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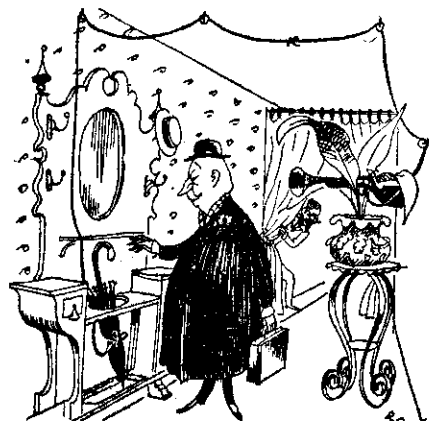
A Defence of the Detective Story

PROVOKED by John Stuart Mill's opposition to the secret ballot, John Bright said the worst of great thinkers was that they so often thought wrong. It is a saying to be remembered for one's aesthetic and intellectual protection. *The Listener* published the other day a very lively attack on the vogue of detective stories by Edmund Wilson, an American. Mr. Wilson is a distinguished critic, perhaps a great one. But even the greatest critics have their weak spots; their allergies, as the doctors now have it. Dr. Johnson was heavy on *Lycidas*. Matthew Arnold didn't think much of Tennyson, and considered that Abraham Lincoln lacked distinction. Mr. Wilson is allergic to detective stories.

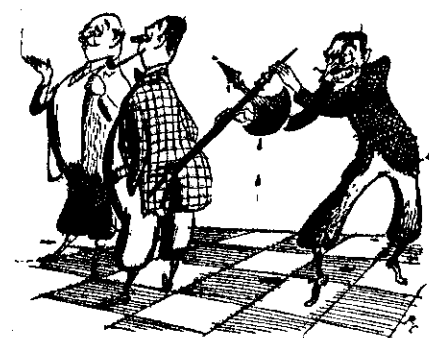
He says he hadn't read any since Sherlock Holmes, and only did so under pressure. This, I venture to say, was his loss. He missed, for example, *Trent's Last Case*, the best detective story since Conan Doyle. In any case it is dangerous to break new literary ground under pressure. We all know the grudging mood in which we approach a book that somebody nags us into reading. Besides, to judge fairly the output of to-day, one should, I suggest, have served an apprenticeship. Not that Mr. Wilson doesn't make good points. A gifted critic could hardly fail to do this. The detective story addict is an easy mark; a "sitter" indeed. I am one myself, and in my indulgence of one or two every week I can stand aside and watch myself behaving like a blooming fool. I know it is a form of escape like tea and tobacco, but I don't mean to give up any of these things. The tricks of the trade—the amazing elaboration of murder, the careful throwing of suspicion on innocent people, the imbecility of characters in concealing evidence, the mannerism of detectives, official and amateur—these and other things make many an addict laugh who has a capacity for critical detachment.

HOWEVER, we go on reading detective stories—why? Because we like the fun, the excitement, the human interest in them. Is it "escape"? Well, suppose it is, where is the line to be drawn between "escape" and its opposite? Isn't a vast amount of literature escapist? Are we to be bound to realism all our days? Mr. Wilson might consider the possibility that one reason for the vast vogue of detective stories is the drab and often disgusting nature of the realistic novel. People prefer clean murders to dirty triangles. To adopt George Moore's remark, they don't like watching the process of ploughing the fields of sex and suffering with knitting needles. They prefer a robust and marching tale, and if it turns on a murder, perhaps so much the better.

There are grades of detective stories, and grades of "fans." There is a type of reader corresponding to the drunkard who will drink methylated spirits if he



"... The amazing elaboration of murder"



"... Throwing suspicion on innocent people"



"... Imbecility of characters in concealing evidence"

can't get anything better, but there is a considerable class of well-educated men and women who look for exceptional and even rare qualities in their stories. Some readers prefer the pedestrian competence of Freeman Wills Crofts and his Inspector French; others encourage the creation of a highly intellectual set-up like Michael Innes's. To follow Mr. Innes you have to reach almost the standard of Oxford Greats.

There is plenty of instruction as well as entertainment to be got out of

(continued on next page)