



W. J. SCOTT

The proper study is man, not manslaughter.

(continued from previous page)

else must be subordinated — motives, character, inner conflicts, the clash of codes and ideas, the emotional quality and significance of experience. . . . If a writer becomes more interested in those than in the mathematical formulae of his plot, he then engages in the proper business of literature and ceases to write thrillers. The deficiencies of the genre are well illustrated in the work of Dorothy Sayers. In her detective novels her main concern was the working out of a carefully constructed plot, in which Lord Peter Wimsey had to identify and capture the criminal. The result was that she could not attend to the proper business of literature, and her characters, especially the incredible Lord Peter, are crude and conventional. When she wished to write about the real experiences of human beings, she found herself obliged to abandon a form of expression so barren as the detective story. (It is not relevant to my purpose to discuss the quality of what she has written in place of it). Occasionally the preoccupation of authors with moral problems—Chester-ton and Graham Greene are examples—does manage to infuse into the framework of the detective story and the thriller some of the genuine substance of literature, but the occasions are rare, and the books still do not rank very high.

#### Defence and Attack

When we examine the attempts that have been made by educated readers to defend the thriller habit, we come upon some remarkably specious arguments. They are indeed so naively specious that they in themselves provide evidence of the surrender of the educated of which I have spoken. Let me now examine some of the pleas for the defence.

1. "Turn your back on popular literature (including the thriller) and you turn your back on life." The obvious truth is that most popular literature is fantasy and has no relation to life. In one way this statement of the *Herald* columns has meaning—that, if we want to know what sort of mental lives many people lead, we should read the books of fantasy they are accustomed to read. But, of course, the educated people who read thrillers and other kinds of popular literature don't read them for this purpose, but for their own pleasure and excitement.

"A healthy mental digestive process," declared the same writer, "can assimilate all these things from street ballads to 'Whodunits.' It is dyspepsia which

rejects them." Like many other analogies, this one won't bear very close examination. A varied diet is not quite the same in books as in food; assimilation by a reader of the 'Whodunits' always involves the excitement of identification with fantastic characters, an acceptance of a view of life that most educated people in their cooler moments will readily admit to be false and unreal, and a perhaps more than temporary blinding themselves to the facts of experience.

2. "Good westerns and detective stories are intellectual exercises, too, like sonnets, and far more entertaining." Such reading, it is true, does provide intellectual exercise of a kind, but in it the mind is being exercised on artificial and simple problems without personal or social significance. But in another way, the exercise means the relaxing of an educated reader's usual standards of value, and the acceptance, as I have already said, of a distorted view of life and character.

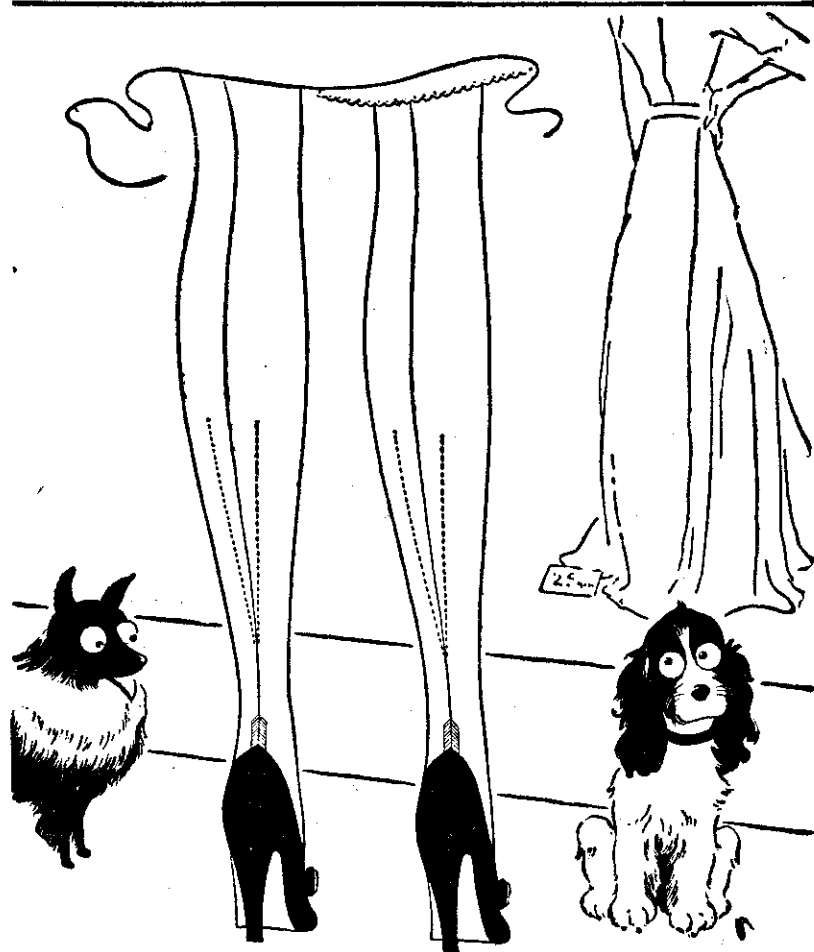
3. "I think that a clever mystery tale trains the mind." Of the Archbishop who made this statement, it may fairly be asked: Trains the mind for what? Theology and philosophy? Tolstoy, Milton, Fielding and Eliot? Or more mystery tales? The logical, and clearly the only possible answer is the last.

4. "The intellectual believes in relaxing now and then (to read thrillers). Thereby he strengthens his taste and widens his sympathies." The author of this assertion, made in a Wellington newspaper, is a well-known New Zealand writer. Like the Archbishop, he may fairly be asked to answer the questions: Strengthen his taste for what? Widens his sympathies for whom? It is difficult to see how a taste for good literature can be strengthened by making a willing and habitual response to poorer literature. A reader who samples the thriller, finds it inferior, returns to his normal higher level may perhaps have his taste for the better books strengthened by the experience, but if he forms the habit of reading thrillers in his moments of relaxation, the only possible result is a strengthening of his taste for thrillers.

#### "Shocking Deterioration"

So far as the other part of the assertion is concerned, it is in the highest degree absurd to argue that relaxing to read thrillers can lead to a widening of sympathy for other people, and can make the reader a more understanding and sensitive person. The effect will, of course, be the reverse; for the organised day-dream that the thriller provides must dull and vulgarise feeling; it cannot very well sharpen and discipline it.

If it is argued that the reading of this literature of distraction eases the inner tensions of the intellectual and makes him a more comfortable person to live with, there are, I think, two relevant replies to make. First, the fact that he requires such a poor form of literature to give him his compensation release is further proof of his surrender to the mass producer of inferior literature; second, no evidence can be produced to show that the thriller has more power to perform this function than *Tom Jones*, *War and Peace*, *Put Out More Flags*, *Howard's End*, or any other of the many novels that seriously attempt the proper business of literature. To advance this extraordinarily specious argument is to give further evidence of the educated person's surrender; it reveals a shocking deterioration not only of taste but of the reason as well.



## shop hounds

She has taste, this girl, don't you think, Pom?

Surely, Spannie. You see, her stockings have both the converging fashion marks *and* the taper heel, which means they *must* be

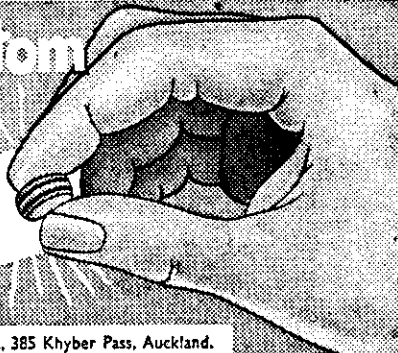
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