

What Are the Great Mystery Stories and Why?

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HE is a sad clown who doesn't take his clowning seriously; even he whose dreams are haunted by a vision of himself in the habit of Hamlet must be expected to bristle a bit if he have reason to believe his ancient art misprized. And the chances are that he will need only to be subjected to a psychic frisking, such as provides our intelligentsia with its favorite indoor sport, to be found guilty of hip totting professional prejudices containing far more than half of one per cent. of pure venom. Upon such manifestations of humanity in clowns the seasoned will look indulgently. It is comfortable to pretend that the opinions of others don't matter . . .

In this mood the writer is disposed to question the wisdom displayed by the editor in picking on one so long identified as a writer of mystery stories to write about mystery stories and their writers. He addresses himself to his topic, indeed, with considerable diffidence, well aware that his frankly partisan pleadings are open to challenge as utterances of simple self-interest, by no means unconscious of the promptings of *amour propre*, and fearful lest his prejudices and faulty memory lead him into error. A ticklish task . . .

But one thing nerves his paltering hand, the knowledge that the plea he means to enter on behalf of the mystery story can't be construed as wholly a selfish one in this season, when the book he is offering isn't a mystery story in any sense . . . if one except an obvious question in respect of its publication at any season . . .

He has now in mind a time, too long ago, when dumb luck startled him out of an uneasy obscurity in the penumbra of the literary spotlight with the news that he had, overnight, in effect, become the father of a best selling book. An experience which imbued him with sympathetic insight into the emotional reactions of all parents of ugly ducklings. . . . He recalls an evening subsequently spent in the home of a pretty lady with a good husband, a kind heart, a vague eye and an editorial berth that brimmed her cup with sweetness and light. She was telling the author how perfectly thrilled she had been by his book, how she had been positively unable to put it down from the moment when her attention was riveted by its opening phrases until that inevitable ungodly hour in the small of the morning when her poor, tired eyes read the closing words. And he remembers, oh, most clearly! how glad and proud this incense made him, and how he purred a little—modestly, he hopes.

But of a sudden the pretty lady became acutely aware that others were listening in of the little company whom she had bidden to meet this lucky dog, and she stammered guiltily. "But," she said, smoothing her lap with a nervous hand—"But, of course, you understand, I don't really care for mystery stories."

II.

The author wondered then, and he is still wondering, with a wonder restimulated from time to time by echoes in substantial sense of that apology, why is it that a taste for fiction that pleases mainly because of the ingenuity with which its plot is fashioned should be held something low, and why a knack at fabricating such tales connotes to the general an intelligence incapable of appreciating (much less essaying) other forms of literary expression? For they are few and far to seek, outside the thin well read line of Presidents and Justices of the Supreme Court of the United States and Premiers of England, who will hardly own up to liking a mere mystery yarn. . . . And once, when THE SUN conducted a symposium on the two best books of individual reading published during a certain year, the then editor prefaced the author's nomination of "El Supremo" and "Sonia" with expressions of polite astonishment that so notorious a peddler of fictional dope should discover tastes so catholic!

Even at that time the author was inclined to fancy himself moderately

as the writer of more than one novel not properly to be classed with the mysteriously *declassé* mystery story; and through such experiments he has learned that, at least to one of his gifts, no form of literary composition is so difficult, no labor so onerous and exacting, as the making of a mystery that will not wobble under the weight of every hard look. Which is one reason why it affords him so much delight to come across such a story from a new pen, and so much vicarious indignation when he sees it dismissed (as ordinarily it is) with an impatient flirt of the critical quill, as just another of those things, while at the same time the rankest sprout in the pseudo-psycho-carnalistical hotbed and the most *gauche* graduate of the *flapperoodle* class are recommended as noteworthy performances in the field of contemporaneous letters.

The author pauses here to cock an ear attentive to the drone of his motor, fearing to detect the grumble of personal grievance in its generator . . . and resumes reassured, honestly persuaded that he makes this mean not on his singular account, but rather as self-appointed champion of a class of writers, of whom he is one, and whose work he believes to be commonly undervalued, for what it is, when it isn't through indifference or downright bias misrepresented.

Granted that most mystery stories must fairly be reckoned trash, it will hardly be claimed that any other class of fiction, taking it by and large, makes a nobler showing, or that better than 15 per cent. (admittedly an optimist's guess) of any year's whole output of novels rises above the level of even tolerable mediocrity. Wherefore this author contends that, as with work of other sorts, when a workmanlike mystery story turns up it ought to be proclaimed as such, without regard to the predilections of the reviewer and irrespective of the clamor of clear treble voices which rings down the aisles of the literary jungle as the bandarlog-rollers of the day roll from log to log, gleefully chasing one another's tales.

III.

The mystery story may not be "important" in the sense in which that adjective may be applied to the thoughtful study of life; but surely to be entertaining for entertainment's sake alone is no unworthy aim; surely there is nothing intrinsically contemptible in a medium which Balzac employed upon occasion, and Poe, too, and Conrad, Stevenson, Henry James, Kipling, Dickens, Mark Twain, Hudson, De Morgan, Du Maurier—heaven knows how many more honored pens! Surely the mystery story of to-day isn't necessarily to be held negligible because in our day as in others scores of ordinarily competent journeymen artisans have taken a fling at it and returned to their last sadder and wiser writers. "La Peau de Chagrin," a mystery story in double sense, and "Une Tenebreuse Affaire," among other essays of Balzac's, unquestionably influenced Poe to compose tales of mystery which made his name, and incidentally American letters, illustrious. "Tom Sawyer" and "Pudd'nhead Wilson" were rare mystery stories. De Morgan seemingly couldn't write without a mystery to lure on his pen. Conrad's "Chance," for the best part of its great length, is a mystery story superbly handled, and so is "Romance." Dickens strung story after story on threads of mystery, ending with that whose snarl can never be unraveled, "Edwin Drood." "The Turn of the Screw," if nothing else, admits James to the goodly company of the great who weren't too great to try—and who didn't fail. "The Man Who Would Be King" is, of course, by far the finest of Kipling's many briefer mystery stories; in his later manner there is "The Brushwood Boy," for one of a dozen, all admirable; and "Kim" carries its fair measure of mystery, too. "Green Mansions" is a great mystery story, the greater for its exquisite simplicity. A more perfect tale of mystery than "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" you will search long to find; yet to this writer's taste nothing that Stevenson ever wrote—or, for that matter, that any other author ever wrote—holds so much of sheer magic as "The Wrecker."

Here, if you please, is mystery that runs full tide from start to close, a dark, swift stream of wonder and dread, whose illegible face is none the less swept by the high winds of true

romance, whose black ripples none the less laugh back at the sun. . . . With consummate craftsmanship the secret of its enigma—posed by an easy grouping of everyday circumstances—is withheld to the very last; the explanation, always the tricky point in a tale of this order and too frequently the disappointing one, is at once simple enough to content the most captious stickler for "probability," and strange beyond all telling. Rich with human character and humor and drenched with color of incomparable loveliness, a warm book; this author finds it everything a great mystery story ought to be. He has read it at least a dozen times, he hopes to read it as many more; and he will lay it down at the last, as after the first reading, with a sigh of envy for that art which guards so jealously the secret of its sorcery.

Dumas dealt in mystery with a spendthrift hand, though it isn't easy to name one of his novels that may rightly be rated a true mystery story. He was forever giving a gay gesture of mystery and forever running short of patience to carry out

sure of finding, with him, a rewarding mystery.

In novels dealing with the supernatural Bram Stoker's "Dracula" set a standard which few writers since have succeeded in approaching. Of a slightly different order, but still of the same school, the stories of Arthur Machen, collected under the titles of "The Hill of Dreams" and "The Great God Pan," contrive unique illusions of strangeness and terror. Using like materials, Algernon Blackwood, though more ambitious, seems the lesser artist. Somerset Maugham was more successful with "The Magician," a tale whose weird atmosphere of horror ranks with that of Wells's "Island of Dr. Moreau."

Two excellent mystery stories that have given this author hours of keen enjoyment are little known in this country, possibly in part because of their unfortunate titles—"WO" and "The Ocean Sleuth"—by Maurice Drake. Lacking the supreme artistry of Stevenson, their mysteries are quite as sanely compounded as is that of "The Wrecker," they are well



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Its promise through more than a few chapters. His people lived at too brisk a pace to have time to waste on riddles. When a secret sought to plant itself in the path of d'Artagnan he had the heart out of it with his sword in a twinkling, and hastened on his headlong way with a laugh for the stupidity of the business. His impetuous shoulders made nothing of the webs which Aramis was always weaving between his ways and the honest light of day. . . . And in general Dumas had scant use for mystery save as an expedient; when invention faltered and pace of narrative threatened to flag, it was his custom to drag in some strange character by the ears, christen him The Unknown, and let speculation about his identity keep interest a-simmer till invention got its second wind and the story picked up its heels once again—when incontinently, as a rule, The Unknown would be rudely shorn of his pretensions incognito and left to shift for himself in the ruck.

At the knees of this colossus stands one by no means of his stature, but a giant among mystery writers notwithstanding—Jules Verne, progenitor of ten thousand tales of intriguing invention. And as Poe was to Doyle, so Verne seems to have stood to the H. G. Wells that was—one of the most ingenious of mystery mongers in a day whose passing has not for all of us been altogether compensated for by H. G. Wells As Is. The list of those puzzle stories of his younger years is long, and every one is worth your while.

Of another school are the novels of Sir Rider Haggard. Elements of mysticism inform his mysteries, intimations of supernatural forces at work play like heat-lightning down the far horizons of his midnight skies. Wherever Allan Quatermain turns in his wanderings you may be

written by a writer of excellent humor. So are John Buchan's "The Watcher on the Threshold," in which the supernatural plays some part, and "Greenmantle," in which it doesn't; the latter is one of the best stories of mystery and adventure ever penned. The stories of Bernard Capes should find a place in the same rack, somewhat overmannered though most of them are. E. Phillips Oppenheim to-day carries on (not consciously, in all likelihood) the tradition of Henry Seton Merriman. He hasn't mastered Merriman's convincing trick of sober and matter of fact statement, understatement it often seems, and his treatment is all his own, but he uses the same brushes and pigments and makes much the same choice of subjects. At his best, when Oppenheim himself is really interested, his mystery stories are quite the finest of their kind.

Echoes of mystery stories half forgotten haunt the mind. This author would like to read again, if only to find out if they are really as good as he thought them years ago, E. W. Howe's "The Story of a Country Town," Ballantyne's "The Missing Ship," "The Great Hesper" (the name of whose author glides recapture), some of the novels of Fergus Hume, Cutcliffe Hyne, Archibald Clavering Gunter. . . . Titles and authors named wholly at random, as they come to mind, without meaning to imply that they belong in the same group. . . .

In this country, within the last two decades, a number of excellent mystery stories have been written, by Mary Roberts Rinehart, Meredith Nicholson, Robert W. Chambers and Rupert Hughes, whose titles are too well remembered to need recounting; "The Mystery," by Stewart Edward White and Samuel Hopkins Adams; "The Flying Death," by Adams alone; "The Leopard Wom-

an," by White, likewise entirely on his own; "The White Cat" and "Find the Women," by Gelett Burgess; another "Find the Woman" and "Uneasy Street," by Arthur Somers Roche; "C-Q in the Wireless House" and others, by Arthur Train; Mrs. Atherton's "Mrs. Balfame," Tarkington's "The Two Van Revels" and (though admittedly here the vein of mystery is slender) "Monsieur Beaucaire"; many of the short stories of Irvin Cobb, Will Irwin's "The Red Button" and "The Thirteenth Chair," any number of George Barr McCutcheon's workmanlike romances; Owen Johnson's "The Sixty-first Second."

And from across the water, in the same period, in addition to the titles already mentioned, a series of splendid stories have come from A. E. W. Mason, with "Running Water" leading the list, as well as B. L. Putnam-Weale's "The Human Cobweb," Cynthia Stockley's haunting "Blue Albes," Rose Macaulay's "Potterism," Katherine Cecil Thurston's "The Masquerader."

Contemplation of these scrambled lists suggests yet another reason why the mystery story deserves better of the booktaster than it is accustomed to get these days. Demonstrably it has done and is still doing yeoman service in developing writers of ability—and not infrequently in suppressing the other sort, a service as well worth generous recognition.

IV.

With the mystery story Balzac emerged from his twilight years of toil and frustration, with the mystery story Poe and Stevenson came into their own. Sir Arthur Quiller Couch as "Q" commenced author with "Dead Man's Rock" and "The Splendid Spur." "Peter Ibbetson" and "Tribby" were mystery tales with which Dú Maurier developed his genius. . . . And like these, most of the authors of to-day who are mentioned in this paper began with the mystery story and have been working up from it to higher levels—several of them have already gained considerable altitudes. Those last the mystery story taught to build with that solidity of construction which alone can insure permanence in literature.

He who would build a well made mystery tale must respect fundamental laws; must learn to dig and plant a foundation firm enough to support four walls and a roof exposed to the most searching blasts of incredulity and critical hostility. After which it must be his part so to embellish his building with becoming graces of color and design that he who runs will wish to pause and rest in it a while. A method whose observance has yet to hurt the serious study of character and modes and manners and which inculcates as well a saving reverence for economy, simplicity and precision of expression—for, in the sound old word whose right significance is fast being forgotten, grammar—the grammar of our English tongue, wanting which every effort to achieve glamour must prove unavailing.

Nevertheless, there is to-day apparent a studious and persistent endeavor to deny the worth of such honest workmanship and set up the belief that true art in the architecture of fiction builds ever willfully, at random; seeking first (it would seem) to establish an entrance, preferably a back door, then a scullery, one or two more unsavory cubicles, with bedchambers ad lib., rarely an apartment less disconcerting, and a foundation, if any, by way of afterthought, something as sketchy as a pit a child will dig in sand. It is against the rules of this school to roof its makeshifts or hang shutters at the windows. . . .

Work such as this can stand only in the sight of those to whom jerry-building is a gauge gallantly flung in the face of outworn convention. With its contempt for first principles of story building contempt for elementary laws of language structure and for sound usage jizzes cheek-to-cheek. Refusing to recognize any necessity for taking form and proportion into consideration when creating a work of art, such writing denies its right to term itself an art: Art without form being unthinkable.

It would be amusing, then, instructive as well as entertaining, if The Dial, say, in pursuit of its praiseworthy ambition to encourage new writers, should condition its annual gift of \$2,000 upon the production of a mystery story so well knit as to command—on its merits alone—a market with one of the popular magazines. One ventures the prophecy that the results would be illuminating to all concerned, donor, donee and long suffering bystander to boot.