tell; indeed they have allowed themselves to be persuaded that to tell a story is a negligible element in the art they practise. Thus they throw away their strongest appeal to our common human nature, for the desire to listen to stories is surely as old as the human race; and they have only themselves to blame if the writers of detective stories have stolen their readers from them. Moreover, they are often intoler­ably long-winded. They too seldom understand that a theme will only allow of a certain development and so will take four hundred pages to tell you what could be told in a hundred. They are encouraged to do this by the contemporary fashion for psychological analysis. To my mind the abuse of this is as harmful to the ‘serious’ fiction of today as was the abuse of the descrip­tion of scenery in the novels of the nineteenth century. We have learnt now that descriptions of scenery should be short and should be used with the one and only purpose of getting on with the story. So should psychological analysis. In short, the detective writers are read because of their merits notwithstanding their often obvious defects: the ‘serious’ novelists remain in comparison little read because of their defects notwith­standing their often conspicuous merits.

IV

Hitherto I have dealt with the simple story of detection founded on the principles laid down by Poe in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue.* During the last half- century such stories have been written by the thousand and their authors have used every possible expedient to give them a specious novelty. I have already referred to murder by unusual means. Authors have been quick to make use of every new scientific and medical discovery. They have stabbed their victims with sharp icicles, electrocuted them by telephone, injected air bubbles into their blood vessels, infected their shaving brushes with anthrax bacilli, killed them by making them lick poisoned stamps, shot them with guns concealed in cameras and polished them off by invisible death rays. These extravagant methods are too improbable to carry conviction.

Sometimes of course authors have shown remarkable ingenuity. One of their cleverest inventions has been what is known as the locked room puzzle: a dead man, obviously murdered, is found in a room locked from the inside so that the murderer could apparently neither have got in or out. Poe used the idea in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue.* It is surprising that the critics have never noticed that his explanation of the mystery is demonstrably false. When, as the reader will remember, the neighbours, roused by terrific shrieks, broke into the house inhabited by the two women, mother and daughter, whom they found murdered, the daughter was found in a room locked from the inside with the windows securely fastened also from within. Monsieur Dupin proves that the giant ape which had killed them had got in by an open window and this had closed by its own weight after the beast’s escape. Any policeman would have informed him that two Frenchwomen, one old and the other middle-aged, would *never* have left a window open to let in the noxious airs of night. However the ape got into the house it was not through an open window. The device has since then been most ably used by Carter

Dickson, but his success has produced so many imitators that it has by now lost its savour.

Every background has been utilised—the country house party in Sussex, Long Island or Florida, the quiet village in which nothing has happened since the Battle of Waterloo, the castle in the Hebrides isolated by a storm. So have clues—finger-prints, foot-prints, cigarette- ends, perfume, powder. So have unbreakable alibis which the detective breaks, the dog that does not bark, thus pointing to the fact that it was familiar with the murderer (this was first used, I think, by Conan Doyle), the code letter which the detective deciphers, the identical twins and secret passages. Readers no longer have patience with the girl who wanders about deserted corridors for no adequate reason and gets knocked on the head by a hooded, masked figure; nor with the girl who insists on accompanying the detective on a dangerous errand and by so doing makes a mess of his plans. All these settings, all these clues, all these puzzles have been worked to death. Of this, of course, the authors have grown well aware and they have sought to give interest to stories that have been told a hundred times already by inventions more and more extravagant. All in vain. Every method of murder, every finesse of detection, every guile to throw the reader off the scent, every scene of action in every class of life, has been used again and again. The story of pure deduction has run to seed.

It has been replaced in the public favour by the ‘hard-boiled’ story. This is said to have been invented by Dashiell Hammett, but Erle Stanley Gardner claims that the first to write it was a certain John Daly. In any case it was Hammett’s *The Maltese Falcon* that created the vogue. The hard-boiled story purports to be realistic. Duchesses, cabinet ministers, wealthy indus­trialists seldom get murdered. Murders seldom take place in great country houses, on golf links or at race meetings. They are seldom committed by elderly maiden ladies or retired diplomatists. Raymond Chandler, the most brilliant author now writing this kind of story, in his sensible and amusing essay, *The Simple Art of Murder,* specifies the constituents of the genre. ‘The realist in murder,’ he says, ‘writes of a world in which gangsters can rule nations and almost rule cities, in which hotels and apartment houses and celebrated restaurants are owned by men who made their money out of brothels, in which a screen star can be the fingerman for a mob, and a nice man down the hall is a boss of the numbers racket; a world where a judge with a cellar full of bootleg liquor can send a man to jail for having a pint in his pocket, where the mayor of your town may have condoned murder as an instrument of money-making, where no man can walk down a dark alley in safety because law and order are things we talk about but refrain from practising, a world where you may witness a hold-up in broad daylight and see who did it, but you will quickly fade back into the crowd rather than tell anyone, because the hold-up man may have friends with long guns or the police may not like your testimony, and in any case the shyster for the defence will be allowed to abuse and vilify you in open court, before a jury of selected morons, without any but the most perfunctory inter­ference from a political judge.’

All this is very well put and it is evident that such a state of society offers the realistic author suitable matter for a story of crime. The reader is willing to believe that the incidents related actually happened; indeed, he has only to read the newspapers to know that such things are happening far from seldom.

‘Dashiell Hammett,’ as Raymond Chandler says, ‘gave murder back to the kind of people that commit it for reasons, not just to provide a corpse, and with the means at hand, not with hand-wrought duelling pistols, curare and tropical fish. He put these people down on paper as they are, and he made them talk and think in the language they customarily used for their pur­poses.’ This is high praise and it is justified. Hammett had been for eight years a Pinkerton detective and he knew the world of which he wrote. It enabled him to give a plausibility to his stories which has been equalled only by Raymond Chandler himself.

In the novels of this school actual detection takes a relatively minor place. No great secret is made of the murderer’s identity and the interest of the story depends on the detective’s efforts to fasten the guilt on him and the dangers he incurs while doing so. A consequence of this is that the writers have discarded the tiresome use of clues. In fact, in *The Maltese Falcon,* Sam Spade, the detective, pins the murder of Archer on Brigid O’Shaughnessy by pointing out to her that she is the only person who *could* have committed it, whereupon she loses her presence of mind and admits it. If she hadn’t done this, but had coolly answered ‘Prove it’, he would have been nonplussed; and in any case had she got Perry Mason, Erie Stanley Gardner’s astute lawyer, to defend her, no jury would have convicted her on the flimsy evidence which was all that Spade had to produce.

The authors who specialise in the hard-boiled story have been at pains to give their detectives character and personality, but have mercifully refrained from giving them the extravagant oddities with which in imitation of Conan Doyle many of the writers of ‘pure’ detective stories have thought fit to endow their sleuths.

Dashiell Hammett is an inventive and original writer. Unlike the authors who use the same detective over and over again, he has created a different one for every story. The detective in *The Dane Curse* appears to be a fat, middle-aged man who depends on his wits and his nerve rather than upon his brawn; Nick Charles in *The Thin Man* has married a wife with money and retired from the business, which he resumes only on pressure; he is a pleasant fellow, with a sense of humour; Ned Beaumont in *The Glass Key,* a professional gambler and only a detective by accident, is a curious, intriguing character whom any novelist would have been proud to conceive; Sam Spade, in *The Maltese Falcon,* is the best of them all and the most convincing. He is an unscrupulous rogue and a heartless crook. He is himself so nearly a criminal that there is little to choose between him and the criminals he is dealing with. He is a nasty bit of goods, but he is admirably depicted.

Sherlock Holmes was a private detective, but the authors who came after Conan Doyle seem to have preferred to solve their mysteries by means of a police inspector or a brilliant amateur. Dashiell Hammett, having been himself a private detective, very naturally used private detectives when he came to write stories, and his successors in the hard-boiled school have very wisely followed his good example. The ‘private eye’ is at once a romantic and a sinister figure. Like the amateur he can be cleverer than members of the force and he can do things, mostly shady, which they are by law forbidden to do. He has the further advan­tage that, since the District Attorney and the police regard his unorthodox methods with suspicion, he has to fight them as well as the criminal. It adds tension and dramatic conflict to the story. Finally he has the advantage over the amateur detective that as it is his business to deal with crime he cannot be regarded as a busybody who pokes his nose into what is no concern of his. But why he has adopted this unsavoury pro­fession we are not told. It does not appear to be a lucrative one, for he is always short of money, and his office is small and poorly famished. We are told little about his antecedents. He seems to have neither father, mother, uncles, aunts, brothers or sisters. On the other hand he is fortunate in having a secretary who is blonde, beautiful and loving. He treats her with kindly affection and now and again rewards her devotion with a kiss, but so far as I can remember is never so far carried away as to make her a proposal of marriage. Though (with the exception of Chandler’s Philip Marlow) we are not told where he comes from nor how he acquired the knowledge to pursue his avocation, we are told a good deal about his person and his habits. He is irresistible to women. He is tall and strong and tough, and can knock a man out as easily as we can swat a fly. He can take any amount of punishment without permanent injury, for he has more courage than prudence, and will put himself, often unarmed, in the power of dangerous criminals who beat him up so brutally that you are astonished to find him up and about in a day or so apparently none the worse for it, and he will take risks so hazardous that you hold your breath. The suspense, indeed, would be unbearable if you did not know that the gangsters, crooks and blackmailers who have him at their mercy dare not riddle him with bullets or your novel would come to an untimely end. He has remarkable power of absorbing hard liquor. In the drawer of his desk there is always a bottle of rye or bourbon which he gets out whenever he has a caller and whenever he has nothing else to do. He keeps a flask in his hip-pocket and a pint in the glove-compartment of his car. The first tiling he does when he arrives at an hotel is to send the bell-boy for a bottle. His staple diet, like that of most Americans, has a certain monotony about it and consists for the most part of bacon and eggs or steak and ‘French fried’. The only ‘private eye’ that I can remember who cares what he eats is Nero Wolf, but he is a mid- European and his un-American addiction to succulent victuals, like his passion for orchids, must be ascribed to his foreign birth.

The social historian of the future may notice with surprise what is plainly a difference in American habits between the time when Dashiell Hammett wrote his stories and the time when Raymond Chandler wrote his. After an exhausting day passed in heavy drinking and hair-breadth escapes from violent death Ned Beaumont changes his collar and washes his hands and face, but Raymond Chandler’s Marlow, unless my memory deceives me, has a shower and puts on a clean shirt. It is evident that the habit of cleanliness had in the interval gained an increasing hold on the American male. Marlow, unlike Sam Spade, is an honest man. He wants to make money, but will only earn it by lawful means, and he will not touch divorce. Marlow is himself the narrator of the too few stories Raymond Chandler has written. Usually the narrator and protagonist of a novel remains a shadowy character, as for instance is David Copperfield, but Raymond Chandler has succeeded in making Marlow a vivid human being. He is a hard, fierce, fearless man and a very likeable fellow.

To my mind the two best novelists of the hard-boiled school are Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. Raymond Chandler is the more accomplished. Some­times Hammett’s story is so complicated that you are not a trifle confused: Raymond Chandler maintains an unswerving line. His pace is swifter. He deals with a more varied assortment of persons. He has a greater sense of probability and his motivation is more plausible. Both write a nervous, colloquial English racy of the American soil. Raymond Chandler’s dialogue seems to me better than Hammett’s. He has an admirable aptitude for that typical product of the quick American mind, the wisecrack, and his sardonic humour has an engaging spontaneity.

The hard-boiled novel, as I have said, lays little stress on the detection of crime. It is concerned with the people, crooks, gamblers, thieves, blackmailers, corrupt policemen, dishonest politicians, who commit crimes. Incidents occur, but incidents derive their interest from the individuals who are concerned in them. If they are merely lay-figures you do not care what they do or what happens to them. The result of this is that the writers of this school have had to pay more attention to characterisation than the old writers of the story of deduction found necessary. They have had to make their people not only credible, but con­vincing. Most of the older detectives were creatures of farce and the extravagant oddities their authors gave them succeeded only in making them grotesque. Such persons never existed but in their begetters’ wrong­headedness. The other actors in their stories were stock characters without individuality. Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler have created characters that we can believe in. They are only a little more heightened, a little more vivid, than people we have all come across.

Having been at one time a novelist myself I have been interested in the way both these authors describe the appearance of the various persons they deal with. It is always difficult to give the reader an exact impres­sion of what someone looks like and novelists have tried various methods to achieve it. Hammett and Raymond Chandler specify the appearance of their characters and the clothes they wear, though briefly, as exactly as do the police when they send to the papers a description of a wanted man. Raymond Chandler has effectively pursued the method further. When Marlow, his detective, enters a room or an office we are told concisely, but in detail, precisely what furni­ture is in it, what pictures hang on the walls and what rugs lie on the floor. We are impressed by the detec­tive’s power of observation. It is done as neatly as a playwright (if he is not as verbose as Bernard Shaw) describes for his director the scene and the furnishings of each act of his play. The device cleverly gives the perspicacious reader an indication of the sort of person and the circumstances the detective is likely to encounter. When you know a man’s surroundings you already know something about the man.

But I think the enormous success these two writers have had, not only financial, for their books have sold by the million, but critical, has killed the genre. Dozens of imitators have sprung up. Like all imitators they have thought by exaggeration to improve upon their models. They have been more slangy, so slangy that you need a glossary to know what they are talking about; their criminals have been more brutal, more violent, more sadistic; their female characters have been more blonde and more man-crazy; their detectives have been more unscrupulous and more alcoholic; and their policemen have been more inept and more corrupt. In fact they have been so outrageous that they have become preposterous. In their frantic search for sensationalism they have numbed their readers and instead of horrifying them have caused them to laugh with derision. There is only one of the many merits of the two authors I have been discussing that they do not seem to have thought worth copying. They have made no attempt to write good English.

I do not see who can succeed Raymond Chandler. I believe the detective story, both the story of pure deduc­tion and the hard-boiled story, is dead. But that will not prevent a multitude of authors from continuing to write such stories, nor will it prevent me from continuing to read them.