

TO MY FRIENDS ACROSS THE CHANNEL

Why should I hide it? On the contrary, I am proud to say that what may be called my literary work, and within it my adventure novels, has been considerably influenced by English novelists. First, Dickens; second, Conan Doyle, at the height of his popularity about twenty years ago, when he was introduced to the French public.

I deliberately choose these two names as marking the beginning and the end of my becoming as author of adventure novels. At the same time, I could also mention what I owe to Kipling, to Wells, and to many others, for the field is vast and illustrious. But from the start, I navigated between Mr. Pickwick and The Hound of the Baskervilles... not forgetting that, from the heights of the Milky Way, Edgar Allan Poe presides over my humble attempts.

Dickens gave me a taste for picturesque detail and humor, without which even the best-constructed adventure novel would be nothing more than a cold mechanism. Mystery in literature cannot be reduced to a mere problem; to escape geometry, it requires liveliness... and the more extraordinary the adventure, the more it must be grounded in the amusing reality of everyday life.

If you remain only conceptual, go up to the board—but forget about picking up a pen.

This colossal petty bourgeois, Pickwick, inspired in me the horrific bandit Chéri-Bibi, a decent man at heart, yet a victim of the most unexpected adventures: unable to walk out on the street without killing someone! Put a good heart inside such a killing machine and see how much it can suffer! Comedy, humor, and mystery—all at once!

My Rouletabille, this young eighteen-year-old reporter who solves the most difficult criminal problems and brings his better judgment into the darkest of investigations, is clearly modeled after Sherlock Holmes, who himself finds its origins with Poe.

When the newspaper L'Illustration asked me to write my first novel, The Mystery of the Yellow Room, I set the goal for myself of outdoing Conan Doyle in terms of mystery, and to be more well-rounded than Poe ever was. I accepted to start with a similar problematic: a murder committed in a perfectly sealed room.

Poe and Conan Doyle cheated: the room was not truly sealed. In The Murders in the Rue Morgue, there was a chimney; in The Speckled Band, there was a passage. I, however, was adamant not to cheat! The room would be as sealed as a safe: no hidden exit, no secret door, no trick.

In truth, Poe and Conan Doyle cheated: the room was not completely sealed; in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* there was the chimney that allowed passage for an ape; and in *The Speckled Band* there was the hole through which the snake slipped... As for me, I undertook not to cheat! The room would be closed like a safe, with no secret compartments! No exit! I defy the murderer to escape through a wall, a door, a window, the floor, or the ceiling. The door is locked with a key, bolted on the inside; the windows are barred. Everything remains as it was: the victim, traces of the murderer—and the murderer is no longer there! How did he leave? ... Rouletabille will say it later, to the murderer. Only Rouletabille was thinking about it the right!

Since I must remain in a field where I have felt directly, as an author, the warmth of English literature, how could I fail to pay a supreme tribute to Kipling, whose first reading plunged me into an inexpressible emotion? It was the most beautiful story in the world! Oh! that man who remembered having rowed on galleys that had perhaps seen Cleopatra! who found proof of it

within and around himself! ... That day was planted in my mind the seed from which one of my first novels was to grow: *The Double Life of Théophraste Longuet*, which was translated into English under the title *The Black Feather*... the story of a brave rubber stamp merchant who, during a visit to the “Conciergerie,” suddenly receives proof that he was, in the eighteenth century, the most illustrious of bandits: Cartouche! Likewise—there you have what can transform a man’s life, such a revelation!

Wells, with his *The War of the Worlds*, *When the Sleeper Wakes*, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, produced in me an impression that asks only to be expressed... and which indeed is expressed in another of my novels: *Balao*, a great ape, a kind of anthropoid, who has undergone an operation on his tongue and who speaks; who in turn is subject to the law of men—but with what consequences! Brave Balao! While his adventures (all illuminated as well by the moonlight under which runs, in the jungle, Kipling’s “little man”) appeared in *Le Matin*, I was receiving desperate telegrams from readers: “Above all, don’t kill him!”

If I owe part of my humor to Dickens, it is largely to Kipling and to Wells that I owe having brought into my adventure novels a certain poetry and a touch of lyricism. For adventure novels are what one makes of them! It is strange that people insist on drawing a strict line between them and the psychological novel...”