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# ART OF MYSTERY IN FICTION.

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THE original inventor of the legend of how a man sold himself to the Prince of Darkness, taking for his share of the bargain renewed youth and unbounded riches, certainly deserves to be awarded the palm for the most wondrous and mysterious plot that ever emanated from the human brain. He must have been a deep thinker, one well versed in the philosophy of goose quill, knowing that his story would thrill the reader, and that he had achieved the great point of seizing upon that reader's imagination, and holding it, so that he would follow the mystery of the fiction to the very end. It may have been the result of some haphazard lucky thought, but still he must have been a careful student of every-day life, and must have duly noted how largely curiosity or the desire to fathom the unknown is developed in the human brain. It is possible even to descend lower in the scale of creation and to find this quality in creatures which progress on four hands or four feet, and to note how frequently the hunter lures the unfortunate quarry to death by holding forth something novel to its gaze. But, setting aside the beast of the field, it is sufficient to recall how very soon in infant life a pair of little wondering eyes begin, in the nurse's parlance, "to take notice," and how, before long, the use of the curious eyes is supplemented by a tiny, outstretched, feeling hand, trying to touch that something before it which is unknown. The child grows, and with its growth the desire increases, and, to speak broadly, becomes an insatiable desire to know what is on the other side of the wall that he cannot climb. In his simplicity he is the Simon of nursery lore, who cut open his mother's bellows to see whence came the wind. A much-maligned youth, by the way; for his simplicity was only the natural thirst for knowledge of a mystery; and, after all, he was somewhat of a philosopher studying pneumatics, and possibly wiser than his judges. As the ordinary Simon of every-day life matures and becomes

versed in his many studies, we find him still seeking after the meanings of the many mysteries of life, and dabbling in science as chemist, or as astronomer, puzzling out the why and wherefore of the worlds around; perhaps even turning to occultism as an earnest student, or as a victim of the charlatan; and, above all, sooner or later, trying to dive into the mysteries of the great unknown—the future.

It is this strong passion to know the unknown that is seized upon by the writer of a certain class of fiction, who realizing the vastness of his audience, and calculating his probabilities in prizes to be won in the shape of notoriety, publisher's smiles, and their consequences, throws over his natural desires to follow out the so-called higher paths of literature with the delineation and analysis of character, and in the first pages of his work seeks to start his reader off upon the hunt after a mystery. The flaire is prepared, the scent is there, and the hunt for the elucidation begins. If cleverely arranged the hunter grows warmer and more breathless chapter by chapter, and at this rate he would soon run the mystery down; but he is carried off on false leads, disappointed, sent back to the true, and goes on with repetitions of the trick of which he is delightfully ignorant, till the last chapter is near, the quarry—the mystery—almost in sight, and finally, after a breathless chase, the aim of writer and reader is achieved.

Without going back to the most ancient utilizers of the hidden in fiction, it is a far-enough cry from the *Mysteries of Udolpho,* to the *Mysteries of a Hansom Cab;* from secret passage, dark dungeon, and strange appearances, to murder most foul and unnatural. Between those two points how innumerable have been the devices adopted to catch the reader's attention!

A goodly list of literary devices might be catalogued from the thousands of stories poured forth from the press, and it is food for the student to watch the hold they take upon the ordinary—even upon the extraordinary—reader, who is easily attracted to the mystery chase if that mystery be good. It may be dressed with a curdling thrill like that of De Montepin, who starts his readers upon the trail of a horror in the cemetery of Père la Chaise, with the strange and gruesome idea suggestive of the natural, supernatural, and always of the ghastly—the discovery of a thin stream of blood issuing from beneath the stony door of one of the more

pretentious tombs ; or one of the ingenious complications full of the detective element contrived by Gaboriau or Boisgobey ; or the myst tery of a higher class arranged with its masterly sexual attractions, of the personage prisoned in the gloomy mansion who startled governess *Jane Eyre* with her nightly shrieks. Again, who amongst us was not fascinated by the fortunes of the beautiful bigamist whose first husband so mysteriously disappeared, and who did not long to penetrate *Lady Audley's Secret,* even feeling ready to forgive its rather vapid ending for the sake of the enjoyment experienced while under the clever novelist's spell ?

Then we have the well-used, never-failing mystery followed as intently in real life as in fiction, the unravelling of that poisoning case which, once begun, has a perfect magnetism for the reader, whose stimulated mind goads him or her on in the chase with piquant questions. For there is first the sufferer dying by inches from that unknown fell disease which baffles all the physicians' skill—that is, the fiction physicians—for they remain chapters long in utter ignorance of the mysterious ailment. Then the discovery : it is produced by poison. But what poison ? The symptoms are new to science. No deadly drug in the pharmacopœia would produce these effects. How could it have been administered ? By what means ? The suggestions are many—so many little mysteries to make one big—and when it is settled that the victim is being slowly poisoned, comes the leading up to the questions of who could be the administrator, and for what reason is the unfortunate being gradually done to death. Here is plenty of choice for the writer to gratify his reader : love, hatred, revenge, rivalry, hard cash, or, strongest of all—very telling this—for psychical reasons, to see a victim die.

Mystery is a strong card in the novelist's hand. By few has it been played with a skill like that of Wilkie Collins, who, with little characterization or sentiment, without creating individuals of fiction whom we remember, or whose sayings we quote, could hold the attention of the novel-reading world with his *Woman in White,* or set them eagerly agog to find the whereabouts of the mysterious diamond taken from its Eastern sanctuary. For ingenuity of construction, blind leads, bafflings, and sustained interest *The Moonstone* stands high in the catalogue of the mysteries of fiction ; and the reader was penetrating to a degree who fastened upon Mr. Godfrey Ablewhite the theft, the

point being most graphically and tragically revealed in the scene in the East End where he lay a corpse.

It is not great, perhaps, this art of mystery in fiction, partaking as it does of the nature of a puzzle or conundrum ; still it is ingenious though stagy, with its designing and fitting, and surely to be commended as an art worthy of a meed of praise. Especially now that we have reached in reading a period when we are going through a transition stage which to the thoughtful is most marked. The novels of a century or so back were manly but coarse, and many a clever work retains its place on the bookshelves on account of its being licensed in its licentiousness by the brand, or hall mark, "classic." Then, as refinement obtained, we went through a phase of the morbidly sentimental, followed up by the sentimental romantic, which gave place in turn to productions of sterling worth lasting up to and continued in the present day. In company with all these, of course, there were the importations from across the Channel—clever, unprincipled, immoral, often filthy to a degree. In these, for the most part, the art of mystery was wanting. There was no room for it. The text was in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred sexuality. These had their readers naturally enough, but the hot-blooded exotic novel was neither popular nor plentiful. Now we have changed all that. Another French fashion has been imported ; it has obtained its hold upon a largely increasing *clientèle* of readers, and is dubbed the gospel of nature. By them the honest, straightforward is pooh-poohed ; Scott is a bore, Dickens burlesque, Thackeray tiresome satire, George Eliot old-fashioned and dull. The French novel, in short, a score or so of years ago, was read and not named ; now it is read, and not only named but is answerable for a new school of novelists who base themselves upon their French masters and imitate them as nearly as they dare ; for there are reasons—patent reasons—not unconnected with circulation, which hinder the modern Gallicised writer from going as far as he probably would. We have held up to us as master-pieces of nature and realism, *Manon Lescaut, Madame Bovary,* and the sham philosophic but mighty efforts of a great brain, the works of Zola. One casts no slur upon the ability of the writers of these romances. They are Frenchmen, of France, and their ways are not ours. But the insidious work is going on and is having its

effect. Naturally our writers are ruled by the demand. The success of one brings forth many imitators, and the result is that many of the books now published, notably those written by the so-called weaker sex, grow broader and stronger—certainly in more senses than one. The school of writers to whom we owe this advance, this imitative effort in letters, scorning the art of mystery in fiction, claim for their work that it is in its breadth and strength more masculine—they might add feminine, though the reader may wade through many a novel without finding a true woman—nothing but the animal feminine whom the Frank delights to portray. The influence is daily growing, and an example of its effects is plainly before us—an example almost ludicrous—for we find one of our principal newspapers giving its assurance (in answer to certain rumors) that the novel appearing in its columns has not been expurgated, but is exactly as it came from the novelist's pen.

One might expect that with the advance of this class of narrative with naturalism so strongly to the fore, the old school of sensationalism would be beaten out of the field, but though the new writer basing his fiction upon his French master may out-Herod Herod and cause a massacre among the innocents he contemns, the mystery-lover will never be convinced, but will seek after his favorite food with as great a zest as ever. There is nothing repellent here: the natural desire to penetrate the occult is evoked, and in this lies the power which has won for many a work utterly wanting in truth to nature, plausibility and literary style—a work in fact of the most crude and rugged type—a fabulous circulation. It would be invidious to name such books, to pose as a judge, and give what at best would be only one opinion, but the question must have been asked by many a reader how it was that such farragoes of impossibilities—such tragi-burlesque played by abortive imitations of human life—could have enthralled their hundreds of thousands, and kept their attention from the beginning to the end. The answer is simple. It is the mystery of the story and the curiosity excited. These have a peculiar charm for most readers—most, for a tale of this kind with an ingenious, well-constructed plot partakes somewhat of the nature of the fabled Maelstrom. Even the lover of the vapid style of society novel, or of those dealing with afternoon calls and tea, liberally amalgamated with upholstery and the latest fashions; the

lady worshipper of the athletic giants who crush the gentle violets of society and break hearts because it is their nature to, and consequently go on macadamizing their life path with these brittle objects so liberally offered to them—in novels; the patron of the libraries who is content with nothing less than character-studies, analysis of life, struggles against temptation, sexual or religious infidelity, stories of pure-minded church dignitaries fighting against doubt, or Barham's worst devil of all—the "laughing woman with two bright eyes," and who go through three volumes representing in Book I. the flitting fly, in Book II. the contact with the web and the vain struggles, and in Book III. the rescue and cleansing of the tangled wings by faith, fighting or death; all these readers fall at times to the ordinary mystery in fiction. Their nature is too strong for them. The cover of the popular-sensation story is lifted with possibly a smile of contempt for the people who can "devour such stuff," and of course just to skim a few pages to see what it may be like. Or it may be by accident, for want of something better to hand. Then a few lines are read, and could the ingenious writer be looking on, and always supposing that in cleverness of construction and freshness of idea the story is one of the best of its class, he too could have his smile for the great-browed deep thinker and student of the higher questions and theories of the nineteenth century. For the reader has placed one foot in the literary whirlpool, the other follows, and in the vast majority of cases complete immersion ensues; he starts on his career round and round, lost to everything but the insidious curiosity-exciting plot of the book, till the brain hunger is excited, and with the desire thoroughly piqued, he reads on to the very end. Then the book is thrown down—possibly with a contemptuous, "What trash!"

One joins issue here. Is it such trash when it has been so constructed and so written that it has kept the reader's brain spellbound, held the attention not only for the time occupied in reading three ordinary library volumes, but often in a tantalized state from month to month—six, or even twelve—when the work has appeared in periodical or magazine? These effects are produced by a combination of nature and art; nature worked upon by art most artfully; but it is given to few—this power of piquing a reader's brain. Once touched, though, the novelist has a

wonderful ally in his victim, who colors up the pictures, and represents them to his mind's eye to suit his own taste, and often renders that which is dull bright in the extreme—to himself.

One might exemplify how strongly this is the case in many of the stories of adventure that have been written for boys, which, so to speak, have been merely skeletons—hard, dry bones, but well set up, strong, and perfectly articulated. Every joint has been carefully placed, and the form is without a flaw. Then comes the young reader to the mysterious bones, eager and full of curiosity. His vivid young imagination begins to work, and in a very short time that skeleton is clothed by him—not by the author—with elastic tendon, vigorous muscle, and a color of which the writer has hardly dreamed. The skeleton is alive and full of action, while the scene in which it begins to move and have its being impresses itself so upon the soft wax of the youthful imagination that it lasts there unabraded by a life of toil and care. And, though in a less degree, the adult reader, albeit his or her brain is a little thicker in its *pia* or *dura mater*, and more difficult to impress, also helps the author in his work. One who has studied these questions from many points of view, and, above all, noted how a story will "catch on," and almost electrically seize the imagination of the reading world, will constantly see that in the majority of cases the most popular fiction of the day is that in which mystery plays a prominent part—a mystery which is well concealed. It is no secret. There as aforesaid is the natural desire for the weird and wonderful—that hunger for the knowledge of the unknown which began with the forbidden apple; and the practiser of the art in question merely grows for those who hunger a fruit that is goodly to the eye, agreeable to the taste, and one that if he—or she—be worthy of the honored name of author, should only contain in its seeds a sufficiency of hydrocyanic poison to make it piquant in its savor. It is no forbidden fruit that he should offer, only an apple that is hard to pick, now within the grasp, now hidden amongst the leaves of the bright garden in which the reader is lured to stray, and rest and refresh, away from life s carking care —a fruit whose first bite excites fresh desire, whose taste brings forth an intense longing for more, and of which the choicest and most enticing morsel is cleverly held back to the very end.

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