

The Saturday Review

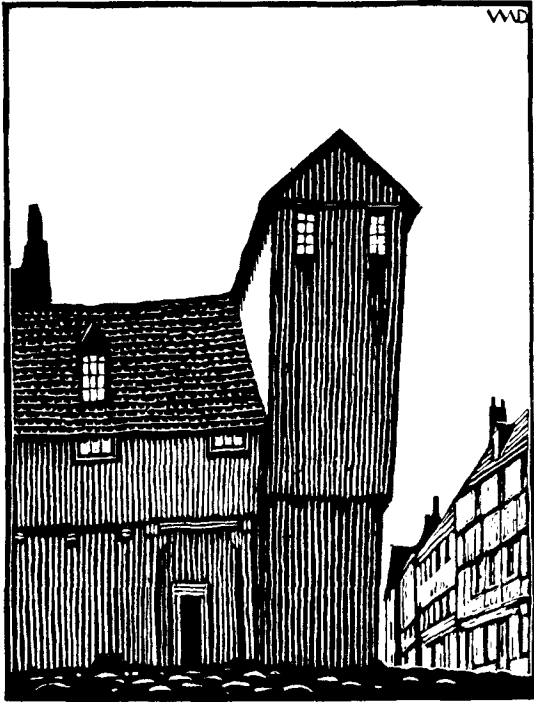
of LITERATURE

EDITED BY HENRY SEIDEL CANBY

VOLUME IV

NEW YORK, SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 18, 1928

NUMBER 30



OMINOUS HOUSE

The door dark whispered woe, the panes blank fire,
The rearing gable like a reptile's head—
For fiend or nightmare would you fain inquire?
Enter, and hark the dithering of the dead!

Deepness of Earth

THE foreign lecturer (and perhaps any lecturer) with a "message" has become a nuisance, but when the lecturer is himself a message, complaint is voided. Matthew Arnold, so it is said, was seldom heard beyond the first three rows of his audience, and yet the man stood for so much in himself that he seems to have left a deep impression behind him. Those who could not hear, apparently felt.

A. E., who has been with us for some weeks now, has also made more than a usual impression upon American audiences. He can be heard, and the soft Irish-English that comes through his great beard is readily comprehensible, but it is what the man palpably is that seems to count. For here is a hearty, humorous mystic who has lived in the depths of a nation, and radiated energy, ideas, inspiration for a third of a century, a man tolerant in a time of hate and bitterness, constructive when destruction was the only fashion, confident of the spiritual power of devotion to an ideal, while self-seekers, fanatics, and the predatory raged at each other and tore Ireland to pieces. It is not hard to be a dreamer, it is not hard to be a "booster," it is not hard to be a martyr, devoted leadership is not rare, but to keep a sense of human values in times of great disorder or great success is given to few men large enough of mind and soul to count in history.

We do not envy Ireland its distractions, but we do envy its George Russells. No one seems to be thinking as he is thinking, on this side of the Atlantic. Americans do not even quarrel over values. We have committed ourselves so completely to a state where every individual has his share of comfort, his right to noise, his opportunity for a formal education, his means of cheap transportation, his privilege of reading two newspapers a day, that questions as to the quality of our living seem impertinent. There are scolders and deriders of course, but they

are noisier than their audiences, and have no plan of salvation except a "don't" or a "stop." Thoreau, who was regarded as a harmless fool by his Concord neighbors, would be certified a lunatic in any suburb to-day. And yet, like the makers of the Irish renaissance as Russell describes them, all he wanted was to make the world without correspond to the mind within, so that an American could keep his soul his own in a not too hostile New England. Thoreau *really* believed that without vision a nation perishes. So does George Russell, and by vision both mean not emotional rhetoric or moral diatribes, or tiresome conformity, but the perception of values which belong to a rounded life where the spirit is as comfortable as the body. Russell has made coöperative farming successful in Ireland. He is an economist as well as a poet. But where is the American dirt farmer who stands upon a platform of better ideas, more spiritual happiness, more depth of living, for the agriculturist? Give us higher wages, the unions say, and we will take care of the spiritual values. Keep the country prosperous and we will guarantee its civilization, say the capitalists. It was not thus that Emerson reasoned.

* * *

Indeed, the draining of idealism from American literature is made painfully evident by the mere presence of such powerful idealism as George Russell's. Our skilful journalism, our highly competent realism, our sudden grip upon the weapons of satire and irony, are well enough, but there is a kind of spiritual provincialism in a widespread literature that assumes an exclusive interest in complexes, abnormalities, material success and failure, neurotic relationships, the form, the noise, the by-products of life in the busy streets. And if, to modern Americans, there is something naive in an Emerson who insists on believing that every New Englander has the soul of an incipient genius, or in a George Russell who expects his poets to create revolution and his mystics to be the men chosen to direct practical affairs, is it not we perhaps who are the naive ones, when we assume that prosperity will take care of the prosperous, and believe that a nation can be bred on tabloids and educated in the science of getting on, can find happiness where the advertisements tell us to buy it, and satisfaction in the life depicted for us in our books?

* * *

We are spread very thin over this continent, and even in New York we go upward (toward, not into, the skies) far easier than downward. Sometimes as one reads the thin competent poetry of our city dwellers and the strident realism of our novelists, or notes the rarity of the contented man in America, the nervous inability to sit and meditate, the good-humored fear of emotion, the failure to take pleasure easily, the utter divorce between women particularly and such permanent qualities of their environment as sky, soil, and sun, it does not seem to be spirituality we lack as yet, for we have scarcely reached its possibilities, but just common sense.

The Ninth Volume of the "Ashley Library," a catalogue of printed books, manuscripts, and autograph letters, collected by Thomas J. Wise, and printed in London for private circulation, has just appeared. "The completion of the finest bibliography of modern English literature which has ever been carried out, or even projected," says Edmund Gosse, "is a matter of wide importance to the intelligent reader. . . . This is, without doubt, a record of the largest and, what is more important, the most scientifically organized collection of English *belles-lettres* which has ever been gathered by one person."

Here's to Crime!

By WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

SINCE the beginning of last summer I have read approximately forty-five detective stories. This, in itself, probably constitutes a major offense. The admirable introduction to Willard Huntington Wright's anthology, "The Great Detective Stories,"¹ (Take off those green whiskers, Mr. Wright, and come clean! We know you!) refers to the fascination of such fiction as being comparable with that of the printed puzzle. In many such tales there are diagrams and cryptograms—there is even so modern a development as a crossword puzzle cryptogram in at least one recent one that I have read. Hence detective stories have attracted certain of the greatest minds of all time—mine, may I blushing add, not figuring conspicuously among them.

But I think there is even more than that to be said. Granted that those of us who have attained to a certain modicum of comfort and ease in our present state of quasi-civilization (susceptible as this condition may be to instant disruption) exult, upon cozily and perhaps crassly cabined nights, in following in slippers ease certain rather desperate fictional affairs,—beneath the layers on layers of our own smugness and self-esteem there may lurk a piacular reason for this. The man-god receives a gift; the totem-animal (in other words, the invented villain of such literature) "atones for bloodshed within the kinship group." Or is this, perhaps, to take such fiction too seriously? Sometimes I wonder,—when I regard its wide and prosperous dissemination throughout the modern world. We demand the vicarious thrill which, in a well-oiled mechanical existence, we are far too effete to secure for ourselves through experience. The atavistic impulse easily returns. Nothing is more atavistic than the man-hunt. Mobs of individually feeble citizens are

This Week

Drawing.

By W. A. Dwiggins.

Quatrain.

By William Rose Benét.

"New York Is Not America." Reviewed by Bernard De Voto.

"The Changing South." Reviewed by Donald Davidson.

"The Classical Tradition in Poetry." Reviewed by Paul Shorey.

"Victor Hugo, the Man and the Poet." Reviewed by Christian Gauss.

"Cities and Men." Reviewed by Chauncey B. Tinker.

Next Week, or Later

Upton Sinclair.

By Walter Lippmann.

actually, as we know, often swept into incredible excesses by it.

Yet it must be admitted that the average detective-story addict sets out to indulge in his particular mental vice with no such sadistic urge. He is often a simple soul; he is most probably a masochist. He secures pleasure from hoping to be frightened, —to have his hair stand on end. He knows he will be completely reassured either by the acumen of a master-mind or by the organized efforts of a Scotland Yard. However, perhaps, to return to Mr. Wright's pronouncement, numerous folk do approach the matter more mathematically. They merely desire to be set interesting enigmas and to sharpen their wits upon them. There are, I know well, many of these highly intellectual addicts. So well versed are some of them in the dissection of problems, so intuitive in analysis, that, nine times out of ten, they can pick their villain long before the author of the tale in hand desires them to discover him. I have one of these unerring sharpshooters in my own family. My mind is comparatively slow, and this is therefore vastly annoying!

The prevalence of such detective intellects "shadowing" the author, following his every move with bloodhound nose to the slot, has resulted in our time in the most devious manoeuvres on the writer's part to throw the reader off the scent. That eminent familiar of crime, Mr. Edmund Lester Pearson, feels (he has said so to me) that the fact that the most unlikely of all people presented in a detective story is now pretty certain to turn out in the end to be the real criminal, has strongly influenced the public mind to believe that anyone caught committing a real crime has actually not committed it at all. However that may be, the fact remains that if you see a sweet old grandmother or a perfectly innocent young lady or a young man of the most enormous rectitude hovering shyly on the verges of a tale swarming with the most brutal, degraded, and unconscionable characters, she or he is instantly suspect. Mr. Pearson mentioned a story to me, "The Mystery of Lovers' Cave," I think it was called, in which a "sweet young thing," beloved I believe by the hero of the narrative, was sternly compelled by the author to become guilty, merely to serve his own nefarious purpose of tricking the reader. In their desperation, as their audiences increase, detective story writers are being put to every possible shift and dodge. At the end of a tale of Sinclair Gluck's (which I shall refer to later) no less than four persons, in the climax, are found guilty in rapid succession of one of the crimes—the last individual being—but it is too cruel!

Now, not to intrude myself obnoxiously, but frankly to present the attitude that I fear will govern the progress of these remarks, I may say in passing that a gentleman who meant it entirely pleasantly once introduced me at a gathering as "the poet who has never grown up." That still ruffles my feathers whenever I happen to think of it. But the same must be true of my attitude toward the theatre (for I seem to be able to sit through plays over which my contemporaries heavily groan) and the same must be true of my attitude toward the detective and the mystery story, for I have of late—alas!—even gone Edgar Wallace and Sax Rohmer!

Mr. Wright, to whose most thorough and excellent discourse upon the detective story I have already referred, draws a cogent distinction between the mystery story and the detective story. I am an admirer of both, and I may even digress into discussion of mystery stories for a paragraph or two—I give you fair warning: But the mystery story proper, according to my eminent contemporary, is that kind of tale "wherein much of the dramatic suspense is produced by hidden forces not revealed until the dénouement." Into this class fall stories of "diplomatic intrigue, international plottings, secret societies, crime, pseudo-science, and spectres." The detective story is quite different. True, the mystery story and the detective story "often overlap." They "borrow devices and appeals" from each other. They "usurp each other's distinctive material." But the chief characteristic of the detective story is that it is in the "category of riddles—the puzzle in fictional form." It is at its best when there is an entirely "realistic environment." It "must succeed by ingenuity alone."

This gives us our classification pretty clearly. But before I go any further I must, as I have hinted, help Mr. Wright to remove his green whiskers. He is, many are now thoroughly convinced, the "S. S.

Van Dine," who has written "The Benson Murder Case," "The 'Canary' Murder Case," and most recently "The Greene Murder Case" running serially in *Scribner's*. He is an art connoisseur, incidentally, and was editor of the *Smart Set* in its most aesthetic period. It is evident from his Introduction that he has read more detective stories than I shall ever read. His own predilections, if you are interested in internal evidence, are manifest in those of "Philo Vance," the detective of "S. S. Van Dine's" creation. He speaks with authority, both as a student and as a creator of "seventh large printings."

Mr. Wright swiftly traces for us the development of the detective story. He even refers airily to that builder of the stone treasury of the third Rameses, whose pleasurable robbery of it is retailed by Herodotus. He goes on to Poe's cryptography and scientific experimentation. He hales forth Dickens's Inspector Bucket, Wilkie Collins's Sergeant Cuff, Poe's Dupin, Gaboriau's Lecoq, and so on. I myself have always held the theory that Gaston Leroux, Maurice Leblanc, and William Le Queux were all the same person, but Wright well knows their differences, and to whom to attribute the exploits of a Rouletabille and to whom those of an Arsène Lupin. He juggles with Anna Katherine Green's Ebenezer Gryce, Freeman's Thorndyke, Arthur Morrison's Martin Hewitt. He is entirely familiar with Louis Tracy's Furneaux, Ernest Bramah's Max Carrados, and Jacques Futelle's "The Thinking Machine." I have spent hours myself with John Buchan's Richard Hannay, with A. E. W. Mason's Hanaud, with Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot; but this man amazes me with babble of Bennett Copplestone's (and that isn't even his real name) Chief Inspector William Dawson; of Ernest M. Poates's psychopathologist, Dr. Bentron; of Lynn Brock's Colonel Gore; of George R. Sims, James Hay Jr., and Louis Dodge.

Enough! Enough! I am defeated before I start. He deals in such precise phrases concerning J. S. Fletcher as "fortuitous incidents" and "antiquarian researches." He has to say of Chesterton:

The fact that *Father Brown* is concerned with the moral, or religious aspect, rather than the legal status, of the criminals he runs to earth, gives Chesterton's stories an interesting distinction.

Which may be obvious, but could not be more compactly put. And the man also arouses exorbitant curiosity in me (who have till now never heard of that author) with his reference to Arthur E. MacFarland's "Behind the Bolted Door," with its "entirely novel (so far as I know) device." At this point I am about to remark that Agatha Christie's "The Murder of Roger Ackroyd" seemed to me to exploit a device also novel, when Wright halts me by dubbing it a "trick played on the reader," and "hardly legitimate." I simply cannot agree. In this one particular I immediately go to the mat with Mr. Wright. Otherwise I unreservedly recommend, to all intending students of the detective story, his condensed essay. By the time you have read all the books he mentions, you too will, presumably, have become an expert.

Thus the prologue, as usual, eats up most of the space that should have been devoted to analysis. And coinstantaneously the whim seizes me to digress briefly into a discussion of tales which are not detective stories pure and simple. For the mystery story is equally my enthusiasm. Not the mystery stories of E. Phillips Oppenheim, for whom I have the blindest of blind spots—but such mystery stories as—well, I shall merely mention them. Let me ask you, do you know May Sinclair's "The Victim," from her "Uncanny Tales," reprinted in "26 Mystery Stories Old and New by Twenty and Six Authors," edited by Ernest Rhys and C. A. Dawson Scott and published by Appleton? There's a most remarkable murder and ghost story combined. Do you know "The Barometer," by Violet Hunt, in the same volume, or "The Ghost Ship," by the late Richard Middleton? How about "Told for the Truth," the story of Hunter and his marital lemur, in Cyril Hume's volume of short stories, "Street of the Malcontents"? How about—if you really like mysteries—Edward Lucas White's "Lukundoo," with the grisly tale of the emergent minikins, and the one of the burglary of the strongly-walled estate of the enormously wealthy monstrosity in "The Snout"? Or, for the matter of that, how about the insidious atmosphere of "The Place Called Dagon," by Herbert Gorman, or "Witch Wood,"

by John Buchan, the latter an historical novel centering about the furtive practice of obscene rites in a Scotch parish in the time of the great Montrose?

And more shuddery still is Francis Beeding's recent "The House of Dr. Edwardes" (Little, Brown), featuring a diabolist at large in a congeries of dangerous lunatics in the Alps. This is an excellent horror and mystery tale; one of the best of recent years.

But I must tear myself away from such phantasmagoria, and come, at long last, down to my detective stories.

Gentlemen, and ladies, at this point I wish to inform you that I think one may fall a prey to classification. I have praised Mr. Wright for his, and yet, upon analysis, I rebel. One of the stories I am reviewing here long after its original publication (and you will find a number of last summer's books touched upon in this article, together with those of the fall and of this immediate winter) is a story of (of all places) Burma, and a story in which the innocence of the heroine, though she is sorely beset, is never in doubt from the beginning because of her own initial statement—yet, so far as literary values go it is a better novel than most of them. It does not move faster, it does not puzzle nearly so much, but the characters and the environment emerge in the round. I refer to "Green Sandals," by Cecil Champaign Lewis, whose "The District Bungalow," a romance, has just lately appeared. I hate Burma, as an abstract idea. I put off reading his novel for months because it had an insipid jacket and because I thought I was going to grow apoplectic over Burma. The fact remains that the book, though in a secondary category, is satisfying. Psychology interests me more than high explosives, chemical formulae, cryptograms, cross-word puzzles, or thumbprints. I encountered, as I had feared, "mango," "durians," "sesamum oil," "bawarchis," "gharry," "mali," "Madras boy," "teak, paddy, cutch, and wolfram"—all the things that ought to remain in italics, and whose meaning you forget the subsequent instant. But in spite, rather than because of, these native details, the atmosphere began to build around one; and the characters proved human to a degree. According to Mr. Wright's formula this is a bad detective story. That may be. It is a good book, though certainly not in the first flight.

I have reviewed heretofore Frances Noyes Hart's "The Bellamy Trial." Mrs. Hart reported the Hall-Mills case, I understand. Why did no one think before of making a detective story an account of the trial after the event? She brought off her cracking good idea with considerable merit in the execution. Then there is A. E. W. Mason's "No Other Tiger." Mason is sufficiently an old stager. But go back to "At the Villa Rose" if you wish a thriller of the first water. His most recent is not so good as that, nor so good, in fact, as his "The House of the Arrow." But it is certainly sufficiently above the ordinary. He is a narrator born—and an exciting one—and the atmosphere of his climax in "No Other Tiger" seems to me no less than masterly.

To digress again, I have perused such a number of yarns that in my dreams the lady with the pretty purple eyes who shot sixteen Chinamen in a junk off Singapore and escaped through the hawse-hole (if junks are so equipped) with papers of international importance, finally became inextricably entangled with the natty French master-detective who found the marks of false teeth on the secret panel behind the portrait of Sir Anthony Guffe-Goffe at Mossback Grange—until I couldn't for the life of me tell which incident occurred in "The Fangs of Fright" and which in "Oh Murder!" And my credulity has undergone such horrid strains and stresses that the poor thing is now warped out of all recognizable shape and will never again, I fear me, be the same. Nevertheless, it has been a great debauch. Sleuths and crooks of encyclopædic information, lightning intuition, herculean physical vigor (and don't forget the big mellow emotions) are entirely familiar to me now. Pretty, innocent girls (or pretty innocent) who get mixed up in all sorts of strenuous crimes and emerge from physical and mental tortures as dainty and as charming and as nobly loyal and as—Oh, absolutely!—unbruised as in the *status quo ante*, I simply take for normal. Master-minds that sit in remote high rooms, before diabolical inventions, plotting wholesale destruction

(Continued on page 610)