

Fashions in Fiction

By Vincent Starrett *Author of "Murder on 'B' Deck," "Seaports in the Moon," "Penny Wise and Book Foolish," Etc.*

It is a commonplace that there are styles and fashions in every thing. Not alone in hats and shoes, summer flannels and winter tweeds, but in art and architecture, music and literature—even in dogs and diseases. And as, for the most part, the world's epidemic fancies recur at almost stated intervals, it is the fashion to assert that there is nothing new under the sun. Somebody said that, long ago. Was it Shakespeare or one of the Minor Prophets? In any case, it was never better asserted than by my old schoolmaster, Professor Block. "Wonderful it is," he said, "that at every era in the world's history, for periods of indefinite duration, the caprices of men have a singular unanimity." Let us, then, for a few moments, speak of literature—more particularly of its most recent manifestation of an older fashion.

Nothing, of course, succeeds like success, unless it be successful imitation. For everything, no doubt, there is a reason, however difficult it may be, at times, to discover it. Almost certainly, the reason for a successful fashion in literature is somebody's triumphant discovery that human nature is an immutable fashion in itself. Whatever has pleased humanity—in bulk—in one age, in all probability will please it in another—with, of course, such superficial changes as may be suggested by the topical preferences of a later day. At the root, then, of all literature of popular appeal are the fundamental emotions of the race: love and hate, greed and envy, joy and sorrow—you know the list, for you learned it, years ago, in those ultra-sophisticated textbooks of fiction, the fairy tales of Grimm and Andersen and the rest of that joyous company.

The immediate fashion begins, then, with a highly successful revival on the literary stage of some such masterpiece as "Cinderella" or the story of Cain and Abel. The public loves it, naturally, for it is familiar and at once the volume becomes, in the jargon of the time, a best seller. And at once, of course, the clever opportunists begin to beat their own typewriters to the same tune. Thus, the outstanding best seller of the fall list is inevitably the guidebook to spring fashions. In literature, of course. Let but Kansas realism succeed for a season and every publisher in the union sends forth an SOS for Kansas realism. When for a season Sabatini is the fashion, the cloak and sword swagger bravely on each new list and jacket from Gotham. When a Strachey succeeds hugely with mordant biography, every jolly hack in Christendom turns his hand to mordant biography. It is one of the precepts of book-selling, and possibly one of the tragedies of literature, that every successful volume must have as many *begats* as a chapter of the Old Testament. However, and happily, many even of the Begats are admirable things, for with a fashion once begun, some excellent fellows are in the market with their wares.

At the moment, I venture, the fashion is detective literature, and it is a memorable chapter of publishing. Where the immediate caprice found its beginning may be matter for debate. It is the fashion to charge it to the



Portrait of Starrett by Eugene Hutchinson

account of the pseudonymous S.S. Van Dine—but before Van Dine there was Fletcher, and before Fletcher there was Doyle, and before Doyle there were Gaboriau and Collins, and before Gaboriau and Collins there was Poe. Before Poe, as a matter of fact, there was a long silence, for he was indubitably the originator of the detective story fashion as we know it; none the less, he had been anticipated—somewhat nebulously perhaps—by Voltaire, and before Voltaire there were the Arabian chroniclers. Contemporaneously, I think, the fashion was made widely respectable by the late President Wilson, whose praise of Mr. Fletcher's "The Middle Temple Murder" swept that admirable detective novel into a popularity that the mystery tale had not attained since the heyday of Sherlock Holmes.

At the moment, there is Wallace, almost a regiment of writers in himself. If he is not the best writer of detective tales the world has known, certainly he is not the worst. And quite certainly he is the most prolific. Fletcher published some four full-length novels a year, at the height of his popularity, but Wallace, if report be true, turns out six or eight in a twelvemonth and at the same time finds leisure to dash off two or three successful thrillers for the stage. At the moment, also, there is the Crime Club, Incorporated, and the Detective Story Club (a selected murder every month, with plenty of alternatives in the way of theft and arson), and where the end will be—the temporary cessation, that is, before another fashion captures the public fancy—who is to say?

Meanwhile, there is a crime story for every taste. Millionaires and piano tuners meet on the common ground of a passion for detective literature. Capital and labor, society and the street car travelers, the four hundred and the four million, unite to praise or condemn the newest mystery fiction from the red-hot presses of Messrs. Raffles, Holmes & Company. Presidents and Princes advertise their delight in the *genre* while the publishers reap the benefits of that publicized admiration. Again the transcendent detective, successor to Lupin and Vidocq, Lecoq and Holmes, stalks the literary boards with lens and notebook, his nostrils quivering like a hound at scent. Dr. Thorndyke putters brilliantly in his London laboratory, Philo Vance drops his *g's* in Broadway and the Bronx, and at two western universities classes in scientific detection are about to begin to function with results which, whatever may be their benefit to the enlisted students of criminology, are certain to be felt in literature.

What, then, is your fancy, gentlemen, in the way of Murder? A knife-slain manufacturer of washing machines, with a red hand upon the wall beside his murdered corpse? A dead, cold diplomat from Graustark in the elevator shaft of a shingle factory? Or a beautiful and nameless woman with the familiar odor of bitter almonds about her silent lips? Whatever it may be, be sure that the fashion has provided a size to fit your intellect, a color to match your complexion.