

# TALES OF DETECTION



EDITED BY DOROTHY L. SAYERS

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FICTION

TALES OF DETECTION  
EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION  
BY DOROTHY L. SAYERS

## INTRODUCTION

THE expression 'Detective Story,' though still loosely used to describe any tale dealing with crime and detectives, has acquired of late years a narrower, specialized meaning. Careful writers now reserve it for those stories of crime and detection in which the interest lies in the setting of a problem and its solution by logical means. Psychological studies of the criminal mind are more properly called 'crime stories'; while criminological problems whose solutions are arbitrarily revealed by coincidence or accident, or by straightforward explanations by the author, are styled 'mysteries' or 'thrillers.' Although, theoretically, there is no very good reason why a problem story should not be written about some subject other than crime, yet the detective story is, historically, an offshoot of the story of crime and sensation, and retains the marks of its origin: its intellectual structure is embellished by the emotional elements of horror, moral indignation, and excitement common to all types of crime literature.

It took some time for the detective story, as we know it, to establish itself as a specialized branch of crime fiction. We find sporadic examples of it in Oriental folk-tales, in the Apocryphal Books of the Old Testament, in the play-scene in *Hamlet*; while Aristotle in his *Poetics* puts forward observations about dramatic plot-construction which are applicable to-day to the construction of a detective mystery. But the story in which the logical problem is recognized as the main source of interest is, for practical purposes, the invention of the last ninety years. Even within this period it was only by slow degrees that the most important principle of the modern detective story was isolated and generally accepted: the principle which we know as the 'Fair-Play Rule.'

I say 'isolated and generally accepted,' because the fair-play rule was, on two occasions, discovered and applied quite early in the period. In three at least of Edgar Allan Poe's stories, published in the 'forties, the essential clues are all collected and set before the reader *before* the detective makes any deductions

from them. Again, and apparently quite independently, Wilkie Collins hit upon the same method of narration in *The Moonstone* (1868). But neither critics nor imitators seem to have grasped at the time the essential difference between these stories and other stories dealing with the exploits of detectives. Not until the present century did readers, helped by such able critics as G. K. Chesterton and Father Ronald Knox, learn to make the observance of the fair-play rule the test of quality in a detective story.

The brilliant experiments of Edgar Allan Poe have something Melchizedek-like about them; in a literary sense they are, to all intents and purposes, without beginning or descent, and it is difficult to show that they derive from anything but his own analytical mind, which he enjoyed exercising upon real or invented criminological problems. Nor do they appear to have exercised any great immediate literary influence. Poe's style, at once harsh and affected, was against him; and although he himself says that his object in writing these stories was 'to depict some very remarkable features in the character of' his detective, Dupin, his character-drawing was not sufficiently vivid or sympathetic to capture the fancy of the common reader. Yet he gave us the working model of the Holmes-Watson combination and of that opposition between the conventional policeman and the unconventional amateur which was later to become a commonplace of detective fiction. He also established the two great formulae for the 'surprise' solution, by way of the unexpected means (*Murders in the Rue Morgue*) and the most unlikely person (*Thou Art the Man*), and, in *The Purloined Letter*, pointed the way to the solution achieved by psychological, rather than material, clues.

During the following four decades, however, the main development of the detective story lay along the lines of the English 'sensational novel' of Dickens, Collins, and Le Fanu, and the French *roman policier* of Gaboriau.

Now the main difference between these writers and Poe is, put crudely and plainly, that he was a short-story writer and they were novelists. Recent improvements in police organization on both sides of the Channel had aroused a widespread general interest in detective problems, but both in England and in France this particular interest was grafted on to the main stock of the novel of adventure and the novel of contem-

porary bourgeois manners. The writers approach the subject in the spirit of the novelist: however complicated the problem, they never present the story as an isolated episode existing solely in virtue of its relation to the mechanics of detection. They are interested in the social background, in manners and morals, in the depiction and interplay of character; their works have a three-dimensional extension in time and space; they all, in their various ways, offer some kind of 'criticism of life.' Dickens, delighting in humour and humanity; Gaboriau, wittily depicting the life of the French provincial town and interrupting the progress of the detection in order to go back and retell the story from the emotional point of view of the murderer; Le Fanu, with his emphasis on the picturesque and romantic and his masterly evocation of an atmosphere of spiritual evil; Collins, solidly preoccupied with such important social questions as the inequalities of the marriage law and the legal position of illegitimate children; all conceive of the 'mystery' as a constructional element in a work of universal scope, and view their characters in relation to a life outside the limits of the plot. Even in *The Moonstone*, in which the human interest is most rigidly subordinated to the plot-structure, the handling is unmistakably that of a novelist; Poe might have constructed the impeccable 'fair-play' plot, but he could never have surrounded it with such suggestive and rounded studies of life and character as Rachel Verinder, Gabriel Betteredge, and Rosanna Spearman.

In this rich and complex structure which we know as the 'sensation novel' of the 'sixties, contemporaries naturally failed to single out the element which was new in European literature or to see the possibilities of special development inherent in the fair-play plot. Lesser exponents imitated, as usual, the worst qualities of the masters. They grasped the rough idea of a secret, a sensation, a surprise solution; what escaped them was the importance of the logical elements in the unravelling of the mystery. By piling secret on secret and shock on shock and leaving the solution to chance coincidence, they succeeded in debasing the sensation novel until it became as vulgar, trivial, and unwholesome as its worst enemies had ever thought it. Good novelists, now earnestly tackling religious, social, moral, and political questions, would have nothing to do with it, and it was left for hack writers to concoct, ever more thick and slab, the hotchpotch of murders, bigamies,



lost wills, missing heirs, impersonations, thefts, frauds, and sensational coincidences, to tickle the indiscriminating palate in defiance of sense and decency.

When, towards the end of the century, Conan Doyle came to put new life into detective fiction and lift it once more to a plane where self-respecting readers could take notice of it, it is significant that his great success was achieved in short-story form. True, the first Sherlock Holmes tale was, in its material aspect, a brief novel, with its formal structure modelled upon Gaboriau (*Study in Scarlet*, 1887). But he is the spiritual heir, not of Gaboriau, and still less of Dickens, Collins, or Le Fanu, but of Poe. Holmes and Watson (whoever may have been their prototypes in real life) are Dupin and his friend made human and lovable. Brilliantly as they are conceived, they do not belong to the wide and complex world of the novel, but to the more restricted field of the short story. They are static figures; after forty years they have not aged or developed in any essential manner, and, despite all ingenious speculation about the number of Dr. Watson's marriages, they remain men with no private lives. Again, the social background and the minor characters are sketched in with no more elaboration than is strictly necessary to the plot. If we compare, for example, *No Name* with *The Hound of the Baskervilles* we realize at once that it is something more than a difference in wordage that makes the one a novel and the other an expanded short story.

On the other hand, Conan Doyle does not invariably follow Poe's stern example in laying *all* the clues before the reader: over and over again, Holmes presents his deductions first and his observations after.

'How do you know that he values it [the pipe] highly?' I asked.

'Well, I should put the original cost of the pipe at seven-and-sixpence. Now it has, you see, been twice mended: once in the wooden stem and once in the amber. Each of these mends, done, as you observe, with silver bands, must have cost more than the pipe did originally. The man must value the pipe highly when he prefers to patch it up rather than buy a new one with the same money.'

*The Yellow Face.*

'Fair play' would have described the pipe and its repairs first and given the detective's conclusions only after the reader had had the opportunity of drawing them for himself. Poe sometimes allows Dupin to let off detective fireworks in this

arbitrary manner, as in the famous 'thought-reading' passage in *The Rue Morgue*, but with him they are incidental decorations only, whereas Conan Doyle frequently allows them to intrude into the investigation of the central problem.

Thus, the Sherlock Holmes stories, in a sense, miss the great qualities both of Poe and of the great sensation novelists, having neither the analytical purity of the one nor the wide human range of the others. Yet Doyle's contribution to detective fiction is of enormous importance. His style is clear, witty, workmanlike, and persuasive, free from violent sensationalism on the one hand and from academic pomposity on the other; his characters, within their limitations, have the breath of life in them and command belief and enthusiastic affection; finally, he initiates the reader into the romantic adventure of the intellect, exciting him, not by a multiplication of shocks and horrors, but by contemplation of 'the great issues that may hang from a bootlace.' Poe had been too abstract, the sensation novelists too emotional; but now it became possible for the detective story to win the heart of the public in its own right as a problem.

The immediate result was a huge demand for more stories of this kind and a stimulation of the reader's intellectual powers. People began eagerly to observe phenomena for themselves and make their own deductions. They became more critical and demanded from detective writers an increased regard for technical accuracy. Doctors complained of sketchy medical detail; policemen of infractions of official etiquette; lawyers of impossible court scenes and indefensible tamperings with the rules of evidence. Writers, hastening to comply with these requirements, found huge stores of material ready and waiting to be used. The possibilities of science were explored: L. T. Meade, in collaboration first with Clifford Halifax and later with Robert Eustace, wrote the long series of tales beginning with *Stories from the Diary of a Doctor* (1893) and ending with *The Sorceress of the Strand* (1902), and this paved the way for R. Austin Freeman and the modern scientific detective story. In 1913, Frank Froest, an ex-superintendent of Scotland Yard, wrote *The Grell Mystery* along the lines of real-life detective methods; and after him came others—Freeman Wills Crofts, J. J. Connington, John Rhode, Henry Wade, E. R. Punshon—to make the policeman the hero, instead of the butt, of detective fiction. Legal technicalities were exploited: the laws of

marriage and inheritance, the peculiar pleas of *autrefois acquit* and *autrefois convict*; the custom of gavelkind and the intricacies of the law of entail. Settings were chosen (such as railways, artists' studios, ancient universities) in which special local knowledge played its part in propounding and solving the problem. New discoveries in all spheres (wireless telephony, 'heavy air,' the new barbituric compounds, invisible rays, infra-red photography, Freudian psychology) were pressed into the service to bring about a murder or a discovery. As the public became familiar with the technique of detection by finger-prints, analysis of bloodstains, tests for poison, microscopic examination of bullets, and so forth, the fictional machinery was elaborated to keep pace with the intensive education of the reader's mind. The fair-play rule came to be established; and it was finally accepted that, while the clues must be shown and the solution reached by reasonable deduction, yet the writer might assume the reader to be acquainted with *any* established and recorded fact, however obscure or recently discovered.

Though it was no doubt highly necessary to achieve this perfection of technique, the result was that the detective story became over-intellectualized. The human interest was lost in the mechanical ingenuities of the plot; and since any competent craftsman could hammer together a problem of this kind, the genre once again began to be neglected by the genuine literary artists. Though much of the best detective work was produced in novel form, the technique was still that of the short story 'with a twist in the tail,' and everything—more especially psychological probability—was sacrificed to the 'surprise ending.'

A few writers, such as E. C. Bentley and A. E. W. Mason, still remembered that they were novelists and strove hard to keep the detective story in touch with life; but these were rare exceptions. It became axiomatic that the great romantic emotions were out of place in detective fiction, so that we observed the extraordinary phenomenon of a whole literature based upon a hypothesis of crime and violence and yet abstaining from any serious treatment of the sins and passions—particularly the sexual passions—which commonly form the motives for violent crime. H. C. Bailey, indeed, founded his 'Mr. Fortune' stories on a genuine morbid psychology, while G. K. Chesterton—a voice crying in the wilderness—succeeded,

almost alone, in bringing the name of God into a detective story without making it sound like a blasphemy. But the mass of writers shrank from any profound treatment of the larger emotions, and preferred to handle their characters as mere chess-pieces endowed with conventional attributes.

Now, no kind of fiction can survive for very long cut off from the great interests of humanity and from the main stream of contemporary literature. Many readers complained they 'couldn't read detective stories' because the characters were uninteresting and the writing was uninspired. It looked as though the time had come to revert—but this time with the improved fair-play technique—to the Victorian conception of a detective story that should at the same time be a novel of character and manners; and the modern tendency is towards this kind of development. We can now handle the mechanical elements of the plot with the ease of long practice; we have yet to discover the best way of combining these with a serious artistic treatment of the psychological elements, so that the intellectual and the common man can find common ground for enjoyment in the mystery novel as once they did in Greek or Elizabethan tragedy.

The present collection of examples, being necessarily confined to short stories, cannot altogether do justice to those writers whose best work has been produced in novel form; it does, however, illustrate certain tendencies in the development of the detective story. Poe's *Purloined Letter* shows his criminal using his knowledge of psychology to bamboozle the police, and outwitted by a detective expert in drawing psychological inferences. In *The Biter Bit*, Wilkie Collins makes use of his technical legal knowledge within the narrow frame of the short story. The excerpt from Stevenson's *Master of Ballantrae* is an excellent early example of the 'perfect murder' that seeks to baffle justice by escaping beyond the range of legal and material proof. *The Man in the Passage* displays G. K. Chesterton both in his strength and weakness—the material clues a little neglected (though fairly presented as far as they go); the psychological clues illuminating by their insight into human nature and leading up to a brilliant surprise ending. E. C. Bentley's *Clever Cockatoo* and Ernest Bramah's *Ghost at Massingham Mansions* achieve a delicate balance of the humane and the intellectual elements. The purely scientific detective story is represented by *The Tea-Leaf* (by Edgar Jepson and

Robert Eustace) and *The Contents of a Mare's Nest* (a typical Austin Freeman). Thomas Burke's sinister tale, *The Hands of Mr. Ottermole*, creates so fine an atmosphere of horror that only at a second reading do we observe how fairly the clues are laid. Father Ronald Knox in *Solved by Inspection* deals in plain inference from observation. Agatha Christie, though better known through her 'Hercule Poirot' detective stories, provides in *Philomel Cottage* a modern specimen of the 'perfect murder' by psychological means for comparison with the Stevenson tale. Anthony Berkeley's *Avenging Chance* is the 'short story with a twist in the tail'; he is a master of this method, and subsequently elaborated this same plot to novel-length, giving it an extra twist in the process (*Poisoned Chocolates Case*). In *The Sleeping-Car Express* and *The Elusive Bullet*, Freeman Wills Crofts and John Rhode make use of their expert technical knowledge of railways and ballistics, respectively. *The Image in the Mirror* is my own attempt to make fair use of a motif which has sometimes been used unfairly to spring a surprise which the reader could not have foreseen; here the clue is openly and even ostentatiously trailed for the reader who happens to have dabbled about among popular works on biology. Henry Wade's *A Matter of Luck* is the kind of story in which the reader is shown the crime first and the detection afterwards; it shows his realistic handling of police methods. In *Superfluous Murder*, Milward Kennedy uses the method first popularised by R. Austin Freeman of showing the method of the crime first and the method of detection after; adding a cynical twist in the modern manner. H. C. Bailey's *Yellow Slugs* is not only first-class detection but also a characteristic expression of his passionate hatred of spiritual cruelty. Finally, in *The Nail and The Requiem*, C. Daly King, the American psychologist who wrote the curiously Peacockian 'Obelist' novels, presents a short story; so that we end, where we began, in America.

DOROTHY L. SAYERS.

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## EDGAR ALLAN POE

### THE PURLOINED LETTER

*Nil sapientiae odiosius acumine nimio.*—SENECA.

AT Paris, just after dark one gusty evening in the autumn of 18—, I was enjoying the twofold luxury of meditation and a meerschaum, in company with my friend, C. Auguste Dupin, in his little back library or book-closet, *au troisième*, No. 33 Rue Dunôt, Faubourg St. Germain. For one hour at least we had maintained a profound silence; while each, to any casual observer, might have seemed intently and exclusively occupied with the curling eddies of smoke that oppressed the atmosphere of the chamber. For myself, however, I was mentally discussing certain topics which had formed matter for conversation between us at an earlier period of the evening; I mean the affair of the Rue Morgue, and the mystery attending the murder of Marie Rogêt. I looked upon it, therefore, as something of a coincidence when the door of our apartment was thrown open and admitted our old acquaintance, Monsieur G——, the prefect of the Parisian police.

We gave him a hearty welcome; for there was nearly half as much of the entertaining as of the contemptible about the man, and we had not seen him for several years. We had been sitting in the dark, and Dupin now arose for the purpose of lighting a lamp, but sat down again, without doing so, upon G——'s saying that he had called to consult us, or rather to ask the opinion of my friend, about some official business which had occasioned a great deal of trouble.

'If it is any point requiring reflection,' observed Dupin, as he forbore to enkindle the wick, 'we shall examine it to better purpose in the dark.'

'That is another of your odd notions,' said the prefect, who had a fashion of calling everything 'odd' that was beyond his comprehension, and thus lived amid an absolute legion of 'oddities.'

'Very true,' said Dupin, as he supplied his visitor with a pipe, and rolled towards him a comfortable chair.



'And what is the difficulty now?' I asked. 'Nothing more in the assassination way, I hope?'

'Oh, no; nothing of that nature. The fact is, the business is *very* simple indeed, and I make no doubt that we can manage it sufficiently well ourselves; but then I thought Dupin would like to hear the details of it, because it is so excessively *odd*.'

'Simple and odd,' said Dupin.

'Why, yes; and not exactly that, either. The fact is, we have all been a good deal puzzled because the affair *is* so simple, and yet baffles us altogether.'

'Perhaps it is the very simplicity of the thing which puts you at fault,' said my friend.

'What nonsense you *do* talk!' replied the prefect, laughing heartily.

'Perhaps the mystery is a little *too* plain,' said Dupin.

'Oh, good heavens! who ever heard of such an idea?'

'A little *too* self-evident.'

'Ha! ha! ha!—ha! ha! ha!—ho! ho! ho!' roared our visitor, profoundly amused; 'oh, Dupin, you will be the death of me yet!'

'And what, after all, *is* the matter on hand?' I asked.

'Why, I will tell you,' replied the prefect as he gave a long, steady, and contemplative puff, and settled himself in his chair. 'I will tell you in a few words; but, before I begin, let me caution you that this is an affair demanding the greatest secrecy, and that I should most probably lose the position I now hold, were it known that I confided it to any one.'

'Proceed,' said I.

'Or not,' said Dupin.

'Well, then; I have received personal information, from a very high quarter, that a certain document of the last importance has been purloined from the royal apartments. The individual who purloined it is known; this beyond a doubt; he was seen to take it. It is known, also, that it still remains in his possession.'

'How is this known?' asked Dupin.

'It is clearly inferred,' replied the prefect, 'from the nature of the document, and from the non-appearance of certain results which would at once arise from its passing