

THE FASCINATION OF CRIME.

BY "A REVIEWER OF FICTION."

THE Nation is becoming less and less criminal. Our prisons are emptying and our treatment of delinquents becomes more humane. The aftermath of the Great War, to the surprise of prophets, who based their predictions on psychology and experience, has not brought us a great wave of crimes of violence. We have developed new methods of crime and have made use of modern inventions to facilitate wrongdoing. Occasionally we are startled by the effrontery of criminals who successfully dare publicly to commit robberies that seem almost incredible. Such events are rare, and our murder statistics prove that the most heinous of all crimes (except high treason), in the eyes of the law, has not as many votaries in proportion to population as it had in the past.

In the United States of America the contrary is the case. There crimes of violence and murder are so frequent that they appal English readers of the American Press, and the statesmen of that Republic are much perturbed by the lawlessness of the people and the sympathy of great numbers with crime. There it is possible to organize campaigns of violence for political or personal ends and for a series of terrible offences to be committed before any one is brought to justice. At times, something like a reign of terror prevails, and cities witness outrages on order that are inconceivable to the inhabitants of Great Britain. Crime has decreased in Great Britain; it increases in the United States, and many reasons have been given for the contrast. In both countries prosperity has advanced, and crimes induced by misery and poverty tend to diminish, but whatever be the cause in the United States, murder is committed with a frequency that makes sociologists tremble as they see the decay of respect for law and the falling off in regard for the value of human life in the minds of certain sections of their people. It may be that climate has something to do with this, or that as American legislation very often lays down the ideal and not the attainable, there has come into being an ignoring of law that carries with it psychological consequences evidenced in crime waves.

Whenever an outstanding crime is committed in England and a mystery lies behind it—whether it be the mystery of the identity of the criminals or the means by which the crime was wrought—the Press seizes the opportunity to make a "feature" of the occurrence. The placards specialize on it, and the public as a rule talk about it to the exclusion of more serious topics. The less criminal the nation is, the greater the fascination of the crime for the citizen. All classes are touched by the infection of interest, and the many descriptive columns feed and excite that interest. It would almost seem that the more strange the experience, the greater the attrac-

tion, and the cleverness or otherwise of police work draws forth comments from those who appear otherwise incapable of deductive or inductive reasoning. There is a morbid and unwholesome side to the business, but humanity has always found in crime something that touches the emotions and calls forth responsive interest. The great dramatists base their plays on crime, and much of our literature is concerned with its commission and detection. Motives are laid bare and sympathy with the criminal is often produced by the brilliancy of the artist in words. But as a rule the greater the writer, the less he strives to make us feel that the criminal is ordinary, and that it is through some misapprehension or lack of repression that he commits the crime. Very little interest is taken in the lunatic who kills—great interest is centred in the ordinary man or woman who under the impulse of strong temptation or emotion kills. Perhaps some of this is due to the fact that most people realize that they, under certain circumstances, "but for the grace of God" might have yielded to criminal impulses, for in addition to the fascination of the unusual there is a certain underlying sympathy for the poor fellow who has yielded to strong temptation.

But we are not concerned with the crimes that occur, but with the crimes that have not been committed. Detective literature is of comparatively modern growth. It has in one form or another found a place in all literature, for the unveiling of the detection of a tragedy has in it the seeds of a detective story. Probably the weird tales of Edgar Allan Poe have been not only the forerunners but the parents of most of our present-day detective tales. Never, however, have yarns spun by clever writers on imaginary crimes had so great a vogue. They pour from the press by the hundred, and are probably the most widely read form of fiction. A Prime Minister on a journey buys it, a Bishop is known to be a constant reader of detective tales, and very often we have found men of the highest intellectual achievement half apologetically confess that the fiction which pleases is that dealing with the mystery of crime and its elucidation. A very large proportion of the detective stories read in England comes from America, where perhaps the ordinarieness of crime may make the study of the imaginary offences and their detection a relief to minds that are distressed by the chronicle of undetected guilt. Hope springs in the human breast, and the fact that in the pages of a novel the Crime Club or the solitary criminal is brought to book serves as a solace for the reader.

But this will not explain the enormous public that reads American, French and English crime fiction. A visit to any great circulating library will prove that stories of this class are the most widely read, and the publishers' lists confirm the impression. The popularity of Sherlock Holmes gave birth to a host of imitators, but the long story is the most popular, for it maintains the mystery to the end, although some authors have lately taken the unusual step of showing how the crime was committed, and then they give an account of the futile efforts of investigators to discover the criminal, until at last the man is brought to justice. And we also have the

resources of science brought to bear on the detection of the guilty. No better proof can be given of the idolatry of science and popular belief in its infallibility and power to solve all questions in heaven and earth and out of them than the popularity of those writers who make a speciality of utilizing the scientific sleuth with his equipment of blood tests, finger-prints, photographs and analytical chemistry. It is all very wonderful, but even science has its limitations, and scientists do not know everything. Yet the atmosphere of knowledge in the books has its own appeal, and the great mass of readers to-day have just that smattering of science which enables them to guess what will take place and thereby enhance their own self-esteem. For all who read these books know the self-satisfied feeling that comes from the successful detection of the criminal before the curtain is raised, and the even greater satisfaction that follows the clearing of the innocent. We are all sufficiently British to think that it is far better that many guilty should escape than that one innocent should suffer.

When we look down the list of the successful writers of detective tales we find among the names eminent King's Counsel, authors who have achieved success in other departments of literature, and men of affairs. Ladies, too, have done well in this department, and their books sell by the tens of thousand. It is true that the law in a great many of the tales makes the legal profession angry, and one of the most distinguished lawyers of our acquaintance mournfully told us that he had to abandon detective stories in favour of Wild West tales, as he could not tolerate the ignorance of the detective stories, whereas he had no test for the truth or falsehood of the exploits of cowboys where law was rudimentary and mistakes did not matter. Perhaps we find in his remark an explanation of the vogue of the books we have in mind. Readers are attracted by the skill of the minds that work ingeniously through apparently insoluble mysteries or are intrigued by the physical exploits of those who manage to shoot their way through odds that are all against them. It is the old story. Those who know least of mind are attracted by clever tales, and those who are least acquainted with the life of the daring brawny revel in their performances. The root fact remains that the sensational has an appeal which cannot be ignored, whether it be the appeal to the admiration of the man who works through to the discovery of the criminal or the muscular hero with marvellous eye and incredible "drawing power" when he uses his revolver.

By far the ablest of the recent detective stories we have read is one that leaves the reader completely at sea until he reaches the end of the book. Its construction is worthy of the great ability of the writer, who has been a distinguished public servant and publicist. In the early chapters we have a picture of the circumstances under which a murder is committed, and we enter upon the events that follow with just that "impossible of solution air of mystery" that makes us keen to see what has really happened and how it occurred. And all through the book we are puzzled by these chap-

ters, that seem to have no organic bearing on all that happened and yet provide a clue to the innocence of the accused. The literary skill shown in the writing of these preliminary pages is very great, and the artistry of the gaps in knowledge bewilders.

We have a young detective taking counsel with an old past master in the craft, and here we are brought into surroundings that really puzzle and confuse thought. So many people pass before our eyes, and so contradictory are the deductions naturally drawn, that we do not know "where we are" as to the murder. We have fingerprints and physiological facts brought to our notice. Very soon we are convinced that one of the accused is innocent, but how can he clear himself in the face of the evidence that makes him certainly guilty as far as facts disclosed warrant a conclusion? The other accused has no place in our sympathy. Her guilt is manifest. Everything except the strange atmosphere of the early chapters points to her guilt, and the fairest of Judges, the most painstaking of Counsel, as well as the Jury, are all convinced that she had done the deed. As far as we can see the Court details are accurate, and our legal friend will find no flaw in the proceedings from Coroner's Court to the dread sentence. Within the law all steps are taken and the inevitable conclusion is reached.

But is it the right ending of the process? Here the writer enters upon an unusual tract of country. The young couple happily married are settling down when occurrences of the most extraordinary character bring to them a repetition of what took place in the past. They and every one else are bewildered, and only by great exertion and the use of every possible method of investigation are they able to get on the track of the real criminal, who confesses his guilt under an hallucination. It is all amazingly clever and well constructed. The reader is held entranced by the *dénouement*, and nothing appears impossible in the tale. Everything slips into its proper place, and events are seen in their true perspective. No wonder the book has enjoyed a very large sale.

But what is the secret of its success? In the first place, the crime committed removes from society a most offensive character, but we are not for a single moment led to conclude that thereby it is excusable. On the other hand it must be punished, for even the most innocent may suffer under similar conditions. Then the young police sergeant has his chance, and we are induced to hope he will succeed and thereby be enabled to marry the girl he loves. A love engagement between two most excellent young people calls forth our human interest, and when the young man is arrested our sympathy goes out to him. The physiological facts disclosed are not horrible, but so ordinary that the merest tyro can understand them and make him feel that the young man will be acquitted. As for the woman, no one can like her, and whether in the village, in London or in the dock, her character warrants belief in her guilt. And the surprise at the end comes without in any way taking from the self-esteem of the reader. How could he possibly imagine what he had been given no reason to believe? It is one of those unex-

pected endings that in their naturalness bring no astonishment when all is known, but in their very fitness there is the apology for ignorance because the essential motive has not been disclosed!

Are statesmen, bishops, professional men and the great multitude to be condemned for their attraction to detective yarns? We do not think so. If they show how crime is committed and make play of the professional crime detector, they almost invariably discover the criminal and show the futility of his misplaced ingenuity. They amuse without boring; they interest without taxing the intelligence. Some have to be condemned by their subject-matter being nasty, but the majority avoid the themes of the fiction that is a curse to society because of its pollution of the mind by authors with the muck-rake. Crime fascinates, and it is to the benefit of the State that its attractiveness is killed among those who might imitate it by the certainty of detection. The criminal is shown to be up against all the best instincts and skill of a self-protective society; and this is something to the good.

EVOLUTION AND WAR. By Reginald Cock, M.R.C.S. (Eng.). London: *Elliot Stock, Paternoster Row, E.C.* 3s. 6d. net.

It is refreshing to find some one who has a right to speak, challenging what is loosely called Darwinism. The author goes even further than this—he boldly dedicates his book to the fundamentalist, Wm. J. Bryan, round whose opinions circled, in 1925, the famous Evolution trial at Dayton, Tennessee. How far it is true to say that to-day “the vast majority” of clergymen accept the theory of organic evolution, is hard to say. It is rather a sweeping statement which we are inclined to question. In contrast with the doctrine of uniformity—held by all evolutionists—the author stresses the fact that the Bible teaches that in a bygone age, called “the beginning,” something took place which is not now taking place—“the essential idea is that creation is a completed work and is not now going on.” He proceeds to examine the theory of Natural Selection—the crux of Darwinism. Here and in other chapters he has given us a scientific study in which technical terms are so carefully explained that the ordinary reader can follow him in his task of demolishing this “theory.” There are some hard nuts for the Darwinians to crack! But to Dr. Cock, so far as we know, belongs the credit of having been the first to relate this theory to the subject of War. His proposition is that “if Evolution is a fact, then War is a biological necessity”—and this is the culmination of a forceful study of a subject that is constantly being brought before us, often with the calm assumption that there is nothing to be said on the other side and that it is rank heresy even to suggest that it may not be true. Mr. Bryan described Darwinism as “a cruel and heartless theory according to which the strong kill off the weak.”

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