

THE RENAISSANCE OF WONDER



O wonder was in the eighteenth century the attribute of fools; at the end of the nineteenth it is the privilege of the wise, and the wisest is he who wonders most. Half a century ago Positivism was considered the only religion worthy of an intellectual person; Supernaturalism was ruled completely out of court; about which time arose the Fox sisters, and Spiritualism had its beginning.

The truth of the matter is, that man is born to wonder as the sparks fly upward; it is, perhaps, a not unhealthful feature of our own time that its inventions and discoveries have been so largely of a mystical or supernatural character (if we may so term them), as is pre-eminently seen in the case of the Roentgen rays, that the faculty of conjecture being literally paralysed, we are left free to wonder, without a guess, as to what our next development is likely to be.

That this mental condition must powerfully affect our literature goes without saying; rather, it says itself is the case of one of the very first of these discoveries which we have ventured to term mystical. Even as an hypothesis, the interfluent ocean of ether exercised a most powerful influence upon the imagination of Edgar Allan Poe, whose statement of it is probably the clearest and most coherent known to the world. And to it the world demonstrably owes that freedom in dealing with the weird, the mystical, the supernatural—by which terms we mean such phenomena as cannot be immediately accounted for by known natural laws—which gave us the *Prose Tales*, and marked thus the beginning of the new epoch.

Nothing is more remarkable in the literary period which just preceded these Tales than the supposed necessity under which every writer laboured of explaining those supernatural incidents of which, so treated, the public was decidedly fond. Sir Walter Scott, whose literary life belonged to this period, though for some years he was contemporary with Poe, is a remarkable example. The ruth-

less robbing of one's early years of faith in the demoniac parentage of *Anne of Geierstein* is something which in middle life one finds it still hard to forgive. Yet Scott himself was capable of wonder; among other things at the second sight of Allan MacAulay, which thrilled his blood though his understanding blushed. It is curious that his unexplained phantoms, such as the *White Lady of Avenel*, are peculiarly bodiless, *invraisemblable* creations, for which, as an artist, he might have blushed with very good reason. Scott's explained mysticisms constitute therefore simply an apology for his own credulity.

It was because the eighteenth century retained a sneaking faith in the possibility of a marital union between man and supernatural being, that it required so stringently a categorical assurance that nothing of the sort had affected the genealogy of Geierstein; the nineteenth feels itself to have ascended the hill of science above the level of these clouds of superstition, in whose conformation and swiftly changing outlines it feels therefore a philosophic and artistic interest.

But we must not omit all reference to a certain form in which the unexplained marvellous found immediate acceptance even during the period of Scott. As an allegory of life, the supernatural explains itself; credulity is unnecessary in the case of the *Faust* of Goethe or the cameo-like romances of De La Motte Fouqué. It is curious, however, that the German people, certainly the most mystical and speculative among the nations, should so allow their English-speaking cousins to lead in the production of the literature of the marvellous; but wonder, after all, is rather Celtic than Teutonic; your true German investigates, ruminates, experiments; but he is almost never surprised.

The American and, in a less degree, the Englishman, on the other hand, is either surprised or bored, both in life and literature; hence, the recent tidal wave of romanticism, which some of our critics are disposed to deprecate; hence, also, the popularity of novels treating of hypnotism and kindred topics; and the avidity with which the public seeks after that class of story which deals with the discovery of crime, and which we call "De-

tective Novels," or tales, according to their length and mode of construction.

That the Detective Novel should be classed as the child of Wonder, that very prolific literary Mother who lives in an ink-bottle, can surprise no one for longer than a moment. True, it involves no element of the mystical, at least, necessarily; but it is certainly included under the definition which we ventured a moment ago to offer of the supernatural, as that which cannot be immediately accounted for by any known natural law. As, for example, in *Lost Man's Lane*, the work of a writer of this school, some of whose productions only just fall short of being literature, we are presented at the very beginning with an apparent impossibility, more difficult of credence than any ghost or demon of them all; and it is the plucking out the heart of this mystery, and the bringing it into the realm of natural law, that supplies the interest of the story.

But to admit the existence of a "school of detective literature" is to outrage the critics, whose attitude is rather that a writer whose power of making literature is already established may be guilty of a detective story without total death to his reputation, if he throws himself on the mercy of the court. If, however, tales of this character are based upon a fundamental need of the human mind—the need to wonder—they are at least worthy of respectful consideration; to dismiss their case unheard as irrelevant to literature, is to degrade them, their readers and their authors; which last, when necessity is laid upon them to write a story of this character, will feel that they appeal to a lower type of audience, and hence will fall into a lower style, both morally and artistically, than would be the case were they allowed to believe that even a detective story might possess the very highest degree of literary merit.

It has been said already that some of the works of Anna Katharine Green only just fail of being literature, which, perhaps, when one considers the matter, is rather a broad way of putting it. For the critics have, as usual, the law on their side. Literature is a reflection of life, and life is not solely occupied with the discovery of hidden crime; hence, no story which is solely or chiefly concerned with such discovery can be literature. But, on the

other hand, to the victim of a crime or to the chief friends of the accused, the discovery of the truth is, as a matter of fact, for the time being, the whole meaning of life and the world; may not literature reflect life as it appears under such circumstances? Unquestionably it may. But it *must reflect life*; and life is growth—the growth of character. "Life is never the same again" to any of the participants in such an experience; and to depict the fusing of the character in such a crucible, and its re-crystallisation under other and perhaps purer forms, might tax the skill and the insight of the most sincere artist. One cannot recall that it has ever been adequately done; Mr. Kipling, perhaps, could do it if he would, as he could do most other things. The writer who has come nearest to it, who has, at least, given us a lady-like and Church of England rendition of the theme, is Miss Charlotte M. Yonge, in *The Trial*, a tale of a false accusation and a final discovery of the truth.

But if a detective story is one that contains a detective, Miss Yonge's is not such; *The Trial* lacks also many other features which we are accustomed to recognise on the pages of works very far apart in literary merit. Let us take *The Moonstone*, of Wilkie Collins, *Dossier 113*, of Emile Gaboriau, and the already alluded to Anna Katharine Green's *Lost Man's Lane*, and note the points which they have in common, and which are so usual in stories of this class as to be dangerously near establishing their claim to be considered necessities of construction. Each of these writers has, then, in the first place, created his or her own type of detective; and it would be most instructive, had we the space at our disposal, to indicate the contrast between the astute M. Lecoq, in his habitual disguise and with his decidedly free manner of life, the melancholy Cuff, morally devoted to the culture of roses, and the stout and rheumatic Mr. Gryce, estimable and virtuous. A marked difference between the French mode of seeking after truth and that which commends itself to the Anglo-Saxon instinct of justice might also be pointed out, with a foot-note referring to *l'affaire Dreyfus*; and possibly one might go so far as to characterise the Gallic as the subjective method, which, having first determined before the tri-

bunal of the seeker's own intellect what the truth ought to be, proceeds to look for alleged facts to support the result so gained, ignoring such as tend in an opposite direction, and filling up *lacunæ* by the aid of a lively imagination and documents more or less genuine.

Two features common to these stories strike us at once as savouring of clap-trap—that is, the invariable putting forward in the early part of the tale of a supposed criminal, who is never by any chance the real one; as a correlative to this, the veritable guilty party is always represented as particularly estimable; and, secondly, the weapon of death or the means to the commission of the crime is as regularly placed from the first in what the children's game calls "open sight," so innocently and apparently casually, that the reader is almost certain to overlook it. This method, as has been said, borders upon clap-trap; yet, when deftly handled there is not only no objection to it, but it has some artistic necessity. This is very evident in *The Moonstone*, where the cabinet in Miss Rachel's room, the "vehicle" which "stank," and the insomnia of Mr. Franklin Blake are in turn examined and described, without exciting the shadow of suspicion in the mind of the most blasé, that they are of any particular importance to the story. And not one only, but each of several persons, is subjected to suspicion before the great Cuff finally writes upon a slip of paper, in a sealed envelope, the name of Godfrey Ablewhite. *The Moonstone* is, indeed, as regards artistic construction, easily first among detective stories; its incidents fall out so naturally as to conceal the skill with which they are introduced and woven into the texture of the story. M. Gaboriau's works are only a good second, in spite of the interest which he manages to infuse into his long narratives of the early life of his characters. Invariably one feels impatience with the beginning of these narrations, then becomes interested, and is almost sorry when they finally come to an end. But French villains are always a little incredible to the American mind; and Miss Sarah Brandon, "Sir Tom" and the other members of *La Clique d'Or* are open to this imputation in a very high degree.

Miss Green's stories exhibit precisely

the same features which we have noted already. Who suspects the well-sweep in *Lost Man's Lane* of being concerned in the mysterious disappearances? or the hatpin in *That Affair Next Door*, of having been the instrument of death? What one does learn, however, is to suspect the apparent and to recognise the stereotyped in Miss Green's work. Perhaps it is impossible for one writer to produce very many detective stories and yet not lose his spontaneity—a misfortune which has happened not only to Wilkie Collins, but to Dr. Conan Doyle. Nothing, not even poems of Shakespeare or Browning, tipped out by a spiritualistic table, is sadder or more weird than the resuscitation of Mr. Sherlock Holmes, in the last cited author's recent stories in the *Strand*, as an anonymous newspaper critic. Sherlock Holmes is a real artistic creation, a detective of altogether a new type; while the only machinery to which the author condescends in producing his *Adventures* is that of the assistant detective, always mistaken in his deductions, whom we might also have discovered in the other writers examined. Everything else is perfectly individual and spontaneous in each separate adventure; and Dr. Doyle has even rendered an actual service to psychology, by showing us the possibilities of development in that power of observation which most of us carry with us, wrapped in an absent-minded napkin. It is true, perhaps, that the astute Mr. Holmes sometimes observes what isn't there; for example, we should like to be made acquainted with the typewriter which tends to make worn places on one's cuffs; but for ingenuity of construction, these are unrivalled among detective tales; we believe it to be practically impossible to solve the mystery of a single one of them, except by the reprehensible practice of peeping at the back of the book.

We have referred to the possibility of Mr. Kipling, or perchance Mr. Richard Harding Davis, giving the world our ideal detective novel; necessarily it will and must, when it comes, contain still a newer type of detective. M. Lecoq is the imaginative or subjective. Sergeant Cuff the deductive, Sherlock Holmes the philosophic and inductive reasoner from observed facts. What remains? The present writer can hazard only one con-

jecture. Could one discover crime by telepathy? May the detective read the mind of the criminal, fathom his schemes by sympathetic insight, and thwart his plans through the knowledge acquired by pressing the letter containing them, unopened, against his forehead? If so, what, in other respects, will be the character of the telepathist? Must he, like Dr. Doyle's hero, repair the ravages of criminal hunting by means of the cocaine bottle? And how will his personality

affect the delinquents with whom he comes in contact? Hypnotically, of course, but just how?

The subject has far-reaching possibilities, and as for the story, it will probably not be told immediately, even by Mr. Kipling; but with a suitable background and adequate handling, it may prove, when it does come, to be the great American novel for which all of us profess to be patiently waiting.

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HOW AN EDITOR TESTS A STORY.



HIS is not a talk about story-writing by a story-writer. It is only the confession of an editorial reader who has had to read some thousands of stories in

the undress of manuscript.

I once knew an undertaker who claimed that he never grew callous, and that his tears were authentic. Most editors also, I think, grow more tender with experience toward the naked bits of eager authorship which they have to decline. The business of sitting, like a little deity, over manuscript never becomes altogether mechanical. Of course the editor gets hardened to the old rounders who turn up regularly; but every day there are stories offered which bear unmistakable marks of dreaming ambitions, and to each of these he knows that his decision is an awaited crisis. The result of this squeamish feeling is that he is led to write many personal letters to accompany the declined manuscripts, and in these, with a weak benevolence, he seeks to say some word of discriminating commendation.

Naturally, this good talk is near to criminality. I knew a young woman who kept writing rubbish year after

year because, when she sent her first story to Colonel Higginson, he wrote her in general terms of kindness and advised her not to try to publish anything for five years. He was, perhaps, not to blame for not knowing that she was foolish, but she turned his caution into a word of eventual hope and cherished it like a guaranty.

Softness of this kind is not the fatherly virtue that it used to be. There is now scarcely a bright girl in school who does not have some notion of some day being a clever story-writer. She sees no reason why she cannot be. She probably knows she cannot be an actress; she sees no chance of becoming a physician or a college professor. But the praise she gets for her compositions and the apparent simplicity of the successful story in the periodicals fill her mind with foolish and impossible dreams. It is appalling to think that a single paper like *The Youth's Companion* can have twenty thousand stories submitted to it in a single year. *The Ladies' Home Journal* is said to have about as many stories, of a different order, sent for its inspection. The other magazines and the syndicates swell the number beyond belief. It is not too much to estimate that a grist of sixty thousand short stories comes to the editor's desk every year.

There is nothing encouraging about