


THE CASE AGAINST THE THRILLER



BY W.J. SCOTT

IN AN editorial of a few years ago, the *Times Literary Supplement* had this to say: "The literary die-hard's case against the thriller crumbled when the dreadful truth was revealed that Cabinet Ministers, Bishops, Judges, dons, members of the Royal Society, and even Royal Academicians were unashamedly thrilled by the thriller." In the *Nation* of November 25, 1944, Joseph Wood Krutch wrote: "It is read either aggressively or shamefacedly by nearly everyone, and it must be, at the present moment, the most popular of all literary forms. To these witnesses to the popularity of the thriller dozens of others from literary sources and one's own personal acquaintance could be added. The fact with which we are faced is that this literary form has been accepted as defensible reading by the educated (including W. B. Yeats, Woodrow-Wilson, T. S. Eliot, and André Gide), and that the literary defence which was at first apologetic has become markedly more emphatic and positive in the last few years. This change in tone can mean one of two things—either the detective novel has improved to the point where it passes the tests for good literature, or the critical judgment of the educated reader has deteriorated. I am going to argue that, unfortunately for the health of literature and criticism, it means the latter.

Let me begin with a very obvious admission: some detective novels are better than others. The Sherlock Holmes stories are better than the Colwyn-Danes of the *Champion*, the Lord Peter Wimsey stories better than those of Edgar Wallace and Ellery Queen. But what I will not admit—and cannot admit without viola-

tion of my standards of judgment and reason—is that detective stories are ever good literature. The proper business of literature is, and has always been, to interpret man to man, to show human nature in action, to illuminate any and every aspect of experience by the power of the creative imagination. This is something that the detective novel is prevented by the conditions of its existence from doing. Its emphasis is invariably and inevitably on the kind of plot which keeps the reader guessing, springs a dramatic surprise, and ties up all the loose ends with a neatness unknown in real life.

To this main purpose all else must be subordinated—motives, character, inner conflicts, the clash of ideas and codes, and the emotional quality and significance of experience. If the writer becomes more interested in these than in the mathematical formulæ of his plot, he then engages in the proper business of literature and ceases to write detective fiction. Dreiser's *American Tragedy* and Dostoevskii's *Brother Karamozov* always seem to me highly illuminating illustrations of my argument. Both contain all the elements of the detective story, and any one of the dozens of competent detective story-writers could translate either into a very effective example of the type they traffic in. But Dreiser and Dostoevskii were more interested in telling the truth about their characters—why they were as they were, what went on in their minds, what forces within themselves and without they had to struggle against—than in limiting the number of loose ends in the interests of a neat plot with a crushing climax. In the latter part of his career