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THE CRAFTSMANSHIP OF THE ONE-ACT PLAY

By

PERCIVAL WILDE

. . .

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THE CRAFTSMANSHIP OF THE ONE-ACT PLAY

In Preparation:

THE INN OF DISCONTENT and Other Fantastic Plays.

THE CRAFTSMANSHIP OF THE ONE-ACT PLAY

BY

PERCIVAL WILDE

BOSTON
LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY
1923

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PREFACE

In the ancient and honorable family of the drama, the one-act play is a newcomer. Whether its first exemplar date from the eighteen-eighties, or whether, by some stretch of the imagination, works of even remoter origin may bear the designation "one-act play" is beside the point: compared with the antiquity of its kindred, the one-act play is an infant, whether thirty, fifty, or even a hundred years of age.

Due to its youth, no considerable body of theory has grown up about it. In art, theory oftener follows than precedes luxuriant development. It is for the artist to show that the thing is possible; theory, by consolidating his gains, may sometimes lay the foundation for a still loftier development.

It is for this reason, doubtless, that so little has been written upon the craftsmanship of the one-act play. The works of the Russian, Nicholas Evréinov, being inaccessible, even legendary, to the English-speaking reader, it has remained for Professor Lewis' pioneer volume to indicate the existence of an unsuspected field. Into that field the present author has dared to wander only because his practical familiarity with his subject, his profound study of it as a practitioner, and finally, his love for the form itself may, to some extent, compensate for his shortcomings in many other directions.

While scrupulously giving credit to earlier writers upon allied subjects, he has refrained from indicating what, in the following pages, is original with him, and what, in more or less modified form, is drawn from general dramatic theory. For the well-informed reader

no indication will be necessary; for the novice such information would be meaningless. Suffice it to say here that the views which the author has put forward are the result of years of study and experiment, and have been subjected, both in his own writings and in the writings of others, to the severest of all ordeals: the test before an audience. If he has invented names for qualities which have heretofore been nameless, it is because he has been compelled to do so, — and because practical experience in the school of the theater has impressed upon him the importance of qualities which, perhaps, have as yet been recognized only by the unaccountable instincts of the creative dramatist.

For permission to quote, the author gratefully acknowledges the courtesy of the authors and publishers of the following important critical works:

William Archer: "Play-making." Small, Maynard and Company, Boston.

George Pierce Baker: "Dramatic Technique." Houghton, Mifflin Company, Boston.

Edwin Björkman, translator: Preface to Strindberg's "Miss Julia." Charles Scribner's Sons, New York.

Clayton Hamilton: "Problems of the Playwright", "Seen on the Stage", "Studies in Stagecraft", "The Theory of the Theatre." Henry Holt and Company, New York.

P. P. Howe: "Dramatic Portraits." Mitchell Kennerley, New York.

Brander Matthews: "The Development of the Drama", "French Dramatists of the 19th Century", "The Principles of Playmaking." Charles Scribner's Sons, New York.

"A Study of the Drama." Houghton, Mifflin Company, Boston.

Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch: "On the Art of Writing." G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York.

"Shakespeare's Workmanship." Henry Holt and Company, New York.

For permission to quote from "Plots and Personalities" (Century Company, New York) the author is indebted to his friend, Doctor Edwin Emery Slosson, co-author with Professor J. E. Downey, and for permission to quote from "A Handbook on Story Writing" (Dodd, Mead and Company, New York) he is obliged to Doctor Blanche Colton Williams.

Following the lead of critical writers in general, authorization has not been solicited for the many brief quotations from plays. Without such quotations criticism would be pointless; and to ask permission would tie the hands of the critic. On the other hand, the lengthy quotations from "Allison's Lad", "Lucifer", and "A Marriage Has Been Arranged . . ." are printed with the permission of the respective authors, Miss Beulah Marie Dix, Mr. Charles McEvoy, and Mr. Alfred Sutro, and the lengthy quotations from the works of Lady Gregory and from those of the late J. M. Synge have been authorized by the publishers, G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York, and John W. Luce and Company, Boston.

The author's indebtedness to his good friend, Montrose J. Moses, is very great indeed. This volume would never have been begun, much less completed, had it not been for his consistent encouragement and sympathetic interest. Its existence is testimony of a moral support which has been as invaluable as it has been unfailing.

Sharon, Connecticut.
November, 1922.

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BOOK ONE

THE PLAYWRIGHT AND THE PLAY

THE CRAFTSMANSHIP OF THE ONE-ACT PLAY

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTORY

A PLAY is performed. It is a success, which means that it produces the effect intended by the author. It is a failure, which means that it does not produce the desired effect, or, still worse, produces an unexpected and unwelcome effect. It is at this point that dramatic criticism starts. It is at this point that critical analysis of the play begins. The audience has expressed its judgment. It is the function of the dramatic critic to explain this judgment; to justify it, if it be valid; to question it, if for any reason faults in either the production or its auditors make him feel that there has been a mistrial.

The author may have written an excellent play. He may be unfortunate in his interpreters. His leading actor may, at a crucial instant, forget his lines. His charming heroine may fail totally to charm. His young lovers may already be suffering from the diseases of old age. His scenery, perhaps salvaged from an earlier failure, may be hopelessly inadequate. Finally, his audience may be unfortunately chosen.

Yet here dramatic criticism begins. The critic, supposed in his own person to represent an ideal audience for any play, will express an opinion, tempered, in so far as he sees fit, by the opinions of the other hearers, upon the merits of the play, upon the adequacy, or the reverse, of its interpreters, and principally upon the total effect achieved. Inasmuch as the playwright, if sane, will desire the approval of his audience in such

measure as to promise a long succession of other audiences, the critic will weigh the chances of success, and will, according to his lights, estimate their excellence.

Into the field of dramatic criticism I do not wish to intrude. Dramatic criticism is essentially analytic. This book will attempt to be essentially synthetic. The dramatic critic begins with the play a *fait accompli*, and calls attention to this or that detail now apparent in it. The details not apparent in the finished play, but which have contributed largely to the making of it, constitute one of the most important subjects of this book. The dramatic critic is interested in the final result. This book deals chiefly with the obstacles which must be overcome in order to make that final result possible. The unnecessary, the hurtful material which the artist discards, is at least as important as that which remains, and which eventually constitutes the body of the work. The pen is mighty: the blue pencil is often mightier.

Beginning then with the vision of the play successfully produced and satisfactorily received, this book attempts a synthesis. Between the first glimmerings of the idea, and its final fruition on a stage before an audience, many, many obstacles must be overcome. The audience sees only the finished work of art. The playwright, looking forward to it, is acutely conscious of the many hills which must be razed, of the many valleys which must be filled, before the work of art may have being. In the distance he beholds a radiant dream, precisely as the sculptor, looking upon a lump of clay, visions the beauty into which it will be wrought. There must be a framework to hold the material in place until it shall be able to bear its own weight; here something must be added; here something removed. That is his present business, for art is merely a process of selection and rearrangement, merely a matter of removing the veils which obscure the ever-present

loveliness about us. But when the public is finally invited to inspect the finished work, the unsightly frame must be permanently hidden, and chips, dust, and the *débris* of creation must have disappeared. They have served their purpose. They are no longer necessary.

Yet their disappearance must be complete. They are outward signs of a craftsmanship that has striven for a result: that result has not been achieved if anything more than the result is apparent. If the technique of a play is obtrusive; if, like the skeleton of a crustacean, it is clearly visible on the outside, the critic will justly comment upon it. The machinery is obvious, naked, he will say, and it creaks: machinery, unless deeply buried, is likely to creak. While this book deals with the essential machinery, it deals also with the equally important devices by which the skeleton, after having performed its functions, is clothed and concealed.

Many excellent works upon the general subject of the drama have called attention to the notable instants in outstanding plays. They are all important to the critic. Nevertheless I have no hesitation in saying that they were the source of little concern to the playwrights in whose minds they originated. No dramatist of my acquaintance has ever lain awake nights worrying about the great moments of his play. Many, many, on the other hand, have labored months — even years — in order to solve problems whose existence the critic of the finished work never suspected. Similarly the student can gain little by rapt contemplation of excellencies unless this be joined with some apperception of their part in the play as a whole, unless this be joined with some comprehension of the art by which the playwright has focussed attention upon them. The cutting and the setting of the jewel are more important than the jewel itself. By itself the jewel has splendor:

but not a tithe of what it will possess when the craftsman has done with it.

It follows, therefore, that instances where the artist has failed, moments when in the face of a difficult or impossible task the technique of the playwright has deserted him, will be at least as instructive as the rarer occasions upon which the perfect coöperation of every art has given birth to a masterpiece. To inform the student that "Trifles" is a fine play, and to request him to turn out another as good is discouraging; to point out, on the other hand, that all of the many dramatizations of "Markheim" have resulted in ineffective plays, and to indicate the reasons for this uniform result, may lead him to apply the same principles to his own writing. The existing literature of one-act plays is a mine of instruction. Hundreds of plays show how playwrights have succeeded in solving problems. As models they are useful: but there their use ends. As many and more plays show how playwrights have failed to conquer difficulties. Here the student may well be asked to address his ingenuity to the task of overcoming them. He cannot but profit by coming face to face with obstacles which will confront him daily in his own writing.

No playwright, however great his contribution to literature, has failed at some time to commit instructive blunders. The very greatest of them have occasionally been careless, or dazed by the nearness of the work, hurried, perhaps, by the compulsion of the idea, have been guilty of the most palpable errors. The body of their work is entertaining and instructive to the laity; but their shortcomings constitute clinical material of a value so pronounced that I have not hesitated to point out the bad as well as the good, the imperfection as freely as the excellence. Perhaps some consideration of the first will lead the reader better to appreciate the second.

I am not interested in "laws" of technique. I have no faith in a dramatist's Decalogue. Practical experience in the theater has taught me to believe in the individual interpretation of underlying principles, expressed with the utmost breadth. "Laws" which decree that a play which has held thousands spellbound is no play because it conflicts with set notions of what a play ought and ought not be are no laws at all. "It is just as if a man who has found a sauce excellent," comments Molière through the mouth of Dorante, "were to investigate its goodness according to the recipes of the cook-book."[1] • To accept "laws", and to follow them blindly, is to write mechanical drama. "I have noticed one thing about those gentlemen," comments Molière again, "and that is that those of them who talk most about laws, and who know them better than anybody else, write plays which nobody cares for." Common sense and practical observation of audiences teach more, and lead to greater accomplishment, I believe, than "inviolable rules" which the modern dramatist is forever — successfully — breaking. It is more than a coincidence that this point of view is adhered to in the two volumes of supreme value to the working dramatist: Professor George Pierce Baker's "Dramatic Technique", and Mr. William Archer's "Play-Making."

The artist, in every field of creative effort, places great reliance upon his instincts. Yet he is not likely to come into the world with those instincts fully formed. However great a natural talent, only study and practice can develop it to the utmost. By itself practice will bring mature craftsmanship: but the process will be so lengthy that repeated failures may have broken the dramatist before its completion. Study is but another name for profiting by the labors of others. In art, as everywhere else, there is a struggle for existence. False

[1] "La Critique de l'École des Femmes."

instincts go down in competition with sound instincts: if the artist's unconscious choice is not dependable, he is not likely long to have the opportunity to exercise it. Bad plays may be written, but in conflict with better plays they are eventually driven to the wall. The process may be long; it may be tedious; it may even permit strange aberrations. But false ideals are not lasting ideals: in the long run, the fit, and only the fit, survive.

Obviously, sound instincts are based upon sound principles, principles which the artist himself may not understand. The student, wishing to acquire the first, cannot do better than investigate, and eventually assimilate the second. Nor need this involve any great excursion into the purely academic field. To the critic, absolute truths are measurably important. To the dramatist, the pragmatic sanction: the knowledge that "it works" is often enough. His task is the creation of beauty rather than the explanation of the "why" underlying all beauty. The creator cannot stop to apply the yardstick of absolute definition to the material from which his work is to grow. To him a definition is of value only as it suggests methods which he may apply in his actual practice: he is less concerned with the absolute aspects of his art than with the broad principles that apply to his exercise of it.

This volume, therefore, is an inquiry into the "how", and touches upon the "why" only when direct illumination may be drawn from it. It strives to consider the problems of the one-act play entirely from the standpoint of the playwright, and, so far as possible, in the order in which they arise. The principles which we are to consider are neither radical nor startling. Common sense must sustain them, or they cannot be sustained.

Chapter II: The Qualifications of the Playwright

> Alceste. *Je ne dis pas cela. Mais enfin, lui disais-je,*
> *Quel besoin si pressant avez-vous de rimer?*
> Molière: "Le Misanthrope.

At what age may we determine that the Lord, in His infinite wisdom, instead of sending us a plumber, a physician, a lawyer, or a plain business man, has seen fit to visit us with yet another playwright? I do not know.

It is absurd to argue that because the child is interested in "playing house" the man is likely to follow in Sir J. M. Barrie's footsteps. If anything, the indication is quite the reverse: some of our very worst plays have been written by some of our very best actors. It is equally absurd to take seriously the fact that the child is an expert at that form of mid-Victorian torture known as "speaking a piece." A great actor may be a fine elocutionist; but many great elocutionists are not even indifferent actors; and the playwright, who bears the same relation to the actor that the violinist bears to his Strad, may feel his part deeply and be wholly unable to express it if his only instrument be himself. History records that Beethoven, whose contribution to music is perhaps as great as that of any other man who ever lived, sang wretchedly, even grotesquely. The art of interpretation is one thing; the art of composition quite another. Aptitude at "amateur theatricals" should not be taken too seriously. The play instinct, infinitely varied by civilization, is universal in the human race. Doubtless in the very earliest days imbeciles could be found to play

the part of "Sabre-Tooth Tiger," while other wiser individuals demonstrated the procedure of "Man with a Rough-Stone Club." The dramatist, if then existent, would probably have been found perched on a safe cliff, taking copious notes.

Playwriting calls for the coëxistence of two indispensables: not only must there be the worth-while thought, but there must be expertness in the art of reducing it to speech and action. In every age there have surely been "mute, inglorious Miltons" possessed of the worth-while thought, but prevented by economic pressure, or by lack of expertness, from making it known to the rest of the world. Painfully true is the reverse: there are only too many men gifted with mere technical dexterity and deficient in profundity; past masters of form, understanding nothing of content; incredibly adept at all the tricks of "hokum" and never rising above "hokum" because of the failure of their vision to carry them further.

Obviously the playwright should possess both the dream and the machinery for making it tangible. He is not likely to show even the promise of either at an early age. Only too justly Professor Baker warns against "trying to phrase for the stage thoughts or emotions not yet mature."[1] Time may or may not bring the maturity; study and application may or may not bring dexterity. How shall we determine if either goal is likely to be reached, or if the aspirant, in his own interest, should not be persuaded to abandon all hopes of becoming a playwright?

First, and perhaps the most reliable indication, is intense interest in the drama; in the text, rather than in the actor; in plays, rather than in "shows." Are you seriously, intensely interested in the theater? Do

[1] "Dramatic Technique," v. (A complete list of all technical works quoted, giving publishers' names and addresses, will be found in the bibliography, pp. 367 *et seq.*)

you make it a point to attend the worthwhile plays acted in your town? Are you sufficiently interested to purchase the published play, even after you have witnessed its performance, and to read it over again, not once, but many times? And when you do read the play over, do you visualize the acting of its parts? Do you form — or attempt to form — a definite conception of each of its different characters? Do you realize that the playwright is trying to build real men and women, thoroughly consistent in themselves, differentiated each from the other? Do you detect occasions when the playwright permits his own personality to obtrude, and allows his creatures to speak as he himself would speak rather than in accordance with their own proper persons?

When you go to the theater, do you prefer the first row or the last? Would you rather sit in the orchestra or in the gallery? Has it ever occurred to you that the play cannot be considered apart from its effect on the audience, and that that effect can be studied best from the cheapest seats in the house? Have you ever deliberately tried to gauge the reaction of the audience? Have you ever felt that the audience was inappropriate for the play? When something goes wrong, are you amused or mortified? In other words, is your sympathy with the play, assuming that it is worth your sympathy, or are you more interested in its misadventures?

After the play is over, what image remains with you longest? The recollection of the ingenue who displayed perhaps a trifle too much of her silk hose, or the memory of some bit of dialogue, some situation, which for some reason impressed you? When you tell the story of the play to your friends, do you identify the characters by the names which the author has given them or by the names of the actors who happened to impersonate them? And are you able to tell the story?

When I mention Paula Tanqueray, Crichton, Falder, Hilda Wangel, Maurya, do I evoke any definite picture in your mind? Or must I shift to the safer ground of Douglas Fairbanks, John Barrymore, and Charlie Chaplin? Do you know who wrote "Iris"; "Captain Brassbound's Conversion"; "'Ile"; "The Darling of the Gods"; "Kismet"; "The Pigeon"; "Interior"; "Alice-Sit-by-the-Fire"; "Michael and His Lost Angel"; "The Tinker's Wedding"; "The Monkey's Paw"? Do you remember easily, or is it an effort? Could Pinero have written "A Kiss for Cinderella"? Could Barrie have written "The Thunderbolt"? Could Shaw have written "Candida"?

Do you ever make the bright remark, "I love Billie Burke! She's always so witty"? [1] Do you talk during the play? Do you finish your cigarette during the intermission, at the cost of missing the beginning of an act? Do you ever wait in the lobby to hear the comments of the audience as it leaves the theater?

Do you read dramatic criticisms? Do you ever differ with them? Do you ever decide not to attend a play because it is to be withdrawn at the end of the week?

Only you yourself know if you answer these questions truthfully. Do your answers tell you to hope? Or do they tell you that you are likely to be a Lady Epping? And who, by the way, was Lady Epping?

No, it is not necessary to be an encyclopedia of theatrical information in order to become a playwright. It does not matter in the least if you are unable to place a single name of the many with which I have bombarded you. My point is far simpler; were you really interested, and did you try to answer my questions, or did you, perhaps, just skip? The dramatist would not have skipped.

The importance of interest in, and respect for the

[1] Assuming that you have not met her off the stage.

theater can hardly be exaggerated. Robert Louis Stevenson, master of the novel and of the short story, failed dismally when he turned his hand to playwriting. At the age of twenty-four he had never been in a theater.[1] When finally he approached it, it was "in a smiling, sportive, half-contemptuous spirit." [2] To his father he wrote, "The theater is a gold mine; and on that I must keep my eye." [3] "He amused himself by playing with his subject, instead of wrestling with it after fasting and prayer." [4] His lack of interest in the living theater, his unwillingness to learn what every successful dramatist from the time of Aeschylus has had to learn, may, perhaps, suggest a reason for his failure.

Granted an intense interest in the drama, let us pass to the next indication. The future dramatist will like to write. He will enjoy the labor of creation; he will take pleasure in transferring his thoughts to paper. He may not find it easy to light upon the precise combination of words which best expresses his meaning; indeed, as his taste improves, as his judgment becomes stricter, he may find it exceedingly difficult to satisfy the exacting demands of his self-criticism. If he is naturally fluent in the beginning, he often becomes less fluent as he progresses. His standards will rise, and the pages which once delighted him will seem hopelessly childish. If he is not naturally a facile writer, he may acquire greater ease through practice. But ease in writing alone never yet made a dramatist. It is one thing to combine words into sentences, and to combine those sentences into dialogue. It is a much

[1] Graham Balfour, I, 161. Quoted by Clayton Hamilton in "Problems of the Playwright", 166.

[2] Sir Arthur Wing Pinero: "Robert Louis Stevenson: The Dramatist."

[3] Graham Balfour, quoted by Pinero.

[4] Brander Matthews: "The Principles of Playmaking", 52.

more difficult task to make the dialogue natural and effective, charged with meaning, advancing the action of the play subtly and continuously from the rise to the fall of the curtain.

Like Sentimental Tommy, the playwright will labor hours over a phrase. But he will enjoy the labor. His mind teems with characters into which his pen must breathe the breath of life; fully formed scenes tug desperately at recalcitrant bits which refuse, somehow, to emerge from the clouds; his pen, not always the faithful servant of his thought, fumbles and gropes, and sets down phrases which life blots out impatiently. But he persists, for there is no work under the sun in which he takes a greater pleasure. He may find writing difficult: never does he find it distasteful.

The playwright will be interested in other people. He will try to discover the motives behind their actions. He will study them both at first hand and through the eyes of other writers. He will envy the ability of Mark Sabre, in "If Winter Comes", to understand "he's right from how he looks at it and it's no good saying he's wrong", and he will try to acquire the same penetration into character.

When Hedda Gabler, having reached the end of her tether, walks into the next room and shoots herself, Judge Brack, aghast, exclaims: "Good God — people don't do such things." By the remark he shows that he would have made a poor dramatist. Ibsen knew better.

Agmar, in Lord Dunsany's "The Gods of the Mountain", might well have written plays. His understanding of "preparation" is profound;[1] his insight into human nature is convincing. The beggars shall

[1] Act I. Agmar (*To Slag*). Go you into the city before us and let there be a prophecy there which saith that the gods who are carven from green rock in the mountain shall one day arise in Marma and come here in the guise of men.

not wear green raiment over their rags: "The first who looked closely would say, 'These are only beggars.'" Instead

> Each of the seven shall wear a piece of the green raiment underneath his rags. And peradventure here and there a little shall show through; and men shall say, "These seven have disguised themselves as beggars. But we know not what they be."

Many writers have identified their names with some one type of character. The dramatist realizes that one character, however altered in the minor details of sex, social station, or age, does not make a play: however striking in itself, it is only by setting it off against others that it may reach its fullest stature. Life, his great prototype, is an infinitely various, infinitely complex picture gallery. Some small section of that gallery he will endeavor to reproduce in his creatures, and he can reproduce it intelligently only in so far as he himself understands it. He cannot explain to others what he has not taught himself. He will be continually occupied in studying character, the raw material of drama.

He will be interested in psychology, pure and applied, and he will be particularly interested in the psychology of the emotions, for drama without emotion, he knows, is like a body without a soul. Vicariously he will try to feel emotions which circumstances have not yet brought into his own life. His characters will feel such emotions; acting as their spokesman, he must express them. He can do so forcefully and convincingly only if he can make himself feel the same emotions warmly, poignantly, profoundly. From his mind comes the framework in which he places his characters: only the earnestness of his soul can make them true, human, sympathetic.

Naturally enough it follows that a man who can

share the feelings of other persons, who can realize equally what is comic and what is sad to them, who can, in his imagination, partake of their joys and sorrows, is likely to be a good *raconteur*, and after he has found himself, a good speaker. It is significant that Augustus Thomas is a remarkable orator, and that St. John Ervine, John Drinkwater, David Belasco, Channing Pollock, James Forbes, Cosmo Hamilton, Zoë Akins, and Lady Gregory are all far above the ordinary standards of excellence as speakers. This is easily comprehensible. The playwright possesses the ability to visualize powerfully. His study of other people has taught him to think clearly and logically. His acquaintance with his own art has made him an adept at leading to a point. When he speaks, when he tells a story, he is but reproducing in words, far less carefully chosen than those he sets on paper, a sequence of pictures which is precise and detailed in his mind. If he deals in abstractions, his thought is clear and orderly: he has learned that from the necessity for the same qualities in his plays. If he recounts an anecdote, he makes it telling, for he surrounds it with a wealth of convincing detail: his ability to put himself in the place of any character in his story makes that not only possible but natural; he builds it skillfully from an interesting beginning to a still more interesting close. And his stories are not likely to fall flat: he has studied the reactions of audiences for too many years to err either in his choice of a story or in his manner of narrating it.

The way in which an aspirant recounts an anecdote, I believe, is likely to furnish a better clew to the presence or absence of latent dramatic talent than any other one indication. It is the simplest of all tests of that invaluable quality known as dramatic instinct, a quality which is but the sum of the others.

I have said nothing about imagination. There is little that need be said about imagination. A man

either possesses or lacks it. If he lacks it, it is sheer madness for him to embark upon the writing of either poetry, drama, or fiction. If he possesses it, and it is sufficiently vivid and fertile, he will not be able to refrain from transferring some of his ideas to paper. He will find stimulus everywhere. A chance remark; an accidental juxtaposition of words; a picture; the sight of a young face — or of an old one; a beautiful woman, or a hag; anything and everything in life, and even death and what may follow death itself, will set his delicately attuned mentality jangling. Often he will recognize that the thoughts which result are neither sufficiently original nor interesting to warrant preservation. But if his imagination is fresh, if it is active and luxuriant, often he will discover a germ which may well be transplanted into some remote garden of the mind, there to grow, perhaps, and flourish, until in the fullness of time its fruit shall be firm and sweet and ripe, and worth the plucking.

I have spoken of the fundamental endowments of the dramatist. These are the essentials. A large share of each is indispensable if he would write plays, and not merely ruin reams and reams of good white paper. Taken together, these qualities, and years of practice, *may* make a playwright. The total lack of any one of them would be, I fear, an absolute barrier to such a career. The electrician who submitted to me a play in which an eminently sane and respectable paterfamilias for no reason in particular cut the throat of his six-year-old daughter was not lacking in imagination, though I recall that I commented upon a certain *non sequitur* in his psychology. The thousands of well-meaning persons who insist that their effusions must be good because what they portray "really happened to a friend of mine" are not lacking in either sympathy or in an inclination to write; but their choice of themes suggests weakness in the department of the imagination.

The simple souls whose truck-drivers talk like Lords, and whose Lords talk like nothing on God's clean sweet earth, disclose inevitably that they are deficient in powers of observation.

One more thing is essential. Not even the publishers of "Wonder Books for Writers" can open a royal road to fame and fortune. Except in the rarest cases, years are necessary for the cultivation of a talent. Except in the rarest cases, more years are necessary for its profitable recognition. There is need for patience; and more patience; and then, again, still more patience.

Chapter III: The Studies of the Playwright

SOME books are printed in a type so minute that it is difficult to read them. The Book which the dramatist must read to the end of his days is written in characters so gigantic that one may not understand at first that it is a book at all. Here and there one discerns meaning; but even oftener one discerns no meaning whatsoever. This section of the text is perfectly comprehensible; that a mystery to the profoundest scholar. More puzzling still, diverse chapters, read in connection with each other, seem to contradict: to contradict flatly.

One begins to suspect that the Book has been carelessly revised, else its inconsistencies would have been reconciled by the Author. Yet as one begins to read better, as one passes from deciphering letters to recognizing complete words and phrases, one glimpses occasionally a deep, majestic order pervading the whole. Then some of the inconsistencies begin to disappear; then some of the contradictions cease to contradict; and in their places come other still graver, still more impenetrable mysteries. And in the endless pursuit of their solutions, for the dramatist is convinced that there are solutions, he passes the most fruitful hours of his life.

According to one's ability to read from the Book is one's work. He who reads truly, sympathetically, is likely to contribute a mite to the accumulated treasure of the ages; he who reads badly, or scorns to read at all, will find that his work is not worth the doing; that it is false, shallow, insincere.

Yet the Book is not always serious, not always grave, not always profound. It is shot through with

lighter moments. It is brilliant in satire; scintillant in wit; robust sometimes and delicate at others in its humor. Its most thunderous pages may be followed, capriciously, by its lightest, exactly as in the drama which mimics it a smile so often follows a tear. It is not even always dignified. It is likely to be ludicrous, extravagant, preposterous; and the dramatist, guessing at an explanation, transfers both cause and effect to his stage. It is apt to be whimsical, fantastic, poetic, and in a flash to turn to the bitter, the sordid, the melancholy. From it have been drawn all of the dramas that have been written, yet it is fuller, richer, more inspiring than before. It is the Book of Life.

So vast a subject may be studied in many manners. Each individual, indeed, will have his own way of approaching it. Its purely physical side, its so-called "local color", the various guises under which it presents itself to the senses, can be apprehended best at first hand. If you would write of some remote corner of the earth, it is well to be familiar with your subject; if not, you risk a catastrophe with the first better informed audience. But if you write of the people who live in the house next door, and write inaccurately, you will come to grief just as surely. It is not necessary to travel to the end of the world to make a flagrant error; unless your observation is keen and true, you will inevitably make it in writing of the things you think you know best.

The public is surprisingly well informed, and peculiarly well informed on matters of apparently minor importance. If, in a serious play, your heroine comments upon the smell of pine needles in a place where pines do not exist; if your hero plucks goldenrod in the spring, or violets in the fall; if, through excess of poetic fancy, you people your heavens with constellations which are not visible at the given time and place, you risk destroying every shred of illusion.

Your characters stamp themselves upon your audience through their speech. If you have listened inaccurately, if their language is not in perfect harmony with their station, if they indulge in dialect, and it is a dialect which you have evolved entirely out of your inner consciousness, if their grammar or their manners are either better or worse than in real life, your play — unless frankly unrealistic — may never survive the handicap.

Again, your psychology — and the most reliable knowledge of it comes from direct observation — must be faithful. If one of your characters, after fifteen minutes of innocuous desuetude, suddenly turns out to be a villain, the audience must be made to feel that it is right and logical. If another indulges in the luxury of a last-minute reformation, it must be convincing — or your play will suffer. The Colonel's lady and Judy O'Grady may be sisters under their skins, but they will not arrive at identical conclusions in identical manners. The result may be the same. Their methods in reaching it may not even be similar. And both are present in every audience, quick to detect an error in the portrayal of either.

The matter of familiarizing one's self with detail may perhaps be likened to the process of learning to speak a foreign tongue. There is a period when you are thinking in your native tongue, and translating your words, one by one, into the stranger one. Just so the playwright to whom the details of his subject are new will translate them to the stage in such a manner that his auditors will smell the midnight oil and sense the effort by which the local color is dragged in. And art, your audience knows, must be effortless: there is no art which does not conceal a still greater art.

When, however, the student of a foreign tongue has proceeded to a point at which he is able to *think* in the new idiom, when the mere details have been learnt —

and digested — he will be able to speak for the first time as a native does: simply, correctly, and convincingly. Very similar is the problem of the playwright: when the details have been mastered, when he has coördinated them, when they have become a digested part of the mental equipment with which he approaches a certain play, he will reproduce life intelligently. Instead of clogging his action with superfluities of which he is rather proud, much as the beginner in French will commence every sentence with the magic words, "*Eh, bien*", he will unhesitatingly select the essentials which his instinct indicates and discard the rest without a pang. The play is the thing. If a given detail helps it to achieve its effect, well and good. But if it stands between the dramatist and his goal, it must come out, now or later.

May I further qualify what I have just said? A play is a finely integrated highly complex organism. Mere photographic observation has its uses, but by itself, it will not make a play. Something more is necessary, and that something may perhaps be defined as some apperception, however faint, of the underlying forces which blend all details into a unified whole. At his best, the dramatist is also a philosopher. He shows not only life, but penetrates deeply into life itself.

From the writings of others, too, the playwright learns much. Physical detail is apparent to his senses. Psychological detail he often divines. But it is not given to any one man to come into personal contact with the many and varied subjects of the world's literature. Characters, passions, emotions, which he cannot always study at first hand, are accessible in the works of other writers. In plays, novels, history, biography, poetry, he finds infinite food for thought — and innumerable suggestions for his own plays. The flashes of light which the great masters have cast upon

their subjects, their judgments of human nature, their observation of character under the stress of circumstance, all these are touchstones by which the playwright continually corrects, emends, and enriches his own thinking.

Sir Joshua Reynolds wrote:

> The more extensive your acquaintance is with the works of those who have excelled, the more extensive will be your power of invention, and what may appear still more like a paradox, the more original will be your own conceptions.[1]

The raw material of drama lies about us. The closest personal observation is necessary to check one's interpretation of it. But other minds have labored at the same task, and have separated some small part of the wheat from the chaff. Everything that has already been reduced to writing is the inheritance of the man who begins writing to-day. He cannot make himself too familiar with it.

Nor will familiarity with literature breed slavish imitation. Far otherwise; the knowledge that such and such a task has already been incomparably well done will lead the dramatist to apply his own talent to new and less plowed fields. A little familiarity is dangerous. There is the risk, as Mr. Archer points out in discussing theater-going, that the aspirant

> . . . may fall under the influence of some great master, and see life only through his eyes; or he may become so habituated to the current tricks of the theatrical trade as to lose all sense of their conventionality and falsity.[2]

The risk may be minimized if the aspirant submits himself exclusively to no one influence.

[1] Quoted by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch in "On the Art of Writing", 29.

[2] "Play-Making", 7.

It is a misfortune, perhaps, that everything that is worth reading is not accessible in a single tongue. The dramatist who would keep abreast of modern contributions to his art will find a knowledge of French nearly indispensable. As yet François de Curel, to cite but a single exemplar, is nearly unknown in this country. The last few years have witnessed the translation of one or two of his plays into English. But the impressive body of his work, instructive, perhaps, to every future dramatist, is inaccessible to the person unable to read it in the original. Hervieu, Donnay, Lavedan, and Lemaitre are known to some slight extent in America through the medium of English versions of very uneven merit. Rostand, indeed, is a great name to the American, but no translation can convey the splendor of his verse.

Particularly in the one-act play have the French demonstrated their singular genius for the dramatic. From the poetic drama of Coppée to the "thriller" of De Lorde, Francheville, and Garin; from the "*proverbe*" of De Musset to the naturalistic "*scène de famille*" of Méténier and of his host of followers; from the earliest "*vaudeville, mélée de chant*" to the present light comedy, too often unblushing and unashamed, the contribution of the French has been vast, original, and significant.

Need I say that my advocacy of French should not be interpreted as a disparagement of other languages? German and Italian, particularly the former, will be found useful; Spanish far less so. The European development of the drama is proceeding with giant strides; the playwright will profit by familiarizing himself with it.

Foreign languages are a valuable equipment; but the dramatist's main equipment will be in his own tongue. The study of English, and particularly the study of spoken English, is invaluable. His supreme

object, at all times, is to make his dialogue clearly, easily understood. The greater his command of words, the larger the fund upon which he may draw in selecting the phrases which best convey his thought. This does not mean that he shall stud his discourse with polysyllabic jaw-breakers. Quite the reverse; the homely, simple Anglo-Saxon word is not only more effective, but harder to select. It is easy to clothe a thought in stilted language; the playwright must accomplish the feat of expressing it in plain English. And he will need some knowledge of grammar. Only too often is he called upon to write simple, *ungrammatical* English: I do not believe that a person totally ignorant of grammar can write convincing, *ungrammatical* dialogue. I am fully aware that many individuals talk such English fluently, even elegantly. But the dramatist, wishing, very often, to transfer bad English to the stage, will need sufficient knowledge of his mother tongue to enable him to recognize his errors as he deliberately makes them. Moreover, he will need direct personal observation to assure him that he is actually reproducing a spoken argot, and not evolving a non-existent form of speech out of his imagination. Good good English is the common language of the essayist; good bad English is the common language of the dramatist.

Obviously the playwright's principal study will be of his own art. Only through incessant application and practice can he hope to perfect any department of it. Strength in but one quality will call attention to weakness in others.

The writing of drama demands the harmonious working of three great faculties: observation, thought, craftsmanship. The material is gathered by the first; developed by the second; cast into form by the third. A good play is the result of the correct functioning of all three.

The dramatist will therefore scrutinize his work closely. However harsh his own criticism, that of the world will be no less relentless. If he discovers an error, he will attempt to cure it; and he will endeavor to commit less in his future work. If, upon a hasty reading, he discovers no errors at all, he will be assured not of the excellence of his play but of the weakness of his criticism. The errors will be there: he has but to recognize them. The final test before an audience, to which he looks forward with eager apprehension, will disclose them pitilessly.

The world sets its standards. The dramatist, if he be sincere and earnest, will endeavor to set his own appreciably higher. He will fail to reach them, but even in his failure he will be conscious that he has striven to give of his best.

Chapter IV: A Chapter of Definitions

DEFINITIONS may be annoying, but they are necessary. Words are the currency of thought; definitions its foreign exchange. If we are to use certain terms freely, it is important that we indicate at the outset upon what basis they may be exchanged for others which the reader will accept at face value. Only in this way can we make sure that our interest is actually in the same subject.

We shall have frequent occasion to use the term "play." Precisely what do we understand by it? We are chiefly concerned with the "one-act play." What is it, and what relation does it bear to other kinds of "plays"? Let us, remembering that we are striving to approach our subject synthetically, collect the elements from which we can fashion practical, working definitions.

We begin, then, by noting that a play must be considered in connection with an audience. I am aware that there is a large class of so-called "closet drama", arrangements in dialogue form intended rather to be read than to be acted. Freed from the limitations of the living theater, at liberty to avail himself of every device known to the novelist, the author of such literature requires little or no knowledge of the technique of the dramatist: he is working in a medium in which its employment might be the reverse of useful.

It must be apparent that the knowledge that one work is merely to be printed, while another is to be subjected to the very different test of actual representation, influences the author from the outset. The printed page will remain open as long as desired by

the reader. Clearness, perspicuity, logic are valuable in every form of literature: but if the printed page lacks them, nothing prevents the reader from applying any amount of study, or the author from superadding any amount of explanation. Here, at once, the acted text differs, and differs radically. Its personages speak in the tempo of life. At moments of passion words may pour from their lips at a speed almost too great to permit their comprehension; at other times there may be few words and many silences. But the speed is never altered merely to permit the audience to ponder. The pages of the acted play turn whether the reader has digested them or not; and they may not be turned back. Cheerfully the dramatist accepts this limitation. The author of "closet drama" need not concern himself with it at all.

We may go farther. The writer of "closet drama" may lean heavily upon stage directions of a difficult or impossible nature. Thus Mr. Theodore Dreiser's interesting and suggestive "The Blue Sphere" contains:

MRS. MINTURN (*a neighbor, looking out of her window at some sweet pea vines and smiling*). What a perfect day! How nice Mrs. Arthur's trees look! I think — (*She is thinking of calling on Mrs. Arthur*)

From the same composition:

[*Mrs. Delavan commences paring apples, all thought of the child passing from her.*

From the same author's "The Spring Recital"

THE CAT (*springing*). There! I almost caught him! (*Peers into the hole*) Just the same, I know where he is now. (*He strolls off with an air of undefeated skill*)

From the same composition:

[*A passing cloud of Hags and Wastrels, the worst of the earth lovers, enticed by the gaiety of sound, enter and fill the*

arches and the vacant spaces for the moment, skipping about in wild hilarity. . . . Persistences of fish and birds and animals, attracted by the rhythm which is both color and harmony to them, turn and weave among the others. . . .

One is tempted to comment that Mr. Dreiser has gained nothing that would not be even more effectively gained by a short story. By adopting the pseudo-play form he has been compelled to divest himself of a large part of his equipment as a prose writer. He has been forced to substitute the imagination of a chance reader for his own tried and tested skill as a narrator. The result is questionable.

The true play reaches its fullest stature only when presented before an audience. Between performances it exists in print or in manuscript, precisely as does a symphony or an opera. There are classes of persons who can take up one or the other and read intelligently. But in the actual performance beauties and defects imperceptible to the most expert reader become extremely apparent. The acted play is the printed play — and a great deal more. Indeed, if the living drama did not possess something entirely foreign to the printed page, how many persons would leave the warmth and comfort of their own firesides to journey to the theater? Times without number it has been evident that the playwright, visioning correctly into the distance, has foreseen and counted upon the subtlest reactions of his audience. If the author of "closet drama" possesses this rare ability, how is it to serve him? He is setting before the eyes of his readers not characters in the flesh, but words which he hopes shall evoke them. Facial expressions; the significant pause; the visible conflict of wills and personalities, — these are as nothing to him. He may arrange his typography as does the playwright, he may omit quotation marks and print his own comments in italics, but in what respect can he accomplish more than the novelist? What

is a laugh or a sob? The descriptive art of the greatest writer cannot approach the reality of the thing itself as it issues from the lips of the living actor.

Having posited that a play must be considered in connection with an audience, may I add that it must be considered in connection with the emotions of that audience; that if it fails to arouse emotion of some kind, it is not a play? It may arouse sympathy or scorn for its characters; pity or envy; affection or dislike; commiseration or laughter. It may evoke all or any of the varied emotions known to humanity. But if one has merely commented, "It's interesting"; if one has not been compelled to depart from a purely intellectual attitude and become a partisan, however slight, of some character or theme, something is missing. That something is the play.

Fiction, if it at all aspires to be art — appeals to temperament, and, in truth, it must be, like painting, like music, like all art, the appeal of one temperament to all the other innumerable temperaments whose subtle and resistless power endows passing events with their true meaning, and creates the moral, the emotional atmosphere of the place and time.[1]

A play exists to create emotional response in an audience. The response may be to the emotions of the people in the play or the emotions of the author as he watches these people.[2]

It is this response that the playwright has in mind when he begins to write. Humanity in the mass will respond as the individual will not. No matter how excellent your wit, no solitary auditor will either laugh or applaud for sixty consecutive seconds. Yet neither response is uncommon in the theater. A flash of humor

[1] Joseph Conrad: "The Art of Writing." Quoted by Blanche Colton Williams: "A Handbook on Story Writing", 12.

[2] George Pierce Baker: "Dramatic Technique", 43.

may win a smile from a reader. Place a thousand of the same persons in a single room, and the smile may grow to Homeric laughter.

The psychology of the crowd is a curious and fascinating subject with which we are not directly concerned. Theorizing upon the subject cannot teach the dramatist a tenth of what he will learn by direct observation. Sufficient for us to know that an audience responds as an individual does not, that its perceptions are at once broader and more delicate, its reactions less self-conscious and more emphatic, its tastes, the variety of subjects in which it is interested, infinitely wider. It is to an audience, then, that the playwright addresses himself, and particularly to the emotions of that audience.

From the effect to the cause is but a short step. That which the dramatist places upon his stage, by means of which he rocks his theater with laughter or saddens it with tears, is drawn from life. The changing relationship of individuals or groups with other individuals or groups; the passions of man, good or evil; his thoughts and speculations upon any and every subject; his idealism, his poetry, his aspiration, or their reverse; conflict, physical or mental; most of all, the changes which the attrition of life brings about in character and destiny, all of these are the substance proper of the play. Life is movement; movement from and movement towards. This movement the dramatist reproduces in the form of a story. But life itself is badly arranged. Logical, purposeful, emotive in its entirety, sections small enough to come within the compass of the stage may be devoid of these essential requirements. By a simple process of selection and rearrangement the dramatist supplies them. Faithful always to detail, in accordance with the standard of the play itself,[1] it is his privilege — and his duty — to order

[1] See p. 223.

and assemble those details so that they shall show forth most clearly the thing which he himself has seen. Perhaps the prototype has obscured essentials with a mass of unrelated trivialities; perhaps the two things or persons who would be interesting in juxtaposition exist only at the opposite poles of the earth; perhaps — and very often — there has been a lack of coherence, of justice, even of reasonableness. From the wealth of material which lies at hand the dramatist selects and lifts out a compact, moving story, true in its elementals, effective in its sequence, persuasive in its reality.

The play is concerned with life, but with the representation of life rather than with life itself. Life has its humor, but often as not it is overdone. Life has its tragedies, but in themselves they are too real to be artistically enjoyable. It is only by the device of representation, only by the salving sense that the play, after all, is but a play, that an audience pleasureably exercises the emotions of pity, fear, and terror.

The Romans, connoisseurs in cruelty as in other things, portrayed the fearful legend of Apollo and Marsyas in the arena, compelling unfortunate malefactors to play the part of the boastful Phrygian, who, for his presumption, was flayed alive. The tragedy proceeded to its terrible end. Yet here was no play. The actor ceased to be an actor and became a victim. He stepped not only out of his skin but out of his part: what began as drama ended as ghastly reality.

Our definition is nearly complete. Let us add but one term to it, and that a term to which we have already referred.

All art, be it painting, sculpture, architecture, music, or any of the diverse fields of literature, is orderly. Beneath the most luxuriant flowering of a poetic imagination, beneath the freest and wildest expression of man's search for beauty, is profound order. Indeed, Art, as a whole, might be succinctly described as an

aesthetic recognition of order. Drama, as one of the arts, partakes of this characteristic of every art.

Let us then hazard as our definition, bearing in mind that every term is to be interpreted in its broadest connotation, and bearing also in mind that we are less concerned with absolute truth than with a practical working equivalent that will guide us farther:

A play is an orderly representation of life, arousing emotion in an audience.

Chapter V: The One-Act Play

WHAT is a one-act play? Let us differentiate it from the full-length play at once by saying that it is superior in unity and economy, playable in a comparatively short space of time, and intended to be assimilated as a whole without the aid of intermissions. Each of these essential requirements merits somewhat attentive consideration.

The one-act play moves within bounds of which the writer of long plays knows nothing. It is not an abbreviated play; much less, as a rule, is it the material out of which a longer play can be made. Unity is its inspiration; unity is its aim; unity is its soul. Unity is at once its mainspring and its escapement, its motive power and its limitation. The swiftness of exposition, the brevity, the homogeneity of effect which insists that every word contribute towards that effect; these are necessities unknown to the more leisurely three- or four-acter. The entire first act of a long play may be given up to the narration of what has come before: the one-act play must accomplish this in a few minutes. If, in the course of the long play, the interest flag momentarily, little is lost. Should this occur, even for an instant, the one-act play is ruined. A single effect, conveyed powerfully or delicately, or poetically or rudely, or seriously or whimsically, according to the character of the effect itself; an instantaneous arrest of attention, a continued grasp, and relinquishment only after the curtain has fallen; this is the goal and the method of the true one-act play.[1]

Unity implies, to begin with, a single major situation and its corollary, a single dominant impression. There may be, as in Mr. Gilbert Cannan's "Everybody's

[1] Percival Wilde: "Confessional", preface.

Husband", a well-marked series of minor situations leading up to it; or, as in Mr. Alfred Sutro's "The Man in the Stalls", an apparently major situation may explode into a still more powerful one. But the major situation, the moment in which everything which has preceded is brought into sharp and brilliant focus, is indispensable. No series of minor episodes, however cunningly contrived in themselves, can take its place.

The movement of the one-act play may be likened picturesquely to the fusion of two or more refractory metals. The dissimilar ingredients, ugly, rough, misshapen, are placed in the crucible. Heat is applied. The processes of change begin, and begin differently, for one element may succumb quickly while others exhibit the colors of the rainbow before yielding finally to the chemist's alchemy. The principal ingredient may apparently resist; the heat grows more intense; glowing redness flames into coruscating white, and eventually there comes an instant of perfect fusion, perfect liquidity, the instant for which the chemist has been waiting. In that instant he pours, and the fiery mass quickly solidifies in a new shape, a new color, a new and sometimes an unexpected beauty. Precisely so the one-act play, beginning often with a strange assortment of characters, motives, themes, what not, grows warmer, begins to glow, to shed light, until in the instant of maximum liquidity, the instant in which lives and destinies are quivering upon a single word, thought, or act, the entire play changes, changes powerfully and beautifully before the eyes of the spectators, and comes forth in a new and more lasting form.

It is this instant that the audience has the right to expect. It is the lack of this instant that it will resent if it cheated out of it. It is upon the power, the blinding truth of this instant that the life of the play in literature depends.

Let not this be misinterpreted a plea for melodrama. Some persons, I am aware, will picture heroes and villains locked in mortal combat; earthquakes, tornadoes, and all the visible manifestations of physical forces. Such persons, for many years to come, will continue to get what they want from the purveyors of their favorite fare. But the writers of one-act plays consciously address themselves to audiences of a type able to appreciate something better.

The spirit of the one-act play demands economy of major characters. Most of them revolve about a single dominant character. Another group, typified by Mr. Harold Brighouse's "Lonesome-Like", Lady Gregory's "The Workhouse Ward" and "Coats", Mr. Alfred Sutro's "A Marriage Has Been Arranged", and Miss Alice Brown's "Joint Owners in Spain", casts nearly equal emphasis upon two central characters. But if the number of emphasized characters increases beyond a certain point (depending chiefly upon the length of the play), blurring of the story and confusion in the audience are likely to result. Mr. George Calderon's "The Little Stone House" uses a large and beautifully etched group of minor characters simply to project Praskóvya and Sasha into sharper relief. My "Pawns" places every emphasis upon the dominating figure of the sergeant, the remaining characters being used merely to accentuate varied aspects of an unchanging background.

There is danger, even in a lengthy one-act play, in attempting to focus sharply upon a large number of characters. Leonid Andreyev's "Love of One's Neighbor" is successful because the morbid crowd is welded into a single unit of opposition to the man in danger. Karl Ettlinger's "Altruism" is less successful because the author, striving to tell a story about every character, bewilders his audience and obscures his theme. In a full-length play, with ample time for the development

of individual portraits and histories, the desired result might possibly have been obtained. Mr. Philip Moeller's brilliant "Helena's Husband" develops five puppets with strict impartiality, with the effect that the maximum emphasis falls upon the author's cleverness rather than upon anything in the play itself.

In its largest sense the one-act play is impressionistic, and subjects not susceptible to such treatment must remain foreign to it. Even its realism is likely to be impressionistic. Mr. Gilbert Cannan's "James and John" is a *tranche de vie;* but even the most cursory examination will disclose that it obtains its effect not by piling on details but by artistically selecting the significant ones.

The canvas of the one-act play is small. Upon its limited surface but one or two characters can be depicted in their full stature. The others must be considered accompanying instruments, successful only in so far as they amplify — and lose themselves — in the more important melody. Their delineation calls for the most skillful restraint.

In the two preceding paragraphs we come upon a subtle and important distinction: the full-length play may counterfeit life by direct imitation, by duplicating upon the stage a sizable part of the external world; the one-act play is apt to rely more largely upon the delicate art of suggestion. The full-length play may be a series of detailed pictures; the one-act play is more likely to be a series of vivid flashes. The full-length play, after running through two thirds of an evening, ascends to a long-awaited and well-prepared climax. The one-act play begins, culminates, and ends in a quarter of the time, and as often as not its highest point is as powerful, as gripping, as dramatically effective as that of its longer relation.

There can be no art without economy; there can be no good one-act play without the most artistic economy.

The half of artistry consists in learning to make one stroke better than two. The more simply, economically, you produce the impression aimed at, the better workman you may call yourself.[1]

The question is never, "Given the means, how great an effect can you produce?" It is rather, "Desiring an effect, what are the least means with which you can produce it?" The disparity between the two cannot be too impressive. To land a tarpon with rod and line is art; to catch herring with a close-mesh seine is murder. The writer of the one-act play cannot choose: his choice is dictated by his medium. Economy demands insight, power, brevity, vividness, craftsmanship, and, more often than not, a touch of poetry. It is the soul of the one-act play. What can be more admirable than the perfect restraint of "Riders to the Sea"? For every word that is spoken, ten are left unsaid.

I have suggested that the one-act play is "playable in a comparatively short space of time, and intended to be assimilated as a whole without the aid of intermissions." The first phrase demands no explanation whatever; the second requires a great deal.

The intermissions which divide full-length plays into separate acts are not only physical but psychological necessities. An audience, despite Mr. Bernard Shaw to the contrary, cannot remain physically — or mentally — seated in one place for a length of time much exceeding forty-five minutes.

Any one who has seen a performance of "The Trojan Women" by Euripides, or von Hoffmansthal's "Electra", needs no further proof that though each makes a short evening's entertainment it is exhausting because of uninterrupted movement from start to finish. To plays of one long act

[1] Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch: "Shakespeare's Workmanship", 6.

most audiences become unresponsive from sheer physical fatigue.[1]

Mr. Archer, denying the necessity for act division, admits its "enormous and invaluable convenience." [2] It has its uses, he concedes, for marking a rhythm.

May I point out that wholly aside from these functions, the intermission supplies a brief period during which the mimicry of life on the stage is brought into cogent relation with the reality of life in the audience? The auditors will reflect, ponder, discuss, agree, question, reconcile, and this upon a basis of life's norms. What has passed in one act will become part of the digested mental equipment with which the next act shall be approached. In other words, audience and dramatist have covenanted that the play shall be assimilated part by part; that between periods of deglutition there shall be periods of digestion, periods during which thoughts of external things, the sound of music, the sight of one's neighbors, the realization that the play is a play, pave the way for further developments.

May I submit that it is this essential of the full-length play that differentiates it most sharply from the shorter form? The genius of the one-act play, its motion, its swiftness, require that it be assimilated at a single sitting. May the curtain fall during its progress? If it can do so without impairing its unity, without unduly increasing its playing time, and if it is not dropped merely to allow the audience to assimilate it part by part, the answer must be "Yes." How often may the curtain fall? Any number of times, provided that by doing so it does not destroy one of these essential characteristics. "The Emperor Jones", despite its large number of scenes, despite its successive changes

[1] George Pierce Baker: "Dramatic Technique", 118.
[2] Play-Making", 137.

of time and place, is unquestionably a one-act play. Georg Kaiser's "From Morn to Midnight" hovers neatly on the border line, depending largely upon the manner of its production. On the other hand, I insist that "The Gods of the Mountain" is a short three-act play, and this chiefly because its two moderately lengthy intermissions are necessitated not primarily by changes of scene but by psychological considerations having to do with an audience.[1] "The Emperor Jones", with a larger number of scenes, would lose nothing at all were each intermission reduced to a few seconds.

Again, I would call neither "Getting Married" nor "Misalliance" one-act plays. The fact that the curtain, by the capricious will of the author, is not lowered until the last line of the dialogue, does not prevent the audience from lapsing into numerous periods of inattention, which, to the exceeding detriment of the play, take the place of intermissions.

If, during the action, the curtain falls and does not rise again immediately, there has been no one-act play. It does not matter in the least why the curtain remains down: an appreciable intermission has been created, and the psychological effect upon the audience must follow.

I am aware that "one-act" play in the sense in which I am here using it is a contradiction in terms. Yet the word "playlet" is a diminutive, and "sketch" is far from satisfactory. May we not disregard what the

[1] Mr. Clayton Hamilton, for whose judgment I have profound respect, takes an opposite point of view in "Problems of the Playwright", 179. "Considered technically, 'The Gods of the Mountain' is a one-act play in three successive scenes; and in production, these scenes should be hurriedly disclosed upon the stage without any intermission." To me, the marvelous terminations of each act (the close of the second act is quoted on p. 208) bring the action to pauses so emphatic that I would resent the immediate lifting of the curtain.

dictionary has to say about an "act" as "a section of a drama", and accept instead its statement that an "act" is also "an exertion of power; something done; a deed"? May we not then say that we use the term "one-act" play because, in the largest sense, there is but a single exertion of power, a single "something done", a single deed? The one act may be spread over many scenes. I do not doubt that with continued improvement in the mechanics of play production we shall some day see one-act plays in which scene follows scene with the rapidity of the motion picture. But they will be true one-act plays nevertheless.

We may now combine the foregoing into a single definition:

A one-act play is an orderly representation of life, arousing emotion in an audience. It is characterized by superior unity and economy; it is playable in a comparatively short space of time; and it is intended to be assimilated as a whole.

BOOK TWO

THE APPROACH TO THE PLAY

Chapter VI: The Function of Technique

ACCORDING to Mr. Lee Wilson Dodd,[1] a young journalist whose versatile talents have carried him from the post of baseball editor to the chair of dramatic critic for a metropolitan daily advised a group of college men thus:

> Don't worry about art or style or details of technique. Get enthusiastic over something — anything — and when you are full of it, *boil over!* First thoughts are usually best — nearer the truth as you really see it — feel it; more authentic; more vital. Learn to write *fast*, and don't correct too much!

Having propped up this amazing dictum as his target, Mr. Dodd proceeds to demolish it with elegance and lucidity. First thoughts are *not* usually best; a few of the acknowledged giants may have produced literature by the simple process of "boiling over", but writers of humbler stature have not succeeded in doing so. Good writing — let alone masterpieces — contains as factors "both the primary creative drive, and the shaping, refining, critical intelligence."

Mr. Chester S. Lord [2] is even more explicit:

> Lafcadio Hearn urged the students of the University of Tokio to study the construction of sentences — to write them over and over again until they were nearly perfect, saying: "A thing once written is not literature. . . . No man can produce real literature at one sitting. . . . For literature more than any other art the all-necessary thing is patience." Tolstoy rewrote his important work three or

[1] *Literary Review*, January 28, 1922.
[2] *Saturday Evening Post*, May 20, 1922.

four times. Rossetti revised "The Blessed Damozel" in repeated editions until the last was quite unlike the first. Tennyson changed his productions over and again. Gray was fourteen years in perfecting the "Elegy." It has been suggested that Sir Walter Scott's later novels, written at great speed, are inferior to his earlier and more leisurely work. Samuel Butler's masterpiece, "The Way of All Flesh", was under construction for twelve years. All literary history furnishes examples of great authors who toiled long over their manuscripts.

Enthusiasm is indispensable, but the feat of "boiling over" may indicate only the shallowness of the container. The true artist, honoring his art rather than the elation of the moment, is not likely to "write fast." He would rather write well, and but a little experience will teach him that speed and excellence are rarely compatible.

The playwright simply cannot collect "first thoughts" and permit them to "boil over" into a one-act play. Too many of the hopeless efforts which will never see the light of print, much less that of the stage, have been composed in this ecstatic fashion. The writer who cheerfully disregards the prime canons of literature usually pays even less attention to such minor details as logic, coherence, and truth. He will insist that his writings are "plays", and the unimportant fact that he cannot find others to agree with him will not abate his self-confidence. If, eventually, he succeeds in obtaining a hearing, it will be because in the interim he has rewritten the "first thoughts", and has incidentally mastered some of the principles of the "details of technique."

The average layman is obsessed with the idea that technique is a fearful and wonderful thing, with particular stress on the first adjective. The material of drama, he admits, is likely to be interesting. But technique is a pestilential something which must be

plastered upon a perfectly good play to gain the good will of the critics. In his attendance at theatrical performances, and more rarely in his reading of the printed play, he may have singled out lines which are unusually awkward, which conflict violently with their setting, which seem to have been injected, for no reason now comprehensible, into an otherwise reasonable play. The tyro, observing such instances, will remark that here are outcroppings of "technique", much as a large ore body is like to show its presence upon the surface; and if he is particularly honest, will comment to himself that while such visible evidences of artifice may be distressing necessities, the play would be far better off without them. Of course, he is not likely to voice this perfectly correct opinion in public. Mr. Shaw, he has heard somewhere, disregards technique. All other writers are slaves to it. Dimly he pictures the dramatist scrutinizing the finished play and adding splashes of technique here and there. Cooks, he recalls, have the painful habit of sprinkling finely chopped parsley over nearly every dish. The eater may not care for parsley, but the traditions of cookery demand a visible supply of it. Hence he yields to the inevitable, and accepts what he calls "technique", and what I propose here to characterize as out-and-out clumsiness, as a necessary ingredient of many plays.

The tyro is not alone in his delusion. I have heard producing managers, who should certainly know better, express the view that an admittedly feeble composition "would be all right if somebody could put a little technique on to it", here, doubtless, regarding "technique" as very similar to reverse English. The one prevents the cue ball from following the object ball into a pocket: perhaps the other will prevent a sickly thing masquerading as a play from following its predecessors into the storehouse.

Technique, which is as fundamental as the thought

in whose expression it is presently to aid, can no more be "put on to" a suffering play than can straight limbs and healthy articulation be "put on to" a congenital cripple. Its task is similar to that of the science of eugenics: it would rather prevent malformations than attempt the cure of those which are unhappily existent. If there is hope, both the surgeon and the dramatist can accomplish some little good by cutting away diseased material and performing more or less radical operations. But precisely as the best surgeon may leave one leg an inch shorter than the other, and will never be able to efface the scar of the wound through which he has entered, so the dramatist may never succeed in imparting true homogeneity to the play which he has torn apart and put together again. It is far better for both the play and the man to be well born.

Novelists are often surprised that the labor and thought which they have expended upon their work are of so little use to the playwright who attempts to dramatize it. The answer is simple. To the playwright a novel is merely an outrageously deformed play. The theme may possess dramatic value. But into its development dramatic technique has not entered. Hence the experienced playwright simply disregards everything but the story, stated in the fewest possible words, and, discarding everything that the novelist has done, builds afresh from this common ground. The finished play will be clothed to a greater or lesser extent in the actual words of the novelist; but the arrangement of scenes, the sequence of episodes, is sure to be radically altered.

Technique, while indispensable, is not the fetish of the dramatist. A play is but the product of a creative imagination which has taught itself to function along orderly lines; merely the reproduction, in a form for all to see, of some quality in life which the dramatist has already glimpsed. If it is art, it is not the output

of fancy shackled by technical considerations. Quite the reverse, the instant that technique becomes the master instead of the servant of the creative impulse, art, as such, ceases to exist. Technique, to be useful, must have become digested and assimilated; must, like the dramatist's knowledge of humanity, have become part of the equipment with which he approaches his task.

The beginner is likely to find that technical difficulties bulk large as he makes his first experiments: that his writings will be flawed, hence productive of an unfortunate effect upon an audience, or that as a result of too violent struggles with his problem, he will find it impossible to remove the traces of combat. But as the beginner ceases to be a beginner, his difficulties will shrink. He will find his craftsmanship urging him on to greater achievement; enlarging his vision rather than constricting it; helping him rather than hindering him. It will become his invisible servant, not less useful because of its invisibility.

What is the technique of the dramatist? It is that special equipment by means of which he imparts to his work such clearness, such reasonableness, and such interest that when played before an audience it will produce the effect he desires. It is accumulated common sense, expressed not in "laws", but in instinctive recognition of broad principles, variable in their application as the dramatist himself. Technique is a means to an end. The dramatist, in the language of philosophy, is a teleologist: he is consciously working towards a definite goal, a goal which exists or which should exist in his imagination before he ventures to set a word on paper. He is fully aware of what he desires to accomplish. His technique is the instrument by means of which he will select the simplest, clearest, and most forcible method of fulfilling his purpose.

The technique of the dramatist begins to function

before the birth of the play. The twin worlds of thought and external reality are full of dramatic material. From them the dramatist may not make an indiscriminate selection. He would be true; cogent; convincing. Hence his technique, which is presently to aid in the transmutation of his material, consciously or unconsciously questions and tests every element that he brings to the melting pot. Each will have a certain, definite part to play in the development of the whole. Is it, or can it be made strong enough? Plausible enough? In connection with the other elements of the drama, is its choice a wise one? Or would it, perhaps, be better to omit it entirely? No word of the play has yet been written, yet looking forward to the effect which the finished work is to have upon its audience, is this element helpful or hurtful? Will it add to or detract from the total impression? Will it be a high light or a shadow? There is need for both. Will its adoption, in either capacity, weaken the more important matters upon which the play centers? All material has its uses; is everything that we have now assembled necessary for our purpose, or are we cramming something into the play rather than let it go to waste?

The material once chosen, the dramatist's technique will erect a tentative framework upon which the completed edifice, the play, may grow advantageously. For each play this framework will be different, for no two problems are alike. More than that, there are no plays for which a choice of several frameworks is not originally possible. The dramatist's technique, testing its own creations, will help to decide which of the several alternatives most nearly answers his requirements.

During the act of writing, technique plays the rôle of a friendly but incisive critic. Certain characters are to be developed; certain situations are to be made clear. Are they developed, and are they clear? Does the dialogue actually convey the necessary thought,

or is it but a sequence of badly chosen phrases, intelligible to none but its author? There is action: is it sufficiently motivated? Is the play continually interesting? Does it rise, naturally and inevitably, from one instant to the next? Technique cannot take the place of wit, sincerity, or inspiration. But it will comment forcibly upon the lack of either.

Technique has still one more task. It will not cease to function until every unsightly trace of the act of building, every surface outcropping which inartistically indicates the presence of a framework within, has been eliminated from the finished play. Precisely as the painter rubs out the penciled lines which have guided his composition, so the playwright destroys every visible vestige which mars the completed work.

Art is never effortless; but it must appear so. Only the playwright knows what pains it has cost to fuse his refractory material; and only the playwright should know. The attention of the audience must never be diverted from the content of the play to its form; never from the problems of the characters to the problems of the playwright. It is never sufficient to show that the dramatist has won a hard-fought battle: technique will insist that there has been no battle at all.

The playwright must bind these words upon his brow:

A purely technical problem must not merely be conquered; it must be annihilated!

Chapter VII: The Material of the Play

"LIFE is not only the raw material for the stage," writes Mr. A. B. Walkley,[1] "it is the model as well." From life the dramatist takes the elements of his play; against life he checks the finished product. As he departs from life, so he departs from human interest. Life supplies him with theme, character, situation, atmosphere. Taking a little here, adding a little there, selecting, eliminating, arranging, it is his object to create something which, when compared with its great original, will be truer than life itself, more persuasive, more moving, more real. Life is superficially illogical, superficially unjust, superficially tedious. The art of the playwright gathers together elements from which shall grow a life that shall be plausible, reasonable, interesting; that shall be vivid, convincing, potent in its mastery of emotion. Looking beneath the surface, giving free rein to his imagination, the dramatist sees what life might be. By the simple process of disregarding the unessentials, of compacting into a unified whole the salient elements which his art and his instinct select, he is able to make others see what he has visioned. His canvas is small. Upon it he cannot hope to show his prototype in its entirety, nor does he wish to do so. Infinitely more artistic is his impressionistic portrayal; his selection of the representative, and his use of it to suggest, to evoke in the minds of his auditors a world greater and more interesting than that which in the ordinary humdrum of living lies about them.

[1] "Playhouse Impressions", 114.

The play, to return to our definition for an instant, is orderly: the art of the dramatist one both of selection and rejection. It is an art of compression, an art of bodying forth a truth by touching boldly and skillfully upon its most suggestive details. What is discarded is that part of the inconsequential, the trivial, the contradictory, which, while it may be found in life, is rather the by-product of life than life itself.

Too much emphasis cannot here be laid upon the importance of artistic selection. That a thing has "really happened" is no valid reason why it should be transplanted bodily to the stage. If it contains the substance of drama, it may be drawn upon — with discrimination. But the mere fact that it has "happened" is no more in its favor than the fact that it has not been known to happen would be against it. It may — and often does — lack every requisite of a play. It may be disorderly, disjointed, improbable, unconvincing, without satisfactory beginning, development, or end. It may be true and possess none of the persuasive attributes of truth. The audience is far more concerned with "Could it happen?" than with "Did it happen?" It will grant premises freely; it may balk at conclusions.

If the author cannot invent more effective, more interesting stories than most of those to be found ready-made in life, he is likely soon to run out of material. The thing that "really happened" has probably happened so many times before that no feature of novelty is left in it. Paradoxical though it may seem, the more unusual, the more freakish an actual occurrence, the more certain that some thousands of indolent writers have written plays of various degrees of badness about it. Life is repetitious; and the average observer takes note only of the exceptional in it. The combination of the two means that the more remarkable, the more unbelievable an event, the surer it is to impress itself upon well-meaning but unthinking persons who

labor under the delusion that the stage is a place for the improbable, instead of the reverse.

The layman's introductory "Good enough to be made into a play" usually heralds a long-winded story centering upon one of the innumerable coincidences to be found in life, and banished, because of their improbability, from the theater. Miss Alice Brown, author of the poignant "Joint Owners in Spain", unwisely builds "The Web" upon an incredible series of no less than twelve consecutive coincidences. The audience will doubtless accept the first; may or may not accept the second, but as the inconceivable sequence of miracles ascends from the plains of mere improbability to the vertiginous heights of sheer impossibility, all resemblance to life is lost, and what began as a serious play changes irresistibly into farce. The play may be founded upon actuality, but if "facts", writes Professor Baker,

> are to convince a theatrical public, the dramatist must so present them that they shall not run completely counter to what an audience thinks it knows about life.[1]

The resemblances that episodes in real life sometimes display to the highly evolved art of the theater are remarkable. The occasional discovery of cliffs bearing resemblance to the profile of George Washington is also remarkable. But a competent sculptor can make a better likeness. The remarkable thing about the cliff is not the excellence of the resemblance, but the fact that there is any resemblance at all. It is not the proper business of a cliff, while making likenesses is the proper business of the sculptor. On the one hand is a curiosity; on the other hand, art. Just so life's occasional contribution of a complete dramatic action is surprising, because accidental; the theater's consistent accomplishment of the same thing is not surprising,

[1] "Dramatic Technique", 68.

because deliberate. Life aims blindly; the dramatist does not.

"Life is the raw material for the stage." May I direct particular attention to the adjective? The dramatist's task is one of selection, arrangement — and artistic manufacture. The unusual in his play is the thing which he has discovered, and which he has so elaborated that it is accepted for its emotional content without tax upon the credulity of an audience. "There never is a story", wrote O. Henry, "where there seems to be one."[1] The dramatist learns the truth of this at every turn. Hence in his search for material he is concerned with the unusual beneath the usual; the interesting and emotive event which may or may not have happened, but which could happen; the underlying drama hidden deep beneath the humdrum of life.

Direct observation and wide experience of life are unfailing mines of material. Life, we have seen, is not likely to supply the play itself; but it will furnish innumerable ideas for plays. Human character, subjected to its attrition, subjected to friction with other characters, suggests theme after theme and situation after situation.

A single individual rises — or falls. The causes for either — his reactions and the reactions of others — here is material for a thousand dramas. His rise or fall may be measured in different terms: he may, in Henley's phrase, become the captain of his soul, or he may become the captain of a large number of dollars. He may struggle with an enemy without, or with a more insidious foe within. He may be worse off for his rise, or better off for his fall; and he may know it, or not know it. His nearest and dearest may be touched in an infinite variety of ways. They, too, may rise or fall,

[1] E. E. Slosson and June E. Downey: "Plots and Personalities", 109.

and their motion may be opposed to his. Raised to a dizzy eminence he may not be able to remain there; or plunged into the depths, something in him — or in some other person — may draw him inevitably to the surface. He may deceive the community: be well thought of when he is a sinner, or reviled when he is a saint. He may do great good and be punished for it; or do great hurt and be rewarded. He may give up his ideals, or stick to them; he may triumph over his vices, or become their slave. His history may be farcical or thought-compelling; the final solution of his problem may be happy — or the reverse But anything about him that contains the potentially emotional element is the raw material of drama. Actuality may not, so far as the dramatist knows, contain either his story or his character as an entirety; but given a starting point by direct observation, imagination and craftsmanship will supply the rest.

The reader may comment that the story, in some of its turns, lacks the elements of novelty. I beg to differ. The novelty which the dramatist brings to any story is his own point of view, his own manner of expressing himself, his own preoccupations. It matters not in the least whether life contains only thirty-six dramatic situations (as the hard-working Georges Polti tries to prove [1]), or thirty-six hundred. To each the dramatist brings the novel element of his own reaction, his own personality, his own insight. A Strindberg, a Barrie, a Shaw, a Curel might write plays upon identical subjects: they would be different.[2]

I have chosen but a single example to illustrate the potency of direct observation. I could choose a

[1] "Les Trente-six Situations dramatiques."

[2] "La dernière Torture" (André de Lorde and Eugène Morel), "The Drums of Oude" (Austin Strong), and "A Pot of Caviare" (Sir A. Conan Doyle), the first two plays, and the last a story, deal with identical situations, identical crises, in characteristically

hundred as easily. Indeed, it is far more difficult to choose something which *cannot* give rise to a play. A fact from the external world plus reflection; sympathetic observation of nearly anything at all coupled with imagination, and the dramatist has a theme — a character — a situation — an atmosphere, and, as often as not, more than one of them.

No one eye can see all that there is to see. Indirect observation, the substance of the conversation of interesting people, is surprisingly suggestive. Any person who comes into contact with life from an unusual angle, and who reacts individually; who reflects, not necessarily either deeply or correctly; who has views of his own, be they as illogical as you please, will, every now and then, supply the dramatist with a bit of promising material. The dramatist, much as he may desire it, can never escape wholly from the barriers of his personality. Be his own contact with life ever so multifarious, still there will be other angles whose existence he cannot synthesize. They touch his life solely through their special interpreters, who are valuable both for themselves and for the interesting

different manners. Mr. St. John Hankin built "The Constant Lover" upon the theme of the May fly who "only lives one day. . . . Think of the poor May fly who happens to be born on a wet day!" Mrs. Eleanor Hallowell Abbott builds a very different story upon the butterfly which "could live only a day. . . . But this particular day, you see, was a rainy day." Neither playwright nor author could have influenced the other: the dates of composition are too near together. But their radically different compositions are based upon a common theme, expressed by each in nearly identical language. "The Gutter of Time" (Alfred Sutro), "Lady Frederick" (W. Somerset Maugham), and "Rosalind" (Sir J. M. Barrie), depart characteristically from identical ideas. The first play I ever wrote, I discovered long afterwards, was built upon a central situation absolutely identical with one used by Mr. W. W. Jacobs in a play first produced in England upon the same night that mine was first produced in the United States. Yet the treatment was very different.

viewpoints they afford. As their conversation becomes franker, it becomes richer in its side lights upon human character. The most productive dramatic ground that has ever come to my notice lies in this field: the comment of one interesting human being upon another. A single chord, and the dramatist can fill in the remaining notes in the correct key. But without the chord, he might never have suspected the existence of the key at all.

Theme, character, situation, atmosphere: all four, as presented in life, are the common subjects of interesting conversation. A momentary light cast upon any one, if the dramatist but catches its gleam, and he has the beginning of a train of thought which may end in a play.

So too the writings of others, books in any vein upon any subject having to do with humanity, are fruitful with suggestions. Chance lines in history, poetry, biography may suggest, doubtless have suggested many plays. The suggestion may be extremely oblique. The connection between the initial thought and the finished work may be indiscernible. But it requires little to set the thoughts of the dramatist racing through a new and promising channel.

Again, interesting conversation, in a form almost too rich, too suggestive, is to be found in fiction and in published plays. Hamlet speaks nearly sixteen hundred lines; Richard III and Iago over eleven hundred each. How many hundreds of plays have they suggested to dramatists, and how many hundreds more will they continue to suggest? For all we know to the contrary, a single line may have given birth to a dozen entirely different dramas.

Wide and deep as are the common sources of dramatic material, the personality of the individual dramatist will color and shape that which eventually becomes his own. Given an identical mass of raw material, as

all of us are, each dramatist will select those elements which are most congenial to his own character and talent. To the end of his days he may remain oblivious of something which another seizes upon, and weaves into a new and unthought-of play.

Chapter VIII: Theme

WE have seen how various, how widespread are the sources of dramatic material. Yet every germinal idea, as it first comes to the writer, will fall more or less clearly under one of several classifications. It may be an idea of a *theme*, which is nothing but an interesting generalization, which, when made tangible, shall bring the truths of the play into relation with the truths of life as a whole. It may be an idea for one or more interesting *characters*, whose representation upon the stage, in a story, will arouse emotion in an audience. It may be an idea for a *situation*, a state of affairs, interesting and arresting in itself, and either followed or preceded by other interesting situations. Or it may be an idea for an *atmosphere*, a *mood*, a *point of view*, capable of being expressed in terms which shall mirror and recreate both it and its influence upon the problems of life.

If the dramatist chooses to consider the hypothetical individual whose rise or fall I discussed in the preceding chapter as typical of a large class, if he is concerned with generalizations, whether self-evident or debatable, with laws, whether man-made or universal, he has a theme, which he may express in innumerable ways. If he is more concerned with the peculiarities, eccentricities, differentiating features which set this particular individual off from other individuals, he has a character, who may be developed through the whole range of drama. If he pays attention chiefly to the episodes and incidents by which the changes in his destiny are visibly brought about or inhibited, he has a sequence of situations, and the ostensible action of his play. If he is

primarily interested in the background, the setting, the environment, human or other, mental or physical, he has an atmosphere, a mood, or a viewpoint, from which, by a process of concretion, all of the foregoing may germinate.

A theme is a declarative statement, possessing some degree of truth and couched in broad, general terms. "Man is naturally polygamous." "War is terrible." "Woman suffrage is desirable." "All Germans are villains." "All Americans are heroes." "Murder will out." "Once a thief, always a thief." "Man is what his environment makes him." "Love of money is man's strongest passion." "Woe unto you, when all men shall speak well of you!"

These are simple, plainly stated themes. Some of them are axiomatic; some of them are highly debatable, falling under the heading of thesis rather than of theme. In themselves they hint but slightly at the vigorous drama through whose medium some of them may be projected. It is therefore necessary for the playwright immediately to particularize, to illustrate his generality in terms of the specific through the choice of appropriate character and situation, to fuse his theme so perfectly with the dramatic that dramatic values, and not polemic values, shall govern the play.

Mr. Archer writes interestingly, but I feel erroneously:

> Ought a theme, in its abstract form, be the first germ of a play? Ought the dramatist to say, "Go to, I will write a play on temperance, or on woman's suffrage, or on capital and labor", and then cast about for a story to illustrate his theme? This is a possible, but not a promising, method of procedure. A story made to the order of a moral concept is always apt to advertise its origin, to the detriment of its illusive quality. If a play is to be a moral apologue at all, it is well to say so frankly — probably in the title — and

aim, not at verisimilitude, but at neatness and appositeness in the working out of the fable.[1]

Mr. Archer, I fear, wrongly identifies "theme" with "moral concept." Many themes have nothing whatever to do with morals. And even those themes which deal with "moral concepts" need not, unless the craftsman wishes, lead to "moral apologues." The dramatist is not confined to the "story made to order." The story which evolves, and in which the theme is perfectly digested, is always more effective.

Mr. Galsworthy's "Strife", conjectures Mr. Archer, originated in a theme, and a later footnote confesses that he is wrong, that the playwright "having seen in conflict the two men who were the prototypes . . . noted the waste and inefficacy arising from the clash of strong characters unaccompanied by balance." Do not the last thirteen words perfectly express a theme? Mr. Archer is hunting for a sermon.

Illustration of theme is but a preliminary step on the road to the play. Actual writing ought not commence until the theme has welded itself with, imbedded itself in a story which, rather than the theme, shall be uppermost.

Professor Matthews writes:

> A play needs to have a theme; this theme must be interpreted by a story; and the story must be stiffened into a plot.[2]

If the story is indeed "stiffened", a moral apologue is not likely to be the result.

Mr. George Calderon's "The Little Stone House" is a very beautiful dramatization of the theme which is expressed in so many words in the last line of the play,

[1] "Play-Making", 17.
[2] "The Principles of Playmaking", 40.

"What's a man compared to an idea?" We find precisely the same thought in the Parmenides of Plato twenty-four centuries earlier; but whereas the philosopher addresses himself solely to reason, the dramatist drives his appeal home to our emotions. The philosopher, interested primarily in the truth of his system, discusses abstractions; the dramatist, interested primarily in the response of his audience, discusses real men and women, and until the curtain is about to fall, does not so much as hint at the deep philosophical truth underlying his story. To the dramatist, it is the human value of the theme that counts.

The ancient theme, "Woman is fickle," is Mr. George Middleton's in the entertaining comedy, "Jim's Beast." Were Mr. Middleton to debate the theme itself, the play would lose much. Instead, his delicate art, lighting upon a novel and interesting sequence of situations, sets side by side the susceptible heroine and the Brontosaurus, which, though weighing forty tons and sixty feet long, was both female and "undoubtedly promiscuous." There are points of similarity, suggests the playwright, and the action ends with the abandoned lover confronted with the sign before the monstrous fossil:

HOOD (*reading and thinking*) "Mainly Herbivorous." "Anything she can pick up." "Several million years". . .

This is at once forcible, amusing, and artistic.

Woman's self-sacrifice and man's inhumanity are at the root of Mr. Wilfrid Wilson Gibson's poetic play, "Womenkind." By the choice of living, breathing characters; by the telling of a compact, powerful story dealing with certain specific individuals living at "Krindlesyke"; by the substitution of the concrete for the abstract, the dramatist gains an effect which mere argument, mere insistence upon the bare bones of the theme, would dissipate.

It happens that in each of these three plays the theme is at some time stated in so many words. That is why I have chosen them as illustrations. But the theme need not be so stated, and in the great majority of existing plays is not so stated. J. M. Synge's "Riders to the Sea", which still holds its ground as the greatest one-act play in the English language, is pervaded with its terrible theme. Time after time the masterly dialogue touches upon some one aspect of it, without ever definitely announcing it in its stark grandeur. Its nature is so perfectly evident from the action of the play that any deliberate statement would be inartistic. In many other plays theme has been so perfectly digested that the play, in retrospect, might have originated from any one of a number.

It is important to note in each of the foregoing illustrations how skillfully the dramatist has buried his theme in his play. It is there, but it is never obtrusive. Reflection may or may not indicate its existence; but it is never allowed to interfere with the palpable values of the play.

It is equally important to note that the themes of the plays mentioned have, in themselves, no particular dramatic force. They may suggest plays, but they do so indirectly. They are more or less axiomatic: no one would seriously debate their truth. They are not questions: they are answers. Hence the dramatist, sensing their nature, experimenting until he has evolved the story which shall serve him best, looks for a series of concrete episodes in the lives of specific individuals which shall lead to and terminate in the suggestion or evocation of truth.

It is otherwise with themes which in themselves are dramatic.

The hero of Mr. John Palmer's "Over the Hills", a play, by the way, showing the influence of Ibsen's "The Master Builder", is filled

> . . . with a restless longing to take once again to the mystic road, the road of all who are born to wander. (*Re-arranging the cushion comfortably behind his head.*) The comfort of this room comes to be a torture to the soul.

The Master Builder, grown old, would climb to the summit of his edifice once again. The theme, essentially dramatic, is announced in the very beginning of the play. The principal character becomes a conscious protagonist. Realism begins to move towards symbolism.

Mr. W. B. Yeats' "Cathleen ni Houlihan", is dedicated to Ireland's "hope of getting my beautiful fields back again; the hope of putting the strangers out of my house." Mr. Yeats personifies Erin as an old woman "that goes through the country whatever time there's war or trouble coming", an old woman for whose love "many a man has died." To Michael she appears the day before his wedding, inspires him to join the ranks of her defenders, and goes, not as an old woman, but as "a young girl, and she had the walk of a queen." Here the dramatic power of the theme permits Mr. Yeats effectively to cast his play in the form of symbolism. The principal character is both protagonist and symbol, actor and theme. Precisely the same construction is adopted by Lady Gregory in "The Traveling Man" and by Mr. Percy MacKaye in "Sam Average." In all three personal advantage and the dictates of loftier impulse are in conflict: the resolution imparts greater power to the theme.

Maeterlinck's "Les Aveugles" begins with a picture profoundly charged with symbolism, yet so artistic, so dramatically powerful considered from any angle, that many audiences do not suspect its true meaning.[1] The

[1] The curious reader, to whom it is not apparent, is referred to Mr. Montrose J. Moses' "Maurice Maeterlinck", 152.

theme acts, and acts so well, that the fact that it is a theme is unnoticed.

Miss Mary Carolyn Davies' "The Slave With Two Faces" takes the ultimate step, approaches and transcends the "moral apologue" of Mr. Archer. "Remember!" says the principal character, "you are only safe — as long as you remain his master. Never forget that he is a slave, and that you are a queen." Here is a theme that instantly projects itself into dramatic action. Miss Davies, following the pattern of the ancient morality play, identifies her characters broadly: "Life, the Slave"; "The First Girl"; "The Second Girl"; "A Workman." The play becomes unconcealed allegory; the theme, powerful, effective in its simplest statement, is announced as a text at the beginning of the action. What follows is its elaboration in terms of fancy sufficiently near actuality to be impressive.

In these latter examples, the themes, less and less buried in the plays, do not obtrude for the reason that they themselves are drama. They are not axiomatic: they are conceivably debatable. They are not answers: they are hypotheses. Most important, they have direct emotional connotation. Hence the dramatist, setting them in the forefront of his action, exhibits their outworking.

The axiomatic theme is treated in one manner; the dramatic theme in quite another. Hundreds of existing plays supply examples, yet it is apparent that to the solution of the technical problem presented, each author has brought only his dramatic instinct and his sense of fitness. I do not suggest that the less experienced dramatist try to replace these invaluable qualities with blind rule of thumb. Plays may perhaps be built like geometrical theorems, but they ought not to be. "The dramatist's 'strategy,'" writes Mr. P. P. Howe,[1] girding at Sir Arthur Pinero, "lays out a play

[1] "Dramatic Portraits", 32.

so effectively as sometimes to leave it quite dead, and the dramatist's 'tactics' are often such, it must be admitted, as to do nothing to bring it to life again." Broad principles must be understood and assimilated before they can be applied intelligently; but once ingested, their application should become an unconscious, instinctive, and artistic matter. Formulas cannot take the place of struggle, work, writing, rewriting — and talent.

In passing, it is well for the reader to observe that the successful treatment of either nature of theme is in accordance with the principle (discussed in later chapters) that every play moves from a question to an answer, from uncertain to certain ground.

When a theme is both debatable and non-dramatic, when, in other words, it is a thesis arousing no immediate emotional response, craftsmanship suggests avoiding it. However great its personal interest to the playwright, only its dramatic interest matters to an audience.

The reader may recall Sir J. M. Barrie's unfortunate "Der Tag", a composition designed to exhibit views upon the responsibility for the World War. Both as a left-handed work of one of the ablest living dramatists, and as an animated debate, it possesses a certain interest. The audience may indeed become converted — if it is not already converted — to the views for which the author argues so elaborately. But debate differs vastly from good dialogue, and "Der Tag" differs vastly from a good play.

A few years ago a prize was offered for a play written upon Woman Suffrage, then not an actuality. The prize was never awarded. It must be apparent that any playwright attempting to treat this theme artistically would bury it in a story having on the face of it very little to do with the theme itself. But such a play would be implausible, as the theme is far from

axiomatic, however phrased. It might conceivably be handled by a technical structure similar to that of "Sabotage,"[1] but that would mean basing a thesis upon an exceptional, rather than upon a typical episode, with disastrous results to the thesis. On the other hand, Woman Suffrage, as such, is not essentially dramatic, and were it allowed to figure prominently in the foreground of a symbolical drama, the drama, as such, would cease to exist. The playwright's dilemma is, I hope, apparent. He can solve it only by discovering some emotional angle of approach — or by choosing some other theme for his play.

The playwright will do well to ponder these matters before settling upon themes of a political or propagandist nature. Where human values can be discerned, a play can also be discerned. But too many bad plays have resulted from the effort to combine drama with themes fundamentally foreign to it.

Mr. Samuel McChord Crothers tells of an unfortunate author who was required to write upon "Our Domestic Fowls" in an "Original, Scriptural, Portable, and Economical" fashion.

> Mr. Martin made his fundamental mistake in undertaking to write the book. Apparently he was a man of sound theological views, who at the same time had had some experience in poultry. Had he undertaken to write on either Systematic Theology or Chicken-Raising, he might have got on. It was in the attempt to do both at the same time, in order to fulfill the requirements of the committee, that he came to grief . . . Mr. Martin cannot forget for a moment his great responsibilities. He is always afraid lest his moral should get away from him. His motto is Poultry and Theology, one and inseparable.[2]

Every playwright should profit by Mr. Martin's example.

[1] See p. 229.

[2] "Among Friends", 83.

A word of caution against timeliness may not be out of place. If a play is peculiarly congenial to the spirit of any one year, its reception in that year may be extremely flattering. Perhaps this is all the playwright hopes for. But the very attribute which makes a play "up to the minute" at one moment, makes it "hopelessly out of date" shortly thereafter. Miss Marian Craig-Wentworth's "War Brides" was timely in 1915, when it was successfully produced. Messrs. Robert H. Davis and Perley Poore Sheehan's "Efficiency" was very much to the point in 1917. The passing of but a few years has caused them to become outmoded and outworn. Mr. Philip Moeller's parody of "The Hymn of Hate" in "Helena's Husband" was highly amusing when the original he burlesqued was well known. But the average age of an audience, according to Mr. Belasco,[1] is only twenty-two or three, and "The Hymn of Hate" is unknown to many of its members to-day. Miss Susan Glaspell's amusing "Suppressed Desires", written in collaboration with Mr. George Cram Cook, is likely to last just as long as the Freudian philosophy lasts and not a day longer. One can neither attack nor champion issues which have ceased to be issues. On the other hand, Mr. Lewis Beach's fine play, "The Clod", is as live to-day as the day it was written — and shows no signs of senescence.

M. Eugène Brieux, tilting with mathematical precision against windmills so infirm that they must needs be propped up lest they fall of their own weight before he can attack them, is perhaps the shining example of the "timely" school. Here, too, one finds the obtrusive theme; the over-logical play, mechanical in its working out, and lacking but a Q. E. D. at its conclusion. The passing of the years is answering M. Brieux mercilessly.

[1] See Clayton Hamilton: "Problems of the Playwright", 82.

Mr. Henry Arthur Jones writes:

> Never choose for your theme a burning question of the hour, unless you wish merely for a success that will burn out in an hour.[1]

Here is much food for thought.

In terminating this chapter it is important to point out that the prime value of theme exists for the dramatist, and not for his audience. The theme may be so effectively buried that it cannot be disinterred; the analyst, endeavoring to do so, may be able to conclude only that it might be one of a large number. Lessing proclaimed the principle many years ago: "It is the same thing to a dramatic poet whether a general truth can be deduced or no from his fable." [2]

But during the actual composition of the play, theme stands at the right hand of the dramatist, inspiring him, checking his thought against the validity of all thought, lending to his work the seasoning of truth.

[1] Preface to "The Divine Gift."

[2] "Hamburg Dramaturgy", No. 33. (Translated by E. C. Beasley and Helen Zimmern.)

Chapter IX: Character, Situation, Atmosphere

THE germinal idea, if of the nature of a theme, must be welded with character and situation before the play can have being. Theme, many times, already contains basic conceptions of character and situation: they must become concrete, human, dynamic.

So too character must be welded with situation, or situation with character, before the raw material whose value the dramatist recognizes can evolve into a play. If theme distills from the combination, the dramatist's task is likely to be facilitated. For him, not necessarily for his audience, it answers the question, "What are you writing about?" It suggests truthful outworking. Flint, steel, and tinder generate fire. Character, situation, and theme generate drama.

The germinal idea may be the conception of one or more characters. Directly or indirectly, it is drawn from external life. Perhaps it is so drawn in its entirety. More often it is a blend of a little actuality and a great deal of sheer imagination, for the dramatist, knowing life, can create characters which will be true to life. A portrait gallery marvelous in its diversity surrounds him. Selecting a little here, fabricating a little there, building man in man's own image, he brings into existence characters which may never have lived — but which might very well live.

The idea alone of an interesting character is no promise of a play. Character is always interesting, but it can appeal to the emotions only when affected by the stress of circumstance; when exhibited in action; when placed in a situation and in a series of situations.

Napoleon, Julius Caesar, and Alexander are interesting characters: but mark how quickly any discussion of them converges upon the obstacles which each faced and surmounted. Simply to say that a character, historical or real, possesses grandeur, or placidity, or even beauty, is to damn it with faint praise. If for these terms we substitute others which may be synonymous, courage in the face of defeat, equanimity of soul despite physical danger, modesty in the midst of triumph, the character suddenly becomes alive. We have exhibited it in terms of action. It has become sympathetic, therefore dramatic.

Wedekind's one-act play "The Tenor" revolves about an opera singer who is self-centered, heartless, cruel; whose devotion to his art — and to himself as an artist — justifies anything and everything. By placing this character in a sequence of well-chosen situations, he becomes real, vital, dramatic.

It matters not how interesting, how compelling the character to the playwright. Action alone, and its development in situation can make it equally compelling and interesting to an audience.

> Suppose, for example, one wishes to put a braggart into a story. "In what situation would he play a braggart's part?" "What character would offset him?" "What struggle can I invent between the boaster and his foil?" "Whom will the reader wish to see victorious?"[1]

Such questions, and dozens of others, will lead us from character to situation and thus to drama.

Mr. Theodore Dreiser's "Old Ragpicker", in his play of that name, is "harmless", a "poor old thing", "not in his right mind, anyhow", "nutty for fair", and stumbles off the stage no more illuminating, no more interesting than when he first entered. The character

[1] Blanche Colton Williams: "A Handbook on Story Writing", 25.

is real enough, but the play falls to pieces for the lack of a satisfactory sequence of situations. For twenty pages the author details "Old Ragpicker's" woes. We become impatient. We are prepared for an action that shall cast a ray of light on something — on anything. At this point the curtain falls. The play ends without ever having begun.

A casual phrase spoken by the principal character, "I'm just as happy", suggests how situation, theme, and play might have been generated. But it is merely casual, and is undeveloped. One ruminates upon the play, and thinks of Mr. Masters' "Fiddler Jones":

> I ended life with a broken fiddle —
> And a broken laugh, and a thousand memories,
> And not a single regret.

Perhaps "Old Ragpicker's" philosophy was as interesting. It could have been shown in action. A play could have been written. It was not.[1]

A similar defect is sometimes found in plays written especially for the use of great actors. It is even more prevalent in plays written by the actors themselves. Too much insistence upon the externals of a dominant character, and not enough insistence upon the validity of the situations by which it is developed, is likely to bring about a state of affairs in which a play is butchered to make a rhetorician's holiday. A dozen situations are no better than one if they are disjointed and inconsequential.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's "Waterloo" was effective theatricalism when Sir Henry Irving played the part of Corporal Gregory Brewster. The dialogue is admirable. Certain of the situations, taken by themselves, are forceful; but there is no connected story; one action does not flow naturally into another; and the jerky

[1] Mr. Harold Chapin's "The Autocrat of the Coffee Stall" makes effective use of a situation similar in some respects.

effect is painfully accentuated by the jack-in-the-box entrances and exits of the minor characters, who pop on and off in disconcerting fashion.

At the end of the play the corporal staggers to his feet, flashes out the line, "The Guards need powder, and, by God, they shall have it!" and dies, for no particular reason other than to afford Sir Henry Irving an opportunity to act. This may be magnificent, but it is not playwriting.

If the dramatist begins with a character his first questions must determine whether or not it can be made interesting and true to an audience, whether or not it can be made warm, persuasive, real. If his answer is in the affirmative it implies the fact that he has discovered the situation and the logical sequence of situations which will permit the character most illuminatingly to be itself.

The germinal idea may come in the shape of a situation, or, more rarely, an extended series of situations. A situation is part of a story; a sequence of situations is a story. Often a single situation will suggest an entire play.

From Miss Williams' "A Handbook on Story Writing",[1] a volume which the one-act playwright will find surprisingly instructive, I quote the following examples:

An old man is turned out after long service.
A criminal is married to one who believes him (her) innocent.
A poor person imitates one of wealth.
One is murdered where he had meant to murder another.
A person masks his features with a veil.
A civilized Indian reverts to type.
A servant kills his master.
One makes three wishes on a charm.
Two failures meet.
A person driven by fear assumes bravery.

[1] Pp. 40–41.

The one-act play and the short story are similar in many details. These ten situations are quite as fruitful for one form as for the other. Messrs. W. W. Jacobs and L. N. Parker's "The Monkey's Paw", built upon one of them, is equally effective as a story and as a play. Another has been used with ghastly power by Mr. H. M. Harwood and Miss F. Tennyson Jesse in "The Black Mask." Another is notable in Sheridan's "The Rivals." Another is at the root of Lady Gregory's "The Bogie Men." Indeed, there is not one of the ten but could be built into a dozen different plays.

With the details of plot construction we are not now concerned. It is sufficient here to note that any play may grow from conceptions as simple, as elementary, as plastic as these.

Given a single situation, and it may be developed into a dozen stories. It becomes real as appropriate characters find their way into it. It becomes true as its theme brings it into relation with universal truth.

Theme, character, situation: the play grows most easily from the last; most enduringly from the first. Any play may quite naturally have originated from any one of the three.

Sometimes a situation runs naturally into a play; but then there is the danger that it may run away with the play. The thrilling story may be most unnatural. The action, over-attractive because of its originality or forcefulness, may not square persuasively with life.

Situation, running riot at the expense of character, results very generally in unsympathetic drama. The characters do what they do because the author demands it of them. It may be interesting. It may even be entertaining. But the audience is not likely to be touched deeply.

Why does the perennial heroine of so many thousand plays refuse to tell her amiable husband "everything" at the first sign of trouble? Because she cannot do so

without spoiling the play. In the end she learns what a good man he is, and lives happily with him ever afterwards, if in the interim he has not slain himself — or her — or the *tertium quid.* But the heroine of the next play fails to profit by her example.

The gyrations of such puppets may divert an audience for an hour. Perhaps that is all the dramatist wishes. But their memory cannot long survive the fall of the curtain.

Situation, running riot at the expense of truth, results in farce or in melodrama. Both are recognized dramatic forms; but it is well for the playwright, at the very beginning of things, to know where the steps which he is taking are bound to lead. He may write farce or melodrama deliberately; but to write either unintentionally argues defective craftsmanship.

Situation has its importance; but that importance must not be overestimated. It is the servant of truth and character, effective when it is governed by them, ineffective when it substitutes its own demands for theirs. Too much ingenuity in devising situations is almost as bad as none.

Of Scribe and Legouvé's "Bataille de Dames" Professor Matthews writes:

> Ingenious with a Chinese-puzzle ingenuity, all the pieces fit into each other, and fill the box exactly, and so completely that there is scant room for the least human nature.[1]

Cleverness, overdone, is its own worst enemy. Amusing at first, it is only too likely to become annoying and irritating in the end. A play may be a "crowded hour", but there is a natural limit to what may be crowded into it.

In this brief preliminary survey the importance of atmosphere, mood, or point of view as an origin of

[1] "French Dramatists", 97.

drama remains to be indicated. All three, in related ways, express the influence of environment. Broadly considered, they interpret the silent insistence of a super-character, a super-soul, variously generated, affecting humanity most powerfully, remaining often unaffected itself. Changing but slowly, man's efforts either to hasten or retard that change are likely to be futile, and to the dramatist, comic or tragic according to the consequences to the individual.

Atmosphere, mood, point of view may be that of the infinite or that of the infinitesimal; may be that of the whole world, or of a very small corner of it; may be the assertion of immutable law, or merely of man-made statutes and conventions.

From the attrition of man and that which lies about him arises drama. As in Maeterlinck's later plays, the individual may loftily scoff at what he calls Destiny, or as in his earlier works, there may be the utter resignation of

> an old man, seated in his arm-chair, waiting patiently, with his lamp beside him; giving unconscious ear to all the eternal laws that reign about his house, interpreting, without comprehending, the silence of doors and windows and the quivering voice of the light, submitting with bent head to the presence of his soul and destiny.[1]

There may be harmonious adjustment; there may be surrender, short-sighted or previsioned, cowardly or wise; there may be resistance to circumambient hazard, physical or moral: it is the versatile reaction of the living upon life.

Human character is but the concretion of larger factors which thus become vocal; situation is the name we give to the innumerable contacts which this rich and diverse expression produces in humanity; theme represents man's search for the underlying truths which are

[1] "The Tragical in Daily Life", translated by Alfred Sutro.

likely to determine the combat. All three generate naturally from an attentive consideration of physical and psychical environment.

Mr. George Middleton's large group of plays, Mr. Harold Brighouse's "The Price of Coal", Strindberg's "Simoon", Miss Zoë Akins' "The Magical City", Mr. William Butler Yeats' "The Land of Heart's Desire", Tchekoff's "On the Highway", Mr. Eugene O'Neill's "The Moon of the Caribbees", the poetic plays of William Sharp and those of Mr. Wilfrid Wilson Gibson, these are but a few of the works in which atmosphere, mood, point of view have found eloquent and amazingly varied interpretation. Any one of these plays may well have originated from a conception of that which pervades it.

Stevenson wrote in a much-quoted passage:

> Certain dank gardens cry aloud for a murder; certain old houses demand to be haunted; certain coasts are set apart for shipwreck.[1]

Here is mood expressing itself through place, and expressing itself, be it noted, differently to every author. I know that if I were to write a play about Stevenson's dank garden, I would place a pair of lovers in it.

This chapter and the preceding may be summed up in a few phrases:

Truth of theme makes a play valid;

Truth of character makes a play persuasive;

Truth of situation makes a play entertaining;

Truth of atmosphere, mood, point of view, makes a play real.

[1] "A Gossip on Romance."

Chapter X: The Genesis of the One-act Play

SIX men have stolen a ruby out of the forehead of an Indian idol. Two of them have already been done to death by its priests. The survivors are gathered in a room in an inn, eighty miles from Hull, in England. They think they have escaped. Then they discover that their pursuers have followed them. The conspirators are in deadly peril. "Remember," says their leader, "you've only my wits between you and death."

Here are questions; a whole series of questions. Will the priests recover the jewel? Will the four thieves escape the terrible fate which has already overtaken their accomplices? Their leader, a man of intellect, who has "a knack of foreseeing things", applies his ingenuity to the problem. Will his scheme work?

Let us turn to the end of the play:

OFF, A VOICE (*with outlandish accent*). Meestaire William Jones, Able Seaman.

[*The Toff has never spoken, never moved. He only gazes stupidly in horror.*

BILL. Albert, Albert, what is this?

[*He rises and walks out. One moan is heard. Sniggers goes to window. He falls back sickly.*

ALBERT (*in a whisp r*). What has happened?

SNIGGERS. I have seen it. I have seen it. O, I have seen it. [*He returns to table.*

THE TOFF (*laying his hand very gently on Sniggers' arm, speaking softly and winningly*). What was it, Sniggers?

. . . . . .

VOICE. Meestaire Albert Thomas, Able Seaman.

ALBERT. Must I go, Toffy? Toffy, must I go? . . .

[*Exit.*

VOICE. Meestaire Jacob Smith, Able Seaman.
SNIGGERS. I can't go, Toffy. I can't go. I can't do it. [*He goes.*
VOICE. Meestaire Arnold Everett Scott-Fortescue, late Esquire, Able Seaman.
THE TOFF. I did not foresee it. [*Exit.*

CURTAIN

The questions have been answered.[1]

One Nicolai Mihailovitch is dead. His widow is inconsolable. The departed was often unfair to her, cruel, even unfaithful. But she will never cease to wear mourning, will be true to him, will show him how she can love. She weeps at the mention of his horse. "Tell them", she commands, "to give him an extra feed of oats."

Here, once more, are questions. The widow is young and pretty, "with dimples on her cheeks." Will she remain inconsolable? Will she dedicate her life to sorrow? Will she be true to the late Nicolai? Her grief is so extravagant that one becomes suspicious.

Her servant reënters half an hour later to find her embracing one Smirnov, "a middle-aged landowner."

LUKA (*catches sight of the pair kissing*). Little fathers! [*Pause.*
POPOVA (*lowering her eyes*). Luka, tell them in the stables that Toby isn't to have any oats at all to-day.

CURTAIN

Again, the questions have been answered.[2]

The scene is a dormitory at Messrs. Trimmers', an English shop whose employees "sleep in."

[*Someone is in the bed in the corner, apparently asleep. The Maid enters rather noisily and looks around. A voice speaks from the bed very faintly, but only just makes a sound.*

[1] Lord Dunsany, "A Night at An Inn."
[2] Anton Tchekoff, "The Boor."

MAID (*familiarly*). Did you speak, miss? (*Listens, but there is no reply. She goes to door. There is a faint sound again*) What is it, miss? Do you want anything? (*No answer. Impatiently she crosses over to the bed*) Did you speak?

MISS T. (*faintly*). Open the window, please.

[*Maid opens the window noisily, then goes out, banging the door carelessly.*

Two shop girls enter boisterously. They are annoyed at finding Miss Tassey in bed. It is another of her headaches, doubtless:

. . . It's my belief she has a headache purposely. . . . She takes drugs, my dear. . . . (*Goes over to Miss Tassey and listens*) She's fair gone, like a nail.

Bit by bit the dialogue develops the pathetic facts about the central character. She is a "poor old thing"; "getting too old for counter work"; "something over forty"; "hobbles about the shop, and she wears mittens"; "she'll get the sack soon. . . . They sacked three last week younger than her." Miss Tassey, motionless, lies in her bed while her younger roommates discuss her.

Again the series of questions. What happens to poor old things who get too old for counter work? Will she "get the sack"? And what will happen then? And why the terrible stillness of Miss Tassey herself, lying in her bed after taking drugs? Here is a most insistent question.

A new character enters. "It's her news, of course." Miss Tassey "got the sack at last." One question has been answered; but the more vital question projects itself into actual interrogation: "What will she do?" "What can she do?" That question is answered and answered finally by the still form on the bed in the background: Miss Tassey has killed herself with poison.[1]

[1] Elizabeth Baker, "Miss Tassey."

Here are three plays utterly different in mood. "A Night at An Inn" is sharp, vivid, terrific; "The Boor" is broadly farcical, humorous, even vulgar; "Miss Tassey" is delicate, subdued, deeply pathetic. Yet in all three a common feature is apparent: the motion of the play is from question to answer; enigma to solution; unstable to stable; uncertain to certain ground. I have chosen these three particular plays as illustrations because of their marked superficial dissimilarity. But the principle whose working is so evident in them is equally at the foundation of every good play that has ever been written. It is well for the playwright to recognize this at the outset; it is well for him to bear in mind the many practical corollaries which follow inevitably from it.

Question and answer, the *terminus a quo* and the *terminus ad quem*, the "perfect action" of Aristotle: what lies between is the play. The questions may be as various as the plays themselves. But without a question, direct or suggested, no play. Without an answer, direct or suggested, no perfect action — and no satisfaction to the audience.

The thing in which the audience is interested is the question. Here is life unfolding before its very eyes: here are human destinies in process of flux; human beings, evoking sympathy in the beholders, facing the dark mystery of the future. It is the promise of change that is inherently "dramatic"; it is the fact that this change will be expressed in terms of human happiness that evokes emotion; it is the assurance that this change will be completed logically and with some degree of finality, that holds the audience in its seats. There is to be an answer; what will the answer be? Vaguely suggested, perhaps, at the very beginning, becoming transparently clear and natural at the end, the solution, and the flood of light that it casts on all that has gone before, is the thing towards which the dramatist — and his audience — are working.

Let us examine the genesis of the one-act play in the light of the foregoing. We may roughly distinguish three major movements: an initial movement will suggest questions by presenting a dramatic situation; a central movement will bring the questions into a focus so brilliant that their solution cannot longer be postponed, and will accomplish this by adding to and developing the dramatic situation; a terminal movement will answer the questions at issue with some degree of finality and satisfaction, by carrying the dramatic situation to a logical conclusion. These three major movements may serve to indicate the framework upon which the germinating idea is to spread its tendrils. We may represent the bare framework thus:

1st Movement	2d Movement	3d Movement
Situation	*Crisis*	*Resolution*
?	? ? ?	=

Its usefulness will be immediately apparent.

An "idea" for a play is very rarely the many ideas which make an entire play. Almost invariably it is but an idea for part of a possible play. It may be an idea for an initial situation, and we may represent it graphically:

Idea ? ? ? =

"Given this situation, how will it work out?"

It may be an idea for a crisis:

? Idea =

"What led to this crisis, and what follows?"

It may be an idea for a resolution:

? ? ? ? Idea

"What dramatic action may terminate thus? What question, arising in the lives of men, growing to and

through crisis, is convincingly, nay, illuminatingly, answered by this solution?"

The original idea, whether it come as theme, character, or situation, may advantageously be surveyed in such a framework. The process of permitting it to add to itself such elements as are lacking in it, and to germinate naturally into a play is facilitated by anything that permits, even compels, an accurate appraisal of existing and desired values. In the bare idea we possess something. We lack certain other things. A deliberate effort to discover both what we have and what we require is a necessary step before the writing of the play can be considered.

We may have begun with theme. We may have embedded it in a tentative situation with tentative characters. Our survey may at once disclose that situation, characters, or both, are quite inadequate. We may have conceived of a play as either beginning or ending in a certain manner. Our examination may reveal that its logical and effective development in either direction may lead to actions and crises hitherto unsuspected by — even unwelcome to — the author. We shall discover, first of all, that the selection of the movement in which we place our tentative situation controls, to a great extent, the embryonic play. Identical situations, placed in different movements, will generate different plays.

Let us turn to the list on page 74.

"An old man is turned out after long service." The dramatist, let us say, has this idea for part of a play in mind. He has in mind, too, the particular part of the play in which it is to figure: whether the yet unwritten play is to begin, pivot, or end upon this situation. Let us examine its development from each possible position.

The play is to end thus. It is difficult to conceive of this as a satisfactory answer to anything that has preceded. Our audience is full of pity: it is unwilling

to see the curtain descend upon an act so clearly merciless. Perhaps the dramatist may solve this difficulty by making the old man an obnoxious character, by exhibiting his villainy throughout the play. Perhaps the act of turning him out makes the happiness of more important characters possible. Perhaps the dramatist, exercising his privilege of changing the old man's sex, may make him a mother-in-law, and drop a happy curtain upon her departure from the home she has all but blighted. Here is a possible play. It has been written many times.

But any one of these expedients compromises the simply stated situation. We are dealing with an "old" man, not a pestilential one. Considered from this point of view, his turning out is not an answer at all: far otherwise, it suggests many questions concerning what is to come. It is clearly a cause of some still more important action. Hence the situation finds its way naturally into the first or second major movements, the conception, by the way, with which our dramatist probably started.

In "Miss Tassey" it is used in the second movement. The entire first movement is devoted to preliminaries. One question after another is suggested. The setting, the atmosphere, the minor characters, are developed with remarkable skill. Miss Tassey is invisible, but her identity is clear: she is any one of Messrs. Trimmers' shopgirls grown old and feeble. The problem is there, real, poignant, disclosed rather than veiled by the careless chatter of her roommates.

A new character enters. For a minute or two she joins in the gossip. Then, abruptly, the revelation is made. This is the beginning of the crisis. With exquisite restraint Miss Baker diverts the conversation to the past, to the infinitely pitiable life that has been her heroine's, while the audience sits breathless, and the crisis, for there are crises without rhetoric, swells.

An instant of resolution; a masterly ending, and the play is over.

Yet this is not the only possible play which might arise from the original situation. We may place it in the first movement. The principal character may be brought upon the stage with the simple announcement, "I've been discharged", and the action may commence at that point. He is old, and he has been employed for many years, hence the audience will want to know something of the reasons behind the dismissal, and the dramatist must needs sap the strength of this particular situation by explaining it after it is a *fait accompli*.[1] But he will do this willingly if he can lead to another still more important situation. Let us, for example, invent a devoted suitor who for twenty years has been proposing to Miss Tassey at monthly intervals, and whom she, for any one of a number of possible reasons, has as consistently rejected. The fact of her sacking ceases to be all-important (as any situation must, if placed in the first movement), and the play centers upon the more important drama through which we portray the reactions of this individual to the changed circumstances. Or a relative of Miss Tassey might have offered her a home long ago, and the offer, for pride of economic independence, might have been declined. Does it still hold good? And what are Miss Tassey's present views upon the subject? Or, if we are writing upon a theme which has achieved great popularity in a certain type of American magazine, Miss Tassey's dismissal might promptly lead to a sudden series of financial catastrophes to the firm which so rashly dispensed with her services, and the millionaire senior, with tears in his eyes, might beg her to return at an increased salary and save him from utter disaster. Tragedy has given place to improbable comedy. Or, to approach the situation from still

[1] See Chapter XVIII.

another angle, Miss Tassey, like so many persons who cannot afford it, may have been supporting a younger relative; may have been sending a nephew through college, or a niece through a music school. In the emergency, how does this second person respond? Which means more: ties of blood, or a "career"? Here are various central situations towards which our first situation, if placed in the initial movement, may lead us.

Let us examine a second situation:

"A servant kills his master." This, on the face of it, is excellent dramatic material. It is richly suggestive; it prompts immediate questions, hence a play may easily begin thus. It will be seen to possess every element of a solution, hence a second group of plays may end thus. Still more, it is an admirable example of brilliant focus, of flux, of that plastic moment in which positions may be reversed and destinies turned round about, and may quite as easily become the crisis of another group of plays.

Here, at once, we have three broad avenues leading from the situation to the play. Each avenue, too, through a hundred different bypaths, leads to innumerable plays. "Servant"; "master": these terms are fruitful when one ponders them a little. Many themes may be imbedded in the complex relationships which they make possible. In "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" do not servant and master reside in the same body? Is it not so too in "The Picture of Dorian Gray"? And in Charles Esquier's dramatization of Mérimée's terrible story of "Lokis"? And, if we let our thoughts wander to the fantastic, do we not find infinite material of a similar nature in the subject of witchcraft?

We need not stray so far afield. Every man has many servants and many masters within him. They are forever in combat. His character determines; his action expresses the result. And "killing" itself

need not be accompanied by an effusion of blood. It may be more difficult — and more dramatic — to kill a master whose very existence is kept a secret than to put to death an external physical adversary. Let a situation but swell into a theme, let one event but be considered in the light of all events, and the plays which may result are numberless.

We need not here investigate other situations. The reader, if he wishes, may appraise them thus. In itself, a dramatic situation is worthless. Only its artistic development, only its artistic incorporation in a play, can draw from it the latent riches it may possess. The principle of question and answer, correctly applied, is likely not only to reveal unsuspected treasure, but to suggest the natural and effective means for its employment.

Chapter XI: The Fourth Dimension

THE curtain rises. An action begins, culminates, is resolved. The curtain falls. This is the ostensible body of the one-act play. The statement may seem surprising, but neither wit, invention, nor skill in the writing of dialogue can make this body breathe and become vital until it has blown into it what, for the sake of emphasis, I should like to call the Fourth Dimension.

A story, complete in itself, is tri-dimensional. It has length, breadth, and, if you please, color. But like a spider web stretched across a doorway, it is flat and feeble; the finger of reality can be pushed through its tenuous substance. Life possesses the Fourth Dimension: the dimension of relationship, by means of which every event, however complete in itself, is inevitably placed with respect to other events. Life is full of complete actions: but they are not considered entirely apart from life. They have the background of life to set them in proper relief; the norms of life, with which, however fleetingly, they are compared, to give them proportion, magnitude, bulk.

Take an event out of its setting of other events, and its effect upon, its interest for, an audience are appreciably diminished. What emotional response can there be to the announcement that Richard Roe has killed John Doe? The newspaper reporter, aware of this, prints no such headlines. To say that one unknown has done away with another is perfectly meaningless. But let him say, for instance that an escaping convict has slain a warder, and the event begins to take on

meaning. Relationships have entered. Both participants in the drama are placed with respect to a community: the action of one upon the other affects a large body of persons.

The reporter may explain that the deceased warder left a widow and five children; that the convict has committed not one but many crimes. But he is likely to stop here. The editorial writer goes farther. He is not particularly interested in the individuals who figure in the tragedy. He thinks rather of the complete event, and he thinks in terms of other events. It argues, he may say, laxness in prison discipline; or the breakdown of the political party which happens to be in power; or the natural rebellion of man against confinement; or any one of a dozen other things.

The bare facts supply length and breadth; the reporter adds color; the editorial writer adds the Fourth Dimension: relationship. The event which might have passed out of our minds rapidly is driven home in its larger implications as part of a body of organized thought. The alleged murder of a paymaster by two obscure foreigners a year ago acquired a large Fourth Dimension through political and economic entanglements. Other events of the same period are forgotten: the Sacco-Vanzetti event is kept alive by its important relationships.

Turning to terms of one-act play technique, a pure action, by which I understand an event apart from other events, may have great interest, but it can have neither great persuasiveness nor great vitality. No action, however powerful in itself, is strong enough to stand alone before an audience unless it is represented as a section of some still larger life, some still more potent action and series of actions.

Sometimes, we have seen, a theme, emerging at the end of the play, will bring what has happened into

relationship with universal truth. But this is not always possible and most certainly not always desirable. I shudder to think of a craftsmanship which would require every play to end as certain gladly forgotten pieces of a by-gone day were accustomed to end: with the abandonment of illusion and the deliberate announcement of a moral. The authors of these pieces were struggling unconsciously to invest their drama with larger relationship. The means were faulty; the result labored.

Sometimes the reactions of outsiders, characters in the play who act as representatives of the audience,[1] supply a Fourth Dimension. It is so in the ancient Greek plays, in which the comments of the Chorus set the central action in a beautiful frame. It is so in the Japanese "Nō" plays. It is so in many modern plays, in which characters not only participate in the action, but voice the opinions of the beholders. It is so in Mr. Shaw's "The Shewing-Up of Blanco Posnet." It is so in Mr. George Calderon's "The Little Stone House." It is so in Lord Dunsany's "The Lost Silk Hat", a delightful little comedy in which relationship is actually dramatized.

"The caller stands on a doorstep, 'faultlessly dressed' but without a hat. . . ." A laborer enters. The caller stops him. Will he kindly go into the house and rescue the silk hat? For this service he will pay him a sovereign. The laborer is suspicious. The caller indiscreetly doubles his offer. The laborer becomes still more suspicious, will have nothing to do with him, and goes.

A clerk enters. Less outspoken than the laborer, he is equally suspicious, and even though the caller explains that a "young and very, very beautiful" girl is sitting on the sofa under which is the hat, declines to become entangled.

[1] See p. 267.

A poet enters. To him the caller explains frankly:

CALLER. I have quarrelled with a lady in that house and have sworn to join the Bosnians and die in Africa.

POET. But this is beautiful . . . to die, and die beautifully for a hopeless love, that is a thing one could make a lyric about. That is the test of essential things — try and imagine them in a lyric. One could not write a lyric about a hat.

Laborer, clerk, poet, each represents some feature of the external world. Through the changing viewpoint of each the exceptionally slight story develops body, fullness, reality. It is as though the artist were exhibiting the beauty of his work by throwing upon it a succession of vari-colored lights: the thing that is illuminated is the same; the manner of illumination adds incalculably to the effect. The expedient of rolling laborer, clerk, and poet into one person — as could be done with a few strokes of the pen and the alteration of a small number of lines — would injure the play irreparably.

In the long play a sub-plot meets some of the requirements of the Fourth Dimension. It may be extremely artistic, or, depending upon the author, it may descend to the level of juvenile-comedy-relief, written with a rubber stamp. Even at its worst, it supplies some relationship: its counter movement sets the central action in some kind of a frame. But the one-act form, as a rule, cannot afford the dispersion of attention attendant upon the telling of a detailed second story involving a second set of characters. Such dispersed attention, as we have seen, injures Karl Ettlinger's "Altruism"

The one-act play avoids this defect by building plot and sub-plot, initial action and complication, about the same character or characters. It is required to concentrate upon an exceedingly small number of persons: only that which touches them directly may be devel-

oped to a conclusion. Yet we have seen that the "pure" action means a thin play. The one-act playwright solves the difficulty by introducing as complication either a second action or a second theme or a second angle upon the points at issue, and weaving, from the two or three threads thus provided, a single thread which is not only interesting but vital. The one-act playwright works towards unity, but the unity of variety; towards harmony, but a polyphonic harmony. He is concerned not only with an idea, but with the idea in a setting of other ideas; with the central idea and other thought upon it; the idea, and its relation to something else.

If the reader will turn to page 84, he will observe that in the examples of play building cited, simple situations were advanced towards play form by methods which may be deduced from the present chapter. Like the craftsmanship which demands it, the Fourth Dimension is not something to be spattered upon a finished play. It is only through its entrance at the earliest stage of the work that the play can grow naturally and powerfully. If it is not there at the outset, the finished play will suffer.

Let us consider a potent fourth-dimensional form: the sub-theme. Some years ago a comic paper printed a selection of well-known adages, each completed by the addition of a second phrase casting the adage itself into a surprising light. I remember only one example: "A rolling stone gathers no moss — but it acquires a high polish." I suggest this as a perfect example of theme and sub-theme. The first is placed in higher relief, richer perspective, more definite relationship by the second. From the first considered singly a play germinates with difficulty. From the two together might easily germinate any of the numerous plays, light or serious, in which this precise pair of themes has been embodied.

"You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear." An interesting theme, clearly. Add a sub-theme: "but it may radiate poetry." May I suggest that the combination of the two expresses — may have germinated into — Franz Molnar's beautiful "Liliom"?

Let us vary the sub-theme: "You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear — and the other sows know it." Here, I submit, is "The Emperor Jones", in words of one syllable. Mr. O'Neill makes his philosophy concrete by the situation of an ex-Pullman porter risen for a brief time to a position of despotic power. But the idol has feet of clay. For all his gaudy trappings, his soul, deep down, is the soul of a savage — and the other savages know it!

The Fourth Dimension, in "The Emperor Jones", is literally boomed out by the reverberations of a drum beaten continuously during the greater part of the action.

From these roots this play may have grown. From these roots any number of effective plays might grow as easily. But by the same reasoning, any good play might have grown from a dozen other pairs of superficially different—but fundamentally related—themes. The author might have begun almost anywheres. The finished play, rich in the Fourth Dimension, stretches its roots in many directions.

A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush — but will you always be satisfied with it?

The end justifies the means — but questionable means may bring about unsought ends.

Reputation is the world's summation of character — consistency is the individual's reaction to reputation.

Stick to something everlastingly — you may give up something worth more.

Each pair of themes suggests not one but a dozen plays, according to the concrete situations chosen to present them to an audience. Of course the choice of the situation depends upon the individual writer. One

type will naturally interpret the first example in terms of one dollar and two dollars, and will altogether reject the last, as being opposed to the tenets of modern business. What other types, higher types, may do, I cannot properly suggest. Each dramatist will see what some other does not; will begin, perhaps, with themes as commonplace as these I cite, and through the magic of his imagination and craftsmanship interpret them in terms as fitting as they are peculiarly his own.

The plays themselves may be lofty, serious interpretations of life; or they may be light, dexterously stressing the comic element; or, depending upon the author, they may be cheap and tawdry, trite and banal. A sound inception cannot guarantee a sound outcome. There is too much variation in the degrees of skill, the powers of imagination, the philosophies of life, which may be brought to the development to permit the results to be similar either in substance or in quality.

I may sum up what I have said of the Fourth Dimension by reiterating that relationship is essential to every play; that it may be shown in many ways, but that it can hardly be shown in too many ways. In whatever form the original idea comes, the expedient of studying its possible relationships, and eventually fastening upon one of them will materially facilitate the germination of an action.

The play is still in the embryonic stage. Everything is tentative. The mind of the dramatist travels back and forth in the effort to find the substance through which his thought shall be made clear and emotive.

There is a longing for a play, with some slight material which may be incorporated in it. Theme, character, situation: all three begin to grow together, to become associated definitely with things which perhaps shall be in the finished work.

Obviously atmosphere, mood, and point of view need not be here discussed: the Fourth Dimension is implicit in them.

Chapter XII: Quickening

DICTIONARY: "Quickening: to become alive; to manifest signs of life."

A play is a living organism. It is conceived, passes through a period of gestation, is born. The embryonic stage is long: should be long. At first vague, obscure, unformed, the unborn play takes on shape, proportion, size. It becomes ponderable. It acquires articulation. Beginning as an idea, intangible, hazy, dimly visioned, it becomes recognizable as a definite entity, possessing beginning, middle, and end; unique, perhaps, in that its existence is apparent to but one person in the entire world.

Suddenly the unborn play begins to show signs of life. Precisely as any other embryo begins one day to move independent of the will of its parent, so the play, even in the pre-natal days, commences to move its newly formed members, acquires an individuality of its own, is abruptly alive.

The layman will think that I speak in terms of metaphor: every playwright knows that I do not; that the motion of the unborn infant is no more apparent to the mother than the motion of the unborn play to the author who carries it about within him. It is part of himself, and yet it is more than part of himself. His will, his imagination, his dramatic instinct have conceived it: but as its evolution progresses his conscious contribution becomes progressively less and less. The characters *will* do certain things in certain ways; will act in accordance with their own views, and not in accordance with those of their author; may become unruly, and run away with the play, and compel the

author to retrace his steps until a play satisfactory both to him and to the characters in it evolves itself.

It is for the coming of this event that the dramatist must wait as patiently as necessary. The layman is wont to inquire, "Do you write any time or only when you feel like it?" This is comparable to asking a prospective mother, "Do you give birth to your child any time or only when your hour has come?" The dramatist writes when his play is ready to be written. The process of allowing the germ to grow into an embryo, and allowing the embryo to evolve into a play is all important; the detail of permitting the fully formed play to fit itself with words and gesture, to set itself down upon paper, is the very last thing for him to think about. When the play is mature it will become articulate without coaxing.

In an earlier chapter I quoted the refreshing but vicious precept: "Get enthusiastic over something — anything — and when you are full of it, *boil over!* . . . Learn to write *fast:* and don't correct too much!"

I should revise this maxim to read thus:

"Get enthusiastic over something — anything — and when you are full of it, *put it away!* Forget it for a week, or a month — if you can — and then come back to it. If it does not attract you as powerfully as it did the first time, if it does not kindle your imagination as vividly, the chances are that the idea is not as good as you thought it was at first. And remember that your equipment as a dramatist, your skill and your fancy are not to be lightly employed upon thoughts not worth expressing. You are not asked to solve the riddle of the universe; but your play, whether tragic or comic, grave or gay, should justify its existence. There are so many unnecessary plays: try not to add to their number!

"Perhaps when you return to the idea you will find it as warm, as inspiring as when it first entered your

thoughts. Approach it, then, with humility. Do not try to 'write fast.' Try, rather, not to write at all; to refrain from writing altogether until the idea, grown into a complete play, writes itself in your mind; and then, and not until then, allow the play to write itself!"

Triviality is the curse of modern art. Of the thousands of extant one-act plays, it is painfully apparent that many should never have been written; that neither in thought nor in execution do they possess qualities sufficiently vital and interesting to justify their preservation. The mere fact that they have come into being argues lack of judgment — and restraint — on the part of their authors. No author can prevent trivial and hackneyed ideas from occasionally appealing to his imagination. The simple process of putting them away for a while is likely to disclose their hopelessness and prevent the writing of a bad play.

If an idea, after a period of suspended animation, cannot appeal forcibly to its author, it is not likely, even with the help that he can give it, to appeal forcibly to an audience.

"Why wouldn't you marry him?" demands Mrs. Cather at the end of "The Magnanimous Lover" (St. John Ervine), "Wasn't he good enough?" "He was too good", replies Maggie Cather. Is there any possibility of an author failing to return to this richly human — and humorous — idea after a week, or a month, or a year?

A fickle young wife has run away from her sensitive husband, yet would "scrupulously avoid wounding him"; debates whether to sign her letter to him "Yours faithfully" or "Yours formerly"; discovers that the sensitive husband has taken advantage of her absence to attend to some "extremely private business." Quite naturally the young wife takes the sensitive husband in tow again, and the "extremely private

business" gravitates to the bereft lover. The situation of the wife — or husband — becoming jealous, and deciding adventure begins at home, is ancient. But to make both "sensitive", to have the entire affair conducted with the most exquisite courtesy, and a somewhat startling respect for decorum, is delightfully novel. Granted that the idea, in its earliest form, was far simpler than even this simple outline, is it conceivable that it would not, sooner or later, command Mr. Houghton to write "Fancy Free"?

There is stoicism in modern life. A woman, going to an operation which may mean her death — and knowing it — can force herself to chatter lightly for the final ten minutes she is allowed to spend with her husband, and he, knowing what she knows, can meet her in the same Spartan spirit. There is the heroic in everyday life. "Old Rumble Growler", the husband, may do many fine things before his hour comes, but he will never do a finer than that which "In Hospital" is to show us. Is it likely that when the idea for this play came to Mr. Thomas H. Dickinson there was the least danger of his ever forgetting it?

The very beginnings of the quickening process are eugenic in their nature: a feeble, inept idea dies quickly; a really good idea is infinitely strengthened and developed. It is evolution, and the struggle for existence in one of its simplest forms: the worth-while thought survives; the others perish.[1] By the expedient of living with his idea for a while before proceeding deliberately with its development, the playwright forces himself to make a tolerably correct appraisal; and this may tell him to go no farther. The finished play must go out into the world without a friend, ready

[1] Since writing the above "Plots and Personalities" (E. E. Slosson and J. E. Downey), 125, calls to my attention a similar expression of the same thought in Stevenson's "Cockermouth and Keswick."

to make friends — or enemies. If, in its most elementary form, it cannot make a friend of its own author, it may well be abandoned. Notebooks, mental or actual, may be used as reminders: they should not become dictators. The playwright cannot test what is to go into the play too soon — or too severely.

A judicious pause at the very beginning may prevent unconscious plagiarism. The idea which attracts the dramatist may unknowingly be lifted from another play. Scribe, an incredibly industrious hack, managed to plagiarize himself some dozens of times towards the end of his long career. A period of incubation between the moment of conception and the mad rush to paper would probably have revealed that he had already made sufficient use of his material. Mr. Archer, ruminating upon a play, evolved the story of "Hedda Gabler", and did not recognize it as such until some time after. "Thus", he continues, "when we think we are choosing a plot out of the void, we are apt to be, in fact, ransacking the storehouse of memory." [1]

The idea, let us say, has survived the test of suspended animation. It remains in the playwright's mind along with other ideas for other plays. It is taken out from time to time, examined, and returned for further germination. Perhaps it is to be one of the ideas which remains in the playwright's memory to the end of his days, and remains unwritten. Perhaps, through the deliberate choice of the playwright, or preferably through the insistence of the idea itself, it drives other ideas into the background. Then commences a process of steady growth. In after years the playwright will find it difficult to remember just how it all began; for in the second stage of the quickening process a perfect blending takes place. The original thought adds to itself whatever it lacks. There is friction and the rubbing off of sharp corners; amalga-

[1] "Play-Making", 25.

mation; fusion; the disappearance of abstractions and their gradual replacement by the tangible and the real. There is a process of give and take, with the playwright standing a little to one side and acting as umpire, anxious that his characters shall work out their destinies naturally and truthfully but anxious also lest they precipitously rush into blind alleys. Jimmy Caesar, in "John Ferguson", complains Mr. Ervine, nearly ran away with the play. It was only by clapping him into jail and keeping him entirely out of the last act that the play could be brought to a conclusion. "L'Aiglon", begun by Rostand to supply Coquelin with a stellar part as a *vieux grognard*, ended as a glorification of the Duke of Reichstadt, a character not in the author's mind at all when he began to write.[1] Nor are these experiences unusual. Every author will find honestly conceived characters occasionally refusing to do what is required of them. If he bludgeons them into submission, truth goes by the board. If he lazily gives in, the play may be wrecked. The only solution, heartbreaking as it is, is to modify or discard the character or the play or both.

This is but one reason why the plastic stage is important. It is extremely improbable that the dramatist, at a first cast, will light upon the precise combination which shall best convey any given thought. Theme, we have seen, must be made concrete in a sequence of situations, and these, in turn, must express themselves through the speech and action of the characters with which they are peopled, characters whom the dramatist may ask only to be themselves. Here are variables. One cannot be changed without affecting the others. The play must be kept so plastic that the inevitable adjustments may take place.

Presently, however, the embryo approaches recog-

[1] Brander Matthews: "The Principles of Playmaking", 187–189, and "A Study of the Drama", 38.

nizable play form. The dramatist may have made a few notes, but the body of his drama exists only in his mind. The idea is no longer vague and hazy: it is precise and orderly. It is no longer abstract: it has become incorporated into a structure which, however crude when compared with its finished form, already bears the signs of organic unity. A tolerably clear path from beginning to and through crisis and to an end discloses itself. As a whole the play is satisfactory. Many of its details are still unsettled, but the high lights are blocked in, there is a scene sequence, and above all there is a conclusion and some understanding of the impression with which the finished work is to dismiss its audience.

It is at this point that conscious development of the play on paper, in the form of a scenario, may commence. The playwright has made certain of his destination. He may begin his travels. The *terminus ad quem* is known, and that is all important. However many currents in the play, all must converge and flow together in the last precious minutes before the curtain falls. Everything that comes before is important only as it leads to these few moments.

The dramatist may have started with but a scrap of a situation, a hazy outline of a theme, a vague conception of one or more characters. By keeping them plastic and by giving them plenty of time, he has permitted a play to evolve itself. It has progressed along shadowy trails to its most vital point: its termination. Upon this the playwright seizes, retraces his steps, and reasons back to a starting point.

Not the least appeal of the play is the uncertainty it arouses in the minds of its auditors. The curtain rises. Persons walk upon the stage. They converse with each other. There are entrances and exits. There is visible action. There is conflict. The audience, keenly interested, wonders what will come of it.

But the playwright must know! The play is something of a puzzle, but it can be no puzzle to its author. Starting with his answer, he has written his play to lead up to it.

The reader will recall Lewis Carroll's famous injunction: "Begin at the beginning and go on till you come to the end. Then stop." The playwright cannot follow this advice. To begin at the beginning is too much like boarding a train without inquiring its destination: it may set him down a hundred miles from nowhere. Instead, the playwright carefully turns the precept inside out:

Begin at the End and go Back till you come to the Beginning. Then start.

BOOK THREE

THE PLAY

THE MOVEMENTS OF THE PLAY

As a convenient division let us recognize a series of well-marked periods in every one-act play, and let us give them names by which we shall roughly identify them.

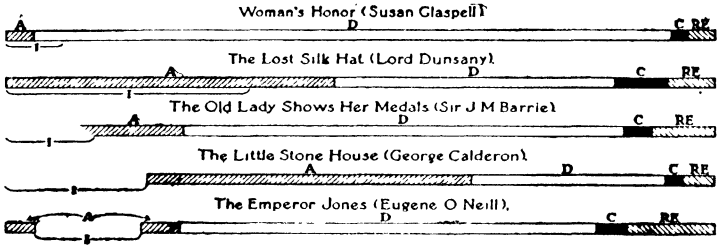
The curtain rises upon the *introduction*, which may or may not coincide with the *attack*, a term by which I propose to designate the period, long or short, which culminates in the first plainly declared dramatic situation. The points at issue are raised, such facts as must be known in order that what is to come may be valid and effective are exposited, and the problem, more or less complete, is set before the audience. This is the first major movement of the play.

The *complication* may introduce a second action, or a second theme, or a second angle upon the points at issue, and is essential to give the play the persuasiveness of life. Upon it follows a *development*, through which the action rises to the *crisis*. The questions which have been suggested to the audience are brought into sharp and brilliant focus. There is a period of liquidity, of plasticity, during which the *involving* action changes to a *resolving* action. This is the second major movement of the play.

The questions at issue are answered with some degree of finality and satisfaction in a *resolution*, during which the action of the drama and the interest of the audience are likely to reach their peaks. It may coincide with the *ending*. This is the third major movement of the play.

Playwriting is an art, not a science, hence these terms must be applied with the utmost flexibility. They serve us merely for purposes of identification, and in order to convey thought without the use of too awkward and too elaborate locutions.

Some appreciation of the flexibility to which I refer may be gained from the following self-explanatory diagram. For the sake of simplicity, the complication is not indicated.



ABBREVIATIONS

I. Introduction A. Attack D. Development
C. Crisis R.E. Resolution and Ending

Chapter XIII: Seizing Interest: The Opening

THE action of an effective one-act play may be epitomized in a single sentence. The Opening seizes interest; the Development increases interest; the Crisis exalts interest; the Resolution satisfies interest. Throughout this volume I have carefully refrained from dogmatizing. Playwriting is an art, and the artist should not be — will not be — fettered by "laws." Broad principles, sound because they agree with common sense, are sufficient, for from them each individual will deduce what is necessary, will cultivate and perfect instincts which guide where formulas bewilder. But upon the subject of interest, greater emphasis must be placed. Here is no principle open to many interpretations: there is but one interpretation. Here is no "law", so called, perhaps, because it is frangible. Here is a truth, valid and universal to-day as it will be valid and universal a thousand years from to-day:

First, last, always, be interesting!

The audience is presumably curious when it enters the theater. That curiosity may have been completely satisfied — or discouraged — by the plays that have preceded yours. You must begin afresh. At the very rise of the curtain you must command interest, compel interest, never to release it until after the play is over.

It has been said times without number that the one-act play, being short, must plunge into its story at the very beginning. This is nonsense. True it is that it is required to make no concession to the tardiness of audiences, as its longer relative often does, by delib-

erately wasting the first ten or fifteen minutes, and refraining carefully from touching upon any subject of importance until the latecomers are seated. Such tactics in a play which may be the last of four would be absurd and ruinous. But it is not true that the one-act play achieves brevity by lopping off parts which are necessary to every play. The Pekinese is smaller than the St. Bernard, but it is equally well supplied with head and tail, hair and hide, heart and lungs. The canvas of the one-act play is not large; but the one-act playwright finds it amply large enough for his purpose.

The first movement of the one-act play, its opening, is conditioned upon the play itself, and most particularly upon the relation between the story and the visible means selected to present its action.

If story interest is to be uppermost, if the characters are apparently usual exponents of an unusual action, if the setting is relatively simple and uninteresting, the playwright may plunge in — unless such treatment is out of key with his story. He has some degree of choice, but as a general thing, the abrupt opening is most effective.

If character interest is to be uppermost, if the action rises visibly from the characters, if atmosphere is to be evoked, if the setting is relatively complex and interesting, a more deliberate opening is nearly always necessary. The playwright has a lesser degree of choice, and as a general thing, the extended opening is more effective.

When the curtain rises, the scene and the characters upon it are either interesting or uninteresting, and that before a word has been spoken. That interest or lack of interest must be dealt with at once. If the latter, steps to create interest must be taken immediately. If the former, it does not matter in *what* the audience is interested. That it *is* interested is the main thing.

The playwright does not fight interest of any kind. He welcomes it, directs it, and eventually transfers it to the subject which shall lead into the heart of his play.

Every play strives to tell a story; but no story can be effectively told until the natural interest of the audience has been skillfully transferred from the things which are incidental to the things which are essential. If characters and setting are ostensibly simple, a single glance, and the power of the forcefully begun story are usually sufficient. But ring up the curtain on a variegated scene, a crowded restaurant, let us say, or a shop with overflowing shelves, or an elaborately designed setting of any kind, and the audience will lock its ears until its eyes are satisfied. Ring up the curtain on but a few interestingly differentiated characters, and unless they are fused into a mob, the audience will insist upon becoming acquainted with each before being plunged into an action.

As an effective compromise, admirably suited to the spirit of the one-act play, the opening may begin with a single sharply stressed note, a *sforzato-piano*, if I may borrow a term from music, and subsiding instantly, may proceed with a necessary introduction before unlimbering its heavy artillery. This, for example, is the method of my "Pawns." The opening lines, spoken in this case by a Prologue, touch the heart of the subject. The interest of the audience is seized, and the characters are given an opportunity to explain themselves while at the same time laying the foundation of an action.

I have suggested using the term "attack" for the period, long or short, culminating in the first dramatic situation, and the term "introduction" for the period during which the audience is made acquainted with the characters, setting, and necessary antecedent events.

In the abrupt opening, attack and introduction coincide. One is accomplished through the other.

In the extended opening, the true attack does not come until the introduction has paved the way for it.

In what may be called the inflected opening, a single sharp note precedes a leisurely introduction.

The choice of method depends upon the visible substance of the play, the nature and mood of the subject, and the taste and judgment of the author.

Let us consider a few effective openings:

"Woman's Honor." The scene is an ordinary room, not in the least unusual. There are two men, in customary business clothes. To the eye, they are most uninteresting. But one of the men is in an extremely awkward predicament. His plight, in other words, is infinitely more interesting than the man himself. Miss Glaspell begins abruptly:

LAWYER. Do you know that murder is no laughing matter?
PRISONER. Well, was I laughing?
LAWYER (*shoots it at him*). Where were you on the night of October 25? Your silence shields a woman's honor.

An extended beginning could not be nearly so effective. There is just one thing to command interest: the dramatic situation. Miss Glaspell plunges into it at once.

"Phipps." The scene and the characters are ostensibly commonplace, though we are presently to discover that the butler, Phipps, is a most unusual person. The playwright might have begun with a leisurely scene showing the beginning of the quarrel between Lady Fanny and Sir Gerald. But the interesting thing is not the quarrel, but what comes of it. As in the preceding illustration, the story is far more entertaining than the exponents upon whom the curtain rises. What extended beginning could possess half the force of the literally striking scene with which Mr. Houghton commences?

"The Lost Silk Hat." The scene is simple, the doorway of a house. The characters are not remarkable to the eye: one may well meet any of them in the street. But a single person is on the stage when the curtain rises, and except for the fact that he is hatless, is not worth a second glance. The abrupt opening is not only logical but inevitable. The audience must be interested at once. The lacking hat is the one arresting feature of a commonplace scene, emphatic because of the contrast. Everything else the audience takes in as the curtain rises. But why is the hat missing? The interest of the audience impinges here. The dramatist seizes it, increases it, and transfers it from the hat to the man — the girl — the situation

"Love of One's Neighbor." An unusual exterior, but one in which the unusual thing is directly bound with the story. *Three* characters in the entire play: a man in apparent danger of death; a hotel keeper who believes in advertising; and a mob. This last character consists of some dozens of persons: tourists, policemen, students, vendors, photographers, correspondents, what not. But while consummately individualized to the eye, it is psychologically welded into a single entity, a single cosmopolitan soul speaking with a multitude of voices. To us, it is one character: the world.

Here a leisurely beginning would ruin the play. Of necessity it would separate the mob into its elements, a thing which the playwright skillfully avoids. The note of the man in danger must be sounded at once, and repeated during the play at intervals short enough to prevent the mob from disintegrating, for the audience, into its component parts. Andreyev begins tumultuously, and continues in the same spirit.

Each of these four plays begins abruptly. Each plunges into a story without appreciable pause for an introduction: the story is by far the most interesting thing about each. Attack, which as in the third

example, may occupy half the length of the play, or, as in the first, may be complete in a few lines, coincides with introduction.

Let us consider a second group:

"The Florist Shop": The *scene* is most elaborate and interesting:

> [*At the back, a broad show window, dressed with flowers, — azaleas, roses, daffodils, violets. To the right of the window, a glass door, leading from the street. On both door and window, the name "Slovsky", in bold script, shows reversed. Two steps lead down from the door into the shop. The woodwork is white, and the floor tiled irregularly in large blue and white flagstones. On the right, upstage, a glass showcase filled with flowers . . . a group of bay trees and flowering azaleas . . . a plaster Cupid, designed for garden statuary . . . plants, vases, attractive wicker baskets, and other paraphernalia . . .*

So elaborate a setting requires time for its assimilation. Nor is this all: the story is slight, charming, revolving about the beautifully drawn *character* of Maude, the saleswoman who successfully combines sentiment and business. The play stands or falls by this single character. Quite correctly Miss Hawkridge does not venture to touch the story proper until the audience has had time to gaze at the setting, and to learn what it must know about Maude.

An abrupt opening here would be disastrous. The show windows; the plaster Cupid; the reversed name on the window, which the audience, childlike, will insist upon deciphering; these are interesting. And the principal character is rather more important than the story she makes possible. Were Miss Hawkridge to plunge into her action, the audience would decline to take the plunge with her.

"The Old Lady Shows Her Medals": The setting does not demand the extended beginning, but the

character of Mrs. Dowey most emphatically does. As in the preceding illustration, the story seems to arise out of the character, and not the reverse. Sir J. M. Barrie's art accomplishes the feat of making Mrs. Dowey interesting from the very first line. When we have learnt to know her, we shall be prepared for any depths of depravity. But imagine the play beginning, as a less expert craftsman might write it, with the plunge into the story: the entrance of Mr. Willings, and the announcement that the forcibly adopted son has "got five days' leave"! Read the play from that point (it is page 21 of the printed version) and there is something lacking. We should be compelled to meet characters and story nearly together, and one or the other would be bound to suffer.

"Interior": The *atmosphere* is unique. Through windows at the rear we see an entire family passing a quiet evening. Never a word do we hear, though from time to time we see lips move. And then, from one side, into the garden which is between us and the house, enter two men: persons whom we are to know as the bearers of evil tidings. The extended beginning is not for them; and the pause before their entrance (unfortunately not indicated in the printed texts) disposes of the setting. Here the extended opening exists in order that atmosphere may come into being, in order that the beauty and mystery and profound symbolism of the play may clothe it as in a garment. The playwright treads upon holy ground, and steps softly.

"The Workhouse Ward": The *characters*, as in nearly all of Lady Gregory's plays, are all-important. Simple as the scene may be, however small the number of persons upon it, the extended opening is necessary so that we may understand the characters themselves before the action which arises from them may have being.

Consider, in the preceding plays, how utterly the abrupt opening would destroy what is most impressive in each.

I have spoken of the inflected beginning, in which the dramatist, setting the play in motion by a single vigorous thrust, follows with an introduction, fully aware that sheer momentum will keep his action going until he is ready to return to it. The exigencies of the play demand the leisurely opening, but the large amount of expository matter which the introduction is to contain may prove tedious. The dramatist solves the problem by striking a forcible key at once, whetting interest with a suggestion of what is to come, and then, aware that the action will continue to grow in the imagination of the audience, accomplishes what may be technically necessary without loss of dramatic effect. Two examples will suffice:

"The Twelve-Pound Look": The action is slow-moving, full-blooded, a *tranche de vie* shot through with flashes of insight. Its effective development necessitates driving home the contrast between Sir Harry and Lady Sims, and between the latter and Kate before the action commences. This will take time, and unless superbly handled, will not hold the audience. Barrie commences with a single forcible note: a bit of business, eloquent, interesting, picturesque, revealing in the light which it will shed upon what is to follow:

[*Harry is to receive the honour of knighthood in a few days, and we discover him in the sumptuous "snuggery" of his home . . . rehearsing the ceremony with his wife. . . . She is seated regally. Her jewelled shoulders proclaim aloud her husband's generosity. She must be an extraordinarily proud and happy woman, yet she has a drawn face and shrinking ways, as if there were some one near her of whom she is afraid. She claps her hands, as the signal to Harry. He enters bowing. . . . He is only partly in costume. . . . She taps*

him on the shoulder with a paper-knife, and says huskily, "Rise, Sir Harry." He rises, bows, and glides about the room, going on his knees to various articles of furniture, and rises from each a knight.

The interest of the audience is seized. The dramatist may proceed more leisurely.

"The Emperor Jones": The scene is striking, but not elaborate. There is very little to look at besides the throne of "eye-smiting scarlet." The action which is to come is powerful, vivid, rising to great heights, and, as we shall see in a later chapter, requiring the most careful and detailed "preparation." It will take Brutus Jones over ten minutes to tell us about his past, and though the audience does not yet know it, those ten minutes do not contain one superfluous word: can in no wise be abridged. The Emperor's past is interesting; but the inflected opening can make it even more interesting.

Mr. O'Neill commences with a striking bit of action: the last of the Emperor's native servants, trying to escape from his palace before the impending tragedy, is seized by an unpleasant individual who is anxious to know what is going on. It is important to note Mr. O'Neill's technical adroitness: that "eye-smiting" throne, the "vista of distant hills" in the background are worth a brief inspection. He provides the time. The woman

[. . . *sneaks in cautiously. . . . She hesitates beside the doorway, peering back as if in extreme dread of being discovered. Then she begins to glide noiselessly, a step at a time, toward the doorway in the rear.*

And again, Smithers, who is to seize the woman, and whose personality, however distasteful, is decidedly interesting, is exhibited to the audience for a few seconds before his victim sees him. A few lines of

dialogue, stressed still more by Smithers' drawing his gun and threatening to shoot, and the woman disappears from the play. But we are now ready for Jones and the inevitable pause in the action during which his character and antecedents are to be developed.

When we consider as a body the plays cited in this chapter, one common characteristic is impressive: each begins with the thing which at the moment is most interesting to an audience. In some of them it is the story, and we find abrupt openings. In others it is the characters, the setting, or the atmosphere, and we find extended or inflected openings. Something about each play can be made immediately interesting: the dramatist selects that as his most effective means of seizing attention. He has but one question: what may most naturally interest my audience? He begins with that.

Chapter XIV: Holding Interest: Exposition

THE form of the opening has been discussed at some length. The subject is important. First impressions, whether of human beings or of plays, count for much. A play which begins limpingly, uncertainly, in which the correct key is not accurately struck, directs attention unfailingly towards its faulty craftsmanship. The illusion of life is destroyed. Persuasiveness is weakened. Power, if felt at all, cannot surge irresistibly to a climax, but is likely to be fitful, uneven, sporadic. The dramatist exhibits his infirmities, instead of the play exhibiting its strength.

How shall the scene upon which the curtain rises be chosen? At what point in the action shall the play begin? These questions may well be left to the chapters on "Preparation." Every moment in a play is important not only in itself, but as an antecedent to those which are yet to come. For the present, let us consider certain essentials in the opening of a play.

A story is to be told. It is to be told about definite characters, in a definite setting, living in a definite time and place. The story itself is to have a definite mood.

Unless ocular inspection supplies full and conclusive answers, the audience will ask — and should be made to ask:

"Who are these people? Where and what is this place? When does this happen?"

It is the function of the preliminary exposition to convey this information — any information — to the audience while holding the interest which the opening

has gained. In the largest sense, exposition begins when the play begins, and ends when the play ends. Every detail of the story is exposited in some manner or another. Let us, however, consider exposition in connection only with the details which become somewhat pressing at the very rise of the curtain.

The program has listed two or more characters. It is usually desirable for the audience to identify each, to discover their names and relation to each other without delay.

In the one-act play such identification is generally simple: the characters are likely to be few, and a few lines, during which the playwright is careful to have his characters suitably addressed, suffice. But like all simple things, the detail of character identification is likely to be overlooked.

My "A Question of Morality" commences with Carruthers and Shelton on the stage. Not until the eighteenth speech can the riddle of which is which be answered, and then only through a process of deduction involving reference to the program. The list of characters describes the speakers as "Carruthers" and "Shelton"; one addresses the other as "Jerry", and Jerry inconveniently addresses his friend as "you." The mistake, and its remedy, are obvious.

A similar carelessness is found in some of Mr. Maurice Baring's "Diminutive Dramas." "Pious Aeneas" proceeds from beginning to end without either of the principal characters being addressed by name. Aeneas makes the confusion worse by addressing his love as "Elissa." It is barely possible that an audience, not knowing the name of the headstrong Carthaginian queen, will scrutinize its programs anxiously. In "The Aulis Difficulty" the printed text explains that a certain smooth-spoken Greek is Odysseus. But the audience, left to the tender mercies of the program, may identify him as Calchas or even as Agamemnon,

two other unidentified characters. To be sure, it does not matter in the least in this particular play, but it is precisely the things that matter least that the perverse audience ponders most earnestly.

Perhaps Mr. Baring will plead that he did not intend the plays to be produced. In that event he should have been careful to make them less actable and far less entertaining.

Sometimes precise character identification is the reverse of useful. In my "Pawns" the persons upon whom the curtain rises are intentionally not identified by name for many minutes. They are simply three peasants expressing slightly varied effects of common environment. Through them the environment is exposited, and this is rather more important than the names the peasants happen to bear. Thus too in Mr. Eugene O'Neill's "The Hairy Ape", there is every reason why the mob which the first scene discloses should not be disintegrated into individuals. Ocular inspection and the identification of a protagonist tell the audience all it need know. Atmosphere, very often, is dependent upon deliberate vagueness — would disappear upon attempts at mathematical coherence. Craftsmanship is concerned first of all with the production of a desired effect.

Blood relationships, when important, usually suggest the means by which they may naturally be exposited. When interesting, as in Mr. George Middleton's "Possession", they are likely to supply a forceful note upon which the play may well begin.

Exposition of scene may require careful attention. The program may locate it broadly; but important details connected with it can be dealt with only in the play proper.

Lord Dunsany's "The Queen's Enemies" takes place in an underground temple. The fact that it is subterranean is vitally important. Hence:

[*Two Slaves appear with tapers on the steps. As they go down . . .*

THÁRRABAS. Is it much further, Tharni?
THARNI. I think not, Thárrabas.
THÁRRABAS. A dank and terrible place.
THARNI. It is not much further.

. . . . . .

THÁRRABAS. The door, Tharni, we have come to the door!
THARNI. Yes, that's the temple.

. . . . . .

THÁRRABAS. And if I were holy Nile I also would stay up there (*pointing*) in to sunlight.

The use of two minor characters, who never appear again, as expository device is uneconomical — hence generally objectionable. Yet how else could the substance of this admirable exposition be equally well established? The dialogue of the slaves cannot be transferred to the Queen and Ackazārpses without robbing it of its notable evocation of atmosphere. Lord Dunsany rightly, I think, chooses the lesser of two evils.

My "The Unseen Host" presented an opposite difficulty. The scene is a room "at an improvised American hospital in Paris." The program tells us this much. But the room is on an upper floor, and it is absolutely essential to make the audience aware of this before beginning the action. It is night, and a view of housetops through the windows, which helps surmount the obstacle in the fourth act of Sir Arthur Wing Pinero's "Mid-Channel", cannot be shown. Hence:

[*Steps are heard ascending the stairs. . . .*
THE SURGEON (*holding the door open*). This way.
THE VISITOR (*appearing at the head of the flight of stairs*). Is he in here?
THE SURGEON. Who?

THE VISITOR. The boy who saw the angels?

THE SURGEON (*smiling*). Oh, you haven't forgotten him, have you? He's in the next room. (*The visitor enters, obviously winded by the long climb*) I'll show him to you afterwards. Get your breath first. You look a little exhausted.

THE VISITOR (*grinning*). A little? Quite a little.

THE SURGEON. Sit down here. . . . Think of the stretcher bearers carrying men up those stairs!

THE VISITOR. There ought to be an elevator.

THE SURGEON. Yes.

THE VISITOR. Put one in. Send me the bill.

To the reader the reference to a flight of stairs, at the head of which the visitor appears, and the subsequent reference to the long climb are quite sufficient. But in the actual production the long climb cannot be shown, and the door through which the visitor enters, instead of opening on the head of a flight of stairs, may disclose only an interior backing.

The information, uninteresting in itself, must be conveyed through the dialogue. It is made less uninteresting by being converted into terms of physical and mental reaction; it has some use as characterization, and it is made to come naturally by answering a question from the audience. The inflected opening creates some positive interest by the use of a few lines which boldly hint at the story.

In exceptional instances there may be every reason to avoid over-prompt scene identification. Mr. John Lloyd Balderston's delicious "A Morality Play for the Leisure Class" is purposely vague. In no other way could the highly ingenious and exhilarating ending be brought about.

On the other hand Mr. M. A. Kister's "The Hard Heart" errs, I feel, in omitting scene identification. The characters talk French-English, occasionally lapsing into that curious French in which feminine singulars

form masculine plurals. But the reader's deductive powers are called into play to determine that the scene is probably laid in New Orleans.

The program, we shall see, may legitimately help to establish time. But where it is an important factor in the play it is well to make sure that it is conveyed to the audience.

Costume and setting are useful, and in accordance with the economy of the one-act play spirit should not be too liberally supplemented by references to historical events. One or two such references have their uses; a dozen, unless the play deals with the historical events themselves, are likely to be unnatural. The persons who happened to live in historic times were not always aware of the fact. Certainly their small talk did not deal exclusively with the great men who eventually found their way into the Fifth Reader.

If the dramatist steeps himself in the customs, beliefs, and atmosphere of a period, he is likely to reproduce it more successfully than the motion-picture director whose sub-title boldly read "Paul Revere", and whose picture showed that historical personage galloping madly along endless lines of telegraph posts.

Miss Beulah Marie Dix's treatment of period in the half dozen plays included in "Allison's Lad and Other Martial Interludes" is a model. Well-chosen externals, supplemented by suitably archaic English, orientate the plays roughly. The program has already established the time exactly. History is never dragged in to help out feeble atmosphere. In the title play there is a single casual reference to Cromwell. It is perfectly natural and unforced, therefore excellent. But a less able dramatist would have neglected atmosphere and customs to stud the play with allusions to King Charles, the Long Parliament, and the contents of Green's History. Without altering another word, he

would shift it into the French Revolutionary period by substituting King Louis, the Oath of the Tennis Court, and Guizot, or into any other period by the same labor-saving device.

Historical personages and events are convenient pegs upon which to hang atmosphere. But an over-abundance of pegs, unless the historical personages actually enter the play, is unnecessary and inartistic.

Mr. William C. de Mille establishes the time of "In 1999" by dialogue that is both natural and laughter-provoking. The program, of course, has stated "Time — Early evening, October, 1999 A.D." The play opens with a simple domestic scene: Rollo, the husband of the future, has been sewing a garment for his child. Jean, the twenty-first-century wife, is dressing to spend an evening at the club. The first dozen speeches establish this blissful and most extraordinary home life. Then the husband asks his wife a natural question:

ROLLO. You must have had a hard day down town, dear.
JEAN. Yes — business is rotten — (*lighting a cigarette*) I'm getting tired of waiting for that wave of prosperity. Ha — last year everyone said — "Wait for 1999, the Tariff will reduce the price of food."
ROLLO. Yes, and the cost of living will go down —
JEAN. Well, 1999 is almost over and we're still waiting.

Of course Mr. DeMille's prime object is to establish the time. He accomplishes this with perfect naturalness by making the audience ask precisely the question he is so anxious to answer. He clinches his point, a few lines later, by an allusion to Sarah Bernhardt, who is growing old, and is about to give still another farewell performance.

Mr. De Mille deals with the future again in "Food." As this is placed only "fifty years from now", man's subjugation has not proceeded as far as it will in twenty-five years more.

comprehensibly Sister Audacia replies: "Never did I know I was as ugly as all that." The Abbess counters: "I wish I had a mirror here. If you could see how you look now you would yourself fall in a swoon and for many a day be unable to take a crumb in your mouth for nausea."

Considered either from the standpoint of mood or the standpoint of character, these last are agonizingly false notes, cacophonous, jarring; inharmonious both with the gravity of the situation and the truthful delineation of the speaker. If the play is to be serious, its dignity must be preserved. The discordant beginning converts what follows into farce, none the less farce because it is unintentional.

Closely akin to the establishment of mood is the creation of atmosphere. Atmosphere is but the expression of a background, making more vivid and real a central action because of the relationship with which it invests it.

From life the play has emerged. Sometimes a cross section of that life, artistically portrayed at the very rise of the curtain, is profoundly suggestive. By the virtue of its contrast it imparts a deeper, a richer vitality to the action which is to be drawn from it.

When the background, physical or psychological, is unusually interesting, the play cannot proceed until it has dealt with it. Yet such compulsion should be extremely welcome to the dramatist: the fact that there is such a background indicates how thoroughly his thought has been orientated.

Minor characters, if there are such in the play, may serve to create atmosphere. If there are none, the major characters themselves, in conjunction with the setting, may be used to evoke it. There is very real atmosphere in such plays as Strindberg's "Simoom" and Lord Dunsany's "The Glittering Gate." It is not less effective for the simplicity of the means used to

bring it about. Characters, it must be noted, may be the reverse of opaque: the audience may well both see the individual and through him see that which he expresses and colors.

Atmosphere often arises from the influence of unseen characters. The Count, in Strindberg's "Miss Julia", never appears upon the stage. The wicked queen, in Maeterlinck's "The Death of Tintagiles", never shows herself to the audience. Yet these personages, in very large measure, determine the atmosphere of the plays.

So, too, characters of still greater consequence, present, though never visible in "Interior" and in "The Blind", lend to the plays an atmosphere which cannot be adequately realized except through the means selected by Maeterlinck himself.

Chapter XV: Expository Device

WE have seen what must be conveyed by the preliminary exposition. Let us examine how it is to be conveyed.

Certain information will be proffered by the printed program, which will tabulate the characters, identify time and place, and very often indicate the relationship of the characters to each other and to the world. The program will state further that the play is a comedy or a tragedy, a farce or a melodrama or what not, and will announce its title. But the playwright looks upon the program as a dubious aid, helping his play little or not at all, and likely to distract attention if the audience insists, after the curtain has risen, upon discovering the names of the actors, the scene designer, and the leading lady's dressmaker.

Custom and convenience permit the program to supply information which is of the nature of orientation. It is not the function of the program to tell a story. It is a dramatic *menu*, advertising the fare which the audience is to expect. It may locate the scene in point of time and place, it may fix time intervals when the curtain falls more than once, it may state that Thomas Jones, a character in the play, is a shop foreman, and that William Jones, another character, is his son by a former marriage. But the play itself should contain — and convey — the information necessary for its digestion. The audience may have omitted to read the program.

From a printed four-act play [1] described by the pub-

[1] Otto J. Kramer and Lester W. Humphreys: "Dollars and Sense."

lishers as "An absorbing love story pointedly presenting present problems", I quote the stage directions opening the third act, and intended, doubtless, to be reproduced in the program:

> *Three years later, during which time George has won the case for Gus, and become half owner of the mine. He was also elected Governor of California.*
> SCENE. *Office of the Governor.*

This is both edifying and surprising: when we left George in the second act he was not even in politics. He has gotten ahead rapidly. Perhaps he has had beginner's luck. But it is not the business of the program to tell us so. It cannot do so without obliterating whatever suspense the play might have in store for us.

Here the use of the first three and the last five words is unexceptionable. But the remaining phrases acquaint the audience with events which, at the proper time, should be dramatically developed by the play itself.

Mr. Kenneth Sawyer Goodman's "Dust of the Road" uses the program thus:

> *The time is about one o'clock of a Christmas morning, in the early seventies. The place is the living room of a comfortable and fairly prosperous Middle Western farmer.*

The point here is "the early seventies." The curtain will rise upon the costumes and furniture of a bygone period. As we have seen, there should be prompt identification of time, but Mr. Goodman, dreading to add a line to his compact exposition, assumes, perhaps unwisely, that the play may dispense with it.

He relies upon program, costume, and setting, each supplementing and explaining the other; but the program may remain unread, and the costume of the seventies may equally well suggest the fifties or the nine-

ties to the average audience. If the point was worth making at all, it should have been more emphatically made in the play itself. It could have been done easily.

An extraordinary use of the program is found in Mr. Charles Rann Kennedy's plays. The program of "The Terrible Meek", after announcing the persons of the play, continues:

THE TIME. *A Time of Darkness.*
THE PLACE. *A Wind-Swept Hill.*

From the program of "The Necessary Evil":

THE PLACE. *The Sitting Room at John Heron's.*
THE TIME. *Nineteen Hundred and Twelve Years after the birth of Our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Here is unique creation of atmosphere even before the rise of the curtain, an expedient effective in Mr. Kennedy's hands, but not to be recommended as a safe example nor to be copied indiscriminately. Mr. Kennedy has evolved technical devices wholly appropriate for his own unusual plays, but limited, as all special technique must be, in range.

A spoken Prologue, or a Greek Chorus, may in certain exceptional instances be used as expository device. Artificiality of form will result: but a certain artificiality is sometimes desirable. Is not the convention of mimicking life on a stage set with impressionistic scenery and shut off at intervals by a curtain artificial in itself?

Neither Prologue nor Chorus need destroy objectivity, the quality that the dramatist is always anxious to obtain. A link between the play and the audience, a character in or out of the play is, if artistically used, interesting and valuable. A device that may pall in a play occupying an entire evening may be strikingly

effective in a form one quarter the length. It is the personality of the link, and not the personality of the dramatist, that tinges the play.

In my "The Sequel", and again in "Pawns", a prologue is used in its simplest form to orientate the play. The information it supplies must remain unknown to the actors, and cannot, without ill effect, be conveyed through them. The programs might indeed carry explanatory lines; but the points are far too important to be thus jeopardized. In the language of the player folk, they must be "gotten across", and gotten across emphatically. The prologue accomplishes this, creates interest and suspense, and relieves both program and play of an impossible burden.

Mr. Stuart Walker's delightful "Six Who Pass While the Lentils Boil" commences thus:

Before the opening of the curtains the Prologue enters upon the forestage and summons the Device-Bearer who carries a large copper pot.

PROLOGUE. This is a copper pot. (*The Device-Bearer shows it to the audience carefully*) It is filled with boiling water. (*The Device-Bearer makes the sound of bubbling water*) See the flames. (*The Device-Bearer sets the pot in the center of the forestage and blows under it with a pair of bellows*) And see the water boiling over. (*The Device-Bearer again makes the sound of bubbling water and then withdraws to where he can see the play from the side of the forestage*) We are looking into the kitchen of the Boy whose mother left him alone. I do not know where she has gone but I do know that he is gathering lentils now.

YOU (*in the audience*) What are lentils?

PROLOGUE. A lentil? Why, a lentil, don't you see, is not a bean nor yet a pea; but it is kin to both. . . . You must imagine that the boy has built the fire and set the water boiling. . . . Are you ready now? . . . Very well. Be quiet.

[*The Prologue claps his hands twice. The curtains open and a kitchen is disclosed.*

The Prologue, the Device-Bearer, and You supply a charming introduction to a comedy that is artificial — and most diverting — and they fade insensibly into the background as the action gathers momentum.

In my "modernized fairy play", "The Dyspeptic Ogre", a Jester serves both as Prologue and Chorus, and steps boldly into the play itself at its conclusion. The theme is highly artificial. To treat it in conventional form would not begin to exploit its possibilities. The use of a chorus, not only as expository device, but to supply a running fire of comment on the play during its action, breaks down the barrier of the footlights, invites the audience to participate intimately in the play, and creates atmosphere.

Pantomime, an expository device even more ancient than the Chorus, should be carefully distinguished from what passes by the inelegant appellation of Stage Business. Pantomime adopts facial expression and visible action as the main language of the play, using little or no dialogue at any time. Stage Business temporarily adopts facial expression and visible action as a language for certain moments in which dialogue is unnecessary.

Pantomime implies the recognition of a convention under which action and thought are preferably expressed visibly. Stage Business implies the recognition of a convention under which action and thought are preferably expressed in the most natural manner.

The most natural manner is not the same manner for all peoples. A Japanese critic writes thus of a European play:

> Speeches play the most important rôle in contrast with gestures in ours. The success of the performance is measured by the degree of skill by which emotions are expressed by the speeches. . . . Some spectators called it too tedious for the simple reason that speeches are not as interesting to them as gestures to which they are more accustomed. . . .

The general makes a nice long speech just before he murders his loved wife, when, were one of us in his place, the boiling breast and the bursting heart would have actually struck the very tongue speechless. . . . Such rhythmical, poetic speeches at such moments are only appreciated by the Westerners.[1]

The play thus criticized is "Othello."

By the same token, the Japanese "Nō" plays, highly interesting in the reading, are likely to produce a curious effect if acted before Occidental audiences.

The true Pantomime, undoubtedly the oldest form of the one-act play, is still to be reckoned with. Mr. Holland Hudson's "The Shepherd in the Distance" is an example of what may be accomplished. Here is a one-act play, perfectly sound technically, choosing to express itself in an unusual manner. Its potency is undeniable.

The very simplicity which lends pantomime its charm limits automatically its choice of subject. As expository device it is vivid, but quite unable to deal with material involving even a minor degree of abstraction. How, for instance, shall the pantomimist convey the thought that his brother-in-law is a Republican?

Sir James M. Barrie solves the difficulty neatly in "Pantaloon." Columbine and Harlequin "are such exquisite dancers that they do all their talking with their legs", while Pantaloon, upon whom the burden of the exposition rests, and the Clown, who turns out to be a villain, are "a garrulous pair." M. Georges de Porto-Riche, dramatizing Victor Hugo's "Zubiri", makes the jealous husband a silent character, while Zubiri and her admirer, carrying on before his very eyes, torture him to death

Prologue, Chorus, and Pantomime may smack of antiquity, but I submit that they need not be discarded

[1] William Lyon Phelps: "The Twentieth Century Theatre", 98.

while effects unobtainable in any other way may be created by them. It is my belief that one of the most significant developments of the one-act play (and of the longer drama as well) is likely to come about through the novel and artistic use of these time-hallowed and much contemned devices.

The Soliloquy has been held up to scorn, yet Georg Kaiser in Germany and Mr. Eugene O'Neill in this country are employing it with unique effect. Strindberg wrote:

> Our realists have excommunicated the monologue as improbable, but if I can lay a proper basis for it, I can also make it seem probable, and then I can use it to good advantage.[1]

Mr. Henry Arthur Jones has pointed out that if used at all, the soliloquy should be confined to the revelation of character and not employed for the development of action.[2] The subject is intensely interesting: it is not the form, nor yet its antiquity, but the intelligent use that the artist makes of it that is important.

Stage Business is often an entirely satisfactory and unexceptionable expository device. Dialogue may be forceful; but the message to the ear cannot be as vivid as the message to the eye. The silent openings of Lord Dunsany's "The Glittering Gate", Sir J. M. Barrie's "The Twelve-Pound Look", and my "The Noble Lord",[3] convey information more forcefully and interestingly than could any dialogue. Dialogue can establish facts; action lifts them up and gives them

[1] "Miss Julia", translated by Edwin Björkman. Preface, 21. I am unable to coincide in his opinion, expressed in the same paragraph, that the thought should not be "written out, but just indicated"; left to the improvisation of "a gifted actor, carried away by the situation and the mood of the occasion."

[2] "The Renascence of the English Drama", 247.

[3] All cited by B. Roland Lewis: "The Technique of the One-Act Play", 144.

power. The dialogue in Miss Susan Glaspell's "Trifles" is all that dialogue can be. Yet at the supreme moment of the play Mrs. Hale "snatches the box and puts it in the pocket of her big coat." Mr. Richard Harding Davis, wishing to intensify to the utmost the suspense in "Blackmail", describes how Fallon

> *crosses to door center, and taking key from the bedroom side, places it in keyhole on side of door in view of the audience. He turns the key several times. He takes the revolver from his left hip pocket and holding it in his right hand, rehearses shooting under his left arm through his coat. . . . Shifting revolver to his left hand, he takes the automatic from his right hip pocket, and goes through the motions of firing with both guns in opposite directions. His pantomime must show he intends making use of both guns at the same time, using one apparently upon himself, and the other, in earnest, upon another person.*

No dialogue could be more eloquent.

Exposition by means of visible action has its greatest scope when large parts of the story may be expressed through actual physical movement. The evolution and interplay of character, the vitally important action which takes place inside the heads of the personages, demands more flexible exposition.

Information, like water, flows naturally down hill. When one person knows what another does not, and is provided with a reason for unburdening himself, exposition is easy. Information flows from the well informed to the less informed to the least informed, the first two being persons or things in the play, and the last being the audience.

There is no reason why a father should not tell his son how, years ago, he courted his mother. There is every reason why the son should not tell his father the same story, unless he can add to it something that the father cannot. The first procedure is perfectly natural; the second is not. In real life a speaker does not inform

a listener of facts with which he knows the latter is even better acquainted. Persons who indulge themselves in such fashion acquire the reputation of being bores. If the author frankly labels them bores, well and good: they may be amusing. If he does not take this farseeing step, the audience is likely to rectify the omission; and the results will not be amusing.

In the one-act play, with its small number of characters, very great difficulties are likely to stand in the way of natural exposition. An examination of the manner in which a sound craftsman overcomes one of the greatest of them may be suggestive.

Mr. Gilbert Cannan, in "James and John", is confronted with a real obstacle. Three characters are disclosed: two sons and their mother. The father, who is to enter later, has just been released from jail and is to return home to-night.

The audience asks many questions: What crime did the father commit? Why? When? What was he like? What will he be like now? How shall these questions be answered? The three characters are equally well informed: for any one of them simply to rehearse the story of the crime to the others would be most improbable, most illogical.

Mr. Cannan overcomes the obstacle with consummate grace and skill by placing his characters upon different reactional levels. James hotly resents the return of the ex-convict: John much less so; Mrs. Betts is his loyal wife. James is filled with violent hatred. In expositing that hatred, he can naturally uncover the facts upon which it is based. Hence:

JAMES. John, you're a soft fool. . . . This man has done us all an injury. . . .

MRS. BETTS. He has been punished enough for his sin. . . .

JAMES. *We* have been punished. *I* have been punished. . . . For years I have felt rather than heard the miserable story whispered to every raw lad who came to the place

. . . and suffered . . . because my father betrayed his trust. . . .

JOHN. I read in a book that no man has the right to judge another man . . .

JAMES. Facts are facts.

JOHN. We don't know what drove him to do what he did.

JAMES. We know — what we know. . . . We know that because our father — because our father — robbed the clients of the branch of which he was manager in order to keep the women whom he had bought . . .

JOHN. You . . . [*James raises his hand.*

JAMES. I will end where I have begun. . . . It is true that he was revered as an upright gentleman . . . that he was an excellent man of business . . . that the directors gave him the opportunity to escape . . . that he had the courage to face the consequences . . . that he had no thought for us . . . that we have been chained here, you and I, to rot and rot. . . . We have suffered enough, I say.

The exposition could have been accomplished easily through the addition of a fourth — and uninformed — character, the minister, let us say. The dramatist is unwilling to make less compact the *tranche de vie* which he proposes to set before us. He surmounts the difficulty by coloring the information so vividly with the emotions of the speaker that James, to all intents and purposes, becomes a better informed person than those to whom he exposits so interestingly and naturally.

This, I suggest, is an example of unobtrusively excellent craftsmanship. It may seem absurdly simple; yet disregard of the perfectly obvious principle upon which it is based has marred more plays than can conveniently be mentioned.

The varieties of expository device are very great. The dramatist has a choice of many vehicles. The one-act playwright's chief objection to inquisitive strangers, gossipy servants, garrulous old ladies, and

guests who exposit and disappear forever [1] is that they destroy economy. If the main action of the play requires minor characters, they may well be made use of in the preliminary exposition. But exposition alone is rarely a sufficient excuse — if it is the only excuse — for the existence of a minor character.

The telephone is an old stand-by, so overworked that I eagerly await a play in which each actor carries an individual instrument, and addresses no other directly at all. The unconvincing device of reading aloud a letter while writing it at a speed which a stenographer might envy has fortunately been adopted by few one-act plays. The more natural device of dictating a letter is less objectionable when the environment permits it; but one cannot always be sure of writing a play so orientated that amanuenses are at hand to take the curse away from a soliloquy.

Considered as a class, these devices are inferior to the natural exposition which can nearly always be brought about through the dialogue and action of the central characters themselves. Even the time-hallowed confidant, to whom the hero unburdened himself periodically in bygone plays, becomes unnecessary if the dramatist reflects that skillful dialogue can often be made to convey a desired message to the audience while concealing its true import from the person addressed. The confidant, when necessary, may himself well be a major character, sharing in the action which his exposition illuminates.

Upon this subject Professor Baker writes:

> The first quality of good expository device is clearness. Secondly, it should be an adequate reason for the exposition it contains: i.e., it must seem natural that the facts should

[1] Henri Bernstein's addiction to encyclopedic guests is amusingly burlesqued by Paul Reboux and Charles Muller in "Le Triche." (*À la manière de* . . . II, 281.)

come out in this way. Thirdly, and of the utmost importance, the device must be something so interesting in itself as to hold the attention of an auditor while necessary facts are insinuated into his mind. Lastly, the device should permit this preliminary exposition to be given swiftly.[1]

The third sentence does not mean that the playwright must go to the ends of the earth to discover new and unheard-of contrivances for exposition. Far otherwise, it means only that the expository period shall be made so interesting, so natural, so plausible, that it shall accomplish what it sets out to do. How this may be brought about will be considered in the next chapter.

[1] "Dramatic Technique", 173.

Chapter XVI: The Philosophy of Exposition

EXPOSITION is not similarly proportioned in every one-act play. The play with a vigorous, vivid action, which, once begun, develops explosively from situation to situation, demands comparatively compact exposition. The play with a subtler, less obvious action, which shall accumulate force gradually, and strike hard only at its very climax, is likely to lift exposition to its most artistic heights, to make much of it, and to interweave it bodily with the sheer entertainment of the story.

The distinction, which is rather a matter of feeling than one of hard and fast analysis, merits somewhat careful examination.

An automobile, let us say, is falling from the top of a sky-scraper. The sight is interesting, reaching a climax when the crash comes. There are many questions to ask. How did the automobile ever reach the top of the building? Why was it brought there? Having gotten there, why was it allowed to fall? These questions are pressing, yet no spectator will be grateful to the bystander who insists upon answering them during the spectacular fall itself. The interest level of such exposition is far beneath the interest level of the action. On the other hand, if an informed person were to shout, as the car began its frightful descent, "There's a man in it!" the dramatic intensity of the moment would be notably increased The interest level of such exposition is quite as high as that of the action.

Translating the illustration into terms of dramatic technique, the proportioning of exposition to action depends upon the interest of each. Action may always

be interrupted by exposition when the latter is of the same or of a greater degree of interest. But at some point in every play the action soars to heights which exposition is not likely to reach. At this point exposition must stop. If it is not complete before the action becomes all-absorbing, any belated effort to rectify the omission will simply irritate the audience. The alternative, expositing after the *fait accompli*, leads to anti-climax.

Let us return to our illustration. Let us assume that the automobile is being lowered by block and tackle, and is not to fall until it is fifty feet from the ground Once more there are pressing questions, but this time the spectators will listen to the person who explains why the automobile is being lowered, what it weighs, and what is the strength of the tackle, which, unknown to them, is to fail at the last moment. The interest level of the exposition is no higher; but the interest level of the action, until the actual catastrophe, is appreciably lower.

Certain highly suggestive principles may be deduced from the preceding:

Exposition being necessary for a right understanding of the play, action should not be allowed to accumulate too great force until it is complete.

If an action is to rise early to a high plane of interest, exposition should be compact and rapid, or should be accomplished through the beginning episodes of the action itself.

If an action is to rise deliberately, if the expository material itself possesses or can be made to possess great interest, action and exposition may be closely interwoven, the latter terminating at a point comparatively late in the play.

The first two principles are so axiomatic that they may be illustrated very briefly. Lord Dunsany's "A Night at an Inn", Mr. Eugene O'Neill's "The

Emperor Jones", and Mr. Kenneth Sawyer Goodman's "A Game of Chess" are plays containing vivid and emphatic actions. Each climbs early to a level of great dramatic power. In each the exposition is swift and comprehensive. The actual amount varies in each; but it is completed in the very beginning of each play. Meanwhile the action, whose launching will mean the end of exposition, is kept in deliberate restraint.

The consequences of violating these principles are illustrated in Mr. Edward H. Smith's "Release." Four gunmen, arrested, facing conviction and death, toss a coin to determine which of them, by shouldering the whole blame, shall save the lives of the others. One "Lefty" having thus been selected, he throws himself into his bunk while the others talk. I condense the dialogue which follows:

He'll be some sore distric' 'torney, wot?
Ya said it.
We croaks a guy an' gits baked fer it, 'n one o' dem guys croaks a dozen 'n dey makes 'im gov'nor.
Wot's gonna happen t'us now?
Five years — mebbe ten — !
Twenty years to life.
But it's better'n da Chair! W'en dey send ya ta git baked it's no fun, no drinks, no women *never* again — no nuttin! — Dat's worse!!

At this point "Lefty throws himself out of his bunk", asserts that the toss of the coin "wuzzn't on da level", and the interrupted action proceeds.

The conversation which I have so briefly summarized ocupies *five pages* of printed text! It injures the play terribly. If the author must show why four grown men prefer imprisonment to execution, he should do so before his action becomes compelling. Once launched, it should be allowed to rise to its climax without suffer-

ing from the injection of verbal footnotes. In the present instance the information offered is as superfluous as it is misplaced. Something may always be left to the intelligence of the audience.

The third principle, that of interwoven exposition, may profitably be examined in detail.

The dramatist faces a difficult problem when his action, as in so many plays, is to rise gently, when, for instance, he is to make use of what Mr. Archer calls

> . . . the art of so unfolding the drama of the past as to make the gradual revelation no mere preface or prologue to the drama of the present, but an integral part of its action.[1]

Let us omit from consideration the very large group of plays typified by Lady Gregory's "The Gaol Gate", Miss Susan Glaspell's "Trifles", Miss Elizabeth Baker's "Miss Tassey", and my "The Finger of God", in which the solidity of the action or the exceptional interest of the expository material, or both, appreciably simplifies matters, and turn to an utmost extreme: a sparkling comedy, light as a feather, yet rising in its last moment to an emotional height which is eloquent testimony to the art of its author. The action is of the utmost delicacy. Compact exposition would throw it upon its own resources, and these, the dramatist knows in advance, are limited. One solution would be to devise a more vigorous action; but this would substitute the theatric for the convincing naturalness of life, would sacrifice the ideal with which the dramatist started: the ideal of producing an effect in extreme disproportion to the tenuity of his means. The obstacle is overcome by making the exposition so unusually interesting that it may be boldly interwoven with the fabric of the story itself.

[1] "Play-Making", 102.

Mr. Alfred Sutro, in "A Marriage Has Been Arranged . . ." is confronted with the task of telling us the antecedent facts of the lives of Harrison Crockstead and Lady Aline de Vaux. An amateur might conceivably begin thus:

Crockstead and Lady Aline are discovered sitting side by side in a conservatory.

CROCKSTEAD. Lady Aline, I am a self-made man, a man whose early years were spent in savage and desolate places. I was poor for thirty-two years; I have been rich for ten. My millions have been made honestly enough. I have no polish, or culture, or tastes. Art wearies me, literature sends me to sleep.

This is compact exposition, and like all compact exposition, directs attention to the action. Confronted with the sudden necessity of continuing on a still more interesting plane, something like this would logically follow:

ALINE. Why are you telling me this, Mr. Crockstead?
CROCKSTEAD. Because I want you to marry me. Will you?
ALINE. Yes.

CURTAIN

The action, abruptly called upon to take a trick, is not yet strong enough to do so with one of its minor cards, and is compelled at once to play its biggest trump. It might hem and haw for a while, attempting pitiably to make use of the material which the actual play develops so artistically, but the result would be no better. Moreover the hypothetical exposition, consisting entirely of phrases culled from two actual speeches, is not so interesting as it might be. Human beings, in or out of audiences, are not ready to listen to autobiographical details until they have become curious about their subjects; until their interest asks for them.

Let us examine how Mr. Sutro does it:

Lady Aline, "a high-born Englishwoman," enters the conservatory, "leaning on the arm of Mr. Harrison Crockstead" who "is a big, burly man of forty or so, and of the kind to whom the ordinary West End butler would consider himself perfectly justified in declaring that her ladyship was not at home."

The couple break apart when they enter the room; Lady Aline is the least bit nervous; Mr. Crockstead absolutely imperturbable and undisturbed.

CROCKSTEAD (*looking around*). Ah — this is the place — very quiet, retired, romantic — et cetera. Music in the distance — all very appropriate and sentimental. (*She leaves him, and sits, quietly fanning herself; he stands, looking at her*) You seem perfectly calm, Lady Aline?

A lightly inflected opening. The strange juxtaposition of characters, the callous, almost offensive insensibility of Crockstead's opening lines suggest questions to the audience. The next three speeches are small talk. Then:

CROCKSTEAD. . . . But then, in this particular instance, I take it, we have not come here to talk?

ALINE (*coldly*). I beg your pardon!

CROCKSTEAD (*sitting beside her*). Lady Aline, they are dancing a cotillon in there, so we have half an hour before us. We shall not be disturbed, for the Duchess, your aunt, has considerately stationed her aged companion in the corridor, with instructions to ward off intruders.

ALINE (*very much surprised*). Mr. Crockstead!

CROCKSTEAD (*looking hard at her*). Didn't you know? (*Aline turns aside, embarrassed*) That's right — of course you did.

Here is a second stressed note: the beginning of the action, delicate as it is. The audience is now so interested in the characters that a dozen speeches, deadly in their sarcasm, lead not to a resumption of the story

but to Crockstead's narrative of his past, all that I have quoted in my hypothetical exposition and more. But the audience is now anxious and eager to hear everything about him. The exposition has been made interesting.

The play proceeds:

CROCKSTEAD. And now — will you marry me, Lady Aline?
ALINE (*very steadily, facing him*). Not if you were the last man in the world, Mr. Crockstead.
CROCKSTEAD (*with a pleasant smile*). At least that is emphatic.
ALINE. See, I will give you confidence for confidence.

And Lady Aline becomes autobiographical. By rejecting Crockstead she has interested the audience in herself.

Mr. Sutro's exposition is skillfully blended with his action, is beautifully interlaced with the growing story itself, and is not completed until the end of the play is nearly in sight. It is the method of many charming plays, difficult for the dramatist, but highly satisfactory when perfected.

Whether interlaced or compact, a single principle is at the root of successful exposition. I have alluded to it several times. It may now be stated succinctly:

In order to exposit interestingly, convey first not the thing itself but a question to which it is an answer. Make the audience demand the exposition: if it demands, it will be interested in it.

Exposition is rather less the art of answering questions than the art of making the audience ask the questions one wishes to answer. Certain simple questions will be suggested to the audience by the sight of the actors and the setting; other questions will be deliberately suggested by the dramatist in order to bring about a natural and interesting disclosure of the fundamentals of his story.

Chapter XVII: Guiding Interest: The Attack

WHAT is the *erregende Moment?* One is inclined to render it "the firing of the fuse." In legal parlance, it might be interpreted as the joining of issue. It means the point at which the drama, hitherto latent, plainly declares itself. It means the germination of the crisis, the appearance on the horizon of the cloud no bigger than a man's hand. . . . There are plays . . . which depict life on so even a plane that it is impossible to say at any given point, "Here the drama sets in," or, "The interest is heightened there."[1]

Mr. Archer's analysis may be interpreted to fix two different points: "the appearance on the horizon of the cloud no bigger than a man's hand" and "the point at which the drama, hitherto latent, plainly declares itself." The period beginning with one, and ending with the other, I propose to call the attack. The first point, as Mr. Archer indicates, cannot always be fixed with exactness, and need not be. The second point, the plainly declared dramatic situation, can always be determined.

The attack may be short or long. The dramatic situation may be reached with extreme rapidity: in "Love of One's Neighbor" it is plainly declared at the rise of the curtain; or, even in plays employing the abrupt opening, beginning upon the main highway of story, the dramatic situation may not come for many minutes: in "The Lost Silk Hat" it is not patent until after the entrance of the poet.

With absolute definition we are not concerned, but some kind of a touchstone by whose use we shall iden-

[1] "Play-Making", 151.

tify a "dramatic situation" is now necessary. I propose:

A dramatic situation suggests questions concerning the future happiness of the person or persons involved in it.

The dramatist's instincts require no touchstone; but the use of one by the less experienced writer may aid in the formation and cultivation of correct instincts.

Doctor Kate Gordon [1] has devised a series of tests of dramatic judgment. Let us test our touchstone.

The situation	*Doctor Gordon*	*The touchstone*
(a) A man is slowly sinking in a quicksand at the foot of a cliff. He is alone and has no chance of escape.	Pitiful and terrible, but not, as it stands, dramatic.	Suggests no questions concerning his future happiness. Undramatic.
(b) Add, however, that "His brother stands on the cliff, rope in hand, ready to save him if he will disclose an important secret."	Becomes dramatic.	Suggests questions. Dramatic.
(c) In a Roman circus the people are leaving their seats to go home, and attendants are dragging out the bodies of the gladiators who have been killed.	Spectacular but not dramatic.	Suggests no questions. Undramatic.
(d) Two men are quietly drawing lots to see which shall commit suicide. It is a modern form of duel.	Though not spectacular, this is a dramatic moment.	Suggests questions. Dramatic.

These four are Doctor Gordon's examples of correct judgment. She continues with an invaluable list of

[1] Quoted in E. E. Slosson and J. E. Downey: "Plots and Personalities", 219 *et seq.*

twenty-five episodes which may be used for test purposes. Doctor Downey had given the test to a hundred and four individuals and tabulated the results. I select, first, the four upon which the vote was most decisive; next a half-dozen on the border line.

Doctor Gordon's episode	*Doctor Downey's tabulation*			
	Dramatic	*Doubtful*	*Undramatic*	*The touchstone*
(13) A young lawyer has been assigned, as his first important case, to the prosecution of a woman accused of crime. He sees her for the first time in court and recognizes his long-lost sweetheart.	102	1	1	Dramatic.
(4) A woman is pleading for her son's pardon. The governor, to whom she appeals, loves her, but tries to resist her entreaties from motives of duty.	101	1	1	Dramatic.
(3) The marriage service is performed, without interruption, for a great military hero and a beautiful young girl.	1	0	103	Undramatic.
(5) A ten-year-old child was carrying across the street a child who was almost as large as herself. A bystander said: "Isn't he too heavy for you?" And she answered: "Oh, he's not heavy. He's my brother."	4	3	97	Undramatic.

The hundred and four persons have done well so far. But they are not dramatists, and their judgment on the following is neither positive nor always correct.

Doctor Gordon's episode	*Doctor Downey's tabulation*			*The touchstone*
	Dramatic	*Doubtful*	*Undramatic*	
(2) A doctor is watching a patient whose fever is at its critical point. At the bedside the sick man's family is kneeling and praying.	16	3	85	Dramatic! "Critical point" = questions = dramatic situation.
(6) A miserly old man is told by a famous surgeon, in the presence of other people, that an operation which would cost a thousand dollars might save his son's life.	67	2	35	Dramatic.
(16) When Handel was a young man he was invited to become the organist in a certain church. Upon his arrival he was told that whoever took this post was expected to marry the daughter of the preceding organist — a lady sixteen years older than Handel.	44	6	54	Dramatic.
(19) A convict made his escape from prison and started for the mountains, when a large bloodhound was set upon his trail. The man made friends with the bloodhound and took him along to the mountains. The dog cost two hundred dollars.	23	1	80	Undramatic; the reverse of a question: an answer.

Doctor Gordon's episode	*Doctor Downey's tabulation*			*The touchstone*
	Dramatic	*Doubtful*	*Undramatic*	
(11) An embarrassed young man tries to ask a lady for her daughter's hand in marriage. The mother, mistaking his meaning, accepts him for herself.	67	1	36	Dramatic.
(22) "Then Jael, Heber's wife, took a nail of the tent, and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly unto him, and smote the nail into his temple, and fastened it into the ground; for he was fast asleep and weary. So he died."	34	3	67	Undramatic from certain angles; dramatic from others. Will Jael escape?

The touchstone, it will be seen, is a better judge than the average layman. Situation Number 16 goes undramatic by a narrow margin. The touchstone sees one question after another: will he accept his lot, or will he reject it? And what will the lady do? And what will be the result expressed in terms of either one's happiness? The situation has been used in farce and in musical comedy.

Situation Number 2 goes down to ignominious defeat. Yet the touchstone declares it to be dramatic, and Mr. Thomas H. Dickinson's "In Hospital", William Sharp's "The Birth of a Soul", Maeterlinck's "The Intruder", and Charles Van Lerberghe's "Les Flaireurs" (The Previsers) [1] are some of the plays woven out of variations of it.

"Questions concerning future happiness." This phrase becomes highly suggestive when we consider

[1] Upon it Maeterlinck based his own play.

how the dramatic situation comes about. The fuel has been collected, either during the opening, or before the rise of the curtain itself. The addition of a new element, or the gradual development of an old one, finally brings about combustion.

A dramatic situation may come like a thunderclap, or it may grow insensibly from its roots earlier in the play and in life antecedent to the play. Before its coming there has been interest in the characters and their setting as such, precisely as the same persons or places would possess interest in real life. Upon its coming, forcefully or delicately, as the exigencies of the play may require, there is often an immediate visible response from the audience. Its facial expression will change, if ever so slightly; its many distressing ways of diverting itself will be forgotten; its members will lean forward in their seats. The preëxistent situation has become unstable. There will be change. That change will be expressed in terms of human happiness. The interest which the audience has displayed in the costumes of the characters, in the artistry of the setting, in the spoken phrases by means of which it has orientated itself, is abruptly transformed into dramatic interest, and it is no longer merely attracted but constrained. The play, as a play, has begun.

To the preëxistent situation something is added, something that makes the audience begin to look into the future. Suddenly it realizes that the scene before it is not stable; not motionless; not unchanging. The art of the playwright has already begun to effect that subtle change in relationship which is the essence of drama. A dramatic situation has come into being.

The scene of Lady Gregory's "The Rising of the Moon" is the

Side of a quay in a seaport town. Some posts and chains. A large barrel. Enter three policemen. Moonlight.

The policemen have brought placards offering a reward for the apprehension of an escaped political prisoner with "dark hair — dark eyes, smooth face, height five feet five." The sergeant elects to watch the quay. The others go.

"A ragged man appears at left and tries to slip past." The sergeant stops him. The ragged man explains that he is a ballad-singer; admits his acquaintance with the hunted man; volunteers to watch for him with the sergeant.

Then follows an instant so effective that many lesser writers have paid Lady Gregory the compliment of imitating it. I quote the lines during which attack suddenly culminates in a dramatic situation. The reader is asked to visualize the scene: the quay; the barrel; moonlight, and none too much of it:

MAN (*getting up on barrel*). All right, sergeant. I wonder, now, you're not tired out, sergeant, walking up and down the way you are.

SERGEANT. If I'm tired I'm used to it.

MAN. You might have hard work before you to-night yet. Take it easy while you can. There's plenty of room up here on the barrel, and you see further when you're higher up.

SERGEANT. Maybe so. (*Gets up beside him on barrel, facing right. They sit back to back, looking different ways*) You made me feel a bit queer with the way you talked.

MAN. Give me a match, sergeant (*he gives it, and Man lights pipe*); take a draw yourself? It'll quiet you.

The lighting of the match, the face it reveals, give birth to drama on the instant. Make no mistake: the audience is not asked to recognize a little man with "dark hair, dark eyes, smooth face, height five feet five." There are too many such, and this would not be decisive enough. Far more effective, it is suddenly shown the expression on the face of the actor, an expression which is concealed from the sergeant, and which

the darkness, until this instant, has presumably concealed from us.

If the reader can visualize Mr. W. G. Fay's playing of the part, he will appreciate the power of the moment. The picture upon which the curtain has risen is comparatively static. The adroitly stimulated suspicion of the audience has begun to make it unstable. The lighting of the match, and the recognition which follows makes it instantaneously dynamic.

The attack in Mr. George Calderon's "The Little Stone House" may be epitomized in a sentence: into a peaceful, but highly colorful atmosphere, come several disturbing elements: tales of suspicious persons wandering about the streets; an augury from the cards; a terrifying face seen at the window; the story of Sasha; finally the revelation of the stranger.

The first four constitute exposition, the establishment of characters, setting, atmosphere. There is emphatic movement towards a dramatic situation, but as yet there is none. The atmosphere has had its effect upon the audience: there is a powerful feeling that something is to come, but as yet it is but an intensification of the feeling which existed in the audience even before the rise of the curtain. Its individuals have come to the playhouse to see a play. Mr. Calderon's highly effective beginning, during which his attack insensibly commences, merely assures them that they will not be disappointed. Anticipation is whetted to the uttermost.

Then "Enter the Stranger, ragged and degraded." Astéryi looks at him, and recognizes Sasha, the murdered Sasha, the angelic son whose body Praskóvya would inter in "a little stone house safe against the rain", and on the instant gathered atmosphere crashes into dramatic situation, more powerful, more compelling because of the effective scene sequence which has culminated in it.

Sir James M. Barrie's "The Old Lady Shows Her Medals" introduces a quartet of London charwomen enjoying their tea and winkles. They are much interested in the war; have sons in it; have views upon the correct pronunciation of "Salonikky", the proper manner of conducting trench warfare, and the comparative virtues of the gabardine with accordion pleats and the plain smock with silk lacing. This is interesting, but not dramatic.

The dialogue converges upon their sons. Only Mrs. Dowey's is a "kilty." We are pleased to hear thus, because we have begun to love Mrs. Dowey, and are rather glad that her Kenneth is so emphatically superior to the scions of the houses of Twymley, Haggerty, and Mickleham. But still there is no dramatic situation unless certain shrewd persons in the audience have rightly interpreted gathering clues.

Then the ubiquitous Mr. Willings enters with the happy news that Kenneth Dowey of the Black Watch has got five days' leave, and looking at Mrs. Dowey with eyes that discern far more than those of her cronies, we discern her head trembling "a little on its stem", observe her "wetting her lips", "listening, terrified, for a step on the stairs", and we are suddenly overwhelmed with the devastating suspicion that Mrs. Dowey is a liar. Once more the accumulated atmosphere has crashed into dramatic situation.

In all three plays the situations during which the attack insensibly begins are undramatic. They supply the fuel for drama. More than that, they foreshadow, to certain acute individuals, the coming drama. The striking of a spark, at the right time, sets the mass aflame.

In each of the three plays the spark is struck by a new element which suggests that the state of affairs is not permanent; will not last; will lead elsewhere; and most important of all, the new element itself becomes

a path clearly leading towards that mysterious elsewhere.

Miss Susan Glaspell's "Woman's Honor", Mr. Stanley Houghton's "Phipps", Andreyev's "Love of One's Neighbor" have already indicated how the dramatic situation may confront us early in the play. It is now important to note that the element in each one of these situations which suggests its impermanence becomes the common link between the opening and the body of the play. To the elements which exposition has supplied or will supply, attack adds a new element, which, by bringing about a dramatic situation, sets the action itself in motion.

We have seen in what manner the dramatist, making use of the material at hand, has seized the interest of the audience; has held it during the intricacies of exposition. The attack guides this interest, increasing it steadily, into the heart of the play. Some one thing, the dramatist knows, is to be of paramount importance. Sometimes, as in plays opening abruptly, he may begin with the situation itself or, as it were, upon the broad avenue leading thither. Sometimes, as in plays opening more leisurely, he chooses or is compelled to begin on a bypath which shall converge presently with the main highway. The interest of the audience will inevitably rest on a variety of subjects: into one of them it should be made to set its teeth. There should be no doubt whatsoever who are the principal characters and what is the dramatic situation.

Mrs. Dowey is the most important of the four charwomen, the one upon whom the play will converge. The author makes that perfectly evident in the opening of the play. Her share of the dialogue is disproportionately large, a fact which would not be particularly significant were it not for the additional feature that time and again she is set in single opposition against her friends. She is the hostess, they are the guests.

She feels for the women in enemy lands, and draws down triple condemnation. Her Kenneth writes her every week; her friends are not so fortunate. He is "six feet two — and a half", begins his letters "Dearest mother", and is a kilty. His competitors, one takes for granted, are scrawny little fellows. They belong to "just breeches regiments", and begin their letters "Dear mother" without exception.

Her interlocutors are one person in three bodies, differentiated, it is true, from each other, but as a mass still more sharply differentiated from her. Mesdames Twymley, Mickleham, and Haggerty blend into each other, and lose themselves in a background. There is what Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch aptly calls "flattening of minor characters." [1] Mrs. Dowey stands forth vividly in contrast.

In a very different key, Mr. Eugene O'Neill uses precisely the same devices to concentrate interest upon Yank Smith in "The Hairy Ape."

The dialogue before his entrance makes William Magnet important in Mr. Theodore Dreiser's "The Girl in the Coffin." "Has Magnet come in yet?" is the first line of the play. "Where's the old man?" inquires the next character to enter. "Where's Magnet?" asks the next. The answers to these questions bring about exposition making the central personage prominent long before his appearance.

In many instances the title of the play has been used to emphasize a dominant character. To mention but a few, there are "The Countess Cathleen", "Mitzi", "Hyacinth Halvey", "Miss Tassey", and "Dr. Auntie."

Miss Zona Gale's "The Neighbors" is unusual in that it deliberately scatters emphasis in order that the central character, the Neighbors, may become more prominent. Grandma and Mis' Abel are most impor-

[1] "Shakespeare's Workmanship", 45–48.

tant at the rise of the curtain. The emphasis is shifted to Peter and Inez, to Mis' Moran, to Mis' Trot, to Ezra, to Peter and Inez again, to Mis' Ellsworth, and is focussed, at the end, upon the culmination of Peter's courtship.

The effect is confusing, but it is evidently a confused effect that the author wishes to produce. The means serve to the end, hence may not be disparaged. Yet with such discursiveness, the mob effect, previously referred to, cannot be obtained. There can be no mob without somebody or something which by remaining apart from it endows it with class consciousness, and, to an audience, serves to weld it into a unit.

If one solitary person in Miss Gale's play remained filled with *un*neighborly feelings from the very beginning until a few lines from the end, the total impression, I suspect, would be even better, and the discursive episodes, now most effective at a *second* attendance upon the play, might be made purposive.

The one person would become extremely important in the play; would, by virtue of contrast and flattening, become the principal character. But to this there can be scant objection if the thought, as is most probable, will be driven home with greater vigor. Molière, treating a similar subject, used such a framework for "Le Misanthrope."

The methods of emphasis and flattening have been touched upon. They may be summarized.

A character may be made to stand out by sharp differentiation; by subduing the others; by making him contrast with a background; by assigning him an undue proportion of important action or dialogue; by keeping him in the minds of the auditors, either physically, or by repeated reference to him when he is not on the stage; finally, by giving him an effective entrance and keeping him important.

Situations and characters are emphasized in similar

manner. Those upon which the curtain rises are naturally emphasized. In the extended opening the dramatist takes pains to transfer this emphasis to the true situation; in the abrupt opening he ventures to exposit only by flashes, for fear of dangerously transferring emphasis. As the play develops the emphasis shifts easily from situation to situation, for its development is by increase of interest. If the reverse, there is anticlimax: the situation of five minutes ago retains greater emphasis than the situation of the present. But if the movement of the action is soundly dramatic, any given situation will pall — should pall — in contrast with that which is to succeed it a few minutes later.

The importance of a sure touch in the application of emphasis cannot well be exaggerated. "How can an audience be expected to know what a dramatist has not settled for himself", asks Professor Baker, "the chief of his interests among several?" [1]

It is here, in the very beginnings of the play, that the value of the quickening process demonstrates itself. The dramatist who has approached his play patiently, who has allowed it to come to life in his own mind before venturing to commit himself on paper, is likely to see the play as the audience sees it, and finally to set it down in such a manner that it will produce the intended effect.

[1] "Dramatic Technique", 76.

Chapter XVIII: Preparation: I

WE come now to what is possibly the most interesting, certainly the most important subject in the field of dramatic construction: the subject of preparation.[1]

Preparation may be defined with the utmost ease and succinctness: it is the art of making the play plausible. The play is to consist of a series of actions and episodes. On the positive side it is the function of preparation so to order them, so to make ready for them, that the succession shall be logical, motivated, and natural. On the negative side it is the function of preparation so to deal with minor matters that at any later moment the thought of them shall not prevent the audience from giving its undistracted attention to the action then paramount. On the positive side preparation conveys such knowledge of characters, setting, and antecedents that the action of the play becomes possible and probable. On the negative side preparation facilitates a sharp and brilliant focus by removing from the field of attention every obstacle which might, at a crucial moment, cause blurring and indistinctness. Its positive function brings about reasonableness; its negative function brings about clarity and simplicity. Without the two there can be no plausible, hence no effective action.

A situation that is prepared is more effective than one that is subsequently explained. It comes as a visible terminus to a richly suggestive chain of origins.

[1] In the vernacular of the stage "Preparation" is known as "Planting." To "prepare" is to "plant."

It arouses increasing curiosity as it nears; as its outlines become distincter; as eventually it discloses itself in full and unexpected power. Interest is on an ascending plane.

A situation that has not been prepared will have dimmed in the mind of the audience by the time that its explanation is effected. However vivid it may have been, it becomes less vivid in retrospect. Interest is on a descending plane.

In the first case an interesting moment is approaching; in the second it is retreating.

The dramatist takes cognizance of both principles. If he begins with extreme abruptness his initial situation is necessarily unprepared. He avoids loss of interest by leading at once towards a still more important moment, and postponing whatever explanation may be required until the more significant situation has begun to grow compelling. Precisely as illustrated on pages 136 and 137, exposition of highly interesting quality may be made to carry other exposition along with it.

Andreyev's "Love of One's Neighbor" begins with the situation of an unknown man imperilled at the top of a lofty pillar. Were he to explain at once, the play would be over. The dramatist, leading towards an even more interesting situation, does not explain the unusual beginning until the play is nearly over, and until our interest, safely switched to another track, is rapidly nearing its peak. The explanation, thus handled, becomes prospective and not retrospective: illuminates what is to come while incidentally clearing up — hence flattening — what has already come.

Preparation begins with the choice of the scene upon which the curtain rises. The play is to be logical. Its crisis is to be reached through a succession of episodes each of which bears some definite relation to its predecessor. These episodes, in real life, conceivably stretch back through a period of many years. Yet the one-

act play, in its limited compass, must contrive to present so many of them that what comes may possess plausibility. Whatever the development, there must be a foundation: neither too little nor too much.

It is here that preparation joins hands most artistically with suggestion. In real life, months, often years, are necessary to judge accurately the character of an individual. In the play, the dramatist sets before us episodes so significant that an incredibly brief acquaintance serves to convince us that one man might commit murder while another might be incapable of resenting the most outrageous insult. Such significant episodes are interesting, and it is often with one of them that the dramatist elects to commence.

Lady Gregory's "Spreading the News" could not take place except in a village excessively addicted to the vice of gossip. The climax will come when an incompetent and idiotic magistrate decides to confront Jack Smith "with the body of the real Jack Smith", and orders both him and the man gossip accused of his murder arrested.

It follows that the magistrate cannot be very well acquainted with the little community over which he wields power, and that at his best he is a poor representative of the bench. Were Lady Gregory to bring him in for the first time at the crisis, there would be sheer incredulity in the audience. It would be too late to explain that the magistrate is new to the district, and his extraordinary reaction to the simple facts set before him would be laughable but not convincing. The appearance of a preposterous character at the summit of a logically developed action would smack of coincidence. Attention would be diverted from the play to its improbabilities; from the central characters to the new character.

Lady Gregory disposes of every difficulty in her opening:

SCENE. *The outskirts of a Fair. An Apple Stall. Mrs. Tarpey sitting at it. Magistrate and Policeman enter.*

MAGISTRATE. So that is the Fair Green. Cattle and sheep and mud. No system. What a repulsive sight!

POLICEMAN. That is so, indeed.

MAGISTRATE. I suppose there is a good deal of disorder in this place?

POLICEMAN. There is.

MAGISTRATE. . . . This district has been shamefully neglected! I will change all that. When I was in the Andaman Islands my system never failed. What has that woman on her stall?

POLICEMAN. Apples mostly — and sweets.

MAGISTRATE. Just see if there are any unlicensed goods underneath — spirits or the like. We had evasions of the salt tax in the Andaman Islands.

POLICEMAN (*sniffing cautiously and upsetting a heap of apples*) I see no spirits here — or salt.

MAGISTRATE (*to Mrs. Tarpey*). Do you know this town well, my good woman?

MRS. TARPEY (*holding out some apples*). A penny the half-dozen, your honour?

POLICEMAN (*shouting*). The gentleman is asking do you know the town? He's the new magistrate!

MRS. TARPEY (*rising and ducking*). Do I know the town? I do, to be sure.

MAGISTRATE (*shouting*). What is its chief business?

MRS. TARPEY. Business, is it? What business would the people here have but to be minding one another's business?

MAGISTRATE. I mean what trade have they?

MRS. TARPEY. Not a trade. No trade at all but to be talking.

MAGISTRATE. I shall learn nothing here.

But we have learnt so much about the magistrate that his action, later in the play, while amazing, is just what we might expect of him. Preparation has chosen a significant episode which exposition has conveyed. But more than this has been accomplished: the key has been struck; the theme, essentially dramatic, has been

established; the important Mrs. Tarpey has been introduced; the besetting vice of the villagers has been made clear; the scene has been exposited; a foundation has been laid for the action, and most important, the play has opened in a manner which is certain to seize interest.

The economy of the one-act play cannot go farther: here is an opening doing artistically and effectively in a few minutes what might well occupy half an hour in a full-length play.

Mr. Bernard Shaw's "How He Lied to Her Husband" becomes possible because Henry's poems to Aurora have been lost. The poems are all important, hence Mr. Shaw begins:

HE (*kissing her hand*). At last!
SHE. Henry: something dreadful has happened.
HE. What's the matter?
SHE. I have lost your poems.
HE. They were unworthy of you. I will write you some more.
SHE. No, thank you. Never any more poems for me. Oh, how could I have been so mad! so rash! so imprudent! . . . Suppose anybody finds these poems! what will they think?

Having thus seized the interest of his audience, Mr. Shaw continues with a lengthy disquisition on sisters and half-sisters, a subject not in the least germane to the play, breaks off to advance the action a little further, and having again grasped the interest of his audience, injects an advertisement for "Candida."

Here is necessary preparation marred by false preparation: Georgina, the husband's sister, is discussed at devastating length. She never appears, though the audience watches the door awaiting her from instant to instant. On the other hand, hardly a line of preparation is devoted to Bompas, the husband, who is

rather more important and vastly more interesting than either Henry or Aurora.

Mr. Shaw explains that the play was written in four consecutive rainy days "as a sample of what can be done with an observed touch of actual humanity instead of with doctrinaire romanticism." There can be little doubt about the actual humanity of Bompas; nor can there be more doubt on the score of the hackneyed stage framework of the eternal triangle; but there can be no doubt at all that had the author taken more than four days Georgina would either have marched upon the scene in flesh and blood, or have written herself altogether out of the play. Mr. Shaw has

> allowed himself the lazy luxury of writing down whatever chanced to occur to him, — without forethought, without selection, and without arrangement, — and adopted the audacious practice of calling the resultant mess a play.[1]

The central situation is so good that the play survives the disorder which assails it in its youth.

An instructive example of false preparation is found in the opening of Mr. Rupert Brooke's "Lithuania"[2] A stranger has come, at nightfall, to a hut occupied by peasants. The mother, after explaining that she and her daughter are not afraid because Anna is "stronger than most men", leaves the room. Then follows:

[1] Clayton Hamilton: "The Laziness of Bernard Shaw" in "Seen on the Stage", 58.

[2] I have always doubted its authorship. The poet who gave us one of the greatest sonnets in the language may have lacked dramatic sense, but he had mastered his native tongue. The author of "Lithuania" uses these phrases in the stage directions: "They are supporting the Father, who is drunk, dazed-looking, and dragging." "The light in one hand, holding the axe stiffly down with the other." "The Stranger is staring with a vague uneasiness about." This is Teutonic English, of which Rupert Brooke, even in his immature days, seems to me to have been incapable.

[*Stranger strolls, rather swaggeringly, to the stove.*

STRANGER (*apparently with slight suppressed excitement*). I suppose a fine young girl like you must sometimes be sick of a life of working, working, in this gloomy place, — beautiful as it is.

DAUGHTER (*looks at him steadily*). Um —

STRANGER. I'll warrant there's not much fun round here; not many young men, no dancing and so on; ah, you ought to be in a big town!

DAUGHTER (*half to herself*). I have my fun —

STRANGER. It's wonderful in a big city! . . . Now, what'd you say (*laughing a little hysterically*) if some good fairy suddenly came (*looking at her*) and promised to take you to a big city and show you everything, and buy you dresses and jewels, and give you the best of everything, like a lady?

(*Pause*)

DAUGHTER (*gets up suddenly and crosses to him, limping slightly*). I'm lame. A dog bit me Would you like to see? (*Pulls up her skirt and down her stocking and shows place under knee*) Are ladies' legs like that? See that cut? (*Holding out her hand*) That's a big nail did that. What'ld they say in cities to that hand? Feel! (*She grips him, with her right hand, just above the left knee; and looks up, smiling slightly. He gives a little exclamation and draws back, rather embarrassed*) Have you ever felt a lady's hand like that?

One's natural impression is that this is a particularly distasteful sex episode, and that further developments in a similar strain will grow to a crisis. It appears subsequently that the only ascertainable purpose of the juxtaposition is to make clear the stranger's benevolent intentions and further to establish the daughter's unusual strength. Both, needless to say, might be accomplished without strewing the path of the audience with irritatingly false clues.

If a false clue must inadvertently be given, its falsity, or the fact that at the very least it is open to ques-

tion, should be shown at once.[1] The hero of Mr. Eugene O'Neill's "The Dreamy Kid", anxious to make Irene seek shelter before he gives battle to the police, gives the audience a false clue:

DREAMY. You run roun' and tell de gang what's up. Maybe dey git me outa dis, you hear?
IRENE (*with eager hope*). You think dey kin?
DREAMY. Never kin tell. You hurry — through de back yard, 'member — an' don' git pinched, now.
IRENE (*eagerly*). I'm gwine! I'll bring dem back!

Then follows reorientation:

DREAMY (*stands listening to her retreating footsteps — then shuts and locks the door — gloomily to himself*). Ain't no good. Dey dassent do nothin' — but I hatter git her out dis somehow.

This is sound craftsmanship. Even the "to himself" is quite permissible: the hunted negro *would* talk aloud.

Certain episodes in the beginning of a play need to be shown; others may safely be related or merely suggested by their consequences. To be shown, a scene ought be both essential and interesting. It should be worth its passage, and it should earn its passage. There is never any excuse for encumbering the one-act play with episodes which are ineffective in themselves merely because they possess doubtful preparational value. If the scene cannot be made interesting, if the surge of rising interest is lowered or even checked by it, it must be resolutely discarded. It is better to do so than to risk boring the audience. The substance, if essential, can frequently be conveyed by a line or two of dialogue.

[1] Even the detective drama and the "mystery plays" are at pains to cast doubt upon the false leads with which they are filled.

If the dramatist has carefully retraced the path from end to beginning, he will know how much — and how little — is necessary to validate what is to come. The entire play cannot much exceed forty-five minutes, and its mood or content may require it to be much shorter. These two factors, and the always present third factor, that of artistic economy, should simplify the decision.

Let us now consider in detail an example of effective preparation.

The crowning action of Miss Beulah Marie Dix's "Allison's Lad" consists in the heroic death of Tom Winwood at the hands of a firing squad. Simultaneously, in the chamber above the courtyard, Sir William Strickland, murmuring "Well done, Allison's lad!" has dropped dead — dropped dead before the news of Tom's bravery could by any human means have reached him. The dramatist wishes to convey the thought that the strong man's spirit stood at the weakling's side at the ultimate hour.

Let us reason back to a starting point, and examine what preparation may be necessary to lead up to this highly dramatic, highly emotive conclusion. There is to be doubt about the manner in which Tom Winwood goes to his death — hence Tom must be a doubtful quantity. There must be a reason for Strickland's interest in him — the dramatist supplies it by explaining that Tom is Allison's lad, the son of a woman whom Strickland had hoped to marry years ago, and whom Jack Winwood, a coward, and the father of the boy, had stolen away from him. The two actions are now bound together: Allison's lad justifies Strickland's interest, and Allison's husband justifies Tom's weakness.

Strickland is to drop dead — that may come about naturally if he is severely wounded at the outset. There is to be the suggestion of the supernatural —

delicate hints must be cast out in advance. Finally a setting in which such events might reasonably take place: the dramatist places her action in "the village of Faringford, in the western midlands of England"; her period at "the close of the Second Civil War, autumn, 1648."

These — and the sequential episodes of the action itself — are the main elements of preparation. Their relation to what follows, and the minor points of interest, may perhaps be made clear by retelling the play from the beginning.

It is midnight of a cheerless autumn day.	Atmosphere — carried out in the play.
In an upper chamber, lit by guttering candles and a low fire, are gathered five gentlemen of the Cavalier party, made prisoners that morning in a disastrous skirmish.	Orientation and introduction — to be covered in the dialogue.
Colonel Sir William Strickland, of the finest type of his party, a gallant officer and a high-souled gentleman, sits in a great armchair.	Natural emphasis.
A dangerous wound in his side has been hastily dressed.	Preparation for his sudden death.
His friend, Bowyer, watches the play at the table which stands at the right.	Guided attention.
Round the table Goring, Hopton, and Winwood sit dicing and smoking.	1. Characterization. 2. Dice are to figure. When they are needed the audience must not question that they were used and at hand in 1648, and upon this occasion.

This is the scene disclosed at the rise of the curtain. The setting is simple, but the characters and the period are interesting and unusual. The opening satisfies the

naïve interest of the audience while directing it insensibly to matters of greater consequence.

It appears from the dialogue that the Cavaliers were captured ten hours ago.	1. Orientation in time. 2. Essential antecedent fact.
They do not know if they will be admitted to ransom.	"The cloud on the horizon."
The question worries Tom Winwood.	Attention directed to him.
The gaming continues. Winwood and Goring brawl.	Characterization.
Bowyer stops them on account of the Colonel.	Attention directed to Strickland's wound.
Strickland and Bowyer talk: Tom, taken in his first fight, is Allison's lad. "Monstrous like unto his father," comments Bowyer. "His mother's son, every inch of him. There's no taint of the father in the boy," asserts Strickland.	Conflicting elements in Tom's character.
Jack Winwood won Allison from Strickland unfairly; he died at Edgehill a coward. Yet Tom is "his mother's son", insists Strickland. "He'll never prove craven."	1. Preparation for Strickland's interest and concern. 2. Light on Tom.
The gaming continues while Tom crosses to Strickland.	Flattening of minor, emphasizing of major characters.
Tom: "You called me, sir?" Strickland: "I did not call, but I was thinking of you."	A hint of the supernatural.
It appears that this is Tom's second fight: the first was at Bletchingly.	Preparation of the future complication, the parole episode.
Tom is proud of his father; does not know he was a coward; has not told his mother about Bletchingly.	1. Why did he not tell her? Implication of something concealed. 2. Bletchingly again emphasized.

Bowyer goes out to speak with the sentries. Hopton would "fain know what's to become of us."

1. Preparation: he is not treated like a prisoner. Later he is to witness the execution. 2. The plainly declared dramatic situation; culmination of the attack. Characterization.

Tom admits "at two in the morning I've no more courage than —" Strickland interrupts in terror: "Tom! Hold your peace."

Bowyer returns. The captors are evacuating the village. He hopes they will accept Strickland's parole, even though so many have been shamefully broken.

Preparation for parole episode.

The commanding officer, Drummond, is an old friend of Bowyer's.

Why Bowyer is not treated like a prisoner.

Drummond enters. Winwood sits with back turned. Three of the prisoners have broken paroles: Goring, Hopton, and Winwood. Winwood was paroled at Bletchingly.

The complication.

Strickland is horrified. Winwood is unable to deny the charge. "Like your father!" gasps Strickland.

1. A blow to Strickland. 2. Further characterization of him and Tom.

By breaking paroles the three guilty men have forfeited their lives to Parliament.

Development.

Drummond intended first to shoot all three. He has decided to shoot one. They may choose by the dice. The low man dies. Tom, "with twitching face", shakes the box and shakes again. Throws seven. Hopton throws eleven. Goring throws eight.

Action. Suspense.

Further development.

○

Drummond informs Tom he has ten minutes to make ready. He goes. Tom begins to go to pieces. His comrades show their fear that he will "disgrace the colors."

Preparation for crisis.

Tom begs Strickland to "make them wait till morning!" He can't be brave in the dark. — Suspense intensified.

His father would have understood the broken parole. "Yes", admits Strickland incautiously, and the boy guesses the truth: he is the son of a coward. "I'll break!" "You will not. Allison's lad!" "You — loved her!" "Yes. And love that part of her that is in you. And know that you will bear you well unto the end. You will not fail." — The developed fact brought to bear on Tom; his action made uncertain; suspense heightened. Preparation for resolution.

Bowyer returns. He announces that he will be allowed to be with Tom at the last. — How the news will be brought.

Tom turns to Strickland: "Sir William! I'll — try. But — can't you help me? Can't you help when — " Strickland: "I can help you. You shall bear you as becomes her son." Tom salutes and goes: "You shall have news of me, Sir William!" — Second hint of the coming supernatural.

Hopton: "What did he mean?" Sir William is "near to swooning." Asks to be left undisturbed. Stands "upon the hearth, erect, steady, and very still."

Hopton: "The man's made of stone." Goring: "Quiet, will you?" He removes his hat. "Think on what's happening in the courtyard, man!" — The crisis.

I quote the fine ending in its entirety:

[*A moment's pause, and then from below, in the rainy courtyard, is heard the report of a muffled volley.*

HOPTON. Hark!

STRICKLAND (*in an altered voice*). Well done!

GORING. Grant that he made a clean ending!

STRICKLAND (*turns slowly, with eyes fixed before him, and the sudden smile of one who greets a friend*). Tom! Well done, Allison's lad! (*Pitches forward*)

GORING (*catching Strickland in his arms*). Sir William! Help here, Frank! (*They place Strickland in his chair. Goring starts to loosen his neck gear. Hopton kneels and lays his hand on Strickland's heart. On the moment Bowyer comes swiftly into the room*)

BOWYER. Will! Will! The lad died gallantly. He went as if a strong arm were round him.

HOPTON (*lets fall the hand that he has laid on Strickland's heart. Speaks in an awe-struck voice*). Perhaps there was!

GORING (*rises erect from bending over Strickland*). Captain! Sir William —

[*Bowyer catches the note in Goring's voice, and removes his hat, as he stands looking upon what he now knows to be the dead body of his friend and leader.*

CURTAIN

Chapter XIX: Preparation: II

IF, near the end of "Spreading the News", we were to learn for the first time of the Magistrate's incapacity, it would come as a coincidence. The dramatist averts this by positing it as one of the premises of the play.

If, at the end of "King Argimēnēs and the Unknown Warrior", the King's dog were mentioned for the first time, there would be anticlimax. By preparing us at the very beginning, the two lines at the end of the play:

MAN. The King's dog is dead.
KING ARGIMĒNĒS AND HIS MEN (*savagely and hungrily*). Bones!

become so overwhelmingly effective that they top the death of King Darniak itself.

If, at the end of "The Golden Doom", the boy were to enter for the first time and run off with the scepter and the crown, there would be both coincidence and anticlimax. By beginning almost at once with the children who "want a little hoop", the boy's second entrance becomes natural and his action logical and emotive.

If, at the end of "The Emperor Jones", silver bullets were mentioned for the first time, we might agree that Jones "died in the 'eighth o' style", but the amazingly powerful conclusion would be ruined.

In each of these plays sound preparation converts a potential liability into a substantial asset. In each the early establishment of the detail which is to become so telling later on "foreshadows" without "forestalling." [1]

[1] See William Archer: "Play-Making", 175.

The early mention of silver bullets, a little hoop, and the King's dog does not disclose what is to come. In themselves they are intensely interesting. Each, I suggest, possesses a double value. Their real value, their purpose in the play, remains hidden in the bosom of the dramatist until the right moment; their ostensible value, sufficient always to justify their existence, makes them entertaining to the audience when they are first presented. The silver bullet is a striking side light on the characters of Jones and of his subjects; the little hoop is a valid and amusing reason for the boy's first entrance; the King's dog, and the thought of its bones, drive home the misery of the slaves in a manner that is picturesque and telling. At their face value the audience accepts them all. When, later in the plays, they appear in altered lights, they are not newcomers but established fundamentals satisfactorily and powerfully rounding out emotive actions.

The lack of double values in preparatory material is likely to make a play mechanical and its beginning tedious. After the first act of Sardou's "Nos Intimes" an auditor complained:

> What a lot of details which serve no purpose, and had better be omitted! What is the use of that long story about the cactus with a flower that is unique in the world? Why trouble us with that dahlia-root? . . Was it necessary to inflict on us all that talk about the fox? . . . And that Tolozan, with his end'ess digressions! What do we care about his ideas on love, on metempsychosis, on friendship, etc.?[1]

Sarcey, from whom Mr. Archer quotes the passage, attempts to justify the dramatist:

> You are impatient of these details, because you are looking out for the scenes of passion which have been promised you. But reflect that, without these preparations, the scenes of

[1] William Archer: "Play-Making", 214.

passion would not touch you. That cactus-flower will play its part; that dahlia-root is not there for nothing; that fox to which you object, and of which you will hear more talk during two more acts, will bring about the solution of one of the most entertaining situations in all drama.[1]

With absolute justice Mr. Archer characterizes such preparation as absurd. In Sardou "French ingenuity culminated and caricatured itself."

May I point out that it is the lack of double values that makes this preparatory material boresome? The defect, here, is quite incurable. The preparatory elements are so mercilessly profuse and cumbersome that the ingenuity which conceived them is wholly unable to make them interesting. The situation in which they are to culminate is to contain twist after twist after twist: it is to be theatricalism to the *n*th. By omitting a few of the twists, by substituting some semblance to life for mere cleverness, the technical burden of the introductory act might be jettisoned enough to permit a little humanity — and real interest — to creep into it. As a whole, a jig-saw puzzle may be interesting: but to an audience its components must stand or fall on their own merits. The dramatist whose preparatory tactics are obvious and uninteresting is likely to do his play an irreparable injury.

The use of double values avoids the inopportune disclosure of future action. Where there is an immediate implication the audience is not likely to search too successfully for a distant implication. The further precaution of confining preparation rigidly to its proper sphere is an additional safeguard against the same catastrophe. Preparation should make possible and plausible — need not, except in special cases, make inevitable. That last is the business of character and destiny, revealing themselves most illuminatingly in

[1] William Archer: "Play-Making", 215.

the moment of actual decision itself. It is generally sufficient for preparation to establish motivation, background, and antecedents. The action itself will come as the last link in the chain. The fact that more than one action is made possible — until the final instant — intensifies suspense.

Mr. Eugene O'Neill, in "The Rope", permits Mary to use a dollar as a skipping stone, a preparatory element emphasized by more than a dozen speeches, and making plausible, later on, the ironic conclusion of the play. The expedient is daring, and it is good — because it works. More than that, it is economical: its use compresses into a single preparatory episode material which otherwise would have to be treated from two separate angles.[1] But not once in ten times can the dramatist risk so bold a device. The danger of forestalling, unless the double value is made remarkable, is great.

The reader will observe in the examples which I have cited how an identical preparatory element is often repeated, in varied form, a number of times. This is because it is essential, and *must* be "gotten across." If the audience at "Allison's Lad" forgets that Bowyer is related to Tom Winwood, no appreciable harm is done. But it must not be allowed to forget that Tom's bravery is a doubtful quantity. The first, whose only value is to account for Bowyer's intimate knowledge of Tom's parents, is mentioned casually; the second, being vitally important, is driven home again and again.

Elaborate treatment, repetition, or, what is often preferable to either, succinct vividness, may serve to emphasize important preparation. It is in the discriminating choice of what is important and what is unimportant that the dramatist — and particularly

[1] 1. Her ignorance of the value of money. 2. Her pastime of throwing objects into the sea.

the one-act playwright — stamps himself an artist or an artisan.

I have discussed the positive side of preparation. The negative aspect requires some consideration.

When the prepared action arrives the attention of the audience is to be narrowly focussed upon it. That means that minor distractions must have ceased to be distracting. The characters, we have seen, may interest the audience at the rise of the curtain. The dramatist has carefully "flattened" those in whom he does not wish too great an interest to persist.[1] The setting may have stimulated curiosity. He has dealt with that curiosity before guiding it elsewhere. In precisely the same manner the instrument with which a central action is to be performed often interests an audience enough to endanger the total effect. With that competitive interest the dramatist, if he is wise, deals decisively.

If a killing is to stand out prominently, the audience's curiosity on the subject of the weapon must be satisfied first. A thing or an action which is to engross attention must be relieved of the presence of contenders for that attention.

My play "Dawn" (suggested by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle) comes to an emphatic crisis in an explosion in which the hero is killed. The audience must not become retrospective; the resolution is yet to come. Hence the means by which the explosion is brought about is carefully presented long before the explosion itself. "Half a quart o' nitro-glycerine", explains Tom, showing a bottle. The audience doubts. It is likely to continue to doubt. Hence the doctor voices that doubt openly. And Tom settles all questions: "You're a doctor — (taking a knife from the table;

[1] Persistent interest in a minor character used solely in the preliminary exposition may ruin a play. This is one reason why the dramatist economizes.

dipping it into the bottle) — taste it!" After this there can be no competitive interest when the explosion comes.

Mr. Richard Harding Davis is at pains to divert attention from the two revolvers which are to figure so extraordinarily in the central action of "Blackmail." This is accomplished naturally by first directing attention to them. At the very beginning of the play, while Fallon is attempting to close a suitcase,

> *there falls from it to the floor, a heavy "bull dog" revolver. Fallon stares at it, puzzled, as though trying to recall when he placed it in his suit case. •Picks it up. Looks at it. Throws it carelessly into suit case and shuts it. His manner shows that he attaches no importance to the revolver.*

Ten minutes later, when he has discovered he will have use for weapons:

> *Opens valise and examines revolver. Places the revolver in his left hip pocket. Then, in a matter-of-course manner from his right-hand pocket, he draws his automatic pistol. This, as though assured he would find loaded, he examines in a quick, perfunctory way, and replaces.*

A short telephonic conversation, and then, in order to heighten suspense, follows the elaborate stage business already quoted on page 135.

In this play, as well as in the preceding, maximum interest is to rest upon an event *following* the catastrophe. Preparation, therefore, does not hesitate to make the coming of the catastrophe, the explosion in "Dawn", and the shooting in "Blackmail", next to inevitable. By doing so interest is focused *through* the catastrophe upon what is to follow.

David, in Miss Zoë Akins' "The Magical City", is to shoot Rudolf. Now if David were a criminal, his possession of a weapon would be perfectly natural, and

would require no explanation whatever. But he is a poet, hence he explains in his habitual language

> I have carried this pistol
> A long time —
> Thinking
> When the world was too bitter,
> And the wolf too close,
> I would send a bullet
> Through my brain . . .

Leek, who is to shoot Hirst, in "The Ghost of Jerry Bundler", by Mr. W. W. Jacobs and Mr. Charles Rock, is a doctor, and might be expected to be unarmed. Hence:

> [*Leek, with revolver in his hand, is just putting it into his pocket.*
> MALCOLM (*seeing him*). Why, what's that you've got there?
> LEEK. A revolver. You see, I do a lot of night driving, visiting patients in outlying districts — they're a tough lot round here, and one never knows what might happen, so I have been accustomed to carry it.

I have confined the last three illustrations to revolvers for a sufficient reason: deadly weapons are a source of immediate interest to an audience. The bare sight of one, unexplained, raises a multitude of questions. There is not the least curiosity if a soldier, or a police officer, or a marauder carries a weapon: that is to be expected. There is emphatic curiosity if a law-abiding citizen does. It must be abated before the action in which the weapon is to figure may monopolize attention.

The same principle, needless to say, applies to the treatment of externals which, at a crucial moment, are not to become overly important. Neither Tosca's knife nor Cleopatra's "pretty worm of Nilus" figures for the first time in the moment in which it fulfills its destiny.

Sometimes the dramatist wishes an external to be sharply focused. An opposite treatment secures the effect.

Miss Glaspell's "Trifles" makes much of the successive discovery of frozen preserves; dirty towels; a loaf of bread; clothes; a sewing basket; a partially completed quilt; a bird cage; a fancy box containing a dead canary. The deliberate lack of preparation for each makes for a powerful interest as disclosure follows disclosure.

Mr. Cosmo Hamilton's "Soldier's Daughters" shows

> *a shabby room of the ordinary, rather more than ordinary, lodging-house kind. The furniture is of the cheap villa type, hideous, gim-crack, and uncomfortable, but, here and there, there are unmistakable evidences of a refined hand and of remote comfort — an echo of "better days" in a large photograph of a distinguished soldier in full uniform, a sword hanging beneath it, several framed groups of officers, and so on.*

And so on for another longer paragraph detailing the interesting furnishings of the room. Buried in the text for the reader, and buried in the stage setting for the audience, is the one important thing: a rusty sword. For three quarters of the play it remains buried. Then, when Pamela has decided that she would rather take up with "a very kind man" than continue to endure poverty, her sister Helen, opposing her not in the least, takes down the sword. It is rusty, and while she discusses where they are to live, she polishes it. Presently:

HELEN. Who can we give father's sword to when we go away?

PAMELA. Why should we give it to anyone?

HELEN. We can't take it with us — there.

PAMELA. Why not?

HELEN. It has never yet had a stain on it that could not be rubbed away.

The sword becomes a symbol, a silent yet insistent voice determining the fine climax, an external rich in associations, commanding and meriting the attention of the audience.

So, too, in Mr. Charles Rann Kennedy's "The Terrible Meek." "The Curtain rises upon inky darkness." A peasant woman is weeping. Another person speaks in "the gentlemanly, well-bred voice of an army man, now under some stress of emotion." Still another speaks in the voice "of a common man, city-bred." There has been an execution. The peasant woman is the mother of the man who has been slain. The army man and the city-bred man, one of his soldiers, talk. It has been a case of sedition, politics, "some rummy religion." The soldier admits "Rawther liked 'im, the bit I saw of 'im." The circumstances of the trial are detailed: the man may not have been guilty at all. The military have but obeyed orders.

The uncannily effective action of the play develops; swells; grows to a profound crisis. The darkness begins to melt away. Then:

SOLDIER. Look sir, wot did I tell yer? It's comin' light again.

CAPTAIN. Eternally.

An unearthly splendor fills the place. It is seen to be the top of a bleak stony hill with little grass to it.

The Woman is dressed in Eastern garments; the Captain is a Roman centurion; the Soldier, a Roman legionary. Above them rise three gaunt crosses bearing three dead men gibbeted like thieves. At the foot of the crosses a flock of sheep nibble peacefully at the grass.

The air is filled with the sound of their little bells.

CURTAIN

Chapter XX: Increasing Interest: The Complication

THE attack has culminated in the creation of a dramatic situation. Interest is at a high level. It is the function of what may be called the complication, entering either before or after the conclusion of the attack, notably to increase this level.

By the complication I understand one or more factors added to a dramatic situation, and making its solution more difficult. It may bring into the play a second[1] action, or a second theme, or a second angle upon the points at issue; it may introduce additional premises, bringing them either from the outside or from the depths of the characters themselves; but it contributes something which, while reasonable according to the standards of the play itself, is generally unexpected by and interesting to an audience.

In Chapter XI the quality of relationship, without which no play can have either great breadth or great vitality, was discussed at length. The one-act playwright, I suggested, works towards unity, but the unity of variety; towards harmony, but a polyphonic harmony. The artistic necessity often satisfied, in part, by the complication, was dwelt upon. We may now examine its actual effect upon the outworking of the play.

Sir Gerald and Lady Fanny have agreed to disagree.

LADY FANNY. Very well then, hit me! Hit me! Hit me, do you hear?

[1] "Second" and "secondary" must not be confused. The second action may be the central one.

[*Sir Gerald steps forward as if about to strike her, and raises his arm; but instead of hitting her he merely scratches his head in a perplexed way.*

LADY FANNY. Well, why don't you hit me? I'm waiting to be hit. (*She turns her cheek meekly towards him, as if it were a kiss she is expecting and not a blow*)

SIR GERALD. Er — yes. But I don't think that's quite the — er — quite the idea . . . if you wish to get a divorce there must be a witness of some sort when I strike you.

They decide that Phipps, being a perfect butler, will be an ideal witness, and they ring for him so that he may testify to Sir Gerald's cruelty.

This is the simple dramatic situation in Mr. Stanley Houghton's " Phipps." A variety of questions concerning the future happiness of the persons involved in it is at once suggested. Certain definite solutions are possible. Then follows:

[*Phipps, a large, pleasant, discreet man of forty-five, enters and stands by the door.*

LADY FANNY (*as before*). Very well, then, hit me! Hit me! Hit me, do you hear?

[*Sir Gerald steps forward and strikes Lady Fanny.*

(*Crying out*) Oh! oh! You've hit me! You coward!

[*Lady Fanny collapses into the easy chair, sobbing Her prostration is so complete that she might have been run over by a steam-roller, instead of having been rather delicately slapped upon the shoulder. As she cowers in the chair, Sir Gerald steps forward with a threatening air, evidently intending to strike her again. Phipps, however, hits Sir Gerald a sound blow under the jaw, catches him by the coat collar and flings him aside, tripping him up as he does so in such wise that Sir Gerald tumbles on to the floor in a heap. Phipps stands calmly over the prostrate baronet, in the attitude of a butler awaiting orders.*

PHIPPS. You rang, my lady.

This is the complication. At once the solution is made immensely more difficult — and immensely more

entertaining. Additional problems have cropped up' additional solutions have become possible, and the complication, it is immediately evident, will have a large share in determining which solution is to be chosen.

Lady Fanny and Sir Gerald, like many other foolish persons, have thought to adjust their difficulties without concerning themselves with the external world. One aspect of the latter, most extraordinary and unusual, but reasonable according to the standards of the play itself, enters to convince them that they have reckoned shortsightedly. The initial dramatic situation, tri-dimensional, acquires the fourth dimension and becomes incalculably more diverting.

In the very beginning of Mr. Howard Brock's "The Bank Account" Lottie Benson explains to a woman friend that the three thousand dollars which Frank Benson thinks have accumulated in the Coöperative are non-existent. "There'll be the devil to pay when Frank finds out," prophesies Lottie. In other words, the dramatic situation will be plainly declared. It exists already.

Frank comes home. "It's twelve years to-day since we started in with the Coöperative." Counting on his little fortune, he has committed himself to throwing up his job. The situation is pathetic. The complication makes it tragic.

Miss Alice Brown's classic "Joint Owners in Spain" posits as an initial situation an unwilling partnership forced upon two cantankerous old ladies. Both inmates of a home, each has worn out a long succession of good-natured roommates. The matron, at her wits' end, decides to put the two recalcitrants into a room together and let them fight it out.

There is simple, homely drama in the situation. It is multipled tenfold when the two belligerents, after an immediate skirmish, divide the room into halves by a

chalk line, and begin to play that each has a house of her own, which the other must not enter without due formality.

In the first of these three illustrations the complication comes quite clearly from without; in the second it is a logical but unforeseen offshoot of the central action; in the third it is a reasonable though unusual reaction of character. Such distinctions can be made, but they are quite unnecessary. It does not matter where the complication comes from nor how it originates so long as it is interesting, persuasive, and related, in some not too distant manner, to the business in hand. If it serves, as do all three of the illustrations, to orientate the initial action with respect to an external world, so much the better. By suggesting additional questions, making possible additional solutions, and incidentally increasing the difficulty of any solution, the complication makes the problem of the play vivid and interesting.

It is the lack of a dramatically valid complication that has prevented Robert Louis Stevenson's famous story, "The Sire de Maletroit's Door", from achieving still more renown as a play.

Denis de Beaulieu, the reader will recall, finds himself innocently trapped in the Sire de Maletroit's *hôtel*, and being taken for Blanche's lover by the Sire, is given the choice of marrying her or meeting death. From the standpoint of romanticism, when a heart-free young man is asked to choose between marrying a beautiful girl of noble blood and being hanged, the obstacle is nil. The path to the end of the play becomes clear on the instant. From the standpoint of realism, when a young man, confronted with such alternatives, promptly elects to save his skin, it is hard for him to convince an audience that his protestations of love are real. It is too, too palpably to his own interest to do what the Sire asks of him.

Stevenson's complication, subjected to the penetrating illumination of the footlights, results both in lack of suspense and in blackening of the hero's character. There may or may not be love at first sight: but love at first sight, made to order on the spur of the moment and in the presence of an imperious necessity, is most unconvincing.

The reaction of the average audience to the introduction of a complication is clearly indicated by Dr. Downey's statistics. If the reader will turn back to page 149, he will discover that situation Number 13, declared dramatic by an overwhelming majority, is a situation plus *two* complications. There is so startling a double coincidence that the trained dramatist, while admitting the drama, would reject the entire situation.

Of Alexandre Bisson's "Madame X", which is very similar, Mr. Archer writes:

> The long arm of coincidence is very apparent. For the sake of a certain order of emotional effect, a certain order of audience is willing to accept this piling up of chances; but it relegates the play to a low and childish plane of art.[1]

Yet François Coppée, an infinitely more earnest writer than Bisson, used a variant of the same improbable situation for "Le Coupable", produced unsuccessfully in the United States as "The Guilty Man."

Situation Number 4, upon which the vote was 101 to 1, contains a powerful complication. The existence of the complication throws the dramatic situation into bold relief. But situation Number 2, upon which, in my opinion the judges erred, is a simple dramatic situation devoid of complication, hence not recognized by the laity. Had any one of a number of possible complications been introduced, the essential drama would

[1] "Play-Making", 287.

have been discovered. What is Miss Eleanor Gates' "The Poor Little Rich Girl" but the poetic development, in a long play, of a variant of this situation?

Let us examine the effect of omitting any complication:

Mr. David Pinski's "The Beautiful Nun" tells the story of Sister Hedwig, who refuses to leave the convent when all the other nuns flee from the approaching soldiery.

HEDWIG. My beauty will be my shield.
ABBESS. Child! What are you saying!
HEDWIG. They will not dare to stain my beauty.
ABBESS. Folly! . . . You will be a living, beautiful nun among the lust-driven soldiers of the enemy.
HEDWIG. They will not touch me.
ABBESS. They will.

Nevertheless Sister Hedwig elects to remain.

This is a dramatic situation. It is weak and unconvincing at best, for the dramatist, in his desire to show both sides, has committed the irreparable error of scoffing at his own theme, thereby inviting incredulity in the audience.[1] The most unfortunate beginning, already quoted,[2] has moreover established an atmosphere in which a serious dramatic action is impossible.

The soldiers enter. They are surprised at Sister Hedwig's beauty, but they recover from their surprise rapidly. She is not a spy; she is not the Madonna come to life; she is a woman, and "devilish beautiful."

[1] It is always well to show *pro* and *con:* but to indicate that there is no truth at all in a theme is to discredit it. If the ugly Sister Audacia scoffed, the audience would take her words with a grain of salt; but the Abbess has no axe to grind, and her comments are accepted as if they came from the author. The opinions of a disinterested character always possess great weight.

[2] Page 125.

She "opens her eyes wide and stares at them." This keeps the soldiers in check for an instant. Then:

FIRST SOLDIER (*as Hedwig turns her back to him, smiles bashfully and then throws himself upon her from behind, with both hands across her face, crying out wildly*)

SECOND SOLDIER (*with a beastly roar raises Hedwig from the ground, seizing her by the legs*)

CURTAIN

There is no complication and no play. This is journalism — not drama. The problem, trebly handicapped and never made particularly persuasive, is solved by the audience long before the playwright. A *deus ex machina* at the last minute cannot help: indeed, the resort to such a device is but a confession of failure.

The effect of the complication is forcibly illustrated by Miss Rita Wellman's "Barbarians", a play dealing in a satiric vein with material almost identical with Mr. Pinski's.

Marta, Sonia, and Lisa, three unmarried sisters of whom at least one is past the first flush of youth, scoff [1] at the fears of their neighbors, and persist in remaining in their little cottage even though the enemy will soon be in undisputed possession of the town.

Here, at the outset, is a situation very similar to that of "The Beautiful Nun." But now the complication enters in the form of a second point of view. What matters that "these men care for nothing", that "they commit the most terrible atrocities", that "they're barbarians"? "I know one thing," says the devoted Marta. "They're noted for being the most fascinating men in Europe — the most perfect lovers in the world!"

We began to suspect, long ago, that the three ladies had ulterior motives in remaining. The well-founded

[1] Not being disinterested, they may do so.

suspicion becomes a conviction, the situation becomes more interesting, the solution far more difficult, and the enjoyment of the audience keener.

At the precise juncture that Mr. Pinski's play begins to fall to pieces, Miss Wellman's takes on a new lease of life. The complication is responsible for the difference.

It is hardly necessary to point out that the subject matter of the two plays can be, and has been, forcibly treated from a serious angle. It is interesting to observe that in the many legends of this nature preserved in the Catholic hagiography, the complication invariably enters. In those which have obtained wide currency, preparation is a marked feature. A story of any kind, true or imaginary, becomes most persuasive, most viable, when the technique is sound.

Lack of complication in a serious play reduces it to the proportions of journalism; lack of complication in a comic play reduces it to the proportions of a simple joke.

When considering situation and complication it is important to keep the terms sufficiently flexible. They are often interchangeable, and for the purposes of craftsmanship, it does not matter how they are interchanged. The complication, full blown, or merely in the form of preparation, may be present long before the dramatic situation declares itself. It is so present, lying in ambush, as it were, in many plays. And the point of plain declaration of a dramatic situation varies not only with every play, but with individual members of every audience. Some spectators will sense the situation and begin to respond to it minutes before their neighbors.

So, too, the second theme, action, or angle, entering in the form of a complication, may be either central or secondary; may be, as in "Phipps", something new, becoming immediately the most important feature

of the play, or, as in "The Bank Account", may serve but to project the initial situation more powerfully and poignantly. In the crisis of the play primary and secondary fuse into each other. But prior to that any arrangement that is effective and clear, that moves naturally and uninterruptedly towards higher and higher planes of interest, is unobjectionable. The two melodies supplement and enrich each other. They reach their peaks not singly but together. The point at which each may effectively enter depends entirely upon the exigencies of the play and the feeling of the playwright.

In concluding this chapter I cannot emphasize too strongly that the complication is not a trick, not a device, not a dramatist's stratagem, but is an approximation, an echo of that amazing complexity which makes actual life so real and persuasive. Life is full of dramatic situations; but they may exist, without advance, for years. The entrance of a complication is likely to project them so forcibly that vigorous and emphatic movement results.

Sometimes the complication is a last straw; sometimes it is an opportunity long and eagerly awaited; sometimes, coming like a thunderclap, it is a development bearing so directly upon the situation that sudden and decisive action follows. History, biography, and the daily papers overflow with examples.

In imitating them the dramatist is but patterning his play interestingly upon life. I know of no play lacking complication that has achieved success either in print or before an audience.

Chapter XXI: Suspense

I quote Professor Baker's admirable definition:

> Suspense means a straining forward of interest, a compelling desire to know what will happen next. Whether a hearer is totally at a loss to know what will happen, but eager to ascertain; partly guesses what will take place, but deeply desires to make sure; or almost holds back so greatly does he dread an anticipated situation, he is in a state of suspense, for be it willingly or unwillingly on his part, on sweeps his interest.[1]

There are two requisites before suspense can be brought about: the premises must be clear, and the sympathy of the audience must be won. If what has preceded has been disorderly, and has been insufficiently understood, the thought of the audience will be retrospective and not prospective. No audience can look forward unless the past has been assimilated: without such assimilation there is nothing to which to look forward. What is to come will be meaningless.

Clarity of premises fulfills an intellectual need. The winning of sympathy fulfills an emotional need. If the audience is perfectly neutral to the characters, it will not care particularly what happens to them.[2] If

[1] "Dramatic Technique", 207.

[2] It is this neutrality, I feel, that handicaps works such as Mr. Miles Malleson's "The Little White Thought." What worthwhile emotional response can there be to characters designated as "The Thought of Somebody Else's Wealth", "The Thought of the Actual Present" and "The Thought of Traditional Beliefs"? The author further handicaps himself by directing that "Each costume should be . . . a little unhuman." Un-humanity is the negation of drama.

it has acquired likes and dislikes, sympathies and antipathies, it will be so greatly concerned with the developments of the play that the dramatist must look well to his logic as the action progresses. The audience will insist upon fair play, and fair play in the drama is synonymous with truthful outworking of premises. Whether hero or villain will conquer, whether, indeed, the characters typify hero or villain at all, are exceedingly minor matters. Only logic need be triumphant in the end.

It is the effort of the partisan audience to look ahead, to anticipate what is to come, that constitutes suspense.

The audience must wish to anticipate: but it must not anticipate too successfully. It wishes to see, but as "through a glass, darkly." It does not object to foreseeing a coming event if its suspense can reach *through* it towards the mysterious developments that are to follow; but if the path to the end of the play is perfectly clear and obvious, if every coming action and reaction is foreseen, or if they will inevitably be on a lower plane of interest than preceding events, it is simpler — and better craftsmanship — to drop the curtain at once in preference to continuing with an action which must become anti-climactic. The play is over, whether the dramatist realizes it or not.

The audience may know nothing, and desire to ascertain; may know something, and wish to make sure; or may know much, and look forward with relish or with dread. In all three cases, the supremely interesting thing is yet to come. In the first, typified by the instant before the curtain rises, the audience has merely been promised entertainment: it is about to look the gift-horse in the mouth. In the second, commonly found at some point after the veiled preparation has begun, the audience suspects and wishes to verify suspicions. In the third, the dramatist has deliberately conveyed information about an approaching event, or,

what is the same thing, has promised that it shall happen. The audience, deeply concerned, looks forward to and through the event, and most particularly towards its effect upon the characters. It may know — often does know — far more than the characters themselves. But no one, with the exception of the dramatist, knows precisely how the characters will react. The audience is in a state of uncertainty, agonizing perhaps, but pleasing; thrilling sometimes, but highly enjoyable. Uncertainty, coupled with sympathetic interest, is the essence of suspense.

We have seen that the play and the episodes within it move from question to answer. Certain simple questions, dealt with in the preliminary exposition, must generally be answered in their entirety. But if the questions which lead us into and through the play are met with complete answers, the action stops dead. Such a state of affairs may be sought in endings: but if at any point prior to the intended end questions and answers balance evenly, interest and suspense vanish, and a premature ending has been brought about.

The dramatist averts this catastrophe and secures an opposite effect by the use of half-answers, answers which satisfy less than they tantalize, answers which in turn suggest new and still more pressing questions. At the beginning of the play a balance to the credit of "question account" is created. New questions, continually suggested by the progressing action, must, if there is to be growing suspense, increase this balance more rapidly than the answers can possibly deplete it.

The four sailors, in Lord Dunsany's "A Night at an Inn", are in horrible danger. They are not what one might call estimable persons, but they need not be. They are four human beings in peril, and the audience sympathizes with them.

There is suspense. The Toff pits his wits against the mysterious forces which threaten them. He sets a

trap in which he expects to catch the priests. This is a half-answer to what has preceded: it satisfied the single question, "What are they going to do about it?" though it does not answer the still more significant question, "Will they save their lives and the ruby?" Simultaneously it suggests a new question: "Will the plan work, and will justice, which is unappeased, even though we sympathize with the men, be satisfied in the end?"

The plan does work, not by slaying the priests *en bloc*, but by trapping them one at a time. The dramatist, sensing the force of his situation, spreads it out over three episodes, builds towards his climax more gradually and more forcefully, substitutes three question-half-answer groups for one,[1] and magnifies suspense accordingly.

[*The Toff knifes the last Priest from behind.*
THE TOFF. A good day's work, my friends.
BILL. Well done, Toffy. Oh, you are a deep one.
ALBERT. A deep one if ever there was one.
SNIGGERS. There ain't any more, Bill, are there?
THE TOFF. No more in the world, my friend.

Certain questions have been definitely answered. But one question is still clamoring for a reply, is being most subtly emphasized by the dramatist, is becoming more pressing, more vital, more insistent than ever: "Will these thieves and murderers escape punishment? What about justice?" Not a soul in the audience believes that the play is over. These scoundrels are to meet their deserts. But how?

Then comes the marvelous climax. Sniggers reenters terrified. He has seen something so awful that he is totally unable to describe it. Stony steps are

[1] It is hardly necessary to point out that the process cannot be multiplied indefinitely; that six such episodes, instead of being twice as effective, would degenerate into farce.

heard. The suspense becomes agonizing. Is this Justice, coming with leaden heels?

The question of the ruby is settled. Then, one by one, comes answer after ghastly answer. The Toff, staggering, tottering against his will to his certain death, speaks a phrase: "I did not foresee it."

It is echoed in the audience.

Suspense, I suspect, is not likely often to rise to heights as impressive as those attained in "A Night at an Inn." The steps by which it is here created and intensified, the masterly touches by which foreboding is made to grow to definite, palpitating fear; finally the most artistic and effective lull before the storm while the atmosphere marches on: these are worthy of the most careful study.

Any powerfully dramatic play makes much of suspense. It is so in "The Monkey's Paw", a wonderful story by Mr. W. W. Jacobs, dramatized with rare skill by Mr. Louis N. Parker; it is so in Mr. Eugene O'Neill's impressive "The Emperor Jones"; it is so in Mr. Chester Bailey Fernald's exotic "The Cat and the Cherub."

We come, however, upon a different use of suspense in Maeterlinck's "Les Aveugles" ("The Blind") and "Intérieur" ("Interior"). Suspense here becomes what is exactly comparable to the organ point in music: a dominant sustained in the bass while other parts move independently.

The curtain of "Les Aveugles" rises upon the famous "très ancienne forêt septentrionale, d'aspect éternel." In the center of a semicircle is seated an aged priest: he is dead. At his right, six blind men, at his left, six blind women, who, under his guidance, have come far from the asylum which harbors them, know nothing of what has happened, and patiently wait for him to lead them home. It is night in winter.

The drama of the situation is palpable the instant

that the audience recognizes that the priest is dead. Yet it is apparent to the audience and not to the characters in the play. The terrible discovery which they are eventually to make hangs over them — and they are unaware of it. Presently they are to learn the truth. In the meantime the audience, godlike, omniscient, is aware of what must inevitably come, and dreads its coming. It is conscious of the impending tragedy, and powerless to avert it.

A similar use of suspense, in less sombre moods, is to be found in Lady Gregory's "The Rising of the Moon", Mr. Arthur Hopkins' "Moonshine", Mr. William De Mille's "Poor Old Jim", and in a host of other plays. Here knowledge of vital importance to a character in the play is first imparted to the audience. A tragic, a dramatic, or a comic moment is to come in due time. The audience is informed, and looks forward with fear, anticipation, or relish.

In none of these cases, be it noted, is the organ point the satisfying element in the play: the answer of answers. It is rather the element whose fusion into the play itself later on will bring about decisive action, whose revelation to the uninformed character or characters will result in the completion of the "perfect action."

Suspense, once created, may be easily killed. To be effective, it must be treated precisely like the action itself: spared interruption by material of lesser interest, and not protracted beyond the length in which it is most potent.

Mr. Howard Brock's "The Bank Account" has always seemed to me to suffer from this last defect. Frank Benson, the pitiable hero, is to be told eventually that his money has vanished. But with fiendish ingenuity the author postpones — and postpones — and postpones the terrible moment.

Frank has taken the afternoon off, careless of what

may happen to his job; to-day is "twelve years since we started in with the Coöperative"; he is going to buy a farm; will begin celebrating by having "a little bust" this very afternoon; is sorry for Charlie Harding, who is "going to be up against it pretty soon" because he is "as old as I am" and "ain't got a cent"; prepares to smoke his first cigar in twelve years; compliments his wife upon her thriftiness; is sorry for his fellow clerks; is glad that he is through, because he never liked "old Anson", the boss. The incident which precipitates the crisis might surely come now. But Benson continues: he began with the Coöperative because of his fear of Anson; now he is independent; has written an elaborately insulting letter resigning his job; has written it fifty times, awaiting the day to mail it; wants to get out into the open; get the "figures out of my brain"; will get a square deal in the country; realizes "how the slaves felt when Abe Lincoln read that little piece to them"; hopes Lottie will not miss the city much; is going to mail the letter at once. At this point "Lottie suddenly flings herself at Frank's feet, sobbing hysterically", and the truth comes out.

I grant Mr. Brock's incomparable thoroughness; but to me it is as painsgiving as it is painstaking. It is too much like torturing some small animal to death: one hopes that the fatal blow will come mercifully soon; when it does not come, one turns aside, wishing to see no more.

Mr. Brock's worm writhes severally every segment in his wretched body. It is not economy. It is not the suggestive art of the one-act play. It is the *tranche de vie*, true to life, perhaps, but the suspense is not sufficiently elastic to be stretched so far.

In the drama, as elsewhere, there is a law of diminishing returns. A moment or a series of moments may be emotive to a degree; but protracted beyond a certain point, the effect becomes progressively less,

and suspense, unduly prolonged, changes slowly into irritation. Drama is motion. Suspense is the tantalizing pleasure produced by artistically retarding that motion. How much to retard, and when, finally, to fling off restraint and plunge into the satisfying action — these are questions which the dramatist can answer only by transcending the barriers of self, and resolving to see his work precisely as an audience will see it.

Chapter XXII: Increasing Interest: The Development

In order to validate crisis and resolution, certain preparatory elements must find their way into every play. But there is far more to the play than the bare exposition of such details. In the incubating period, long before the actual writing of the play has commenced, the fundamentals which must go in because craftsmanship calls for them have clothed themselves in story, have ordered themselves in plot, and, in doing so, have discovered some way in which their presence, which is necessary, may be natural and unobtrusive in the all-engulfing action.

But this is not all. The fundamentals are fixed points. The distances between them may not be large in the one-act play, but interest, crossing the gap, must not flag. It becomes necessary for the dramatist to devise a closely knit scene sequence, progressively more entertaining, leading ultimately to crisis and climax and through them to the final curtain. Certain scenes in the sequence will be there because they contain exposition; others because they contain preparation; others because they contain the action which is the kernel of the play or the characterization which makes it human. But there will be indispensable scenes whose function it is to permit time to elapse for the completion of an off-stage action; there will be others which serve to link together, which act as bridges; and there will be highly important scenes in which the dramatist, in a manner peculiar to himself, will amplify, exploit, and develop his material.

Speaking narrowly, every scene — and every word

— in a good play is necessary. Speaking broadly, there are always two questions: what must go in, and what may go in.

An action, dimensional in time, is to take place off-stage, let us say. Yet the play cannot stop, as in real life, to await the completion of the action. If the time it is to occupy is great, the device of dropping the curtain is sometimes necessary to indicate its passing. If the time is small, there arises a need for a cover scene.

Professor Baker writes interestingly:

> The telephone and the automobile have been godsends to the young dramatist. By the use of the first, a lover can telephone from the drug-store just around the corner, run all the way in his eagerness, take an elevator, and be on the scene with a speed that saves the young dramatist any long Cover Scene. Of course, if said lover be rich or extravagant enough to own an automobile, the distance from which he may telephone increases as the square of the horse-power of his machine. . . . Here, however, a dramatist meets his Scylla and Charybdis. He yields to Scylla, if he does not write any such (cover) scene; to Charybdis, if he writes such a scene but does not advance his play by it — that is, if he merely marks time.[1]

The cover scene itself must be a part of the rising tide of action. Early in Lady Gregory's "Spreading the News" the talkative Mrs. Tarpey supplies a brief cover scene by bewailing the loss of two pounds of sugar. It is entirely satisfactory, because the action has barely begun, has not yet reached a high plane of interest. But two thirds way through my "The Sequel" a need for a lengthy cover scene arises, and if the on-stage action did not advance the play, there would be immediate anti-climax. By reserving what is perhaps the most interesting part of the development for this particular scene, such a catastrophe is averted.

[1] "Dramatic Technique", 136.

Effective cover scenes, in various moods, are to be found in Takeda Izumo's "The Pine-Tree", in Miss Gertrude Jennings' "Between the Soup and the Savoury", and in Oscar Wilde's "Salome." At its best, the cover scene, together with the thought of the off-stage action it covers, provides an additional source of suspense.

The passing of time may sometimes be symbolized. Mr. Thomas Dickinson uses the movement of a sunbeam to condense an hour into three or four minutes in "In Hospital." In "Madame Butterfly" (David Belasco and John Luther Long):

> . . . *the night comes on. Suzuki lights the floor lamps, the stars come out, the dawn breaks, the floor lights flicker out one by one, the birds begin to sing, and the day discovers Suzuki and the baby fast asleep on the floor.*

Twelve hours have elapsed.

Obviously the mood of the play matters very greatly in the treatment of such difficulties. Evréinov takes extraordinary liberties with time in "A Merry Death": the fantastic vein permits him to do what he will. But Mr. John Palmer, wishing to indicate a three hour lapse in "Over the Hills", wisely drops his curtain.

Linking scenes, in which two others are blended together, require little discussion. The one-act play is naturally close-coupled. If a scene is to arise from its predecessor, there is more need for dovetailing, which is simple, than for an independent connecting unit. Sometimes a sizable link is desirable: it can always be supplied by reserving either action or characterization of a proper degree of interest for the occasion. If a scene is to arise through the entrance, from the outside, of additional premises, blending is generally unnecessary and hurtful. Abrupt motion, particularly in the opening of the play, assists in seizing interest.

Logical and interesting development is to the one-

act play what the body is to the human being: its palpable substance. Its omission is likely to be fraught with the most serious consequences.

Tchekoff's "A Tragedian in Spite of Himself", "The Anniversary" and "The Proposal", vastly overrated in this country although according to the translator they are but "good examples of the sort of humor admired by the average Russian", [1] are the cartoons of the comic supplement, liberally inflated by dialogue. The first, sufficiently typical of all three, deals with one Tolkachov, who, entering Murashkin's study, complains in an uninterrupted speech covering over four closely printed pages that he is but an errand boy for relatives and friends, but a beast of burden who must carry home to-night

> A globe for the lamp; one pound of pork sausages; five copecks' worth of cloves and cinnamon; castor-oil for Misha; ten pounds of granulated sugar. To bring with you from home a copper jar for the sugar; carbolic acid; insect powder, ten copecks' worth; twenty bottles of beer; vinegar; and corsets for Mlle. Shanceau at No. 82. . . . Ouf! And to bring home Misha's winter coat and goloshes.

When he finishes, Murashkin, pleased to learn that he lives at Carrion River, asks if he will not also take along a sewing-machine and a canary in its cage. Tolkachov, "chasing him round the room", screams, "I want blood! Blood!" and the curtain falls.

The final scene, clearly, is the first dramatic situation. Complication, lying in ambush, has been present in advance of it. Development there is none: the dramatic situation *is* crisis and resolution. It is funny, precisely as the joke book is funny. It is interesting, but not dramatically interesting. There is a head and there is a tail; there is no body.

It seems almost superfluous to say that the develop-

[1] "Plays", Second Series, Introduction by Julius West, 5.

ment of the play should deal with the situation which has been presented by the play, and not too largely with extraneous matters. But there are many ineffective pieces in which this axiomatic principle is ignored.

One such composition begins with interesting possibilities: a workman has been killed, and the usual compensation is refused to his widow because she is his common-law wife, and can show no marriage certificate. Instead of developing this promising situation to a conclusion, the author now brings in a sympathetic furniture dealer who begins by wiping out the balance due him on the partly paid-for furniture, tells the widow to call at "the office of our society" once a week for "an allowance", writes his own check "to cover the funeral expenses of the husband", and goes, breathing platitudes and leaving the object of his benevolence quite as confused and amazed as the audience. Doubtless such episodes occur in real life. But drama is a "perfect action", which life is not.

Mr. Ridgely Torrence's "Granny Maumee" shows a less glaring but very common weakness. Granny Maumee has been blind ever since she rushed into the fire years ago in a vain attempt to save her son from being burnt at the stake. To-day her great-great-grandchild, her first male descendant since the long-dead Sam, is to be placed in her arms. And the old negress has hopes: "Dese eyes shill yit behole — Befo' my las' houah deze eyes shill look an' see ergin."

In a highly dramatic scene her sight returns, only to tell her that the child is white, that its blood is not pure. At once the action, forgetting the interesting blindness theme, squares off on a new and totally foreign tack: the guilty man must be punished. Granny works incantations; sways the child's mother to her bidding, and prepares for deadly vengeance upon the white man who, by an unexplained — though easily

explainable — coincidence, is the grandson of "de right man" who set "de wrong man afieh at de i'un hitchin' pos'." The blindness is never again mentioned.

Here are three distinct themes, any two of which might have been combined into a sound play.[1] In the effort to bind all three together, a feat calling for craftsmanship of a superlative order, one drops out entirely. If we are able to ignore the short-lived and hurtful blindness episode, the remainder of the play becomes effective. But it is marred by the right-about turn in the middle, which might have been avoided by giving Granny Maumee her sight at the very beginning.

Mr. Rupert Brooke's "Lithuania" exemplifies a far graver fault. The father of the family, after promising to rob and kill the guest who is asleep upstairs, finds his nerve failing him, and resolves to go to the public house for liquor.

> I'll be back in no time. I swear I'll kill him. I'll drink murder into me. My God! (*exit*)

Mother and daughter impatiently await his return, discussing the impending murder, the chances of the father's committing it when he returns, the possibility that the guest is a thief, the risk of detection, and the number of young men who used to call on the mother when she was a girl. The suspense becomes sickly and expires. A short scene with the guest, who has awak-

[1] The theme of the blindness has been used by J. M. Synge in "The Well of the Saints"; by M. Georges Clemenceau in "Le Voile de bonheur"; by Mr. Cosmo Hamilton in "Toller's Wife"; by André de Lorde in "La Dormeuse"; and by M. Georges Duhamel in "La Lumière." The second theme, that of miscegenation, is less common, but has been used by Mr. Edward Sheldon in "The Nigger", and appeared again in another four-act play a few years ago. The third theme, that of vendetta, traces a long and honorable ancestry to "Romeo and Juliet", and farther, and in combination with other themes, has been used in hundreds of plays.

ened, and whom a vague premonition has brought downstairs, and as he retires a second time, Paul enters.

Paul is a young man who has nothing whatever to do with the play, who "only stepped in for a minute", and remains ten. He gives us the interesting information that "It's dirty and cold outside", steals a kiss from the daughter, receives another as a gift, helps himself to still another, and eventually goes. Then the daughter resolves to commit the murder herself.

A more hopeless development cannot well be conceived. The scene with Paul is entirely unnecessary and distinctly injurious. The action, compelled to mark time while the father drinks murder into himself, decreases continually in interest.

For similar reasons Stevenson's "Markheim", a great short story, is ineffective in its many one-act dramatizations. The art of the story-teller succeeds in making crime, discussion, and revulsion an ascending sequence. The dramatist, telling his tale to the eye, cannot make his discussion more vivid than the crime itself, and encounters anticlimax. In the story the murder, described in less than forty words, is immediately subdued, and ten pages of masterly psychological dissection precede the entrance of the supernatural visitant. In the play the murder might perhaps be subdued by the expedient of dropping the curtain and changing the scene; but even then it would be difficult to follow a vivid and engrossing action interestingly with debate, casuistry, and analysis.

The story, something to be read, is in Professor Matthews' words "truly one of the masterpieces";[1] the play, something to be witnessed, does not "get across." If the playwright can make the discussion, the least interesting dramatically, come first, he will have a soundly constructed play: but it will not be "Markheim."

[1] "The Short Story", 354.

The powerful development of the one-act play comes about in only one manner: through the use of a scene sequence, progressively more interesting, forceful, and emotive. It may develop the action directly, or by more fully disclosing the atmosphere may advance the action indirectly.

What may go into the play is of the nature of free fantasia: only the dramatist's instincts may dictate how imperceptibly or abruptly he is to advance from one situation to the next; but freedom is not license. Every scene and every detail in every scene should contribute in proportion to its place in the sequence, and should, at its conclusion, have appreciably lifted the plane of interest. The immediate result is good movement. The ultimate result is good plot, without which there is no good play.

Examples of direct development are too numerous, and too instructive in connection with the complete plays, to be examined here. There is rapid and vivid development in Lord Dunsany's "A Night at an Inn", Mr. Lewis Beach's "The Clod", Wedekind's "The Tenor", Mr. Alfred Sutro's "The Man in the Stalls", Messrs. W. W. Jacobs and Louis N. Parker's "The Monkey's Paw", and Mr. Eugene O'Neill's "The Emperor Jones." There is far more gradual development in Mr. W. B. Yeats' "The Land of Heart's Desire", Lady Gregory's "The Gaol Gate", Miss Susan Glaspell's "Trifles", Strindberg's "Miss Julia", Mr. Gilbert Cannan's "James and John", and Mr. Harold Brighouse's "Lonesome-Like." However accomplished, the action in all of these plays passes quite visibly from one interesting moment to another even more interesting, moves upwards, quickly or slowly, but always steadily.

The action may be indirectly advanced by the progressive disclosure of atmosphere. All that there is in atmosphere cannot be made apparent in any very

brief exposition. However forcibly created at the rise of the curtain, it can nearly always be added to, intensified, made to condition the action itself. Radiating from the juxtaposition of character and setting, emanating in part from each, its repeated expression, becoming gradually more forcible, influences the development of the play.

Of this nature is the remarkable episode which terminates the second act of Lord Dunsany's "The Gods of the Mountain."

Seven beggars, it will be remembered, have passed themselves off on a credulous populace as gods. Their artifice succeeds; they are accepted as gods; a burnt sacrifice is prepared, and as the citizens withdraw, the beggar gods prepare to eat. The curtain might have fallen here, but first there comes an episode apparently unrelated to the action, but most powerfully disclosing atmosphere; entirely unnecessary on the score of construction, but justified a thousand times over for its tonal effect on what is to come.

[*Enter One, loquitur.*

ONE. Master, I want the god that does not eat.

AGMAR. I am he.

ONE. Master, my child was bitten in the throat by a death-adder at noon. Spare him, Master; he still breathes, but slowly.

AGMAR. Is he indeed your child?

ONE. He is surely my child, master.

AGMAR. Was it your wont to thwart him in his play, while he was strong and well?

ONE. I never thwarted him, master.

AGMAR. Whose child is Death?

ONE. Death is the child of the gods.

AGMAR. Do you that never thwarted your child in his play ask this of the gods?

ONE (*with some horror, perceiving Agmar's meaning*). Master!

AGMAR. Weep not. For all the houses that men have builded are the play-fields of this child of the gods.

[*The man goes away in silence, not weeping.*
OOGNO (*taking Thahn by the wrist*). Is this indeed a man?
AGMAR. A man, a man, and until just now a hungry one.

CURTAIN

The action may have paused, but the atmosphere with which it is welded marches on. Omitting lines like the last two, which compel an intermediate curtain to fall, episodes fundamentally similar are to be found in Maeterlinck's one-act plays. Through them the organ point of destiny asserts itself.

The free fantasia in the one-act play is necessarily far briefer than in the longer form. The demands of economy are pressing, and may not rashly be denied. Yet marvelous scenes, unnecessary in the strictest sense but indispensable after their magic has once been appreciated, are to be found in plays such as Sir J. M. Barrie's "The Old Lady Shows Her Medals" and Mr. Oliphant Down's "The Maker of Dreams."

Speech after speech can be cut out of the first without injuring the technical structure: but the play would suffer. Construction is not in the least concerned with the delightfully idiotic song about Mrs. Gill, nor is any particular requirement of craftsmanship satisfied by Kenneth's explanation of how he singly "surrounded" half a dozen Germans. But these things, which cannot be defined, except to say that they enrich the characterization by indirect development, are to the play what the twinkling eye or the smiling countenance are to the human being. Life without them is possible; but life with them is fuller, deeper, and more beautiful.

Mr. Oliphant Down's exquisite little fantasy is as light and as shimmering as a soap bubble. The technique is there, for those who have the heartlessness to dissect it: there is sound exposition, and preparation,

and a cover scene, and what not. But there is also something that craftsmanship recognizes but cannot supply: there is what some one has called "the unnecessary touch of genius", a superfluous thing, unmissed before it exists, but unmissable afterwards.

Chapter XXIII: Exalting Interest: Crisis and Climax

THE crisis is that part of the one-act play in which the events which have preceded are brought into a focus so sharp and brilliant that a resolution or *dénouement* can no longer be delayed. It is the scene in which the play most forcibly states its problem; the scene in which the complicating action, whether interpreted physically or mentally, rises to its highest point; the scene in which the many rivulets of interest which have begun to flow in the earlier movements converge into one mighty flood. It is the culminating point of suspense; the crowning moment before satisfaction and the rounding out of a perfect action.

The crisis is emotive, but the resolution, following upon it, may — usually does — contain even more emotive moments. The crisis rises to a peak. The resolution begins at the summit of that peak. But the resolution, when we come to it, may be upwards; the peak may terminate in a still loftier spire.

The loftiest spire, whether it come in the crisis, the resolution, or, unhappily, somewhere still earlier in the play, is the climax.

Crisis and climax are not the same, and should be carefully distinguished. The climax is the moment that creates the greatest impression upon and gives rise to the most emphatic emotional response from the audience. It is the most emotive moment, wherever it occurs.

If the one-act play is to become continuously more emotive, the climax must come near or at its termination. The crisis may well bring it on. If it comes

too early the plane of interest will slope downwards, and effect and power will be lost. For a play not to "build", not to rise steadily in interest as it nears the final curtain, is a serious, usually a fatal defect.

Mr. Houghton's "Phipps", already cited as an illustration of an excellent opening, contains perhaps too excellent an opening: never afterwards does the play rise to the surpassing height of interest attained at the moment that the butler knocks his master down. What follows is notably clever. But cleverness alone cannot lift the subsequent scenes to a pitch sharper than that of the opening. What is needed is an idea for a development and a central action as forceful and as compelling as that with which the play begins, and withal, in the same key of mocking comedy. It is not enough for the dramatist to continue from his point of origin; he must continue upwards. The crisis and climax towards which Mr. Houghton wrote are less effective than those which come in the first few minutes.

I have spoken of a scene sequence, progressively more interesting. If the crisis is to come where the dramatist would have it, subtle arrangement, skillful restraint, and careful proportioning are indispensable. He does not hew out a central situation at a blow, debate it for twenty minutes, and ring down the curtain. Instead he adduces, part by part and scene by scene, the elements which will eventually bring about crisis, and thus produces motion, creates suspense, intensifies interest, and builds towards climax.

A good play is above all else an object lesson in good arrangement. It is simple enough to make one scene follow another logically; and it is equally simple to make one scene follow another interestingly. But it is far from simple to accomplish both at one time, to devise a scene sequence that is logical *and* interesting, that grows not only naturally but emotively, and upon whose apex climax rests secure. The difficulty, clearly,

is one that should be overcome in the incubating period.

The artistic use of restraint, as a means to eventual crisis, is of great importance. Perhaps the most obvious illustration would point out that in Lady Gregory's "The Rising of the Moon" the sergeant cannot learn of the identity of the man who sits back to back with him without immediate and decisive action resulting; that in Mr. Brock's "The Bank Account" the letter of resignation that Frank is about to mail forces Lottie's hand; that in Mr. Gilbert Cannan's "Everybody's Husband" the disclosure of the true character of the masked dancer earlier in the action would make the play impossible.

The *leit-motif*, to borrow a term from music, is held in reserve until the scene which it provokes may properly enter. But the underlying principle goes much farther than this: *leit-motifs* of lesser importance, introduced earlier in the play, bring about a series of minor crises and minor climaxes. If these crises are to ascend steadily, there must be thoughtful consideration of the impelling forces which usher in and come to a partial focus in each.

The difficulties of an interesting and logical arrangement are largely solved by the use of restraint. It is not necessary for the dramatist to play his trumps in an early scene. Subject only to the ever-present demands of common sense and probability, he must keep enough of them in his hand to do justice to the more important scenes that are to come. His craftsmanship will make the most of the minor cards which he can spare for his beginning. The arrangement of the episodes, the use of artistic restraint, the extraction of large values from slight material in early scenes in such plays as "A Night at an Inn", "Trifles", and "The Little Stone House" are most instructive.

By proportioning I refer both to length and to in-

tensity. A scene contains something worth while. It should be made to give us that something worth while. It may be able to do so in a single sentence or by means of a single visible action; or it may require several minutes to do justice to the potential interest and emotive value of its content. But it ought not be dismissed until it has paid for its passage.

Mr. Arnold Bennett, in "A Question of Sex", had not mastered the art of holding a scene. Not a single scene, from that upon which the curtain rises to the climax itself, is either sharply projected or adequately treated. The dialogue, mercilessly prolix, is a means of obfuscation rather than of enlightenment. The material, none too fresh or attractive, demands more than competent handling: it is not forthcoming.

Upon such a structure climax cannot rest. The play, be it noted, is in the mood of farce; but such excellently conceived and cleverly written pieces as Mr. William L. Prosser's "Free Speech" and Miss Alice Gerstenberg's "The Pot Boiler" show what may be accomplished in that field.

Adequate treatment depends upon clear conception and flexibility of perception. The climax itself is an instant of supreme emotive power, but for all that it may be both brief and rhetorically unimpressive. Emotion in the audience is not necessarily coincident with pyrotechnics on the part of the actors. A simply and sincerely handled scene, convincing in its portrayal of human beings in the clutch of circumstance, goes more surely to the heart than any amount of theatrical bluster.

The action of the play commences at a comparatively low degree of heat. As crisis and climax approach the heat becomes greater, the revelation franker, and increasing passion on the stage is met with increasing interest and sympathy in the audience. But increasing passion is not synonymous with increasing rhetoric:

indeed, there are actions in which the helpless victim is reduced to utter speechlessness. Such an action I attempt to portray in "According to Darwin"; such an action has been very beautifully portrayed by Mr. Bosworth Crocker in "The Last Straw."

Earlier in this volume I spoke of the crisis as an instant of maximum liquidity, maximum plasticity. Moved at the beginning because of the unstable situation and the possibility of change, the audience has become greatly moved because of the probability of change, and at the crisis is intensely moved because of the certainty of change. The evidence is all in. Whether the jury will bring in a verdict of "Guilty" or "Not Guilty" is the business of the resolution. The crisis is concerned only with the certainty that there will be a verdict.

The verdict will be in accordance with the evidence. Its tenor, in many, many plays, can be foreseen. The inevitable verdict upon Harrison Crockstead is that he shall marry Lady Aline; the inevitable verdict upon Brutus Jones is that he shall be put to death. But the moment immediately preceding — the plastic, liquid moment in which one of several solutions is still possible — is overflowing with thrill. There is the absolute certainty that change of some kind must come about. Brutus Jones, improbable as it seems, may escape death; Harrison Crockstead, improbable as it seems, may escape marriage. But the particular business in hand, which the audience has watched grow from the "cloud on the horizon" to the crisis itself, will be settled.

The situation, rendered unstable at the beginning or soon afterwards, becoming still more unstable as the action progresses, has reached a point which is critical. It cannot endure. It must disappear, be wiped out, and be replaced, at the end of the play, by another and a more enduring situation. The questions originally

suggested by the suspicion of instability have become pressing, clamorous, acute. They must be answered. Lies must be blotted out by truth; doubt by certainty; suspense by satisfaction.

It is the knowledge that these things shall come about, the trust that its patience shall be rewarded, the assurance that the problem is at last to meet with an answer, that makes crisis effective upon an audience.

In earlier chapters I pointed out the effect of preparation upon future action. It is now time to point out that preparation of any kind, conscious or unconscious, demands a satisfying action in which it may culminate. Minor preparation will terminate in minor scenes and crises; major preparation will terminate in and beyond the crisis itself. But the lack of a terminus, when it has been foreshadowed, when it has become a psychological necessity, the omission of a scene which the audience has every right to expect and demand, falsifies the preparation, and gives rise, not unnaturally, to acute irritation.

The scene which preparation demands is Mr. Archer's "obligatory scene",[1] a term which is a free rendering of Sarcey's "*scène à faire.*" It is the dramatist's recognition of the demands of common sense, sound psychology, and possible dramatic effect: nothing more. It is common sense not to cheat the audience out of what the premises have promised, and as a corollary, not to indulge in promises which cannot be fulfilled. It is sound psychology to show upon the stage the scenes whose bearing upon the conclusion is so vital that they cannot be dispensed with, and as a corollary, to omit the scenes which contribute little or nothing. It is recognition of possible dramatic effect that obligates the playwright to extract the most from his material, to allow his action to culminate, except in very special cases, in plain view of his audience, and

[1] "Play-Making", 225.

as a third, and most important corollary, to adopt always the most potent, if not always the most orthodox means to the end.

The simple announcement that a play is about to be acted is preparation for a scene in which the crux of the play shall be threshed out. An issue of some kind is raised. There is an unwritten compact between the dramatist and his audience that it shall, at the proper time, be met squarely; shall not be side-stepped. An absolute solution may not be demanded. There are many issues which man may not hope to solve with finality. But protagonist and antagonist, human or inhuman, must sooner or later come into direct conflict and work out their destinies. This is natural crisis: a scene in which the development terminates, and a verdict is called for. The dramatist omits it at his peril.

Mr. Theodore Dreiser's "The Girl in the Coffin" is a case in point. Ferguson, a strike leader, has seduced the daughter of Magnet, a foreman of loom workers. The girl is dead, and until Magnet discovers the guilty man, the "strike can go to hell."

This is powerful drama. Ferguson, the chief, is indispensable to the thousands of striking workers. Will Magnet, to whom the strike means much, sacrifice his revenge when he discovers the truth, or will he kill the "low-down scoundrel" and sacrifice his fellow strikers?

Mr. Dreiser side-steps this paramount issue. As Magnet stands lamenting over the open coffin, Ferguson enters, reasons with him, consoles him, explains that he himself has lately suffered a bereavement, but that while "life can kill and bury my happiness, . . . it can't kill and bury my courage." If this last were not an out-and-out lie, Ferguson would confess to Magnet. But he does not do so, and Magnet, succumbing to his eloquence, finally gives in and decides to help the strikers. It is at this point that Mr. O'Neill, or Lord Dunsany, or even Mr. Shaw would

bring about a crisis. A word; a gesture; anything would disclose the terrible truth to Magnet. Instead Mr. Dreiser drops his curtain and walks off, leaving his audience thoroughly disappointed and dissatisfied.

At some future time Magnet will learn the truth. What will happen then? That is the drama the audience has been promised, and in place of which it has received large doses of windy rhetoric. A vital, highly dramatic issue has been raised, and instead of seeing it through to a finish, the author tantalizes the audience by raising its expectations — and then leaves off.

Sardou, in one of his untricky moments, treated a similar situation with immense dignity and power in "Patrie!" by the simple process of facing the facts squarely. The unwritten compact with the audience calls for just that.

There are times when the crisis may come off-stage, when, in Mr. Archer's pungent English, its "repercussion" may be "far more dramatic than the crisis itself." [1]

Jules Lemaitre, criticizing Maeterlinck's "La Mort de Tintagiles" ("The Death of Tintagiles"), wrote thus:

> Victor Hugo has said that nothing is more interesting than a wall behind which something is taking place. . . . Poor little Tintagiles has fled up the stairs of the tower till he comes to an iron gate. His feeble voice calls for his sister, whom we see trying in vain to open the gate. At last, we hear the sound of the little body falling on the far side of the door. And this is terrible, because we have seen nothing, not the child shivering with fright, nor her who is not ever named, the wicked old woman whose hundred year old hands strangle the child so slowly that he has time to glue his mouth to the iron bars.[2]

[1] "Play-Making", 259.

[2] Brander Matthews: "The Principles of Playmaking", 17. The quotation is partly Professor Matthews' own comment and partly his rendering of Lemaitre's.

Mr. O'Neill, rising to the crisis of "The Emperor Jones", justly places the scene in which the fugitive meets death out of the sight — though not out of the hearing — of the audience. What possible end could have been subserved by bringing the wretched man to his fate in full view of the spectators? Their imagination leaps far higher.

So, too, a great part of the months of thought and experiment which went into my "The Unseen Host" might have been eliminated had it occurred to me at the outset that the "repercussion" of the action was far more effective than its substance. As originally written and completed, the play contained not one of the three characters of the present text. The action took place on the stage. The man who was to die dropped dead in view of the audience. Then it struck me that the action, however impressive in itself, could become far more powerful if portrayed solely through the emotional reactions of persons only indirectly involved in it.

The result is a play which is a cover scene from beginning to end. An action begins, grows, and culminates off-stage, and is brought home to the audience entirely through the contrasting emotions of the persons who are aware of its happening.

I have indicated the relation of crisis and climax to the other elements of the play. I have pointed out that in order to be emotive, the structure which they are to crown must be technically sound. But here, at the summit of the play, the finer equipment of the dramatist, his sensibility, taste, instinct, his poetry, profundity, understanding of his fellow men have their greatest scope. Craftsmanship may indicate what is to be done; but it dare not too narrowly dictate how it is to be done.

There is but one test of effective climax: the reader, if possessed of sufficient imagination, the auditor, unless

absolutely cold-blooded, will be utterly unable to think of questions of craftsmanship when for the first time reading or witnessing a one-act play that contains it. Such plays reduce the spectator, be he dramatist or layman, to a single common denominator: audience.

Chapter XXIV: Logic and the Thriller

IF the motion of the play is from question to answer, the beginning is likely to be less logical than the end. Logic does not suggest questions; it answers them.

It was an interesting discovery of Sarcey's that an audience is never unduly exacting about the assumption on which a play is founded. It will listen to the exposition of a most unlikely state of affairs; it will give its attention to the author while he sets forth the existence of two pairs of twins so alike that their own wives cannot tell them apart (as in the "Comedy of Errors"); or while he explains that a wandering Englishman is the very image of the sovereign on the throne (as in the "Prisoner of Zenda"). It will sit back calmly and wait to see what will happen next, giving the author all the rope he asks for, but whether to hang himself or to pull himself on deck is as the event turns out. If the play which the author builds on an arbitrary supposition of this sort catches the interest of the spectators and holds them enthralled as the story unrolls itself, then they forget all about its artificial basis and they have no leisure to cavil. If, on the other hand, the play is dull and fatiguing to witness, their attention strays away from it and they have time to go back to its arbitrary foundation.[1]

The characters whom we meet in "Mrs. Margaret Calhoun" (Maxwell Bodenheim and Ben Hecht) are "A Dead Man", "Mrs. Margaret Calhoun" and "Five Sentences of a Letter Written by the Dead Man when Alive to Mrs. Margaret Calhoun." The characters of "Overtones" (Alice Gerstenberg) are "Harriet, *a cultured woman*", "Hetty, *her primitive self*", "Margaret,

[1] Brander Matthews, "A Study of the Drama", 209.

a cultured woman" and "Maggie, *her primitive self.*" The strangeness of the characters is sufficient clew to the strangeness — and the interest — of the beginnings.

The curtain of Mr. Alfred Kreymborg's most original "Manikin and Minikin" rises upon "two aristocratic bisque figures" "seated on pedestals turned slightly away from one another." Between them is the clock which they ornament. The beginning of Mr. Philip Moeller's "The Roadhouse in Arden" discloses "Master Hamlet, *the keeper of the inn*", "Mistress Cleopatra Hamlet, *his wife*" and "Master Robin Goodfellow Hamlet, *their son.*" The same author's "Pokey" introduces John Rolfe, and not John Smith, first entangled with a Moellerized Indian Princess.

The "most unlikely state of affairs" may apply to the setting. "The Queen's Enemies" (Lord Dunsany) employs a subterranean temple; "The Crowsnest" (William F. Manley), the crowsnest of a ship; "The Widow's Veil" (Alice Rostetter), a dumb-waiter shaft; "The Elevator" (William Dean Howells), an elevator; "The Windy Shot" (Edward Harold Conway), the bottom of a mine. "Love of One's Neighbor" (Leonid Andreyev) exhibits its principal character on the summit of a pillar; "Jim's Beast" (George Middleton) uses a gigantic fossil as a background.

The apparent unreasonableness of these initial details makes the movement towards logic, which is the essence of the play, more pronounced. It is difficult to conceive of a beginning so bizarre that an audience will reject it. So, too, it will accept statements made by the characters at the *beginning* of the play at face value: it is meeting them for the first time, and is not distrustful. But as the play progresses, as the audience becomes acquainted with premises, motives, and probabilities, the need for logic — and the possibility of non-acceptance of statements and actions — becomes greater.

The earlier information is conveyed, the more freely it will be accepted. Upon this principle rests the theory of preparation. The later information is conveyed, the more plausible it must be to win the same acceptance.

This latter principle is occasionally useful to the playwright. Mr. Calderon, in "The Little Stone House", wishes to cast doubt upon the tale of Sasha's death. By postponing its mention to the last possible minute, some two thirds through the play, he makes sure of the desired result. The author of "Lithuania", guided by a less dependable instinct, ventures upon the announcement of his hero's supposititious drowning but a minute after the rise of the curtain. It is accepted as sober truth by the audience, and the play suffers.

A play is a cumulative sequence of episodes of which each is not only possible but *probable according to the standards of the play itself*. Mr. O'Neill's "In the Zone" portrays life with uncompromising fidelity. Even the theatric gives way, as it should, to its compelling realism. The standard of the play permits of no trifling. But let us turn to such a play, for instance, as Mr. Kenneth Sawyer Goodman's "Barbara." It is quite conceivable that in real life a butler, discovering a female burglar, might not remark "The offense becomes an evidence of temperament, not of turpitude", and might not reply, when the young lady offers to tell the story of her life, "I fear, miss, that I have not the time to listen to a lengthy recital of erotic incidents." But in an atmosphere of artificial comedy such happenings are possible and probable. In the fantastic "A Merry Death" (Nicholas Evréinov), Harlequin is fated to die at twelve. The clock indicates eight. Pierrot, his friend, sets it back to six so that Harlequin shall live two hours longer, is vexed later, and retaliates by setting it ahead two hours. The play runs forty

minutes. In that time the clock indicates the lapse of four hours. On the stroke of twelve, Harlequin dies. All of this is most logical, according to the standards of the play itself.

Good logic is unobtrusive: it permits the audience to concentrate upon the play. Weak logic draws attention to itself, and injures the play in which it figures.

Miss Alice Brown's "The Crimson Lake", a play professedly serious, begins with a *tranche de vie:* two young men, Gale and Chappell, seat themselves at a table in "an aggressively crude Bohemian restaurant." They are much upset. They have just witnessed an accident to Hélène. Upon this realistic beginning follows a series of glaring improbabilities.

One Bromley enters. By an extraordinary coincidence, the window in this room faces the hospital to which Hélène has been taken. It is not remarkable for Bromley to be here, for he "wouldn't leave her", "went with her to the hospital door." But the two other men, who were directly involved in the accident, which Bromley was not, have left the injured woman and turn up in this particular restaurant. The accident is described to Bromley who happened to be there when it occurred:

> She offered to bet that at twelve noon to-day she could drive in her own trap over the same ground and do it in the same time, less five minutes. . . . Just before we got to 23rd Street an old man tried to cross. . . . A car skidded. We saw it at the same instant, Hélène, Chappell, and I. The old man never looked. . . . She wheeled in between him and the car. . . . She took the force of the smash. There she was, a living barricade, horses kicking — my God!

I submit that this was a most remarkable accident. The proprietor enters with Marvin, "a frail old man,"

who is sick. It is the old man of the accident, who, by some unexplained process, has found his way to this populous spot. He becomes talkative.

> I'm goin' so fur as to show you the face of a good woman. (*Takes a case from his pocket, opens and shows them a photograph*) Don't that face preach to you? That's my granddaughter.

Of course it is Hélène, "little Hélène, the pride of the Drama League", as one Evans has courteously pointed out, who has "only broken her proud little back, that's all."

A scarlet-bound copy of Keats is now shown in the hospital window. It indicates Hélène's death. The grandfather, who has not discovered that his Helen is identical with Hélène, rises to the occasion nobly by dropping dead.

I suggest that the logic of this play might be bettered.

Miss Susan Glaspell offends nearly as violently in "The People", and in "Tickless Time"; the latter written in collaboration with Mr. George Cram Cook. The scene of the first is the office of a radical publication; the characters and the philosophy are those of "Sanford and Merton." "The Boy *from Georgia*" who "didn't want to stay at school any longer" "got so excited about it that I didn't even wait for the dance" but came here to help at the precise moment that the radical publication is about to suspend. "The Man *from the Cape*" is an oysterman who, through reading the radical newspaper, has discovered "I'm nothing but an oyster myself. Guess I'll come to life." Naturally he has chosen the same instant. So too "The Woman *from Idaho*" and other characters, whom Oscar, the assistant editor, must have in mind when he declares frankly, "This is a lunatic asylum."

"Tickless Time", setting in the forefront of its action a theme to which there can be no possible emo-

tional response, develops it in a manner whose very logic is illogical. The most interesting moment occurs at the rise of the curtain; the fall of interest to the close of the play is continuous.

Surely these are strange aberrations for the co-author of "Suppressed Desires", a delightful comedy, and the author of "Trifles", one of the finest plays in the language.

The dream play, making use of what might be called a translated subjectivism, is an interesting and effective vehicle. We are to see through the eyes of a character in the play; logic asks only that we see what he might see; that the play within the play, however dreamily inconsequential, have some definite relation to the content of the mind in which it is supposed to take place. But even this requirement is abridged if the playwright choose to verge upon the symbolic, the fantastic, in whose realm there is but one logic: the logic of the dramatically effective; in whose province formal logic gives way gladly to that higher logic known as poetry. "The Emperor Jones", beginning as a dream play, showing us episodes which might well occur in the superstitious mind of the central character, moves gradually towards the symbolic. The first scene prepares for the logical episodes of the next three. But in the following three even the slight logic of the dream play is discarded for the dramatic effect of a poetic symbolism. The auction block, the slave ship, the sacrificial altar are increasingly foreign to Jones' mind; but they are far from foreign to the mind of his race, which he has now come to represent.

The cardinal principle of a sound technique requires it to be concerned first of all with the production of a maximum dramatic effect. If the means to that end are occasionally unorthodox, there can be no possible objection. Only the result is supremely important.

The supernatural is a field of compelling interest to

the one-act playwright. The long play does not often deal with it. Sustained flight and a high level are possible singly: it is the combination of the two that is awkward if not impossible. The fact that the flight of the one-act play is brief allows it to rise, at its best, to elevations which are often inaccessible to its longer relation.

The supernatural, however one may react to it, is one of the things whose principal claim to truth is based upon feeling. It may be nonsensical, but it is very lofty, very beautiful nonsense. As a character in my "Valkyrie!" expresses it, it may be "False as hell, if you like, but beautiful! Beautiful!" When the supernatural touches upon religious beliefs I am inclined to agree with another of my characters: "You believe that a miracle happened in Palestine. You deny that another might happen in Flanders."

Even the free-thinker is likely to admit that the possibility that forces superior to our own lie about us and sometimes touch us is rich in its implications. Yet the one-act play which relies solely upon the direct interposition of the supernatural may create a curious sense of disproportion. Every one of us shelters both a believer and a skeptic in his soul, and the latter scoffs when only the assumption of a miracle can justify the happenings of an otherwise realistic and modern play. He does not object to strange happenings in the plays which Lord Dunsany has placed outside of space and time, nor does he object to the appearance of the angels in Mr. W. B. Yeats' "The Countess Cathleen", for "the scene is laid in Ireland, and in olden times." But he would protest loudly if the same angels appeared at the corner of Forty-second Street and Broadway and there were no natural explanation.[1]

[1] The natural explanation of Mr. Floyd Dell's "The Angel Intrudes" is that the play is impossible. But that does not prevent it from being very delightful.

It is in this last phrase that the playwright finds his salvation. If there is both a possible miracle and a natural explanation, the audience is at liberty to believe what it will. The playwright, with all the art at his command, is likely to suggest that the episodes, or their concatenation, argue the supernatural. It is thus in Messrs. W. W. Jacobs and Louis N. Parker's "The Monkey's Paw"; Mr. George Jean Nathan's "The Eternal Mystery"; Mr. Robert Garland's "The Double Miracle"; Miss Beulah Marie Dix's "Allison's Lad", and my "The Unseen Host." But the existence, in each of these plays, of a natural explanation complies with the demands of hard-headed logic. The mood of the play, its gesture, is towards the less reasonable and far more impressive mystery. What is a miracle but the triumph of faith over skepticism? The play becomes more effective as it provides food for both.

Precisely as eloquence of a certain degree may carry away a hearer, so dramatic intensity of a certain degree may carry away an audience. Both the oration and the play may be illogical: their sheer power may temporarily conceal it.

Professor Matthews writes thus of Alexandre Dumas père's "Antony":

> Of course this story is simply absurd, if you consider it calmly; but this is just what the author will not let you do. He allows no time at all for consideration. He hurries you along with the feverish rush of the action, as resistless as it is restless.[1]

Exactly the same technique is used in certain varieties of the one-act "thriller." Height, within limits, may disguise lack of breadth. If the thriller is sound, no disguise is necessary, witness "The Monkey's Paw." But if the thriller is unsound, intensity may distract attention from its bad logic.

[1] "French Dramatists", 58.

Let us consider "Sabotage", a play barely twenty minutes in acting length, yet concocted by no less than three collaborators, — MM. Charles Hellem, W. Valcros, and Pol d'Estoc.

Pierre Chagneau is an electrician, and a strong union man. Little Jeannot, his child, is sick, and on his account Pierre has missed "very important meetings" [1] for the last two days. He can stand it no longer. "There are enough gasbags already in the unions, too much talk, too little action." He goes. The mother and a neighbor remain with the sick child.

The child takes a sudden turn for the worse; begins to choke. Opportunely the doctor arrives. He decides upon an immediate tracheotomy; an emergency operation. He makes hurried preparations; "there is no time to lose." He makes an incision — and the electric lights go out.

DOCTOR MARGY. Damn it! Right in the middle of the operation, the child could just slip away.

By the time candles are finally found and lighted the child is dead.

Voices outside sing the *Internationale.* The father reënters.

PIERRE (*his voice unsteadied by liquor*). We've got it this time. This beats all the strikes to pieces. That's sabotage, that is! No more lights. I have put the dynamos on the blink. Hear the strikers marching?

DOCTOR MARGY. You miserable fool, look!

PIERRE. Miserable fool? What's the matter?

ANGÈLE. You! It was you, murderer — you have killed my boy! Murderer! (*She jumps at his throat*)

CURTAIN

The sheer theatric effect of the play cannot be denied. As played at the Grand Guignol, with an abun-

[1] I am quoting Doctor André Tridon's translation.

dance of realistic blood, its success was literally devastating. The force of its climax, the intensity of its central situation, was so great that the French audience was quite carried away. The triple coincidence upon which it is founded passed unnoticed.[1]

The late C. M. S. McLellan's "The Shirkers", perhaps the most powerful thriller yet written by an American, is equally founded upon coincidence.

In a lonely hut on the moors live a shepherd and his wife. He, a man of low intelligence, is content; she, of higher intelligence, can stand the loneliness no longer. She wishes to go to the city. He is unwilling. They have discussed the subject before; now the discussion becomes heated. He refuses to give in. She picks up a kitchen knife and stabs herself.

On the instant, there is a knock on the door. A city man, unable to stand the city longer, has wandered out upon the moors. The shepherd, who has concealed the body of his wife in an alcove, is suspicious at first. Then, when the city man makes the bold suggestion that the two shall change places, he accepts with alacrity, pockets the money his guest offers, and hurries away into the night.

The city man, left alone, makes the inevitable discovery. But the wife has merely wounded herself. On that the curtain falls to indicate the passing of a year.

That year brings many changes. The city man, more susceptible than the shepherd, comes to hate the loneliness of the moors. But there has been a still greater change in the woman. A year in the company of an educated man has done much for her. To the

[1] *Sabotage* has sired an evil progeny. It has become impossible, in the works of certain dramatists, for a young man to blow up a bridge without thereby annihilating his nearest and dearest, or for a person actively to champion any cause disapproved of by the author without thereby bringing sudden and utter destruction upon the persons of his daughter, wife, or mother.

city she cannot return with him, even though he offers to take her. She is not his equal; never will be; knows it — and she has come to love him, and cannot bear the thought of separation. Reasoning thus, she takes up the knife for the second time, and kills herself.

On the instant, as before, there is a knock. The shepherd has returned. He has had enough of the city, but that is incidental, for he has questions to ask. Why did not the city man set the police upon his trail? For what reason? Because of the thing the city man found here. The city man feigns bewilderment: he found nothing unusual. "Nothing?" challenges the shepherd, glancing towards the curtained alcove. "Nothing," asserts the city man.

When the city man has departed the shepherd locks the door; glances towards the alcove; hesitates. He is superstitious; nervous. One can read his thoughts. Then he smiles to reassure himself, and tears aside the curtain. . . .

Over fifteen seconds elapsed before the audience recovered sufficiently to applaud the play. A tissue of coincidences, if you will, but for sheer horror, I have not seen its equal.[1]

M. André de Lorde's "Au Téléphone" ("At the Telephone"), played for years by Mr. Charles Warner, is fundamentally sound. A wife, hearing burglars breaking into her lonely cottage, telephones her husband. The latter, miles away, powerless to aid, hears her frantic pleas for help, hears the voices of the ruffians, hears her meet death at their hands. Here is a thriller by "repercussion."

The same author's "Au Rat Mort, Cabinet 6 . . .",[2] done at the Princess Theater as "A Pair of White Gloves", lends ghastly force to the fable of the man

[1] The play, unfortunately, is unpublished. I describe a performance I witnessed nearly twenty years ago.

[2] A collaboration with Pierre Chaine.

who cried "Wolf"! General Gregorff, in danger of his life, appeals to his friends to remain with him. They, remembering that he has suffered similar delusions under the influence of liquor, refuse to believe, and leave him with the woman who presently strangles him to death.

M. de Lorde's bizarre tastes in the selection of subjects are indicated sufficiently by the titles of some of his plays: "L'horrible Expérience"; "Baraterie"; "Terre d'Épouvante"; "Un Concert chez les Fous"; "L'Obsession"; "La dernière Torture"; "Le Cerveau d'un Imbécile." His preoccupation with the horrific has been gloriously burlesqued by MM. Paul Reboux and Charles Muller in "Le Docteur Coaltar." [1]

"Hsioung-Pe-Ling", by M. Charles Garin, author of the equally famous "Le Délégué de la Troisième Section", may well represent the extremes to which the authors of the Grand-Guignol school are willing to go in order to produce an effect.

The scene is laid in China. Li, the merchant, treasures his lark above all his earthly possessions, and leaving upon a journey cautions Madame Li to take the best possible care of it, warning her particularly not to open the silk-covered cage in which it is now confined. Hardly has he gone when Tchang, his deadly rival, whose lark is certain to be defeated by Li's at the approaching contest, enters, and under the pretext of showing Madame Li how to give the lark a lesson, induces her to open the cage. The lark flies away.

The second scene, a few days later, shows the same setting. The cage, silk-covered, is in its usual place. I translate freely:

LI. You will condescend to forgive me for having begged the favor of your most honorable presence?

TCHANG. If I had known of your return, I would, from the

[1] "A la manière de . . .", II, 151.

very break of dawn, have awaited the moment when I might be admitted to your honorable self.

. . . . . .

LI. A wretched thief has taken a contemptible advantage of my absence. . . . I have deliberated how I shall avenge myself upon him. . . . Your approval will be most precious.

TCHANG. I listen with interest.

LI. Here is my idea: I shall make the guilty man come here under some pretext; I shall talk with him, watching his every action, weighing his every word, until I have satisfied myself that I am right . . .

TCHANG. In any case, you must have proofs. How will you obtain them?

LI. From the man himself. I shall say to him (*advancing upon Tchang*): "Wretch! You have committed the most cowardly and contemptible of crimes! . . . But I shall avenge myself!" (*Suddenly checking himself*) Why, worthy neighbor, do you tremble so? Have I been so unfortunate as to inspire you with fear?

TCHANG. I . . . Your expression was so terrible. . . .

LI. I was acting as if the guilty man were before me. I would begin as I have said. Then, taking this dagger, I would seize the man like this (*he grasps Tchang's arm*), and I would say, "Come! Admit it! Confess your crime, or take this dagger in your throat!"

In such manner, acting out his revenge in advance, does Li reduce Tchang to the verge of gibbering lunacy. But as the latter points out, without witnesses to the thief's confession, Li can do nothing; and who, he inquires, will risk his head by becoming an accomplice to Li's vengeance?

LI. I may as well tell you all: I should ask my worthy father-in-law and mother-in-law to come here at a definite hour, without explaining why I ask it of them. Under one pretext or another I should keep the guilty man here until their arrival, and then, as I should have sent away my servants, I would proceed undisturbed.

At this instant Wang and Madame Wang, father- and mother-in-law, enter. With the most exquisite courtesy, Li explains the circumstances, begging Tchang to remain. Then, bit by bit, he reënacts, in terms of shuddering realism, the scene he has described. The play terminates thus:

LI (*with his dagger at Tchang's throat*). Say "I am the thief!" Come, say it!

TCHANG. I . . . am . . . the . . . thief.

LI (*to Wang*). You have heard? You will bear witness?

WANG. We have heard. You may surrender him to the authorities.

LI. To the authorities? No! No! I myself judge him; I myself sentence him; I myself execute him! (*He plunges the dagger into Tchang's throat, and turns upon the terrified Wang and Madame Wang*)

MADAME WANG. My daughter! Where is my daughter?

WANG. What have you done with your wife?

LI. Do not speak that word! Was she my wife, who, not having given me a son, could not even be faithful to my interests?

WANG. Where is she? What have you done with her?

LI. She, who an instant after my departure, betrayed me, who gave to a stranger the treasure I had confided to her, who unworthily took advantage of me, was herself a stranger, a hated stranger.

MADAME WANG. Let me see her!

LI. I have sentenced her to be in all eternity, in the future life, but a body without a head, a being without a name, damned forever!

[*He snatches the silken cover from the bird cage. In it is the head of Madame Li.*

CURTAIN

On the score of technique, no adverse criticism can be made of the play. The same does not hold true on the score of good taste.

Chapter XXV: Satisfying Interest: Resolution and Light

FROM question to answer, half truth to whole truth, doubt to certainty, darkness to light: it is the assurance that this transformation, however unlikely, shall eventually come about, and shall come about in an interesting manner, that holds the audience in its seats. Interest has been seized, increased, lifted to a peak; suspense has reached its uttermost; crisis has brought events to so clear a presentation that change may no longer be deferred. It becomes the function of the resolution to justify and answer what has come before; to fulfill the dramatist's promise to his audience; to satisfy the interest he has provoked.

Where there is a real problem, there can be a real answer. The resolution of the uncompromising play, wholly irrespective of mood, may rise to great heights. Comedy resolution, as found in Lord Dunsany's "The Lost Silk Hat", Miss Gertrude Jennings' "Between the Soup and the Savoury", and Jules Renard's "Poil de Carotte" (Englished as "Carrots" by Mr. Alfred Sutro), is fully up to the standard of the play. But in farce the initial situation is likely to be chosen rather for its satirical or fun-making possibilities than for its dramatic implications. There is no real problem, hence no real answer.

When we examine such typical farces as Mr. Granville Barker's "Rococo", Mr. Bernard Shaw's "The Inca of Perusalem", Jacinto Benavente's "No Smoking", Lord Dunsany's "Fame and the Poet", and Miss Alice Gerstenberg's "The Pot Boiler", we are struck

at once by the weakness of the conclusions. The defect in these plays may be ascribed rather to the form itself than to any failing in craftsmanship.

Falstaffian humor has a very definite place in life, even if it is featured, as in these representative farces, by curates who roll upon the floor, mustaches which possess the power of movement, gentlemen who advise ladies to travel chained in the dog car, goddesses who blow puffs of smoke through trumpets, and authors who write novel, play, and motion-picture versions in parallel columns. Improbabilities and impossibilities are forgiven for the sake of the fun. Man is a healthy animal, and has use for "Laughter holding both his sides." But the ending of the farce cannot, in the natural course of events, wander far from the "wildly motioning the curtain down" of Miss Gerstenberg and "the mêlée is joined once more" of Mr. Barker. Often, be it noted in passing, there is but a simple involving action, lacking resolution altogether. The characters become entangled in a situation which is laughable, but to get them out of it as interestingly as he got them into it is beyond the powers of the author. The curtain comes to the rescue by descending at the moment of greatest merriment.

I argue neither for nor against farce. But I suggest that the dramatist electing to write it recognize its limitations as well as its possibilities. He may be clever and funny, but he is most unlikely to be satisfying. The best that he may expect at his final curtain is the comment, "Very amusing; what's next?"

The development to the crisis is action; the development from the crisis is reaction. Somebody or something feels the weight of the last straw, and reacts decisively. The author says to his characters, in effect, "The case is complete. The evidence is in. Now do something about it; settle it." The dis-

appointed lover kills — or swallows his disappointment; the heroine accepts the hero — or rejects him; the protagonist yields to the inevitable — or is crushed by it; the worm turns — or becomes more of a worm than ever. Nature, too, reacts: the principal character of "The Goal" (Henry Arthur Jones) drops dead; the principal character in "'Ile" (Eugene O'Neill) goes insane.

Action leading to crisis is involving action; action leading from crisis is resolving action.

The resolving action may present the initial situation once over again. If so, it is the initial situation with every question answered. Lady Gregory's "The Workhouse Ward", my "The Noble Lord" (a very much different play directly suggested by the construction of the preceding), and M. Eugène Bourgeois' "Le Pendu" typify what I might call the circular play, beginning and ending in the same manner. In the first, Mike McInerney and Michael Miskell begin and end with a quarrel. In my comedy, the curtain rises and falls upon the sound of a splash, followed by feminine calls for help. M. Bourgeois' bizarre little play discloses a man who has just hanged himself. When two friends cut him down and restore him to life, he becomes so extraordinarily nasty about it that they hang him up again and go on about their business.

In all three plays a single situation is used to suggest questions at the beginning and to answer them at the end. A person entering the theater a minute before the fall of the curtain would probably be nonplussed. But the audience, from whose mind every question has been removed, understands and enjoys.

The solution may be "no solution"; the discovery that the problem can never be solved is in itself an answer. But unless there is advance for the audience in that knowledge, the "no solution" play is likely also to

be an unsatisfactory play. There is distant advance in the final discovery that Mike McInerney and Michael Miskell's problem will never be settled: that they will take pleasure in quarreling with each other to the end of their days. But there is little or no advance in plays which wrestle with a problem for twenty minutes finally to give it up without having either solved the problem or the destinies of the characters with relation to it. The play merely stops; does not end. The result is likely to be a dissatisfied audience.

The fact that a composition "imitates life" does not make it a play. The dramatist's selection of a given problem for treatment implies the promise that he has something new and worth while to contribute by way of answer. If his wisdom is summed up in a long-winded dialogue that covers everything and touches nothing, that sheds no enduring light upon the points at issue, his contribution is exactly *nil.*

It is well to remember that the dramatist is not asked to solve life's eternal problems: if he could do so they would cease to be eternal, and he would probably cease to be a dramatist. But in the best type of play he can shed light by showing the reactions of character in conflict with those problems. The problem does not change: the individual changes a great deal. Something can always be settled, and ought to be settled with some finality. The recasting which takes place in the last minutes before the curtain brings a higher order, understanding, significance, light to the entire play.

The resolution is more than an answer; it is an illuminating answer. We are on the high plane of the crisis. The brevity of the resolution should permit us to remain on that plane or even rise higher until the drop of the curtain. Hence the quality of the resolution must be such that we do not sink. Depending on the key of the play, there must be real cleverness; or real enter-

tainment; or real thought; or real profundity; or, best of all, real exaltation.

The resolution is an answer to a most important question: Why did you write the play? The need for a resolving action is always foreseen; the nature of the resolving action is often foreseen; but the flash of light which the resolving action is to cast over everything that has come before, the brilliant illumination which it is to shed both in prospect and in retrospect, is entirely unforeseen, and is the playwright's justification for the play.

In an earlier chapter I suggested the value of a polyphonic harmony. It is in the resolution that that value becomes extremely apparent. By itself, one melodic element can be entertaining; the juxtaposition of two is likely to be illuminating. Plot and sub-plot, theme and sub-theme, primary and secondary streams of interest, converge into one, and from their confluence results a new and a more durable state of affairs — and light.

One theme, that of patriotism, has failed to move Mary Trask in Mr. Beach's "The Clod." The gradual convergence of a second theme, the Confederate sergeant's use of "one of my best towels" to wipe the barrel of his gun; his brutality; the language that hurts: "You good-for-nothin' — " "You brainless farm drudge" "Oh, shut up!" Finally, "You God damn hag!" brings about decisive action. With "the cry of an animal goaded beyond endurance" she seizes a gun and kills her tormentors. There have been two problems: Will the Northerner escape? Will the woman resent the heaped-up insults? At a blow both are answered. The ending is most instructive:

NORTHERNER (*with great fervor*). I'm ashamed of what I said. The whole country will hear of this, and you. (*He takes her hand and presses it to his lips; then turns and hurries out of the house*)

This is orientation; relationship; the fourth dimension. The action is brought into relation with external life. Then:

MARY (*in dead, flat tone*). I'll have to drink out the tin cup now.

[*The hoofbeats of the Northerner's horses are heard.*

CURTAIN

A surprise ending, and a most effective, most excellent one, despite all "laws of technique" to the contrary. The light which it casts is dazzling — and true.

Mr. O'Neill's protagonist in "The Hairy Ape", obsessed with the thought that iron muscles shall inherit the earth, releases the blind strength that he worships, sets in motion a power greater and even more elemental than his own. It turns upon him and rends him, and wanders off blindly to its own death. There have been two problems: who belongs — brain or brawn — and what will be the fate of the poor fool who would oppose the order of things as they are with his biceps? Gradually the two problems have converged through the many scenes of the play; it is its culminating irony, truth, illumination, that in the instant of apparent triumph, Yank's monstrous ally should destroy him.

Mr. Charles McEvoy's "Lucifer" deals with the domestic life of one Clarence Harvey, a mean and cowardly little man of considerable position. Audrey, his twelve-year-old daughter, has had a terrible dream, and tells it to Captain John Watts, who, as we learn shortly, is Mrs. Harvey's lover.

I dreamt that the hounds came right across the park in full cry after a poor little fox, and father had gone out riding on Lucifer, the horse that killed my groom. Then just when they came to those railings over there, mother screamed, "He's down! he's down!" I was too frightened

to look, and hid my face, and mother said to me that father was dead! It was so real that I am frightened even now when I think of it. But it was only a dream, and father is not going out on Lucifer at all. He is going to ride Ladybird, and that leaves Duke for you.

Watts pooh-poohs the dream: the wind is blowing away from the house, and a fox always runs with the wind. When Harvey enters with the news that Ladybird has gone lame, Watts offers to ride Lucifer. But Mrs. Harvey, who has heard Audrey recount the dream, will not allow it, even though Harvey, learning of it, is quite willing to accept Watts' offer. An unpleasant wrangle between the Harveys follows, terminating still more unpleasantly when Mrs. Harvey, fearing her husband's trickery, tosses a coin herself and settles that he is to ride Lucifer. Harvey stamps out in a rage; Audrey follows him; and in a scene between lover and mistress, the true state of affairs is developed. The child reënters.

AUDREY (*running into the room*). Oh, do hurry on, Captain Jack, Lucifer is so frisky! He nearly threw daddy in the drive!

WATTS. All right, I'll soon catch him up. Ta-ta, little girl. (*He goes out*)

A scene between mother and child follows. Audrey has seen Watts kissing Mrs. Harvey. Her mother threatens her; she must promise to forget it at once. Audrey, frightened, begins to cry. Mrs. Harvey, upset both by the dream and the danger of her husband's learning the truth, tries to quiet her. Moreover she is conscience-stricken at the thought that she has deliberately called the toss of the coin wrongly, has, if the dream prove true, sent Harvey to his death. I condense the ending:

[*A sudden cloud of smoke comes down the chimney.*

A PARLOR MAID. Oh, dear, ma'am! Now the room's going

to be full of smoke. The wind must have turned right round of a sudden.

MRS. HARVEY. The wind turned right round?

AUDREY. Yes, yes, the smoke from the lodge chimney is blowing across the park now. My dream — my dream!

[*A pause and then the deep baying of foxhounds is heard in the distance.*

MRS. HARVEY (*in a wailing voice*). They are coming! They are coming!

AUDREY. Mother! Mother! I see the fox! Oh! oh! oh! He's coming straight here! and mother, there's Lucifer! Lucifer's leading!

MRS. HARVEY. Oh, my God! Look at the fox — straight for the railings!

AUDREY (*throwing herself along the sofa and hiding her head*). I can't look! I can't look!

MRS. HARVEY (*screaming*). He's down! He's down! (*A long pause, while she stares like one transfixed*) Dead . . . Dead! They lift him up! and, oh, the red blood on his face! (*She sinks, moaning, to the sofa*) Clarence! Clarence, my darling, come back to me!

[*The door suddenly bursts open and Clarence Harvey strides into the room, pale and haggered but sobered into some sense.*

HARVEY. Hortense! Get up from there! Take the child upstairs somewhere! Don't let her see him!

MRS. HARVEY (*rising bewildered*). Clarence! Clarence! I saw you killed!

HARVEY. No, my God! You saw Jack. We changed horses. Take the child out of the room. Quick! quick! They're coming in with him!

CURTAIN

Once more, the conjunction of themes, and from the conjunction, orientation, justice, light.

True conjunction of themes is exceedingly important. Without it, a resolution cannot yield real satisfaction to an audience. Mr. William F. Manley's "The Crowsnest" is a charmingly written play, promising well for its author. But the resolution lacks conjunction, hence misses fire.

"The Kid", who is making his first cruise on a sailing ship, goes to sleep in the crowsnest, and dreams a most entertaining—and pictorially effective—dream. Then:

[*Kid wakes with a start, a little cry. He sees Jo, and jumps at his throat. Jo slaps his face. The Kid begins to cry.*

KID (*in bewilderment*). You — *you!*

MATE. Yes, me. Go pelow and wash the aft deck, you swab.

KID (*meekly, and in a dazed voice*). Yes, sir.

[*He crawls down the ladder, glancing yearningly aloft as*

THE CURTAIN FALLS

Here, no doubt, is truth to life. But the play, if I may be paradoxical, should be truer than life. The dream is an interesting development upon what has preceded, but it is not enough to end the play with the brutal announcement that it is but a dream. Its psychological convergence, as in Mr. Gilbert Cannan's "Everybody's Husband",[1] Mr. Kenneth Sawyer Goodman's "Dust of the Road", or, to cite the longer drama, as in Sir J. M. Barrie's "A Kiss for Cinderella", Miss Eleanor Gates' "The Poor Little Rich Girl", or Mr. Walter Hackett's "Captain Applejack" would be productive of a higher satisfaction. As it is, an unwoven thread is left over.

Conjunction of themes casts light in many directions. The extraordinary, but absolutely reasonable conjunction of themes at the end of Miss Doris Halman's "Will-o'-the-Wisp" not only makes the resolution highly emotive, but illuminates, with a strange and uncanny glow, everything that has preceded. The poet's wife, jealous, ventures to investigate the unknown with which he consorts; she is led to her death by it. On the surface a fantasy, the final conjunction not only makes the entire action logical, but throws

[1] Mr. Cannan brings about convergence by the lines at the end of the dream, indicating a course of action followed out upon awaking.

into powerful relief the rich symbolism which is contained in it.

The resolution, as may be expected, is always a moment of heat. Man does not submit to a change in his destiny without some show of passion. Yet the heat is often internal, expressed, perhaps, in the simplest and the most meaningful English. Rhetoric has its place; but in the play of modern life very often it has no place. The dramatist, also a Creator on a smaller scale, is far more concerned with "Let there be light." From that, everything else followed; from that, everything else follows.

Chapter XXVI: Surprise and the Ending

BY a logical surprise I mean an occurrence in a play that is unexpected, startling, and reasonable — hence dramatically enjoyable to an audience. By an accident I mean an occurrence in a play that is unexpected, startling, and unreasonable — hence not dramatically enjoyable to an audience. The first is synonymous with the inelegant but expressive term "punch."

The immediate reaction to a dramatic punch is surprise; the next, recognition of its truth. The first reaction to an accident is surprise; the next, recognition of its falsity.

Mr. Henry James once suggested as a test of the rank of a novel that we ask ourselves whether it aroused in us the emotions of surprise or the emotions of recognition. If it amuses us only by the ingenuity of its story and by the startling effect of its unexpected incidents, it stands on a lower plane than if it pleases us by revealing unsuspected recesses of the human soul, which we accept as veracious although we had never before perceived them.[1]

The dramatic punch arouses the emotions of surprise *and* the emotions of recognition; the accident arouses the emotions of surprise only. The dramatic punch reveals unsuspected recesses, and by doing so, casts light. The accident, however startling in itself, illuminates no recesses and casts no light.

Mr. Lewis Beach's "The Clod", Mr. Charles McEvoy's "Lucifer", Mr. Eugene O'Neill's "The Rope" and "The Emperor Jones" end with emphatic punches. The reference to the tin cup, the changing

[1] Brander Matthews: "A Study of the Drama", 223.

of horses, the bag of gold, the silver bullets are unexpected by the audience. They come as surprises. Yet when they do come they are entirely natural and logical. To quote what a newspaper critic has to say on the subject, each of these plays

> . . . contains a breath-taking surprise and at the same time never moves out of a perfectly natural orbit. In other words, the playwright has not strained for his effect, and so we are at once surprised and soothed, instead of being surprised and ruffled.[1]

Preparation, suspense, and development have led the audience to a resolution whose substance is more or less foreseen. But the very same preparation, suspense, and development have contained other elements leading the audience to a punch crowning the resolution, and this punch is entirely unforeseen. But the fact that the punch has, unknown to the audience, been carefully led up to, makes it convincing, pleasurable, and infinitely illuminating when finally it does come.[2] It will repay the reader to examine the plays I have cited, and to distinguish in each the many subtle preparational elements which make the punch so powerful — and so natural.

In the last three plays the preparation for the punch involves the heinous crime, under "laws of technique", of keeping a secret from an audience.

> By means of secrecy a poet effects a short surprise, but in what enduring disquietude he could have maintained us if he had made no secret about it! Whoever is struck down in a moment, I can pity only for a moment. But how if I expect the blow? How if I can see the storm brewing and threatening for some time over the head of a character?[3]

[1] G. W. Stark in *Detroit Evening News*.

[2] Mr. Clayton Hamilton recognizes this truth in "The Theory of the Theatre", 120–121.

[3] Lessing: "Hamburg Dramaturgy."

Let us examine this statement. Would "Lucifer" be more effective if we knew that Harvey and Watts had changed horses? Would "The Rope" be more effective if we knew the location of the bag of gold? Would "The Emperor Jones" be more effective if in the very first scene the old negress informed us that Lem would melt down coins to make silver bullets? The answer, I am convinced, must be emphatically negative. In all three plays there is a visible storm "brewing and threatening for some time over the head of a character"; in all three we "expect the blow" though we do not know what it will be like; in all three we are maintained in "enduring disquietude." Each of the three withholds highly interesting information from the audience for the sake of a surprise that is "short", if measured by the time necessary to reveal it, but which is overwhelmingly true and effective nevertheless.

The rigid application of Lessing's "law" would simply ruin these fine plays. And audiences, I suspect, would not be particularly grateful to the persons who ministered thus heavy-handedly to their entertainment. Yet the "law", in its entirety, need not be discarded if it can be made to square with a craftsmanship which has progressed since the days of Lessing. It may be modified to suit the demands of what practice, common sense, instinct, and the reactions of audiences have demonstrated to be sound.

A good play is polyphonic: contains two themes; two stories. One may be treated suspensively, becoming the obvious theme. Another, conditions permitting, may be treated secretively, becoming a secondary theme, and emerging, in final development, as dramatically effective surprise — a punch — near the final curtain.

To the development of the obvious theme Lessing's law may perhaps be applied with strictness: there can

hardly be too much frankness, too much ingenuousness. The audience may well be godlike, may well possess the "glory of omniscience" of Mr. Archer.[1] But to the development of the secondary theme Lessing's law cannot be applied at all. There are many, many occasions when the concealment of some factor connected with it, followed by ultimate revelation, will lend extraordinary power and brilliancy to the resolution.

In "The Clod" the visible convergence of the secondary theme brings about the crisis. In the vivid action which takes place it is forgotten. Its unexpected reassertion, at the fall of the curtain, brings about logical surprise — and light. The danger of anti-climax, under such treatment, is grave: only the sure instinct of the dramatist can guide him safely.

In "Lucifer" the question of which horse Harvey is to ride is seemingly settled. The unexpected emergence of the secondary theme in new form at the curtain is breath-taking — and logical.

In "The Rope" the central story deals clearly with the relations between Abraham and Luke Bentley. The secondary theme, used to precipitate the crisis, emerges once more, in a vein of unexpected and sardonic irony, in the last lines of the play. So too Lem's silver bullets in "The Emperor Jones." Non-existent, except in the form of preparation, in the earlier scenes, they emerge with magnificent effect in the resolution.

A secret, then, may be kept from an audience if by doing so the dramatist enhances rather than diminishes the totality of his effect. Such secrets will be found, when they exist, in the secondary theme.

The persistence of a secondary theme, reaching far beyond the apparent resolution, may bring a second — and a more powerful climax — to top a first. Then

[1] "Play-Making", 172, *note.*

the secondary theme ceases to be secondary; primary and secondary interchange places. It is thus in Mr. Alfred Sutro's "The Man in the Stalls" and in my "Confessional."

In the first a wife, learning that her lover is engaged to be married, and powerless to break the engagement off, angrily blurts out the facts of her *liaison* to her husband. His fury is so unexpectedly terrible that she announces that she has confessed to a lie merely to see how he, a dramatic critic with theories upon the eternal triangle, would react. He breaks into Homeric laughter, apologizes for his violence, admits that he has been fairly caught, and shakes hands with the lover. The action is apparently over. Then the wife adds innocently that the tale of the lover's engagement is as false as the rest of it, and while the lover stands aghast continues, "I tell you — if you ever hear he's engaged to *her* — why, you can believe the rest of the story too!" The lover is compelled to accept the situation. Upon this, the infinitely more emotive climax, the curtain falls.

In the second play Baldwin, a man whose reputation for integrity is matchless, has been offered a bribe. His family, indignant at first, is simply paralyzed when the huge amount of the bribe is disclosed. Bit by bit morale breaks down. They would not have Baldwin take a bribe, but is it a bribe? And what will become of him and them if he does not take it? By specious reasoning Baldwin allows himself to be won over, recognizes his own fundamental dishonesty and that of his wife and children, yet decides, because only "the four of us will know it", to accept the money.

Here the curtain might have fallen, but the secondary theme, somehow overlooked, will not let it. There enters a newcomer with the offer of a position in his employ, something for which Baldwin has ceased to hope.

BALDWIN (*thunderstruck*). Do you mean that, Mr. Marshall?

MARSHALL (*smiling*). I wouldn't say it if I didn't. (*He continues more seriously*) I was in to see Gresham this afternoon. He told me about the offer he had made you. But he knew that no amount of money would make you do something you thought was wrong. Baldwin, he paid you the supreme compliment: rather than go to trial with you to testify against him, he confessed.

BALDWIN (*sinking into a chair*). Confessed!

MARSHALL. Told the whole story. (*He turns to Martha*) I can only say to you what every man will be saying tomorrow: how highly I honor and respect your husband! How sincerely —

MARTHA (*seizing his hand piteously*). Please! Please! Can't you see he's crying?

THE CURTAIN FALLS SLOWLY

Because of the persistence of the secondary theme, both of the preceding resolutions contain an element of surprise; but for just that reason they are logical surprises.

In some instances sudden and unsuspected revelation of character, very largely unprepared, but convincing because of its transparent truth, may bring about effective surprise.

M. Charles Méré's "Une nuit au bouge" ("A Night at the Den") tells the story of two aristocrats who, seeking sensation, have decided to dine in a cutthroat tavern in the slums of Paris, — he, an Italian Prince, unarmed, and she, a French Duchess, wearing a fortune in jewels. The Prince, trying to win a bet by frightening her, succeeds so much too well that insane with terror she stabs him.

There is a knocking at the door. It is broken down. I translate and condense the ending freely:

[*Three appalling ruffians enter. The first, Bébert, lurches towards Lucienne, and halts menacingly a yard away from*

her. The second, Petit-Louis, runs to the window and shuts it. The third, Lerouge, discovers the body.

LEROUGE. Gawd a'mighty!

[*Lucienne attempts to escape. Lerouge bars her way. She stops breathless between Lerouge and Bébert. In the meanwhile, Petit-Louis has searched the corpse.*

BÉBERT. What's he got?

PETIT-LOUIS (*handing Bébert the notes*). Six thousand.

[*Bébert takes the bills; counts them. There is a pause. He looks at Petit-Louis; at Lerouge; at Lucienne. He slips three notes into his pocket; then moves slowly towards her. His snaky glance is fixed upon her; she is motionless; trembling, with eyes dilated wide with horror. Bébert takes her hand and puts the remaining three bank-notes into it.*

BÉBERT (*simply*). We split. (*He pushes her rudely towards the door*) Go on! Beat it out of here!

[*She goes, stupefied.*

LEROUGE (*indicating the body*). Come on; it's up to us guys to get rid of this.

CURTAIN

Here again is a secret kept from the audience. But it is a secret only because the audience, worked up to a high emotional pitch by the events which have preceded, sees the ruffians solely through Lucienne's eyes. It knows more than she does, for it is confident that whatever is to come will be highly satisfactory. When it does come its compelling and unforeseen veracity makes it exceedingly powerful.

To keep a secret is often no sin; but to tell a lie is a very grave sin indeed. When the surprise ending is honest and true it gives rise to pleasure: it discloses a new and unsuspected vista, at the end of which is a transfigured but logical view of its subject. When, however, it is based upon lies told to the audience by the dramatist the vista it discloses may be new and unsuspected, but there will be only darkness at its end. Where the surprise ending cannot be brought about honestly, it should not be brought about at all. Dis-

honesty is false preparation, and upon that can follow nothing but dissatisfaction to an audience.

The test of the punch is not surprise; it is truth. Its unexpectedness lends it force. Only its reasonableness makes it illuminating. And, be it remembered, truth, in large enough quantities, is always surprising.

We come now to the ending. Certain questions are to be answered. When they have been answered the curtain may fall. The answers may be transparent before the completion of the action; may be fully revealed at the completion of the action; or may require lines after the completion of the action to make either orientation or the reactions of the characters clear. The nearer the fall of the curtain to the variable point of satisfaction, the more natural it will be.

When what is to come is absolutely conditioned, when the prevision of the audience answers questions more interestingly than could actual portrayal, the curtain may fall before the completion of the action. Lady Gregory ends "Spreading the News" without entirely unraveling Bartley Fallon's problems. It is not necessary. We know what is to come. To continue would lead inevitably to a lower plane of interest: would answer questions which are not as significant as those which have already been answered. Mr. Eugene O'Neill ends "The Dreamy Kid" without showing Dreamy's fate. The knowledge that he, a desperate criminal, is single-handed awaiting the onslaught of a force of police, and is determined to fight, is amply sufficient. Perhaps he will kill two or three of his assailants; perhaps he himself will be killed; perhaps he will be captured and executed; perhaps he will turn his weapon upon himself. It does not matter. The psychological action, which is all important, is complete. The physical action is conditioned upon it, loses interest without a psychological concomitant.

Sometimes the completion of the psychological action will coincide with the completion of the physical action; the last development of the story will bring entire satisfaction to the audience. Then the curtain point will be extremely well marked and unmistakable. To leave off earlier would be tantalizing; to continue would result in anti-climax.

Lord Dunsany ends "A Night at an Inn" thus:

VOICE. Meestaire Arnold Everett Scott-Fortescue, late Esquire, Able Seaman.

THE TOFF. I did not foresee it. (*Exit*)

CURTAIN

Upon that exit the curtain must fall; neither before nor after It marks the instant of complete satisfaction exactly as Sam's exit, carrying old Sarah Ormerod in Mr. Brighouse's very much different "Lonesome-Like" marks another such instant.

Complete satisfaction may arise from a simple decision: the single word "Yes." If that word and the action that it sums up provide a complete answer to the questions which the play has raised, the curtain must fall.

Often, however, the ending of the story does not bring complete satisfaction. There will be questions: "How will he take it? What will come of it?" The question balance still exceeds the answer balance. Then the play must continue for a line, as in Mr. Beach's "The Clod", or for a dozen lines, as in Mr. Cannan's "James and John", or for a brief final scene, as in Sir J. M Barrie's "The Old Lady Shows Her Medals", until the point of psychological completeness is reached. Here compactness, succinctness, the use of phrases which suggest what a dozen cannot better portray, become indispensable. A flash must convey all that a second play might contain, and it must be as brief as the key of the play will permit.

Mr. Houghton's "Fancy Free" is complete a full minute before the fall of the curtain. Fancy has retrieved her erring Ethelbert, and the sensitive Alfred is left alone with Ethelbert's "extremely private business", the lady, the reader will recall, who introduced herself to Ethelbert with the encouraging words, "Do you know, you've got the most delightfully wicked eyes."

She permits Alfred to order champagne for her. Then:

[*Alfred rings an electric bell, and then sits facing Delia in the other armchair. They look straight at each other for some time.*

DELIA (*at length, leaning forward*). Do you know, you've got the most delightfully wicked eyes.

CURTAIN

Being human, the audience has had a pertinent question to ask. Wisely the author permits Delia to answer it.

So, too, my "According to Darwin" ends looking forward. Brother and sister have been brought to utter ruin and degradation by the crippled brother whom misdirected charity has fastened upon them. The action is complete. The tragedy is ostensibly over. Then the charity worker turns to the cripple, the cause of it all, and inquires cheerfully, "Well, Willie, have you any *other* relatives?" and the curtain falls.

The audience has asked, "What will come of it?" The curtain answers simply, "More tragedies."

From the world the action has come. It is complete. The world continues. The play is over, and ends by orientating itself in life. After the tragedy there may be a flash of humor; after the catastrophe there may be the evidence that something is left untouched. It is thus in Maeterlinck's "Interior": Death has come, but

"the child has not awakened." It is thus in MM. André de Lorde and Eugène Morel's fearful "Terre d'Épouvante" ("Land of Terror"): the city has been wiped out by the volcano, but a flower is already blossoming in the ruins. So too in Lady Gregory's "The Rising of the Moon": the hunted man returns to his erstwhile enemy for his hat and his wig, without which he would get his death of cold.

Here is what Professor Burton calls

> . . . the illusion produced by giving the broken rhythm of life instead of the too perfect symmetry of self-conscious art.[1]

•

Even where there is a punch, the buffer of a line or two of final orientation, unless it has already been accomplished, may lend greater character to the fall of the curtain. Over-neatness, over-symmetry is too much like trying to cut a pound of flesh from nearest the heart of life, without cutting either

> . . . . . more
> Or less than a just pound, be it but so much
> As makes it light or heavy in the substance,
> Or the division of the twentieth part
> Of one poor scruple.

Shylock could not do it without shedding blood, and the dramatist can accomplish it only when he is cutting into a lifeless body.

It is hardly necessary, I take it, to point out the dignity, the beauty, sometimes the nobility which the "broken rhythm of life" may bring to the play. After the storm of drama, the peace — and the orientation — of the universe. Anticlimax there will not be unless the curtain is deferred too far: the fourth dimension, relationship, is too potent dramatically to permit interest to relax. And sometimes, even in the broken

[1] "Bernard Shaw: The Man and the Mask", 254.

rhythm of life, there may be the simplest, the loftiest eloquence.

In "If Winter Comes" Mr. A. S. M. Hutchinson describes the going forth of the soul thus:

> Dead? He stared upon her dead face. Where was gone that mask? Whence had come this glory? That inhabitant of this her body, in act of going had looked back, and its look had done this thing. It had departed from beneath a mask, and looked, and that which had been masked now was beatified.

Thus, perhaps, in the last moments, the soul of the play might depart: looking back and beatifying.

Here is superlative orientation from Lady Gregory's "The Gaol Gate":

> MARY CAHEL (*holding out her hands*). Are there any people in the streets at all till I call on them to come hither? Did they ever hear in Galway such a thing to be done, a man to die for his neighbor?
> Tell it out in the streets for the people to hear, Denis Cahel from Slieve-Echtge is dead. It was Denis Cahel from Daire-caol that died in the place of his neighbor. . . .
> One word to the judge and Denis was free, they offered him all sorts of riches. They brought him drink in the gaol, and gold, to swear away the life of his neighbor! . . .
> I will go through Gort and Kilbecanty and Druimdarod and Daroda; I will call to the people and the singers at the fairs to make a great praise for Denis! . . .
> I to stoop on a stick through half a hundred years, I will never be tired with praising! Come hither, Mary Cushin, till we'll shout it through the roads, Denis Cahel died for his neighbor!
> [*She goes off to the left, Mary Cushin following her.*
>
> CURTAIN

And here, from J. M. Synge's "Riders to the Sea", is the broken rhythm of life:

CATHLEEN (*to an old man*). Maybe yourself and Eamon would be making a coffin when the sun rises. We have fine white boards herself bought, God help her, thinking Michael would be found, and I have a new cake you can eat while you'll be working.

THE OLD MAN (*looking at the boards*). Are there nails with them?

CATHLEEN. There are not, Colum; we didn't think of the nails.

ANOTHER MAN. It's a great wonder she wouldn't think of the nails, and all the coffins she's seen made already.

CATHLEEN. It's getting old she is, and broken.

[*Maurya stands up again very slowly and spreads out the pieces of Michael's clothes beside the body, sprinkling them with the last of the Holy Water.*

NORA (*in a whisper to Cathleen*). She's quiet now and easy; but the day Michael was drowned you could hear her crying out from this to the spring well. It's fonder she was of Michael, and would any one have thought that?

CATHLEEN (*slowly and clearly*). An old woman will be soon tired with anything she will do, and isn't it nine days herself is after crying and keening, and making great sorrow in the house?

MAURYA (*puts the empty cup mouth downwards on the table, and lays her hands together on Bartley's feet*). They're all together this time, and the end is come. May the Almighty God have mercy on Bartley's soul, and on Michael's soul, and on the souls of Sheamus and Patch, and on Stephen and Shawn (*bending her head*); and may He have mercy on my soul, Nora, and on the soul of every one is left living in the world. (*She pauses, and the keen rises a little more loudly from the women, then sinks away. Continuing*): Michael has a clean burial in the far north, by the grace of the Almighty God. Bartley will have a fine coffin out of the white boards, and a deep grave surely. What more can we want than that? No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied. (*She kneels down again, and the curtain falls slowly*)

BOOK FOUR

THE WRITING OF THE PLAY

Chapter XXVII: The Choice of Characters

Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch writes:

A dramatic author must start by mastering certain stage-mechanics. Having mastered them, he must — to be great — unlearn reliance on them, learn to cut them away as he grows to perceive that the secret of his art resides in playing human being against human being, man against woman, character against character, will against will — not in devising "situations" or "curtains" and operating his puppets to produce these. His art touches climax when his "situations" and "curtains" so befall that we tell ourselves, "It is wonderful — yet what else could have happened?"[1]

Construction, to which we have devoted fourteen chapters, has but one aim: to extract the largest possible value from any given material. If the material is but a string of flashy situations animated by rubber-stamp personages, the result will be a tricky play. If the material is honest, summing up real observation and reflection, and there is the determination to let craftsmanship be but the servant of truth, the result may be a good play.

In the last analysis, character is the origin of all good drama. Theme is but the consideration of character in the mass; situation but the consideration of character in action. The individual character itself is a part of humanity, persuasive as such, and, to the dramatist, commanding as such.

Characters are a vehicle of thought between the dramatist and his audience. In them the abstract becomes concrete — and persuasive. They are both

[1] "Shakespeare's Workmanship", 66.

the subject of action, and the object of action. From their logical outworking the story develops; from the development of the story come about changes in the characters. From character the action germinates; in character it finds its target.

The choice of characters to interpret a given play is a matter of prime importance. Opinions are to be voiced; actions and reactions are to take place. If these are not inevitably to be referred to the dramatist's indulgence of his own eccentricities, they must come from honestly conceived and self-consistent men and women who, while expressing the play, express themselves in it. They can do both only if they have found their way into the play in the incubating stage, if sufficient time has elapsed to allow characters and situations to become habituated to each other, to weld naturally and coherently into one. The earlier character enters the dramatist's mind, the truer his play is likely to be.

We may roughly divide characters into three classes: those directly involved in the action; those required to supply rotundity; and those required for technical reasons.

The characters directly involved in the action are necessarily few; yet a large degree of choice is open to the dramatist. Minor characters, if there are to be any, will supply background; but the fact that the major characters may supply invaluable background for each other should never be overlooked. Contrast, physical or mental, tempered always by the exigencies of the play, is of very great value. In its light focuses become sharp, differences pronounced, issues clear-cut, and, most important, sympathies become natural and acute.

The audience is emotionally partisan. If there are but two characters in a play, it is better for one to claim most of the sympathy — or antipathy — than for both

to divide it equally. Any attempt at an equal division means that both will suffer.

Lady Gregory has built several of her plays about two central characters so similar both in conception and in action that lines might be interchanged almost at random without the audience being the wiser. Mineog and Hazel in "Coats", Taig and Darby in "The Bogie Men", Mike and Michael in "The Workhouse Ward" are like as two peas. Even if the actors who play the parts bring pronounced differentiation to their portrayal, the result is likely to be anecdotal. Each of the three plays might be summed up in twenty words beginning "Two Irishmen met ---- " The lack of opposition results in artificiality, in casual interest instead of sympathy, in a feeling that two individuals so remarkably alike are, perhaps, a little inhuman. Tweedledee and Tweedledum have met on the street, and are unable to pass because both move simultaneously to right or to left, forward or backward. This may be diverting but it is not moving.

It may sound strange to insist that "The Workhouse Ward" would be still more effective if one character were the "star", but the question has been settled too often by audiences to admit of debate. Miss Alice Brown's "Joint Owners in Spain" and Miss Alice Gerstenberg's "Overtones" make an uneven division of sympathy between the central characters. The plays gain measurably in emotive power as the direct result. In the Quinteros' "A Sunny Morning", Mr. Harold Brighouse's "Lonesome-Like", and Mr. Sutro's "A Marriage Has Been Arranged", a difference of sex between the characters makes both for contrast and for uneven division of sympathy.

Opposition brings about a clear-cut issue. A problem is to be solved. It gains greatly in vividness if, without becoming unnatural or melodramatic, there

can be spokesmen for both sides. They need not be conscious spokesmen; they need not even be consistent spokesmen: the modern one-act play has no use for heroes who are always heroic, and villains who are always villainous; but the audience, permitted to view a problem from two angles, will appreciate it far better.

The central characters, in the one-act play, have need to be few in number. Their use, first of all, is to focus attention, and that cannot be done if half a dozen individuals compete with each other. In such a struggle there is often no victor at all: the audience, bewildered by the many claimants for its attention, can neither understand nor enjoy, and, lacking patience, may lose interest altogether. Miss Zona Gale's "The Neighbors"[1] contains admirable characterization, but its audience, asked to become engrossed in rapid succession in the destinies of eight different persons, and unable to play blindfold chess, must necessarily be at a loss. Eventually the dramatist's conception becomes clear: the central character is "The Neighbors"; but on the road to that thought there has been confusion for which subsequent clarity cannot compensate. A mob character, consisting of many individuals blended into one by the simple device of flattening each, and opposed by a single other character, would have eliminated the difficulty.

The use of a small number of central characters makes for clearness. The destiny of some one person may well be supremely important: the action will become simpler, and the possibilities of the play greater. It is the Toff who really matters in "A Night at an Inn." He is the ringleader; in his person he sums up the play. His three accomplices meet the fate that he does, but the three deaths are measurably less important than his own. The action is clear; what must go into the play is reduced to a minimum; the dramatist's

[1] See page 157.

talents are given great scope. The elimination of the Toff, or the elevation of his companions to his own importance would be ruinous to the play. It is not a mere coincidence that each of the one-act plays which stand head and shoulders above the rest may be summed up as the story of a single individual.

It is the dramatist's first business to be clear. In the selection of his central characters he may well give this consideration weight. It is the business of the one-act playwright to be economical. In the selection of his minor characters this must not be neglected.

Tight writing and a small cast make for dramatic force: often two or three characters will carry a play better than a dozen. But economy stops short of inadequacy. Many plays will require minor characters: if discarded altogether, there will be loss of orientation; if supplied too liberally there will be dispersal of attention and a lessened totality of effect. Somewhere between the two is a golden mean, and for this the dramatist must seek.

Too few and too many minor characters, if they are required at all, are equally dangerous. Subtract any two of Mrs. Dowey's friends from "The Old Lady Shows Her Medals", and the third promptly begins to assume an unwelcome importance. By making the friends three in number, the author brings about flattening, and subdues prominent elements in a background so that the central characters may stand out still more prominently. Add three more charwomen, and the effect is almost equally bad: the charwomen occupy more room than they are worth. Maeterlinck's "The Blind" discloses a single central character who is dead, and a mob character composed of twelve individuals. Take away six, and paradoxically, there would be too many left: instead of Maeterlinck's *two* characters, we would have seven. The mob effect would be destroyed: the audience, to the cost of the

play, might become interested in individuals. Add a dozen characters and the play would simply become inchoate; its poignance would not be increased in proportion. On the other hand, Andreyev, writing tumultuously in "Love of One's Neighbor", has use for just as many characters as his stage will hold.

As so often in playwriting, only the dramatist's instinct can guide him rightly here. Minor characters are accompanying instruments, valuable as they amplify — and lose themselves in — the harmony of the play. They supply a background: life. Against it the major characters stand out prominently and convincingly. It is for the dramatist rightly to judge and rightly to preserve this vital balance. On the one hand, he makes use of flattening; on the other hand, he is careful in the application of emphasis.

Both of these devices have been discussed in some detail in Chapter XVII. It may be well to recapitulate here that a character may be made to stand out by sharp differentiation; by subduing the others; by making him contrast with a background; by assigning him an undue proportion of important action or dialogue; by keeping him in the minds of the auditors, either physically, or by repeated reference to him when he is not on the stage; finally, by giving him an effective entrance and keeping him important.

We may reverse these methods when flattening minor characters:

A character may be made not to stand out by lack of differentiation, i.e., by being fused into a mob; by emphasizing the others; by making him harmonize with a background; by assigning him unimportant action and dialogue; by not keeping him in the minds of the auditors; finally, by giving him an unobtrusive or ineffective entrance, and keeping him unimportant.

A frequent, and an exceedingly effective, use of a minor character is as a norm.

Even in Shakespeare's most terrific and seismic inventions — when, as in Hamlet or in Lear, he seems to be breaking up the solid earth under our feet — there is always some point and standard of sanity to which all enormities and passionate errors are referred by us, albeit unconsciously, for correction; on which the agitated mind of the spectator settles back as upon its centre of gravity.[1]

A character in the play, but not of the play; an individual near whose feet the lightning strikes, who yet is not touched by it, supplies the fourth dimension in one of its most potent forms. Such characters will be found in nearly all of Maeterlinck's plays, lending them breadth and universality.

Certain characters are occasionally necessary for technical reasons. Often they may be eliminated by making adroit use of persons already in the play. But economy should not be permitted to run amuck. Lord Dunsany, faced with a difficult and essential expositional detail in "The Queen's Enemies",[2] rightly chooses the lesser of two evils. But lesser playwrights, far too often, indulge in preposterous expository device for the sake of omitting a character. It may be necessary for the audience to know that John Brown married a lady named Black; but it is ghastly for Brown's son to inform Brown of the fact. The flow of information, I have suggested, is naturally downhill. Correct choice of characters may, in the first instance, select persons so contrasted that information may logically flow from one to another. If it cannot do so naturally, and if it is essential expository material, it may be conveyed in any effective manner, even if it calls for the addition of a character to the cast. Such a step, at any rate, will not ruin the play. The introduction of a farcical detail — unless the play is itself a farce — may be depended upon to do so.

[1] Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch: "Shakespeare's Workmanship", 50.

[2] See pages 119–120.

In terminating this chapter it may be well to mention that certain characters may be more effectively suggested than incarnated. A frequent and distressing type of play persists in placing upon the stage "The Spirit of Progress"; "Error"; "The Thought of Money"; "The Rhythm of the Universe"; "The Spirit of Christmas"; "The Spirit of Gettysburg, Pa." Beginning thus, the play usually proceeds in terms of platitudes and poses.

It may not be inappropriate to suggest that the mere choice of such characters makes inhuman — hence undramatic — whatever theme or situation lies at the heart of the play. I can sympathize with a flesh-and-blood person; I can be filled with anxiety for his future. But I cannot concern myself greatly over the probable result of an encounter between characters frankly labeled "Truth" and "Error." I should like to see "Error" victorious, if only for the sake of variety. But I know I shall not.

Only when the abstract characters step out of their parts and become flesh and blood does the play which contains them become moving. Miss Mary Carolyn Davies' "The Slave With Two Faces", boldly cast in the form of the old morality, sets before us real living figures of which the most important is "A Girl." Her only abstraction is "Life", and that, perhaps, is the most concrete of all abstractions. So, too, the ancient moralities themselves, after labeling the characters with the name of an attribute, developed them, often, with most effective inconsistency, making them, as a matter of fact, anything but abstract.

If the one-act play is to contain out-and-out abstractions, it may best of all radiate them. There are characters which may well come into existence in the minds of the auditors: they may be evoked by flesh-and-blood characters on the stage.

Chapter XXVIII: The Conception of Characters

THE characters of the play may be conceived from two radically different viewpoints. They may be considered primarily exponents of an action, or they may be considered primarily originators of an action. In the process of incubation the play has either fitted itself with types which may act as ventriloquist's dummies in its story, or it has gone deeper and discovered real human beings from whose natural action and reaction the desired sequence of episodes may come about.

If the first, the playwright faces the very simple task of convincing an audience that a certain succession of events *might* happen: his characters are so superficially conceived and so typically drawn that thoughts of their mental processes will distract no attention from the action itself. If the second, the playwright faces the very difficult, but very worthy task of convincing an audience that a certain succession of events *must* happen: his characters are so profoundly conceived and so atypically drawn that thoughts of their mental processes, from which the action develops, become supremely important.

Characterization of the first kind shapes the individuals to fit the action. Characterization of the second kind either succeeds in finding individuals to fit the action perfectly, or shapes the action itself to fit those that it has found. Characterization of the first kind is always sure that there will be a play, however bad. Characterization of the second kind aims at a good play — or none.

Mr. Archer draws an interesting dividing line appreciably higher:

> Character-drawing is the presentment of human nature in its commonly-recognized, understood and accepted aspects; psychology is, as it were, the exploration of character, the bringing of hitherto unsurveyed tracts within the circle of our knowledge and comprehension.[1]

The first is characterization by identification; the second, characterization by revelation. "Character-drawing" presents known territories; "psychology" lays bare the roots of character and personality.

Character-drawing may be merely type-characterization, presenting its subject by the device of repeating a stencilled trait or group of traits at frequent intervals. To this August Strindberg, to his lasting credit, objected violently. He pointed out that the middle-class notion about the immobility of the soul was transplanted to the stage, where the middle-class element has always held sway. There a character became synonymous with a gentleman fixed and finished once for all — one who invariably appeared drunk, jolly, sad. And for the purpose of characterization nothing more was needed than some physical deformity like a club-foot, a wooden leg, a red nose; or the person concerned was made to repeat some phrase like "That's capital!" or "Barkis is willin' ", or something of the kind. This manner of regarding human beings as homogeneous is preserved even by the great Molière. Harpagon is nothing but miserly, although Harpagon might as well have been at once miserly and a financial genius, a fine father, and a public-spirited citizen. What is worse yet, his "defect" is of distinct advantage to his son-in-law and daughter, who are his heirs, and for that reason should not find fault with him, even if they have to wait a little for their wedding. I do not believe, therefore, in simple characters on the stage. And the summary judgments of the author upon men — this one stupid, and that one brutal, this one jealous, and that

[1] "Play-Making", 376.

one stingy — should be challenged by the naturalists, who know the fertility of the soul-complex, and who realise that "vice" has a reverse very much resembling virtue.[1]

With his usual precision, Professor Baker expresses the same thought more forcibly and succinctly:

> Fundamentally, type characterization rests on a false premise, namely, that every human being may be adequately represented by some dominant characteristic or small group of closely related characteristics.[2]

In the tricky play, interesting because of its cleverness and originality, and expressing itself oftenest in the forms of farce, light comedy or melodrama, the type-character is quite at home. His psychology, such as it is, is extremely unimportant: it is that of his type. The action, like the curious insects which possess the ability to skate on the water, scuds hither and thither with such rapidity that there is no time for real cerebration. It would only interfere. Of this class are most of the "sketches" to be found in vaudeville and a discouragingly large proportion of the plays to be found on Broadway.

In the better class one-act play, serious or comic, persuasive because of its truth and human nature, the type-character is sometimes exceedingly useful — as a minor character. I have suggested the very great need for "flattening"; a need far more pressing in the one-act play than in the longer form. While the conception and delineation of the central characters may well call for the best the author has in him, the use of simpler and immediately recognizable characters to fill in is generally good craftsmanship.

A type-character may perhaps be defined as an individual projected with such emphasis upon a dominant recognizable attribute or group of attributes that

[1] Preface to "Miss Julia", translated by Edwin Björkman, 15.

[2] "Dramatic Technique", 235.

the audience immediately knows him for what he is and all that he is, and may, unless he happens to become either amusing or annoying, forego consideration of him for consideration of the play. He is human shorthand, easily readable, and none the less readable because he repeats himself at intervals.

Such, for instance, are the three lesser thieves in "A Night at an Inn." They are thieves and nothing else — except human beings. Our interest turns naturally, as the author wishes, to the Toff. Such are the dozens of characters in Andreyev's "Love of One's Neighbor." Each is so clearly and so consistently recognizable as a type that he becomes merely a facet of the greater and amazingly complex character the author successfully projects: the mob.

The type-character, sometimes simplified and improved by the omission of his repetitive stencil, has his uses. Mr. Bernard Shaw, less skillful than any outstanding dramatist in the use of restraint, is frequently unable to resist over-characterizing his minor personages, with resultant injury to those of his plays that profess to be serious. Mr. Galsworthy, deliberately simplifying characters whose development would be the reverse of useful, brings about far greater clarity and force. J. M. Synge, in the greatest one-act play ever written, does not hesitate to surround Maurya with a gallery of easily comprehensible characters. Bartley, her son, is a repetitive type-character. Nora and Cathleen, her daughters, are photographic, produced by a high order of character drawing. Only Maurya herself is a true psychological character. The result is absolute clarity: the three simpler characters focus attention upon the one who is far from simple. So too Maeterlinck, in a play which surely ranks in the first dozen, separates an entire family from the audience by means of glass windows, characterizing its members only by their appearance.

Since type-characterization results in the production of minor characters, it is very necessary that they be kept in their places. The British and American drama of the dark ages overflows with plays in which "every part is a good part", in which the Swedish cook and the Hibernian coachman and the mother-in-law with a toothache are trotted out upon the stage at mathematical intervals — just to be Swedish or Hibernian or "agonizingly funny." Only farce can survive such a superabundance of good parts: the central characters cease to be central. The dazzling and wholly unexpected success of an eccentric minor character in a farce produced a few years ago made the play a hit overnight. A similar success in a more serious play might have wrought havoc.[1] Indeed, I question if the present brainless fashion of farce, making use almost invariably of low-comedy butlers and maidservants, is as funny as it might be if supplied with a more natural and less obtrusive background. The author, having set out to be comic, does not know where to stop. Contrast, which is invaluable, is overlooked. The costume which is inoffensive at the seashore would become scandalous at an afternoon tea. Precisely so a humorous anecdote is at its best when told with a straight face. Mark Twain demonstrated it more than once; there is a norm, in comparison with which the humor becomes pronounced. A similar norm helps in playwriting, and simple characterization of minor personages helps to supply it.

It is to the characters who may be called originators of action that the modern dramatist goes for his central personages. The conception may be mimetic, making use only of a higher order of "character drawing", or, depending upon the dramatist, it may be "psychological", shedding light upon the fundamentals of

[1] Imagine "Riders to the Sea" with Nora the "hit of the show"!

character. In either event he may make use, to a certain extent, of type-characterization; but he will go infinitely farther and deeper. Since his action is to depend upon his characters, and not the reverse, questions of psychology, logic, and motivation become all important.

Wishing to set before us a given action, the dramatist must inquire from what kind of person such an action might naturally flow. Having answered this question for himself, he must answer it even better for his audience. Judge Brack may say, "People don't do such things", but that opinion must not be echoed on the other side of the footlights.

The dramatist can avert this catastrophe only by the careful and truthful use of preparation. It is not necessary to show that a thief is waiting for a chance to steal; it is quite sufficient to show that he is lacking in moral fiber, and given an opportunity, may react as an honest man would not. It is not necessary to indicate that a character will do a certain thing; it is enough to show that he is capable of similar things.

When a person, either in life or in the drama, performs an act there are always three concomitants: an opportunity, an ability, and a motive. This applies equally to good and bad acts, to big and little ones. Lacking opportunity, ability and motive can only mark time until it arises. Lacking ability, motive will be impotent even in the presence of opportunity. Lacking motive, opportunity and ability alone cannot cause the act to be performed.

When one of the three concomitants is lacking, the act will remain unaccomplished in life, and if, by the will of the dramatist, accomplished on the stage, will not be persuasive.

The visible action of the play will bring about opportunity. Preparation must deal with both ability and motive. Its function, with respect to the first, has

been covered in earlier chapters. Let us now examine its business with regard to the second.

I have suggested earlier that the credulity of an audience is at its highest point at the rise of the curtain. In the very opening of the play, or upon his first and unprepared appearance, a character may commit the basest or the noblest of deeds and win immediate acceptance. Indeed, the act serves powerfully to characterize him. Phipps, not a minute after we meet him, knocks down his master. No person in the audience questions the absolute logic of the deed; on the contrary, it stamps him at once. Mistress Cheeyō, in the very beginning of Takeda Izumo's "The Pine-Tree", performs an action which we shall recognize later as one of superlative nobility. We accept it at its face value; but as it occurs immediately upon the opening of the play we would also accept it at its real value, were that known to us. At the inception of the play, character is created by action. From that point on, action is created by character.

It follows that the central action, taking place near the fall of the curtain, must be motivated with extreme care, and that the dramatist may well take advantage of the initial credulity of his audience to locate such important preparation near the beginning of the play.

We have examined in detail the motivation of the magistrate in Lady Gregory's "Spreading the News", of Mary, in Mr. O'Neill's "The Rope", and of Strickland and Winwood in Miss Beulah Marie Dix's "Allison's Lad."[1] The examination of three of my own plays will indicate how consciously the playwright may take advantage of simple principles in coping with varied problems.

In "According to Darwin" a cripple takes fiendish delight in observing the utter degradation of his family. His viewpoint is so heartless that it would be next to

[1] Chapters XVIII and XIX.

incredible if not motivated. The character of the cripple, being unusual, is therefore established as soon as the difficulties of the opening have been overcome, and, as a matter of fact, long before his actual entrance. The exposition of his selfishness and inhumanity in the days preceding his accident motivates and makes logical his exhibition of the same qualities in the heart of the play. Had I been compelled to open with the cripple on the stage, I would have tried to have his very first word and his very first action similarly stamp him.

In "Pawns" a recruiting sergeant is to shoot an inoffensive and harmless peasant upon the slightest of provocation. The episode which introduces him is therefore of such a nature that his subsequent action is quite in character. Here the preparatory action is not so near the beginning of the play, but it occurs, with equal effect, upon the first entrance of the person whom it is to characterize. The sergeant's act is to be followed by swift retribution; Stepan, one of the peasants, is to disregard a wound and strangle him to death with his bare hands. Hence both Stepan's gigantic strength and his quick temper, his ability and part of his motive, are established as fact long before they will be needed. The three remaining peasants are to witness the double tragedy and take no active part in it; it is in accordance with their characters as developed earlier in the play. The situations of the play arise clearly out of the characters of its personages; it is highly important that the audience know them so intimately that it will accept developments when they come.

In "Confessional" an unusual method of preparation is employed. The absolute integrity of Robert Baldwin is exposited at the very beginning, and accepted for truth by the audience. But the exposition of his honesty does not stop here. Deliberately carried too

far, deliberately hammering in a point that has already been sufficiently made, and taking every advantage of the lessening credulity of the audience, an atmosphere of "doth protest too much, methinks", is brought about, and the audience led to anticipate what the characters themselves do not.

In the first two illustrations there is motivation by likes; in the third, motivation by purposely overdone opposites. One method can always be made to serve if the use of the other is undesirable. The first method, applied to "Confessional", would have vented itself most inartistically by suggesting that every man has his price, a thought which is foreign to the play, and which is never allowed to enter it. The second method, applied to the other plays, would have resulted in perilously slow movement. The exigencies of the individual play must always determine the craftsmanship which is to be applied to it. Formulas can never be flexible enough to meet the varied demands that are made on them.

Motivation, in the last analysis, is the art of making an audience see the dramatist's conceptions in precisely the way that he himself sees them. If his view is superficial, he can hardly expect his auditors to look deeper and discover anything worth the effort. It is only when his view is penetrating that his characters are likely to be both interesting and illuminating.

If the type-character expresses humanity in shorthand, then the drawn character expresses humanity in longhand, and the psychological character expresses humanity by means of the X-ray. The first art is mimetic and perfunctory; the second mimetic and painstaking; only the third is distinctly creative.

Psychology, beginning where character-drawing leaves off, sets forth character in which the action shall take soundings, in which it shall disclose uncharted reefs and unplumbed depths. In the class of true

psychological characters I think we may safely include Mrs. Wright, in Miss Glaspell's "Trifles", Brutus Jones, in Mr. O'Neill's "The Emperor Jones", and Mary Trask, in Mr. Beach's "The Clod", to confine myself only to a few outstanding American plays.

Character-drawing and psychology alike may produce good plays; but only the latter is likely to produce memorable plays. Cleverness, mere ingenuity in causing a plot to execute rapid and complicated evolutions, may give rise to great pleasure, but bids fair to be forgotten quickly. Insight into human nature, true and illuminating portrayal of the subterranean caverns of character, gives rise to even greater pleasure — and may possess enduring value.

Chapter XXIX: The Portrayal of Characters

"ONE touch of nature makes the whole world kin." For "nature" the dramatist may well write "sympathy." Upon it interest, suspense, and the emotional response of his audience are based. Yet in his desire to win sympathy for his characters it is not necessary for him to follow the practice of forgotten writers and oppose heroes, a hundred per cent. good and deserving, by villains, a hundred per cent. bad and treacherous. The modern audience, having discovered that there is probably no such thing as a perfectly good or an altogether bad man, is prone to resent the presence of either upon the stage. The bid for that which may be more certainly obtained by simpler means is too obvious.

Sympathy, naturally defined, is a feeling of well-wishing towards a person who lacks that to which he is clearly entitled. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, these, plus some moderate success in the pursuit, are the things to which every human being has a plain unalienable right. If he has not these things, or, having them, risks being deprived of them, he will command sympathy and an audience will be moved by his struggles.

The degree of sympathy will depend both upon the deserts of the character and the extent of the deprivation he suffers or risks suffering. The four persons who greet us at the opening of "A Night in an Inn" are thieves and murderers. They are probably liars, wife-beaters, and footpads as well. The Toff, by his own confession, is a card cheat. Yet the danger with which they are faced is so hideous that everything but the

fact that they are human beings sinks into the background. There is intense sympathy for them: the unknown horror which menaces them reduces them and the audience to a common denominator: humanity.

On the other hand, Mrs. Dowey is probably a very good woman, and is entirely reconciled to the fate which has placed her upon an humble plane. She is faced with no terrible danger. She has little, and is secure in its possession. Yet she wants one thing: "It was everybody's war, mister, except mine. I wanted it to be my war too." Her friend, Mrs. Twymley, has forcibly expressed herself: "I've heard of females that have no fnale relations, and so they have no man-party at the wars. I've heard of them, but I don't mix with them."

The thing which Mrs. Dowey lacks is that to which she, as an Englishwoman, is clearly entitled. Her aspiration is entirely natural — hence sympathetic. Her ambition achieved, Kenneth's death in the end does not matter so much as the fact that she has also achieved that other thing to which a patriotic woman has a right: a proud sorrow.

The old dramatists made the mistake of piling on the agony too thickly; of menacing persons like Mrs. Dowey with the dangers that threaten the Toff, thus subscribing to the fallacious belief that sympathy increases with morality, when, as a matter of fact, a thief is infinitely more sympathetic than a prig. Instead of sympathizing with an over-good character faced with an over-terrible and most improbable menace, the modern audience would probably respond with healthy laughter.

The winning of sympathy calls neither for the exhibition of supremely good nor supremely bad morality. Everyday morality, which is neither very good nor very bad, is more to the point. Mrs. Dowey, whatever her virtues, is a glorious old liar. The Toff, whatever

his vices, meets death like a gentleman. Humanity, which antedates morality, is the crux.

If a character is human, he will long for something; because he is human, the audience will like to see him get it. If the thing he longs for is in accordance with his deserts, the audience will sympathize keenly; a man deserves the undisputed possession of what he has earned; a repentant criminal deserves the freedom for which he prays; a young man deserves the girl he loves. If the thing he longs for is not in accordance with his deserts, the audience will be neutral or may be antipathetic: a man who has wrongfully acquired what he has does not deserve undisputed possession of it; an unrepentant criminal does not deserve freedom; a young man does not deserve the girl he does not love.

Sympathy, in brief, is the reaction of the audience to a desire for happiness on the part of the characters. To make that sympathy acute, the dramatist has but to make the desire just, natural, and human.

Character may be portrayed to an audience in many ways: by the appearance of the individual; by self-exposition; by the exposition of others; by his action; finally, by the action of others.

Characterization by appearance, obviously, is but a starting point from which the dramatist will build in accordance with the importance of the character. It is most valuable when the physical differentiation is pronounced. The position in life of the personages, their age, the traits that are often revealed by their faces, are always of interest to an audience, and costume, make-up, and stage direction, coupled, in the actual production, with careful casting, may properly come to the author's aid.

Andreyev's "Love of One's Neighbor" is a remarkable example of the adroit use of externals. A uniformed policeman and a boy are the first speakers; there follow English tourists with field glasses; "a tall,

lanky woman of unusually independent and military appearance"; "two tourists armed with cameras"; a comb-vendor; a waiter; a fat tourist; students in uniform; strolling Italian singers and musicians; a pedantic girl tourist with glasses; drunken men; "a very elegant gentleman, the chief correspondent of European newspapers"; a clergyman; Salvation Army members; a man in a white vest, who is the hotel keeper; and finally, "musicians with trumpets and drums, a man at their head carrying on a long pole a huge placard . . . 'I was bald.'" The playwright has written with his eyes; the result is an extraordinary vivid and eloquent picture.

Here is type-characterization of a high order. The characters, deliberately stenciled, and comprehensible at a glance, explain themselves instantly and distract no attention from the greater character into which they are fused.

The facial appearance of Sasha in Mr Calderon's "The Little Stone House"; of Salome in Oscar Wilde's play of that name, and, almost invariably, of the important personages in Mr. O'Neill's plays, powerfully stamps the individuals. The use of the visible to portray a character as he appears in life is always proper. The dramatist often sets before his audience what appears to be a pronounced type — accomplishing the atypical differentiation of the central characters as the play progresses.

Self-exposition, through dialogue, will have effect precisely as in real life. If the individual is a dolt or a wise man, what he says is likely to indicate it. Agmar, in "The Gods of the Mountain", has the vision of prophets; Jack, in my "The Sequel", is a gilded young fool. The views voiced by each make the characterization clear. The central character in Mr. W. B. Yeats' "A Pot of Broth" is exceedingly shrewd; Mr. Brock's hero, in "The Bank Account", is not; Mrs. Chrystal-Pole, in Mr. J. Hartley Manners' "Happiness", is discontented; both father and son in Sir J. M. Barrie's

"The New Word" are shy and reserved; the eponymic character, in Mr. Witter Bynner's "Tiger", is sinister and mercenary: the words put into the mouths of each, no less than the manner of saying them, make the existence of these qualities evident. Here, no doubt, is an expression of the "summary judgment" to which Strindberg objected. It is important to note the dramatists have gone farther; have used a dominant characteristic to apply "tooth" to a canvas before proceeding to overlay it with richer and more delicate pigmentation.

Dialogue, when it is introspective, is not uniformly revealing. Rarely is an individual the best judge of his own character; rarely, by proclaiming his judgment of himself, can he have it accepted at parity. He is too obviously an interested party, too obviously prone to show himself for what he would be rather than for what he is. Even if he can appraise his own character correctly, his voicing of that appraisal will pass through the tinted glasses of his own motives, his reserve or his lack of it, and finally through that same character itself before it can be expressed to another. It is only in moments of passion that inhibitions break down, that the tinted glasses disappear, that the man speaks the truth about himself as it probably is.

Introspective judgment is forcible when it deals with facts; too often feeble when it deals with opinions. When Harrison Crockstead, in "A Marriage Has Been Arranged", tells us "I have no polish, or culture, or tastes. Art wearies me, literature sends me to sleep—" he may only be posing. His English is impressively good; his French is perfect. But when he proceeds to inform us that

> In a little township in Australia — a horrible place where there was gold — I met a woman whom I loved. She was what is technically known as a bad woman. She ran away with another man. I tracked them to Texas, and in a mining camp there I shot the man.

he deals with facts, and characterizes himself most powerfully.

A judgment of character expressed by another is colored, as always, by consideration of the character which voices it. If your friend speak well of you or your enemy speak ill of you, their views will be accepted at a discount. If your enemy speak well of you or your friend speak ill of you their views will be accepted at a premium. Only the opinion of the clearly disinterested and competent character passes at exact face value. Be it noted, however, that opinion of any kind may be only a stop-gap; accepted until actions and the judgment of the audience itself either endorse or discredit it. Opinion always courts a test, and, on the stage, always promises a test. To say that a certain character is good — or bad — or clever — or stupid, unless the events of the play have already indicated it, invites action by which the audience may judge for itself.

These, I feel, are simple psychological truths. The dramatist consciously or unconsciously applies them in a variety of ways. An apparently good man may become bad, or an apparently bad man good, all within the limits of a one-act play. But if that is to happen it is more than probable that his character, in the beginning, contained hidden within it the elements which triumph in the end. There is rather less a change of character than a disclosure of what has always been fundamental in it. Externally there may be a change. Internally there is but a greater consistency.

The playwright, leading towards such an episode, may, among other methods, well make use of the kinds of characterization which are at a natural discount. His art will present a character in one guise. The action, gradually stripping it down to bedrock, may, if the characterization has been subtle, expose it finally as something very much different. The dramatist's

art makes such apparent change of character perfectly natural.

In actual change of character, taking place in twenty minutes or in an hour, I do not believe. Character, perhaps, is the most permanent thing in life, developing insensibly, changing almost imperceptibly, requiring lengthy exposure to new environment to bring about any alteration at all. A man may change his opinion, his determined course of action, or his sympathies in a second. But if he becomes a thief at the end of twenty minutes, the lax moral fiber was present at the beginning of the twenty minutes. Stevenson's "Markheim" does not change his character; the art of the story-teller merely strips off layer after layer and reveals what, unknown to Markheim himself, has always been at the bottom of it.

In considering these principles the dramatist disposes of what, considered from another angle, is a real obstacle in the one-act play; the time of representation required to make plausible a "change of character." If character is thought of but as an accumulation of geological strata, very often deceptive on the surface, the only time necessary is that sufficient to create a force great enough to produce a moral earthquake, and bring about the desired revelation.

Of all means of establishing character none is so vivid and so direct as action. A significant deed characterizes more positively, more economically, and more impressively in a few seconds than half an hour devoted to talk. The deed may be physical, or it may be mental, indubitably expressed. It may be so slight as an eloquent facial expression, or it may be so great as a heart-breaking renunciation, confirmed by visible action. It stamps character as nothing else can. It is character in action; and that is both the expression and the making of character. The "White-Faced Girl," in Miss Doris Halman's "Will-o'-the-Wisp," silent

throughout the play, is vaguely characterized until she acts — but then she is characterized with a vengeance.

In its simplest form action characterizes by the deference — or lack of it — paid to each other by the characters.

In the first scene of Sir J. M. Barrie's "The Will" Philip and Emily Ross are "nervous" when they enter the lawyer's office, and Robert Devizes is "master of the situation." In the second scene Mrs. Ross "sails in . . . like a galleon," and Devizes "removes her fine cloak with proper solicitude." In the third scene Mrs. Ross is dead. "The great Sir Philip enters" and Devizes is "on his feet at once to greet such a client." The actions could hardly be slighter; but they could hardly be more eloquent. Devizes is the norm. Against that background, exhibiting increasing deference as the years roll on, the Rosses work out their stern destiny. The variations of deference shown to each other by Taig and Darby in Lady Gregory's "The Bogie Men" are highly illuminating. In "A Night at an Inn" deference indicates the superior mentality of the Toff exactly as a similar deference in "The Gods of the Mountain" indicates the superior mentality of Agmar. In Mr. O'Neill's "The Hairy Ape" the mixture of respect and fear shown by Yank's comrades is testimony to their opinion of him, and incidentally sheds light on his character.

In its most pronounced form action characterizes by the decisive steps following upon the crisis.

When Jean, in Strindberg's tragedy, places the razor in Miss Julia's hand, he characterizes himself in no uncertain manner, and when Julia takes it and "goes firmly through the door", she, too, characterizes herself. Both, it will be noted, are the final portrayals of characters which earlier actions have established. There have been lengthy speeches, but the actions, the business with the handkerchief which introduces Julia,

the scene in which she begins by slapping Jean on the hand and ends by entering his room with him, the episode of the caged finch have been far more eloquent.

The need for visible action at the summit of the play has been discussed by Mr. Archer:

> A change of will or feeling, occurring at a crucial point in a dramatic action, must be certified by some external evidence, on pain of leaving the audience unimpressed.[1]

The play has brought about disclosure of character. Mere opinion, we have seen, cannot make it convincing; there must be the endorsement of action; an outward and visible sign of an inward regeneration — or degeneration.

Mr. Brighouse, characterizing Sam Horrocks in "Lonesome-Like", explains that his bashful hero

> *mechanically takes a ball of oily black cotton-waste from his right pocket when in conversational difficulties and wipes his hands upon it.*

He forgets to take off his cap. When reminded

> *takes off his cap and stuffs it is his left pocket after trying his right and finding the ball of waste in it.*

When the young lady he hopes to marry faces him, he "backs a little before her." When he kneels it is "suddenly and clumsily." He is turned down, but being lonely, it occurs to him that since he cannot have a wife perhaps old Sarah Ormerod, destined for the poorhouse, will answer as a mother. Having conceived this idea after an ignominious exit, he returns to carry it into execution. A few stage directions tell the story:

> *A knock at the door . . . Enter Sam . . . Bolting nervously for the door . . . Dropping the cotton waste he is fumbling with and picking it up . . . Desperately . . . Admiringly*

[1] "Play-Making", 336.

. . . Still reminiscent . . . Detachedly, looking at window . . . Eagerly . . . Turning to the door . . . He kisses her and lifts her in his arms . . Exit through door, carrying her.

CURTAIN

Here, obviously, is the crucial point certified by external evidence, but every other significant point is equally certified.

The simple visible action of "Riders to the Sea", even if divested entirely of its marvelous dialogue, is nobly eloquent and profoundly moving. The identification of Michael by the stitches Nora has dropped in the making of his stocking; the entrance of the old women, "crossing themselves on the threshold, and kneeling down . . . with red petticoats over their heads", the carrying in of Bartley's body, "with a bit of a sail over it", finally, the illimitable calm with which Maurya accepts the ultimate calamity which an implacable destiny visits upon her, these, I suggest, testify mutely to the craftsmanship of a very great artist.

Yet visible action does not always write itself into the play. It comes about only when the dramatist has given himself time to familiarize himself with his characters, has thought with them, lived with them, felt with them. That he should put them on paper convincingly when they are but casual acquaintances is incredible. He would have difficulty in portraying many of his friends in real life. Until he knows his characters at least as well it is only presumptuous for him to attempt to depict them. Psychology does not lie on the surface, and only intimacy, patience, and the ability to enter into the souls of his characters can bring about truthful portrayal.

For the term "coming to life", a synonym for what I have called "quickening", I am indebted to Mr. St. John Ervine. Its application is simple. Until the character "comes to life" in the mind of the dramatist,

begins to display a will of his or her (not *its*) own, and succeeds in conditioning the action by his own personality, the play, if the author aims high, may well remain unwritten. To this vitally important subject I have devoted an entire chapter.[1] It may be well to recall here that nowhere is quickening more necessary than in the faithful delineation of character.

The occasional portrayal of a half-developed character is unfortunately common. Mr. Laurence Housman's "The Lord of the Harvest" deals with Grinder, Drudge, Dole, Bit and Sup, Dotty Daft, Strike, and Hue and Cry. If anything whatsoever were gained by the device, it would be unobjectionable. But here, quite apparently, is a play that is a morality only in the names of its characters; that endeavors, by the use of label-names, to predigest an action which, but for its irrationality, would be realistic. The result is harrowing.

By the precaution of refraining from writing until Grinder, Drudge, and the rest had found themselves, the dramatist would have written the better play of which he is capable. For one thing, Drudge and Dole, become human, would not have been able to guard a mill full of corn and watch their child slowly starve to death for the lack of it. Here is need for motivation; but I doubt if any motivation can make plausible a psychology so inhuman.

My own play, "The Traitor", indicates what may result from undue haste. The idea occurred to me one morning. The play was written at a single sitting the same afternoon. This might be remarkable if the result were good, but it is not. The psychology of the play is absolutely false. It is founded upon the assumption that "one man would be merciful to a traitor: the man who himself might be discovered any day."

[1] Chapter XII.

Of course the truth is the exact opposite. If anything, such an individual would be the reverse of merciful; would attempt to divert suspicion from himself by a pose of ostentatious righteousness, and instead of being detected by the ruse employed in the play, would pass the test brilliantly. But a little reflection, but a little living with my characters would have disclosed the real probabilities, and would have permitted me to write a better play. Its theatric effect, its substitution of emotional intensity for the demands of logic, does something — but cannot do nearly enough — to overcome its fundamental defect.

The playwright must use his head, but he must also use his eyes. The ability to see his characters in the flesh, to observe their entrances and exits, to watch them in his mind's eye and to catch their facial expressions as the visible action progresses, is useful — almost indispensable. Before beginning to write the dramatist may well form an image of the setting as detailed as possible (an actual plan is helpful), and an accurate picture of the faces and costumes of his characters. The visible appeal is most powerful, and if the dramatist, in the act of writing, can make himself feel it, he is likely to respond to it. The result can scarcely fail to be vivid.

Professor Matthews writes:

> The character which can be seen from only one angle is as thin as a silhouette. It lacks the rotundity of reality.[1]

And Professor Baker:

> No play can rise above the level of its characterization.[2]

Every dramatist, I think, will admit the absolute validity of these statements. Rotundity, which is con-

[1] "A Study of the Drama", 167.
[2] "Dramatic Technique", 248.

vincing characterization, is most likely to be brought about if the dramatist visualizes the character in his habitual environment, places upon the stage not only the individual but the most suggestive of the many acts and reactions by which he expresses his relationship to the external world and to the persons in his corner of it.

A convincingly real character, above all else, is one that is richly orientated.

Chapter XXX: A Digression on Names

MANY minor subjects might be taken up under the general heading of character; but the dramatist's conclusions upon them should be based, I feel, upon direct consideration of life and of the play as its recreator rather than upon the curious results which are sometimes reached by a process of too detached cerebration. I confine myself, therefore, to a brief discussion of only one of the most interesting minor subjects, hoping to show, above all else, the frame of mind in which I conceive the dramatist ought to approach his problems.

Some names fit certain characters and others do not. Moreover, not infrequently the name of the character tends to prejudice one for or against it. Among the many given names, Jennie, Maggie, Clara, Ann, Tillie, are often found to be attached to middle-class heroines of the servant-girl type; whereas, Priscilla, Annette, Dorcas, are Puritan-like and modest. Claude and Percival are erratic; Clifford is weak and unstable; Reginald, Robert, Ralph, are dignified and courtier-like; Henry, Ruth, John, William, Kate, Emily, Samuel, are solid and devoid of affectation; and Benson, Peters, Judson, Squires, Martin, are names for butlers and footmen. . . . Mrs. Chrystal-Pole, Lady Sims, Madam Chenoweth are a bit aristocratic; Clifford Waite and Harvey Western are weak; Frank Sterling, Craig Gordon, Arnold Bennett, are thoroughgoing. . . . To attach a name to a character that does not tend to give it personality and distinction is to place it under a handicap.[1]

Despite the fact that Professor Lewis, in this quotation, has cited a number of the names by which I have

[1] B. Roland Lewis: "The Technique of the One-Act Play", 222.

identified characters in my own plays, I find myself quite unable to agree with his reasoning. Our object, as dramatists, is to portray life penetratingly. Let us therefore consider the function of names in life as we see it.

A family name generally indicates nationality with some degree of accuracy. It is far less accurate in indicating social station. Obviously if a prefix is attached the indication becomes more definite, but it is due to the force of the prefix alone. Sergeant ——, Professor ——, Doctor ——, Lord ——, Admiral ——, Commissioner ——, Private ——, President —— do not depend upon the names to which they are coupled for their specific effect. Without such prefixes, it will be found that family names have meaning according to the persons who bear them.

Rogers may equally well be a millionaire or his chauffeur; a bond owner or a bandit; a pianist or a policeman. Vanderpool may be a railroad president, and may, without the slightest improbability, be a clerk in his employ. Benson is a valet in my "The Finger of God", but neither the distinguished English essayist who bears the same name, nor his brother, the church dignitary, nor the Admiral who recently commanded the United States Navy have ever found it a handicap. Judson may be a butler or a bishop; but if he is a bishop other persons will apply prefixes of respect in the course of conversation, while if he is a butler the tone in which his name is uttered and the omission of all prefixes will express the fact better than the mere accident of name. Mr. Judson may be a bank president or a milkman; but a given stratum of society will not address both with equal intimacy. To Professor Lewis "Madame Chenoweth" sounds "a bit aristocratic." The images which the same name conjures up to me are, in order, a fortune teller; the proprietress of a second-hand clothing emporium, and a

beauty specialist. I mention this simply to emphasize the hopelessness of selecting family names which will carry the same images to many persons. Individual associations, based on resemblances of any and every kind, are far too potent and too various.

Christian names, unless they be diminutives or nicknames, indicate the character of the parents better than that of the persons designated. In life as we find it, Christian names are attached to mites of humanity at an age so early that the individual most concerned is unable to express an opinion. They may be inappropriate. Often they are inappropriate. But they are generally what one would expect of the persons who have bestowed them upon their offspring.

"Lily" may be a brunette; but from the choice of the name alone we form some slight conception of Lily's parents. "Pinkie" is the name of my cook: she is black. She did not have to tell me that her father was unusual. "Elaine", "Guinevere", "Enid" may not fit their possessors; "Launcelot" may be a real-estate agent and "Gareth" a dentist; but their names hint that the fathers or mothers — or both — read Tennyson. "Abraham Lincoln Brown", "Theodore Roosevelt Jones", "Woodrow Wilson Smith" are better clues to the ideals of the father than of the son. "Priscilla", "Dorcas", "Truth", "Faith" may or may not suit their bearers: but they tell us much about the generation which chose them for its descendants.

Far more important than the mere name itself is the alteration of names occasionally resulting from the expression of a mass judgment upon an individual. The variations of a Christian name are sometimes significant. The child may have been christened "William." He may be known by this name, or by one of the many contractions of it. These contractions, in a very definite degree, express something about his character. William Winter, the dramatic critic; Will

Rogers, the lariat artist; Bill Edwards, the former football star; Willie Collier, the comedian; Billy Sunday: in every instance the slightly changed Christian name is an indication of the man. All, it may be presumed, started life as "William." Yet the character of each, and the popular opinion of each is reflected with great force in the metamorphosis which his name has undergone.

A child may be christened "Margaret" or "Elizabeth." In certain circles her name will remain unaltered; in others she will become "Peg" or "Peggy", "Bess" or "Beth"; in others she will be "Marge" or "Bessie"; and should she reach still other strata she will be known as "Maggie" or "Lizzie", "Mag" or "Liz." In each instance the change is charged with meaning, meaning referable not only to the society in which she moves, but to the character of the woman herself. "Samuel Hopgood" may be known as "Sammy" or even as "Hoppie"; but he will not be known as Hoppie if he is the sexton, and he will not be known as Samuel if he wins the hundred-yard dash. Our athletic heroes and comedians rejoice in nicknames and diminutives; our statesmen and financiers, as a class, do not.

How then shall we name our characters? Our heroine is a hoyden: shall we name her "Priscilla Bradford"? She is a Sunday-school teacher: shall we name her "Clarice La Montagne"? The answer is simple. Who were her parents? What is her background? Until you can answer those questions, do not begin to write a serious play. But after you can answer them the name you select will inevitably be appropriate. Perhaps your hoyden *will* be named "Priscilla Bradford." In that event, will not the indicated conflict between the woman she is and the woman her parents hoped she would be strengthen and orientate your play? Will you not, in a single blinding instant, explain far

more than you could put into ten minutes of dialogue? And will not the slight shock with which your audience receives the revelation when you first identify her greatly enhance your dramatic values? As a playwright, your first business is to arrest and command attention: if this, perchance, be your situation, how can you introduce it more effectively?

There is a large class of seeming exceptions. The characters may have taken liberties with their own names. Naomi Hoskins, being in the chorus, may elect to call herself "Bébé du Barry." John Morton Edwards may be "John Edwards", "J. M. Edwards", or "J. Morton Edwards." He may even be "J. Moreton Edwardes." Mrs. Dempsey may suddenly sprout a hyphen, and blossom forth as "Mrs. Dempsey-Carpentier." But may I point out that in every example the name, as always, tells us more about the aspirations of the person who bestowed it than about the person upon whom it was bestowed? Poor Naomi Hoskins had a certain definite ideal when she called herself "Bébé du Barry." As a result we know more about that ideal than about Naomi herself. "Mrs. Chrystal-Pole" aspires to be an aristocrat, that is clear: she is an accomplice to the hyphen, either before or after the crime. But is she an aristocrat? Her name ventilates only her ambitions. They may have failed of realization. The Puritan who named his dog "Moreover" out of the Gospels — "Moreover, the dog came and licked his sores" — has characterized himself for all eternity. But history omits to mention whether the dog was a collie or a pug.

That a family name produces some kind of psychological response is unquestionable; unless it is totally unknown there will be pronounced associations. But in the face of characterization, as presented on the stage, new associations are instantly formed, and it is these that count most with an audience.

Professor Downey describes the reaction of an individual to the name "Grib" thus:

> Had a feeling for him as quickly as I heard the word; felt Grib myself, i.e., obstinate, persistent, muscular, common-sense; as if I would fight for anything I thought mine; would be surprised if any one should rebel against my authority.[1]

Here, evidently, is an immediate association of "Grib", "grit" and "grab"; an association vouched for by the circumlocution which the writer unconsciously adopts in order to conceal it. But the chances of an individual — and his sons — and their sons living up to this detailed and interesting characterization are rather less than remote. The home life of the Grib family, with each of the little Gribs running true to type, is a subject upon which I can reflect with keen delight.

Even with a name so distinctive it must be apparent that the variety of reactions to it may be very great.[2] Hence the effort to characterize by label-names is likely to be futile, besides being false to life and inartistic.

Professor Downey's own reaction to "the bare look" of a name in a "Personal" is interesting:

> BUZFUZ. — Him no big medicine man. — Woggles.

Buzfuz I see plainly. He is young, large, gray-eyed, with tousled mouse-colored hair and clothes askew. This picture comes from the strategic position of the z's.

The message to Buzfuz gives me a notion of his personality. He is brilliant but lacking in self-confidence, and not long out of medical college. And now I notice his beautiful hands,

[1] E. E. Slosson and J. E. Downey: "Plots and Personalities", 67.

[2] A person whom I asked for a reaction to it based an elaborate description upon an association with "grub"!

those of the born surgeon. I understand why Woggles — cheerful sinner — is trying to buck him up by commenting on an already successful classmate.[1]

This, I submit, is utterly delightful. My own reaction is far simpler: I form no particular picture of Buzfuz, whom the name may or may not fit; I form a tolerably good picture of the person who bestows both names and indulges in Indian talk; and I form an exceedingly vivid and detailed picture of Professor Downey, who reveals herself as a most charming and original person. In describing whom she would name Buzfuz she cannot help orientating herself.

In the days now happily past it was the custom to name characters in such a manner that their peculiarities, their stations, their moral attributes, were clearly indicated. To this outworn convention we owe such amazing cognomena as "Lady Gay Spanker", "Colonel Bully", "Sir Tunbelly Clumsy", "Snake", "Feeble", "Sir Fopling Flutter", "Lydia Languish", "Sir Brilliant Fashions" and such more recent gems as "Frank Manley." Even to-day, writes Mr. Archer,

> One does occasionally, in manuscripts of a quite hopeless type, find the millionaire's daughter figuring as "Miss Aurea Golden", and her poor but sprightly cousin as "Miss Lalage Gay."[2]

The modern dramatist is not handicapped by such ghastly conventions. His audiences, he hopes and believes, are more intelligent than their predecessors. He proposes to show them life as he sees it, and life, he knows, labels many of its actors deceptively. When he deals with levels in which nicknames are common, his task is simpler: "Cocky", "Beefy", "Stuffy" are likely to be descriptive; but even here the nickname

[1] "Plots and Personalities", 67. The volume is a collaboration, but each chapter is individually signed.

[2] "Play-Making", 77.

may refer less to personal eccentricities than to occupations, witness "Chips", a ship's carpenter; "Pipes", a boatswain; and "Lamps", a lamplighter.

If, then, family names, as I have tried to show, mean little, and given names, except in their modifications, reveal only the ancestors of the persons who bear them, it must be apparent that the business of naming one's characters is rather a liability than an asset. For the playwright who cares for the truth the solution is simple. He puts himself *in loco parentis;* he names his characters precisely as their forbears would have named them; he uses diminutives as circumstances may warrant, and then, when this is done, he realizes that it is not the name, but the action and dialogue which he allots to each that will mar them — or make them.

Chapter XXXI: Dialogue and Movement

DIALOGUE is the main bridge between the dramatic author and his audience. It lacks the vividness and immediacy of visible action, but it is infinitely more flexible, more resourceful.

Action is the power that causes the play to move. Dialogue is the balance wheel that makes the motion rapid or slow.

Sir Rabindranath Tagore's plays, considered as a group, abound in lengthy speeches. Four printed pages in "Malini" contain eight speeches; the third scene of "Chitra" devotes eight pages to thirteen speeches, the eighth scene gives five pages to five speeches, and the final scene three pages to two speeches. Each point permitting verbal elaboration is developed at great length before being relinquished. The result is extreme slowness of movement. There is a static, almost stationary drama.

Mr. Edward Massey's "Plots and Playwrights", to cite an exact opposite, contains hardly a speech consisting of more than two or three lines. Three of its half-dozen scenes are devoted to the simple, honest portrayal of simple, honest drama. Another scene is given up to the preposterous melodrama which the dramaturgy of Broadway might fashion from the same material. An outer story and four inner stories are to be told. The rapid alternation of the dialogue, the brevity of the speeches, alike in the serious drama and in the preposterous burlesque of it, produce swift movement without which the play would be overlengthy.

Mr. O'Neill's "The Emperor Jones" begins with stage business and a dozen brief speeches; the action is rapid. Jones enters. Action gives way to exposition (the in-

flected opening). Gradually Jones' speeches become longer; he is developing points whose human interest justifies the detail. Exposition complete, short speeches reënter.

Jones flees to the woods. For five scenes he is the sole speaker; yet only once, and then when he prays, is there an even moderately lengthy speech. A phrase or two, and significant action interrupts him; or he interrupts himself: "Nigger, is you gone crazy mad?" "Git in, nigger!" "Yo' Majesty!" In one body he takes the rôles of two persons — and there is movement.

Alternation of speakers produces a pleasing variety of inflections, but something more is necessary to produce rapid movement. There must be a continually shifting, a continually progressing point of view.

Mr. Shaw's "You Never Can Tell" contains this amusing passage:

PHILIP. In that case we shall have to introduce him to the other member of the family: the Woman of the Twentieth Century: our sister Gloria!
DOLLY (*dithyrambically*). Nature's masterpiece!
PHILIP. Learning's daughter!
DOLLY. Madeira's pride!
PHILIP. Beauty's paragon!
DOLLY (*suddenly descending to prose*). Bosh! No complexion.
VALENTINE (*desperately*). M a y I have a word?
PHILIP (*politely*). Excuse us. Go ahead.
DOLLY (*very nicely*). So sorry.
VALENTINE (*attempting to take them paternally*). I really must give a hint to you young people —
DOLLY (*breaking out again*). Oh, come: I like that. How old are you?
PHILIP. Over thirty.
DOLLY. He's not.
PHILIP (*confidently*). He is.
DOLLY (*emphatically*). Twenty-seven.
PHILIP (*imperturbably*). Thirty-three.
DOLLY. Stuff!

There is not even apparent movement. Instead there is delightful characterization, a detail well worth elaborating.

Maeterlinck's "L'Intruse" ("The Intruder") is even more illuminating. By taking an occasional liberty with conjunctions and with punctuation, I quote a number of consecutive speeches as one:

> Grandfather is asleep. He has not slept for three nights; he has been so much worried. He always worries too much: at times he will not listen to reason; still it is quite excusable at his age. God knows what we shall be like at his age! He is nearly eighty, and has a right to be strange. He is like all blind people: they think too much; they have too much time to spare. They have nothing else to do, and besides, they have no distractions. It must be terrible but apparently one gets used to it.

For the sake of a variety of vocal inflections and for the atmosphere it produces, the author divides this passage into fourteen speeches, assigned to three characters. Yet the absolutely stationary viewpoint prevents movement. The division into parts produces only a curiously hypnotic verbal effect.

Here are three persons amplifying a single thought, saying "Yes" in slightly different ways. "Yes" is the antithesis of movement. It may terminate dialogue and lead to action, or it may terminate action itself; but instead of compelling a speaker to continue, it only invites him to continue. "No", "I don't agree", "You're wrong", "That isn't true", "What do you mean?" — these lines demand response.

Assent, whether expressed by other persons in a series of short speeches or implied in a long speech (what is a long speech but a person agreeing with himself "out loud"?) makes for slow movement. Dissent, qualification, opposition, whether expressed by other persons or by the speaker himself, make for rapid

movement. Assent announces, in effect, "We will stay here as long as you wish." Dissent announces, "We cannot stay here. We will go elsewhere." Rapid movement is needed in the great majority of one-act plays; slow movement is quite as necessary in parts of nearly all of them. Dialogue may be made to produce either.

Action, we have seen, travels from lower to higher planes, embraces a series of ascending crises. Yet divested of speech, there may be an utter lack of exposition, motivation, and meaning, and the action will not have the effect that is possible with its aid. Certain of its elements might explain themselves to the eye, but subtle insights into human nature would be obliterated. Imagine "Trifles" — or "James and John" — or "The Old Lady Shows Her Medals" reduced to "silent drama"! Yet the mental picture of the action itself, before the writing of the dialogue has begun, is likely to suggest at what points little or no dialogue will be needed.

Thus considered, an action might look like a profile map of a mountain range; a succession of rising peaks separated by pronounced valleys. Dialogue will fill up the valleys, make one great mountain out of the chain, but the peaks themselves, representing in turn the highest point reached, may fitly be allowed to speak for themselves, may, to carry out the simile, each be approached by a precipice.

We have seen the necessity for visible action, visible certification of mental resolve, at the climax of the play. In many plays such certification is needed at intermediate points. Almost invariably consideration of the profiled action will not only indicate these points, but will equally indicate at what other points stage business must be forsworn for the less vivid, but more versatile exposition of spoken English. When the dramatist goes out of his way to invent pantomime which would have no place in the naked action, it is pretty sure to be un-

natural: he is manufacturing a peak where the action demands none. "The Clod", to cite a good play almost at random, is rich in stage business; but what is there belongs there; it triumphantly passes the test of being retained in the most ruthless condensation of the story. On the other hand "Lithuania" contains a mass of visible action which has no business in the play: which is likely to be forgotten even in a lengthy condensation.

A doubtful exception may be made in favor of business which characterizes; but if it is impressively good it will be found, nearly always, to be an integral part of the story. Characters and action cannot be — must not be — divorced from each other.

Natural stage business, to summarize, is that which is called for by the naked action. If words are not needed to make it clear, then words can add but little to its effect. Natural dialogue is equally that which is indicated by the naked action. If business is not needed to make it convincing, then business can add but little to its effect.

Dialogue bridges from peak to peak, and throws into bold relief the peaks themselves. But the distances between are variable, and the demands which may be made upon dialogue are surprisingly diverse.

The play that is built upon situations, particularly the play that opens abruptly, demands compact exposition. Interest is launched at so high a level that the slightest verbosity, the least falsity of intonation would allow it to drop. André de Lorde's "Au Téléphone" ("At the Telephone") contains two scenes as originally written. Mr. Charles Warner's one-scene condensation is infinitely superior. The horror of the play is so great that protracted a second too long tension would simply snap, and the audience break into laughter. The dialogue must be succinct, suggestive, brief.

The play that is built upon humanity, in which situation arises visibly out of character, often permits, nay,

invites and compels, more detailed treatment. Mrs. Dowey, for instance, is an old lady who cannot and will not be hurried. Her character is a command to enlarge upon it. For her the dramatist is not asked to sacrifice the play; but the latent values which craftsmanship may extract are so huge that some selection of them must have a definite place in the scheme. The dialogue must — I use the "must" advisedly— be leisurely, may stray, provided it strays interestingly and ascendingly and casts out no false clues, and may first of all concern itself with the faithful and well orientated depiction of character, confident that from such a foundation human action will naturally generate.

This, however, is no perfunctory padding. If we are dealing in truth we may show the audience the human premises from which it will arise. Half a dozen links are more interesting than the last two or three which explode into drama. The complete chain we may not hope to show. But we may well go into it as deeply as the interest of the material and the limits of the one-act play will allow.

Dialogue is — and must be — sufficiently flexible to meet varied demands, to extract the worth-while from the material in hand, whatever that material be. If it is slight, dialogue can bring out its most delicate values; if it is rich, dialogue can heighten its drama, lend force to its development, make the rise to the climax powerful and the resolution itself satisfying. If there are gaps, dialogue can equally well close them or bridge them over. Above all, good dialogue needs to be interesting. The burden which it carries is great. It must carry it easily, unconsciously, and it can do so only if it is logically entertaining: if it suggests questions more freely than it answers them.[1]

[1] For detailed treatment of this subject, see Chapter XVI.

In the preface to "Miss Julie" August Strindberg wrote:

> I have avoided the symmetrical and mathematical construction of the French dialogue, and have instead permitted the minds to work irregularly as they do in reality, where, during conversation, the cogs of one mind seem more or less haphazardly to engage those of another one, and where no topic is fully exhausted. Naturally enough, therefore, the dialogue strays a good deal as, in the opening scenes, it acquires a material that later on is worked over, picked up again, repeated, expounded, and built up like the theme in a musical composition.[1]

The exhaustion of a topic is synonymous with a strict question-answer balance, and brings interest to an abrupt halt. But the remainder of the quotation is far more important; it is nothing more nor less than the principle of preparation by repeated emphasis.

The dialogue of the amateur proceeds from A to B to C to D and so on to the end of the play. The dialogue of the experienced playwright, and perhaps there is no surer sign of expertness in the whole range of craftsmanship, is far more likely to move from A to B to C to A to D to B to E to F to G to B to G to H and the like. Not only does this permit simple and effective preparation, but there is true blending of dialogue, which, instead of proceeding by unconvincing leaps and bounds, moves as naturally as the action itself.

Instead of exhausting topics, and flinging away their dry husks, the modern dramatist, selecting those which may be emphasized, will touch upon them, and proceed; and return; and proceed; bit by bit developing his material in such a way that the play, instead of becoming a mathematical procession from point to point, weaves and interweaves its threads closely. This, I submit, is

[1] Translated by Edwin Björkman, 15.

the orderly disorder of life. The dramatist adapts it to his purpose by omitting meaningless repetition, and substituting for it revelation which gradually becomes more penetrating. His first incision will be superficial. Instead of deepening it at once, he may turn elsewhere, returning again and again, always cutting deeper and deeper, and permitting the action itself finally to lay bare the heart of the subject.

Action is power, blind power; and lacking the bond of dialogue, would often fly apart of its own centrifugal force. Dialogue, closely woven because it contains several threads, holds the play together. Its interwoven strands permit it to move easily and naturally from point to point: like Dante's *terza rima*, it is always interlocked; does not discard one thread until it has taken up a next. It neither leaps awkwardly, nor, having brought up a point, becomes so entangled in it that nothing short of force can induce it to pass on. Dialogue that is easy and flowing, that is so natural that it fulfills its function of directing interest to the play rather than to any element of the play, is invariably closely woven and highly integrated.

I refrain from citing examples. It is quite sufficient to turn at random to any impressively good play.

Chapter XXXII: Dialogue and English

THE one-act play commands brevity. The playwright obeys with selection in the choice of episodes and clarity in the choice of dialogue. By the use of artistic selection he presents a scene succession so natural yet so significant that there is neither a sense of omission nor a realization in the audience of the rapidity with which events are moving. By the use of clear dialogue he reduces still farther the time required to set forth and make comprehensible the scenes through which he instills his story into the minds of his auditors.

Clarity of dialogue implies neither the premature revelation of action nor an unlifelike precision in the speech of the characters. It means rather the pellucid expression of the thing the dramatist wishes to make known at any given time, and that by means of action and dialogue, which, while natural and in character, convey the necessary information to an audience. It does not signify that everything is to be told. It means only that what is to be told, and that is for the dramatist to decide, must be told clearly.

The very highest degree of clarity, it goes almost without saying, is required in the preliminary exposition. If the premises of the play are not perfectly understood, the development is crippled at the outset. Not only must the audience comprehend, but it must gather the facts so easily that the play, proceeding at an unnaturally rapid tempo, may yet appear natural and unhurried.

The characters whose action and dialogue are to convey essential information often share their knowl-

edge with an audience: "So that is the Fair Green," remarks the Magistrate in Lady Gregory's "Spreading the News"; sometimes they convey information which is unknown to themselves: but for the fact that he pays no attention to the dialogue, the audience would not so easily discover that the priest, in Maeterlinck's "The Blind", is dead; or they may be charged first of all with the expression of their own personalities. Whatever the circumstances, their exposition can and should be made both clear and natural.

The demands of clarity, as they affect dialogue in the play proper, may be expressed with equal succinctness. A current state of knowledge is always to be exposited. It may be an exceedingly unsatisfactory state of knowledge: the more human the play, the more likely it is to reproduce some part of the obscurity, the mystery, the maddening half-answer with which life greets us at every turn. But even obscurity can be conveyed very clearly. The fact that the dialogue is lucid does not mean that the facts it embodies possess an equal crystallinity. It may be but "darkness made visible"; it may be but one of the innumerable summations of the three words, "I don't know."

MISS LIMERTON. She — listen. (*Puts up her hand*
ROSE (*terrified*). What is it?
MISS POSTELWAITE Listen to what?
MISS LIMERTON. You can't hear her breathing?
MISS POSTELWAITE. How should you —
ROSE. I said she was putting it on. She always breathes louder than that.
[*They listen. Rose shivers, and Miss Limerton rises.*
MISS LIMERTON (*looking at Miss Postelwaite, who rises also*). You don't think —

Here, in Miss Elizabeth Baker's "Miss Tassey", and in broken phrases which convey the agitation of the speakers, is the expression of what, for a few seconds more, remains a mystery.

Clarity of dialogue may be produced by two methods. The dramatist will equip his play with personages whose natural language is clear and precise, or, if he is unable to do so, as in ninety-nine plays out of a hundred, he will permit his characters to talk with absolute naturalness, compelling them to be clear by the use of questions which draw them out.

In life, certain rare individuals habitually express themselves with admirable accuracy and succinctness. In a play such individuals may naturally speak with the same felicity of word and phrase. But most persons are chronically unable to be either brief or linguistically clear, and the dramatist dare not take too violent liberties with them. Within the limits imposed by naturalness, he will compress and clarify their speech; but when those limits are reached, the methods of real life, applied in his microcosmos, solve his problem perfectly.

Sometimes the information to be imparted is so simple, or the informant is so competent, that a direct statement "gets it across" satisfactorily. Agmar, in Lord Dunsany's "The Gods of the Mountain", is naturally lucid. What he says is so well said that it is instantly comprehensible. But Sniggers, upon his terrified reëntrance in "A Night at an Inn" is far from clear, and a series of questions is hurled at him in an effort to clarify him:

> Want to turn informer, Sniggers? . . . What's the matter? What are you driving at? . . . Answer me; what are you up to? . . . Have you seen the police? . . . What then?

Describing a time-honored convention Professor Matthews writes:

> Every person in a play is supposed to be capable of saying just what he means the first time of trying, and in the fewest possible words; and this is a very violent departure from the practice of everyday life, where our speech is uncertain,

halting, and ragged. Every character also uses the best possible means to voice his thought, and every other character immediately takes his meaning without hesitancy; and this is again a variation from the fact, since we are continually failing to catch the exact intent of those with whom we are talking.[1]

The tendency of the modern play is away from the inveracity pointed out by Professor Matthews. There will be both compression and clarification; but either defeats its ends if overdone. The characters are likely to speak naturally, and other characters are quite likely to misunderstand them. Indeed, nothing makes for greater clarity than the simple device of representing the audience in the person of a questioner, who fails to take a meaning, insists upon being enlightened, and compels the informant to dispel all doubt.

A character in Mr. George Calderon's "Derelicts" talks thus:

AGATHA. There's no doubt about human agency; the bulbs of percussion are quite plain. (*Gleefully*) I never saw such a small collection so rich in bulbs of percussion. But the point is this, that my paleolithic station seems to be of *later date* than Dalton's aënolithic. . . .

ROBERT. Really?

AGATHA. Yes, for although the floor of the caves is in actual point of measurement higher than the gravel, it belongs to an older formation, diluvial in fact . . .

ROBERT. Of course it is only recently that the water has exposed the gravel-beds, but the deposits in them may be of any . . .

Robert takes Agatha's meaning without hesitancy, with the result that the audience takes no meaning at all. If Robert were less well informed, he would either

[1] "A Study of the Drama", 137.

enlighten the audience through his questions and Agatha's answers to them, or he would compel the erudite lady to change the subject. Here, evidently, the flow of information from character to character is not steep enough to be informative to an outsider. When two esoterics understand each other perfectly, the audience is likely to understand nothing. It is to be noted, however, that the preceding passage is, in its context, an example of good and not faulty craftsmanship. Agatha's hobby is but incidental; *it must be flattened.* The author's treatment accomplishes his purpose admirably.

On the other hand, Ástéryi, in the same dramatist's "The Little Stone House", is a well of information which Fomá explores:

> Has she no friends to love? . . . She has relatives, I suppose? . . . What mystery explains this solitude? . . . And her son was worthy of her love? . . . So he was a sinner after all? . . . And it was quite clear that his victim was Sasha? . . .

The flow of information is steep, and the dialogue is clear.

Within boundaries set by the intelligence and the vocabulary of the character, clarity of phrasing is based upon aptness in the selection of words. Yet desirable as precise and comprehensible dialogue may be, there is never any reason for the use of unnecessarily and unnaturally good English. If the informant is a child or a foreigner or a half-wit, or if he habitually expresses himself in English which is either too elevated or too debased to be readily understood, a question or two, a half dozen if required, will bring out whatever we desire him to contribute. Not alone will there be clearness, but there will be naturalness as well. It is necessary only to guard against improperly placed emphasis.

If a character, in real life, is incapable of the lucidity of the lecture platform — and this applies to every character at times — it is purposeless and senseless for the dramatist to endow him in the play with abilities which he may not reasonably possess. It is far too simple to clarify his exposition by adroit questioning. Indeed, if there is the least reason to believe that the audience will raise a question on the score of clarity, that question should, if possible, be voiced openly by some character and answered.

Aptness in the selection of words makes both for natural interest and natural fluency. There may be many ways of saying a thing; but not all are equally good. Shades of meaning are to be conveyed; delicate nuances are to have their effect. A keen ear for the value of words is as necessary to the dramatist as an ear for music is to the musician. Limited by the choice of character and the choice of key, each will seek for the notes which are both natural and expressive.

It is easy, perilously easy, to express thought by means of long-winded locutions. Latinized English seems expressly designed for the purpose of making clear fine distinctions. But "hard" words, the dramatist discovers, are more often written than spoken. By their thoughtless introduction into his dialogue he will produce an unlifelike, stilted effect. Very few of his characters will habitually talk like a book.

Mr. P. P. Howe writes:

All Sir Arthur Pinero's persons are unfortunate in this respect. If they like the view, they say, "I could gaze at this prospect for ever." They say "Have done! Have done!" when they wish to convey that that is enough, and "Pray complete your sentence", when they mean "Go on." If they wish to say you are right, they say, "It affords me great pleasure to subscribe to that", and if they wish to say you are wrong, they say, "You are mistaken in the construction you put upon it." "Be silent", they say, and "Please to

ring the bell", and, if they are very strongly moved, "Let me be rid of you!" [1]

I think Mr. Howe is unwise in basing criticism of a great dramatist upon his early and not his mature works, but his point, by itself, is well taken. Such choice of language utterly destroys intimacy. It is the speech of legislators; it would be very much in place in a body of representatives governed by parliamentary law, but its decorum and its bookishness are blighting to drama.

Occasionally the use of stilted English seems clearly called for to perfect a characterization. Many individuals have achieved a degree of culture so toploftical that their common speech sounds like Burke's orations: there is a deliberate effort if not towards rhetoric then towards calculated elegance. But in moments of passion fine words and nurtured inhibitions are wont to slough off, and the man stands revealed as a human being, speaking the language of the dramatist: good bad English. Emotion and not cerebration directs the speech in which tumultuous feelings reveal themselves. Nearly all dialogue, when it becomes heated, turns to the simplicity and the force of plain, homely Anglo-Saxon. It is the spoken language of sincerity: meaning is all important; the speaker seeks adequate and not elegant expression. Such dialogue is sometimes hard to write but it is always easy to dictate. To some readers it may not look well in print; but it sounds like the speech of human beings when it is delivered on the stage.

Precisely as one may object to the use of too recondite English, so one may object to the use of too recondite slang.

Mr. E. H. Smith's dialogue in "Release" is impressively good, but I feel he goes too far in the line "An'

[1] "Dramatic Portraits", 40.

ef I gits a start I'm gonna live on da level wid some square broad." "Gat", "mouthpiece", and "fly moll" are bits of thieves' argot which the context naturally explains. But "square broad", used as it is, is likely to give an audience pause.

> Very few audiences know any dialect thoroughly enough to permit a writer to use it with absolute accuracy. The moment dialect begins to show the need of a glossary, it is defeating its own ends.[1]

Sometimes a human glossary can be written into the play, in the person of an individual who fails to understand and asks questions. Sometimes the play itself may shed light upon some extraordinary phrase, witness Mr. Wilbur Daniel Steele's "Not Smart." Sometimes context may clarify the meaning of unusual words, approved or unapproved. But the language of the play must be good bad English. To that common denominator, varied as one pleases if it remains comprehensible, other languages must be reduced.

Purism is always objectionable. The play is the thing, not the dialogue in it. The audience is to see through speech: its vision is not to terminate there. Hence dialogue which for any reason draws attention to itself at the expense of the play and its characters is not in order. A striking locution, however correct grammatically, attracts emphasis. Unless the playwright courts such emphasis, with accompanying flattening of the play itself, it is well to avoid ostentatious grammar.

In the drama the sentence "None of us are going out" is right and "He told it to her and me" is wrong. If the character's grammatical attainments are of so high an order than he would not be guilty of the first, the dramatist will do well to substitute another locution in preference to committing a grammatical excess

[1] G. P. Baker: "Dramatic Technique", 340.

which might distract attention. "He told it to her and me" is flawless grammar, but it strikes the ear with a harsh burr, and the audience, childlike, might pause to make wagers upon its correctness. "He told it to us" should be substituted.

Simple, effective dialogue derives its greatest persuasiveness from the use of the concrete word in preference to the abstract one. Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch writes:

> I ask you to note how carefully the Parables — those exquisite short stories — speak only of "things which you can touch and see" — "A sower went forth to sow", "The Kingdom of Heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took" — and not the Parables only, but the Sermon on the Mount and almost every verse of the Gospel . . .
>
> Or take Shakespeare. I wager you that no writer of English so constantly chooses the concrete word, in phrase after phrase, forcing you to touch and see. No writer so insistently teaches the general through the particular. . . . Read any page of "Venus and Adonis" side by side with any page of Marlowe's "Hero and Leander" and you cannot but mark the contrast: in Shakespeare the definite, particular, visualised image, in Marlowe, the beautiful generalization, the abstract term, the thing seen at a literary remove. . . .[1]

Through the use of concrete words the dramatist appeals both to the eye and the ear of his auditor

Here, from Mr. George Calderon's "Derelicts", is an example of abstractions:

> AGATHA. I am going on. Don't be offended. What I am saying is wisest. We will meet and be friends; but you and I cannot help each other out of our inward solitude. If we married we should soon wake up to our mistake. Two egotisms do not make a love. Once this momentary haze of romance was blown away by the breath of common life we should find ourselves in a more frightful solitude

[1] "On the Art of Writing", 117–118.

than before, only aggravated by the near presence of another solitude as irremediable as our own. . . . Let us make the most of the little that we have to blind us to the disagreeable truth.

In this long speech there is not a single "thing which you can touch and see." It is beautifully written, and highly effective in print: for the book admits of our reading it as attentively as we will. But upon the stage it may not rivet attention as would the same thoughts expressed concretely: it is too difficult to follow.

Here, from Mr. St. John Hankin's "The Constant Lover", is the abstract becoming concrete:

CECIL. Eve, dear, don't be silly Let's be in love while we can. Youth is the time to be in love, isn't it? Soon you and I will be dull and stupid and middle-aged like all the other tedious people. And then it will be too late. Youth passes so quickly. Don't let's waste a second of it. They say the May fly only lives for one day. He is born in the morning. All the afternoon he flutters over the river in the sunshine, dodging the trout and flirting with other May flies. And at evening he dies. Think of the poor May fly who happens to be born on a wet day! The tragedy of it!

The thought, phrased in the simplest possible words, and passing finally into the universal language of the concrete, appeals to every kind of an audience.

It is the concrete that glorifies the prose of J. M. Synge. With absolute naturalness a lowly character in "The Shadow of the Glen" speaks thus:

TRAMP (*at the door*). Come along with me now, lady of the house, and it's not my blather you'll be hearing only, but you'll be hearing the herons crying out over the black lakes, and you'll be hearing the grouse and the owls with them, and the larks and the big thrushes when the days are warm, and it's not from the like of them you'll be hearing a talk

of getting old like Peggy Cananagh, and losing the hair off you, and the light of your eyes, but it's fine songs you'll be hearing when the sun goes up, and there'll be no old fellow wheezing, the like of a sick sheep, close to your ear.

The whole passage, due to the use of concrete words, is amazingly vivid.

In the following passage from Mr. W. B. Yeats' "The Land of Heart's Desire" two lines stand out prominently:

THE VOICE.

The wind blows out of the gates of the day,
The wind blows over the lonely of heart,
And the lonely of heart is withered away
While the fairies dance in a place apart,
Shaking their milk-white feet in a ring,
Tossing their milk-white arms in the air;
For they hear the wind laugh and murmur and sing
Of a land where even the old are fair . . .

Beautiful as this is, two lines stick more tenaciously in the memory than any of the others. It is not necessary to point them out.

It is the concrete which makes memorable the final lines of "The Countess Cathleen":

OONA.

Tell them who walk upon the floor of peace
That I would die and go to her I love;
The years like great black oxen tread the world,
And God the herdsman goads them on behind,
And I am broken by their passing feet.

It is a far cry from the magic of Mr. Yeats' poetry to the brutality of Mr. O'Neill's "The Hairy Ape," but we come upon an even greater concreteness:

YANK (*bitterly*). So dem boids don't tink I belong, neider. Aw, to hel wit' 'em! Dey're in de wrong pew — de same

old bull — soapboxes and Salvation Army — no guts! Cut out an hour offen de job a day and make me happy! Gimme a dollar more a day and make me happy! Tree square a day, and cauliflowers in de front yard — ekal rights — a woman and kids — . . .

Dat's me now — I don't tick, see? — I'm a busted Ingersoll, dat's what. Steel was me, and I owned de woild. Now I ain't steel, and de woild owns me. . . .

Say, youse up dere, Man in de Moon, yuh look so wise, gimme de answer, huh? Slip me de inside dope, de information right from de stable — where do I get off at, huh?

Similes have contributed to the effect of some of the foregoing passages; but concreteness need not depend upon rhetorical device for its force. The following notable speech occurs in Lord Dunsany's "King Argimēnēs and the Unknown Warrior":

KING ARGIMĒNĒS. Three years ago to-morrow King Darniak spat at me, having taken my kingdom from me. Three times in that year I was flogged, with twelve stripes, with seventeen stripes, and with twenty stripes. A year and eleven months ago, come Moon-day, the King's Overseer struck me in the face, and nine times in that year he called me dog. For one month two weeks and a day I was yoked with a bullock and pulled a rounded stone all day over the paths, except while we were fed. I was flogged twice that year — with eighteen stripes and with ten stripes. This year the roof of the slave-sty has fallen in and King Darniak will not repair it. Five weeks ago one of his Queens laughed at me as she came across the slave-fields. I was flogged again this year and with thirteen stripes, and twelve times they have called me dog. And these things they have done to a king, and a king of House of Ithara.

The longer the speech, the greater its need for image words which shall assist the audience in its swift comprehension. The speaker endeavors to paint a picture; it is difficult to do so without the use of verbal pig-

ments. But sometimes even abstractions can be made persuasive by the use of simple, homely English.

Here, in "The Twelve-Pound Look," is Sir J. M. Barrie in an unusually abstract mood. But mark the fine simplicity of his diction:

SIR HARRY. A man? What do you mean by a man?

KATE. Haven't you heard of them? They are something fine; and every woman is loathe to admit to herself that her husband is not one. When she marries, even though she has been a very trivial person, there is in her some vague stirring toward a wo thy life, as well as a fear of her capacity for evil. She knows her chance lies in him. If there is something good in him, what is good in her finds it, and they join forces against the baser parts. So I didn't give you up willingly, Harry. I invented all sorts of theories to explain you. Your hardness — I said it was a fine want of maukishness. Your coarseness — I said it goes with strength. Your contempt for the weak — I called it virility. Your want of ideals was clear-sightedness. Your ignoble views of women — I tried to think them funny. Oh, I clung to you to save myself. But I had to let go; you had only the one quality, Harry, success; you had it so strong that it swallowed all the others.

SIR HARRY (*not to be diverted from the main issue*). How did you earn that twelve pounds?

Like a rainbow flung across the sky, the abstractions bridge from concrete to concrete. The speech itself is so perfectly written that the reader cannot appreciate its art unless he tries himself to express the same thoughts.

Coleridge considered the most beautiful lines in the Bible, that masterpiece of simplicity and concreteness, these from the thirty-seventh chapter of Ezekiel:

> And he said unto me, Son of man, can these bones live?
> And I answered, O Lord God, thou knowest.

Verbal concreteness can often be supplemented by physical concreteness. Helen, in Mr. Cosmo Hamil-

ton's "Soldier's Daughters", might confine herself to talking about Harry Meridith's sword. By actually showing it, the effect is greatly enhanced. Lord Dunsany, in "A Night at an Inn", is at pains to show the ruby about which the action centers. The delightful beginning of Mr. Stuart Walker's "Six Who Pass While the Lentils Boil" owes not a little to the eloquent combination of dialogue and pantomime with which the pot is set on the fire.

Eye and ear may often supplement each other. Upon the combination of the two rests the vividness of the play.

Chapter XXXIII: Dialogue and Literature

FOR some persons the writing of dialogue is difficult; for others it is superlatively easy. But Sheridan's couplet in "Clio's Protest" is still very much to the point:

> You write with ease to show your breeding,
> But easy writing's cu st ha d reading.

Given unlimited space and unfettered by such minor considerations as naturalness, truth, and fidelity to character, almost any author can express almost any thought by phrasing it in so many different ways that the resistance of the audience and the incompetence of the craftsman may alike be overcome. To write at length is easy; to write to the point is difficult. Casanova, wise old cynic, knew what he was about when he jotted down in his diary

I had promised to write her a short letter, but as I didn't have the time, I wrote eighteen pages

Mr. Clayton Hamilton voices the same truth:

Of all artistic tasks, there is none more difficult than the architectonic task of building a play; but, of all literary exercises, there is none more easy than to pen an endless stream of incoherent dialogue.[1]

Stevenson, he points out, "never managed to unlearn the heresy that fine speeches, and fine speeches alone, will carry a drama to success." [2]

[1] "Seen on the Stage", 59.

[2] Summarizing Sir Arthur Pinero's comment in "Problems of the Playwright", 165.

Whether success be measured by the response of an audience, as it should be, or whether it be measured by the vain effort rightly to anticipate the verdict of posterity, prolix speech, studded with bombast, and spattered with rhetorical flourishes and ready-to-wear epigrams, is not the means by which it can be attained. Good dialogue is the servant of thought: not its master. It is a colored glass through which the audience shall see; not a blank wall, however gaily decorated, interposing its opacity between the play and the beholder.

There is no surer test of a good play than that it subordinates its parts to the whole. If the whole is worthy, the result is sometimes literature.

Mr. Arthur Hopkins pungently expresses his reactions as a producer:

> I see only one thing made of ten or twenty parts that is moving. So long as it moves properly I am totally unconscious of its parts. The moment I become conscious of a part and lose the movement of the whole I know that something is wrong. It is the unfamiliar sound in the engine that warns one that some part is not functioning properly. That is the time to stop the play and investigate.[1]

The effort to produce literature by daubing unnatural elegance here and unnatural wit there is certain only to wring proportion out of shape and to destroy the breadth of artistry which must always be at the bottom. If literature is synonymous with anything, then it is synonymous with artistic truth: never with half-truths decked out in gewgaws and tinsel. Literature is profoundly honest. If the substance of the play is true and worth-while, it does not need and cannot abide the oppressive cloak which florid verbiage offers to cast over it. Like an athlete, the simpler and more natural its garment, the better equipped it is to do itself justice.

[1] "How's Your Second Act?", 30–31.

Elegance might object to the "fish that would be stinking" in "Riders to the Sea"; might offer to substitute less olfactory tea and toast, and this, in all seriousness, is typical of what elegance, when there is no need for it, may accomplish. The facts of life may have a plebeian odor: instead of them it would give us Aran Islanders living in the style of landed gentry. Far from producing literature, it would degrade a masterpiece to the level of tea and toast. Like everything else, elegance has its place: but that place is determined by the imperious necessities of the play and not by the confessed ability of elegance to be elegant.

Professor Matthews thus summarizes the varieties of wit:

> The French . . . call a jest which evokes laughter a *mot*, and they make a distinction which is not easy to render in English between *mots d'esprit*, *mots de situation*, and *mots de caractère*. The *mot d'esprit* is the witticism, pure and simple, existing for its own sake, and detachable from its context. . . . The *mot de situation* is the phrase which is funny, solely because it is spoken at that particular moment in the setting forth of the story. . . . And the *mot de caractère* is the phrase which makes us laugh because it is the intense expression, at the moment, of the individuality of the person who speaks it.[1]

The *mot de caractère*, to begin at the wrong end, is revealing: lights an unsuspected vista into the heart of the character, and makes it pungent by coloring it with strong emotion. Such, for instance, is Delia's line, "Do you know, you've got the most delightfully wicked eyes" at the curtain of Mr. Houghton's "Fancy Free." Two lines earlier in the same play exemplify the *mot de situation:* Fancy, undecided how to sign the letter informing her husband of her flight with a

[1] "A Study of the Drama", 126.

lover ventures "Yours faithfully." "Why not 'Yours formerly'?" suggests Alfred. By themselves the lines are not particularly funny. In their context they become delightful.

Both the *mot de caractère* and the *mot de situation* are of real value. If the first is a penetrating light cast on character, the second is an equally penetrating light cast on situation. The vision of the audience does not stop at the phrase: it passes through it to the substance of the play itself. The *mot* becomes a glass, highly colored, doubtless, but highly transparent and revealing.

The *mot d'esprit* is unfortunately in a very much different position. Revealing neither character nor situation, funny in the play as it would be funny out of the play, it is an end in itself, a part which may stand out at the expense of the whole. It may be dazzlingly brilliant; but the risk that its very brilliance will cause flattening of more important elements in the play is very great. The vision of the audience does not pass through the *mot d'esprit*, the joke, the aphorism, the epigram, to give it an English name, and after a succession of them it is with a start that one is suddenly reminded that the action, which has considerately paused to permit the dramatist to be witty, is again to proceed. The plot, like that of musical comedy, becomes a nuisance, for the entertainment has sunk to the level of the rapid-fire comedians in vaudeville, and what began as a play has become an animated joke book.

From the point of view of craftsmanship, the *mot d'esprit*, the "detachable witticism", as Professor Matthews calls it, is something of an *enfant terrible*. Having gathered a supply, Heaven knows how or where, it may be hard for the dramatist to resist sprinkling them through his dialogue. To a very few there may be no objection, if, by some stretch of the imagination, they might conceivably be evolved by the char-

acters; but supplied too liberally the result will be harrowing. Epigrams, jokes, bright remarks of one kind or another which are neither the expression of character nor situation have a place in the comic sections of the dailies; the play can get along nicely without them.

From the published four-act play referred to on page 128, I quote the words which are placed in the mouth of a six-year-old child, omitting the replies which only lead her on.

> Doctor, is the moon a hole in the sky for God to look through? . . . Well, are the stars the moon's little babies? . . . God's making another moon, ain't he? . . . But, Doctor, why don't he make a hot one? . . . one like the sun, a hot one. . . . Does God make the wind blow? . . . Does it blow only when he breaves? . . . Well, where does the wind go when it quits blowing? . . . Can God do anything? . . . Oh, I wish he would make me a little three-year-old sister in a minute. . . .

The doctor gives her a fan. She remarks, "It's to brush the warm off with, ain't it, Doctor"? He kisses her. She complains: "Your kisses smell too smokey. When I kiss you I wish I was deaf and dumb in my nose." She coughs and vouchsafes the information: "I'm not coughing. It's coughing me." The doctor tells her to put her tongue "way out." "I can't", she replies, "it's fastened at one end."

One or two such lines might characterize the child as a bright youngster. Eight closely printed pages devoted to them substitute the art of the encyclopedist for the art of the playwright, and make the characterization itself unnatural and preposterous. With infinite patience the authors have collected all of the bright remarks which an army corps of little girls might utter in a lifetime. They discharge them as one solid barrage, annihilating everything in sight, including the play,

which is totally forgotten while the infantry presumably prepares to go over the top. When that time finally comes, the barrage has blown its own troops out of existence, and the audience itself may have evacuated its trenches.

From humor of this order to the transcendent brilliancy of Oscar Wilde is a far cry. Here wit, for the sake of wit, reaches a surpassing peak. Yet it consists almost entirely of detachable epigrams, having little to do with the play, and too often stopping its progress.

"In the world", says Dumby, "there are two tragedies. One is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it." This may rank with Lord Illingworth's speech in "A Woman of No Importance": "All thought is immoral. Its very essence is destructive. If you think of anything you kill it. Nothing survives being thought of." When we hear such sayings as these — or the immortal "Vulgarity is the behavior of other people", — we do not enquire too curiously into their appropriateness to character or situation; but none the less do they belong to an antiquated conception of drama.[1]

If the modern audience is interested in the story, it will become impatient at an ostentatious display of brilliancy. It has come to the theater to witness a portrayal of life: it will not be fobbed off with a display of fireworks, however coruscating. If it does not become impatient it is only because it has lost interest in the play, which might as well stop then and there.

The wit of Oscar Wilde is something which everybody worships at the age of twenty, admires at the age of twenty-five, and may or may not tolerate at the age of thirty. It is not filling as, for instance, is the non-detachable humor of Sir J. M. Barrie, with the result that the plays charged with it are already superannuated. "Salome", without a single brilliant line, bids

[1] William Archer: "Play-Making", 386.

fair to outlive the rest. Mr. Arnold Bennett in "A Good Woman", Mr. Kenneth Sawyer Goodman in "Barbara", Mr. Houghton in "Phipps", and Mr. Robert Garland in "The Importance of Being a Roughneck", to mention but a few of the writers who have attempted, with indifferent success, to imitate Wilde's pyrotechnics, have abased themselves, I feel, before false gods. The results are stilted in various degrees, and stilted English means an entire absence of the passion that is fundamental in drama. Moreover, stilted language, the substitution of the three-syllabled word for the simpler one, is not in itself funny.

However one may react to Oscar Wilde's brilliancy, there can hardly be two ways of feeling about his dialogue apart from it. To this day he remains one of the greatest, if not the very greatest of the modern masters of spoken language. Perfection of phrasing, artistic extraction of latent values, and consummate interweaving of threads have seldom, if ever, reached a higher point. I cannot do better than quote Mr. P. P. Howe:

> The whole of Wilde's comic dialogue is notable for its sense of phrase, its general high-pressure excellence, and, in particular, its deft use of repetition. When that admirable father of Lord Goring's makes a habit of turning up at the wrong moment, "It is very heartless of him, very heartless indeed", we are told, and the words are no one's but Wilde's. Perfectly simply, they succeed in being quite full of character. . . . The repeated word or phrase or idea is . . . an instrument that Wilde is delighted to play upon. Its simplest effect may be illustrated quite easily, as when Lord Goring having turned the tables upon Mrs. Cheveley, returns to her the remark she has addressed to him a few minutes before, "Oh! don't use big words. They mean so little" — with an enormous accumulation in their effectiveness. . . . And what is "The Importance of Being Earnest" but a triumph of the deftly repeated motive? It is funny to hear in the first act from Gwendolen's lips that there is something in

that name that inspires absolute confidence; it is more than twice as funny in the second act to hear from Cecily's lips the same thing; and further than that Wilde does not go, for he understands, as the common writer of farce does not, the precise point at which repetition ceases to be serviceable. . . . We shall do well to notice his mastery of the perfect phrase. The Archdeacon, for example, whose conversation for the drawing-room is limited to the exceptional ailments of Mrs. Archdeacon:

THE ARCHDEACON. Her deafness is a great privation to her. She can't even hear my sermons now. She reads them at home. But she has many resources in herself, many resources.

LADY HUNSTANTON. She reads a good deal, I suppose?

THE ARCHDEACON. Just the very largest print. The eyesight is rapidly going. But she's never morbid, never morbid.

"The eyesight is rapidly going" — how perfect that choice of the definite article, and how irresistible![1]

The qualities which Mr. Howe praises so justly in Wilde's comic dialogue may, without exception, equally serve in serious dialogue. The Irish playwrights as a body, Synge, Mr. Yeats, Lady Gregory, and Lord Dunsany have achieved a perfection of phrasing that is impressive. Deft, and not overdone repetition, the subtle insistence of reiterated words, the passing of a phrase from mouth to mouth with but little alteration, as a shout is caught and flung back by echo and reëcho, these create atmosphere in Maeterlinck. Thus, too, what I have referred to as the "artistic extraction of latent values", inspired by that delicate sense of the theater which dictates how much — or how little — shall be made of a given point, is strikingly displayed in the modern one-act play. Dialogue continually presents subjects which may be explored — or summarily dismissed. Only the proportioning of the play as a whole, and the subtlest instincts of the dramatist may

[1] "Dramatic Portraits", 93–96.

suggest that it is well to pause and amplify here and to hasten on there.

The *mot de situation* and the *mot de caractère* have their serious counterparts. Miss Glaspell ends "Trifles" thus:

COUNTY ATTORNEY (*facetiously*). Well — Henry, at least we found out that she was not going to quilt it. She was going to — what is it you call it, ladies?

MRS. HALE (*her head against her pocket*). We call it — knot it, Mr. Henderson.

CURTAIN

Apart from the context, the lines are quite meaningless. But coming as they do, they cast a searching beam of light on what has preceded and what is to follow. Here is the serious *mot de situation.*

So too Maurya's immortal lines in "Riders to the Sea", "It's a great rest I'll have now, and it's time surely. It's a great rest I'll have now, and great sleeping in the long nights after Samhain", are the serious *mot de caractère,* blinding, heart-breaking in their revelation, profound, penetrating, memorable.

We began this chapter with a consideration of what qualities in dialogue might make for that elusive quality known as literature, and we have returned to the point from which we started only to discover that words, however resplendent, can no more thus elevate a play than can the acquisition of a gorgeous butler make a gentleman out of a boor. It is the play that matters first, last, and all the time. The dramatist who begins with the thought of being literary often forgets to be dramatic.

Truth — no less — in whose service craftsmanship has humbly and self-effacingly striven *is* literature. Whether it linger on the outskirts, or whether it enter finally into the Holy of Holies, these are matters which the artist may not foresee, and with which posterity, and not the dramatist, must ultimately be concerned.

Chapter XXXIV: Dialogue and Character

ACTION characterizes most profoundly; but unless the play is to be as full of action as a motion picture, some reliance will have to be placed on dialogue. Not only does the dramatist choose speech as one of his means to perfect characterization, but the fact that speech is to enter into the play commands that it be always in character. Whether he would or no, the playwright is compelled to make his dialogue characteristic.

Perhaps the simplest verbal characterization arises from natural differences in vocabularies. Similar thoughts will be expressed in various ways according to the education of the characters. "Leave me", "Go", "Get out", "Beat it", and "Get the hell out of here" convey a single idea; but the person naturally given to the first would not use the last except in a moment of violent temper, if at all, while the person naturally given to the last would never, except as a jest, use the first.

Not only do vocabularies vary with individuals, but they vary at different moments in the lives of the same individual. Passion has a way of stripping off veneers: the gentleman, toweringly angry, would certainly use short words, and if the occasion warranted it, might swear; "Yank" Smith, on the other hand, whose vocabulary does not admit of simplification, responds to passion merely by an increased flow of epithets. The first takes off his verbal coat to wrestle with a difficulty; the second, having no coat to remove, rises to the occasion by putting on brass knuckles.

It is important to note that however limited a native vocabulary, it is rarely inadequate. A foreigner might find it difficult to express himself in English, but neither the educated nor the uneducated man is likely to stumble greatly in speaking his own language. He may be ill at ease in the company of persons or ideas to which he is unaccustomed, may become self-conscious and embarrassed and tongue-tied. But in an environment which is neither hostile nor unfamiliar, where he can be himself and is not compelled to defer to strange conventions, his fluency — or his lack of it — will depend more upon his character than upon his language. Whatever his vocabulary, large or small, approved English or cant, he has used it too long and is too familiar with its contents to be at a loss. The dramatist, possessing but a bowing acquaintance with a jargon, may feel its incapacity to deal with simple thoughts, and may commit the error of causing a speaker of it to show that incapacity. However common in the drama, this, I submit, is not in accordance with life.

The essential dividing line between two native vocabularies resides in the fact that the larger is richer in synonyms and near-synonyms. The cultured man, sensible of fine gradations of meaning, and equipped with a large vocabulary, is far more likely to be tongue-tied than the Bowery tough whose rough and ready language can be made to fit any subject within his comprehension. Because he can choose from so great a number, the former is often said to be "at a loss for words", when, as a matter of fact, his difficulty is the exact reverse, and he is suffering entirely from an embarrassment of riches. Because he makes a limited vocabulary answer every purpose, the latter rarely finds it hard to express himself. The average college man might easily fail to make clear the distinction between determinism, fatalism, and free will, or might

be unable to explain the law of diminishing returns. A stoker on an ocean liner, if he once understood either, would be able to convey his thoughts with absolute lucidity.

The dramatist, writing an unaccustomed variety of English, will sometimes be at an actual "loss" for words; but the man who has spoken that variety from childhood will not be in the same position.

Under the heading of vocabulary we may include the idiom peculiar to a dialect. Irish-English and American-English have few words which are not in common; but the Irish idiom, curious to note, is more similar to the French than to the English. The predilection for "Is it that" and "It isn't that" in the opening of sentences, the use of "after" as an equivalent for "just" and as a still near equivalent for "*venir de*", and sentences like, "What is it the whole of the town is talking about?" which is almost a literal translation, these indicate the nearness of the Gaelic and the Gallic. English cockney and the many varieties of American slang have their characteristic idioms. It is rarely necessary to shower an audience with strange and unaccustomed words: the grammar and rhetoric of the dialect coupled with the accent of the actors can be made eloquent.

The choice of words, grammar, and rhetoric indicates both nationality and education. They are a groundwork. The manner in which speech is delivered sheds far subtler lights. Two men may have identical linguistic equipment, yet the simple stage direction "pompously" for the one, and "meekly" for the other will at once differentiate them sharply. It is not only what he says, but how he says it that stamps a character. Upon stage directions, fulfilling in the drama the same function that indicatory marks do in music, the playwright has every right to draw as necessary. The tone in which a speech is uttered is all important.

Striking a key in the beginning by a general conception of a character, the dramatist continually develops it, amplifies it, enlarges it, and when there is the slightest doubt how a speech shall be delivered, indicates exactly what is to be done. By choosing his actors appropriately he posits his characters for what they are even before they open their mouths. To carry out his characterization successfully, appropriate words must always be supplemented by appropriate accents and intonations.

The drama, at bottom, is a thing of emotion. Whatever the dialogue, emotional cast of one kind or another colors it. The emotion may be that of the speaker, or it may be that of the play, but in either event it elicits response from the audience. The emotion of the speaker, whatever it is, helps to characterize. The emotion of the play, whatever it is, helps to create atmosphere.

One quarter of dialogue might be called expression of facts colored by emotion; three quarters of it might be called expression of emotion colored by facts. Even exposition dare not be cold-blooded. The characters do not unburden themselves for no reason. The subjects, inevitably, possess sufficient interest to the speaker to justify him in raising them. The two slaves who inform us that we are in an underground temple, in "The Queen's Enemies", are not guides for Cook's tourists: they discuss the subject because they are terrified by it. The Cavaliers who tell us that they have been captured by Cromwell's men in "Allison's Lad" are not endeavoring to write dispassionate history: the fact is of life-and-death importance to them. Brutus Jones might launch into his autobiography out of consideration for an audience, but that is not his reason for doing so in the play: he details his history because he is proud of it, because his rise has been phenomenal, and because he is sufficiently

boastful to enjoy Smithers' unconcealed hate and envy as the recital proceeds.

If the sole reason for dialogue is the will of the dramatist, emotion can hardly have much to do with it. But if the verbal garment of the play is natural it will be so intimately bound up with the emotions of the characters that it will characterize. The manservant who impassively announces, "My Lord, the carriage waits", by that very impassivity sets himself outside of the play. He is a norm, a stationary point unaffected by the action, but valuable to emphasize its effect upon the others. On the other hand, the chambermaid and butler who opened the old-fashioned plays by dusting both the furniture and the family skeletons did not venture merely to state facts: they colored them with their own convenient emotions. All but swamped with the weight of the information entrusted to them, they took time, nevertheless, to explain that they loved the daughter of the house, and hated her father, and thought her mother a simpleton, and did not approve of the young man to whom she was engaged. By doing so they imparted interest to their exposition; they orientated facts against the background of life.

Thus the modern dramatist, while shelving the labored devices of his predecessors, combines exposition of fact with exposition of emotion, and holds the attention of his audience by never allowing it to forget that the matters with which his dialogue deals have direct and worth-while emotional connotation.

As the play rises to its climax heat increases, and the dialogue expresses it. It need neither shout nor bluster: the still waters of speech may run deep. But underneath, however variously signified, there is passion, emotion, profound feeling, growing more intense and voicing itself more intensely as the supreme moment approaches. In farce the emotions of audience and actors may run in opposite directions, the audience

laughing when the actors weep, and becoming apprehensive when they are care-free. In less artificial veins emotion is likely to run high or low synchronously on both sides of the footlights. But for a worth-while emotional response deep must call to deep, emotion on the stage cry out to emotion in the audience, passion and distress find their natural complement in the fullest measure of human sympathy.

Question to answer may also be interpreted as unreal to real. The characters of the play have their inhibitions, their veneers, their poses of one kind or another as the play begins. Their dialogue is an index to the relentless stripping process which is at work upon them, which proposes to tear off conventional husks and show us the real man or woman underneath. As the transformation proceeds, the dialogue becomes franker, discards long words for short, pretense for sincerity, and, precisely as the smith, after a trial rap or two, strikes a shattering blow which drives the resisting metal into shape, so the dramatist, having gradually approached his goal, strikes out his truest and his most permanent characterization in the fierce flame of climax.

We have seen what dialogue is. Let us examine what it is not. It is not argument; not debate; not mere controversy in which the decision must be a foregone conclusion from the start. Argument asks an audience to be impartial; the play demands quite the opposite. Argument, by its very nature, appeals to bloodless intellect; the play addresses itself to warm, palpitant, human emotions. On the one hand we have dialectics; on the other hand, dialogue.

Dialogue is not unnatural. The soliloquy, except when true to life, is unjustified. For the aside there is no justification whatever. In real life a speaker cannot deafen one listener so that he may freely address another. Upon the stage it is a confession of inept craftsmanship.

Dialogue is not too introspective. However edifying it may be for a character to stop at the height of an emotion and perform a verbal autopsy upon it, his ability to do so argues that neither he nor his emotion is real. Such analysis as may be necessary may be entrusted to the audience. The telltale action will supply the material for it.

Dialogue is not inartistically repetitious. It interweaves its strands; it may return again and again to a subject; but every time it penetrates deeper, sheds new light, places deliberately weighter emphasis upon it. Never does it repeat without adding something, however slight. Even the cry of the sentries, reiterated into the distance, carries the information of a far-flung battle line. Repetition is never purposeless.

Dialogue is not difficult to speak. It is the natural expression of an individual using his own vocabulary and choosing the words which rise most easily to his tongue. Precisely as the playwright must strive to see his characters in action, so he must endeavor to hear their speech while he is engaged in writing it.

Professor Baker quotes two priceless lines: "She says she's sure she'll have a shock if she sees him", and "How does one know one is one's self"? the latter indignantly repudiated by the author as an unworthy misquotation of the still more sparkling gem: "How is one to know which is one's real self when one feels so different with different people?" [1]

Prophetic, indeed, the author of the first, who wrote the hissing into the text of the play!

Ghastly as these examples are, others only slightly less absurd are to be found in badly written plays. It is so easy for the dramatist to read his work aloud before writing "Curtain" to it, that slovenliness of this kind is inexcusable.

[1] "Dramatic Technique", 405.

If dialogue is to be the expression of emotion, the dramatist must himself be moved when he writes it, must possess the ability to identify himself temporarily with his characters, see life as they see it, feel it as they feel it. Intellect may analyze, but only the profoundest, the sincerest sympathy can synthesize the warm humanity which voices itself in the play. It is not enough to inquire calmly what a certain character might say in the face of a certain event. If he is to be convincing, the dramatist must put himself in the place of that character so successfully that he can truly speak for him. It is not a question to be settled by cold cerebration; it is the expression of a human being, which can be duplicated only by another human being feeling the same emotions.

The more intimately the dramatist knows his characters, the more lively will be his sympathy for them. Every man is different; and every man has his own peculiar point of view. Unless that be appreciated, and appreciated so profoundly that the dramatist can look on life through the other's eyes and through the other's heart, he cannot hope successfully to speak for him.

Creature and creator, actor and audience, himself, yet not himself, it is the business of the dramatist to feel — and then to write.

Chapter XXXV: Mechanics

UPON the stage everything has a reason. The dramatist has the indisputable right to ring up his curtain at any point in his story that he pleases, and to disclose whom he pleases. But if a character is either to enter or to leave, his only motive cannot be obedience to the dramatist's necessities. It may be highly desirable for A to retire to another room for a few minutes while B and C conspire in comfort; but there must be some sufficient reason for his action or the play will ring false. So, too, if a character is brought upon the stage, he must come of his own volition: not the dramatist's. For every exit there is the question, "Why does he go?" and for every entrance the question, "Why does he come?" If the playwright is not at pains to answer these questions, the play will suffer.

Sometimes the reasons will be self-evident. When a business man enters his home at six o'clock in the evening or leaves it at eight o'clock in the morning no particular explanation is necessary. But if he puts in an appearance in the middle of the day the audience will want to know the reason for it. The following dialogue, or something of the kind, is absolutely necessary in Mr. Howard Brock's "The Bank Account" upon Frank's entrance:

LOTTIE. Why, Frank —
FRANK. Hello, old girl. Going out?
LOTTIE. What's the matter? It's only noon. . . . Is any of the firm dead? Have you got the afternoon off?

The point is dwelt upon, elaborated, and after two excellent pages leads naturally towards the crisis.

Entrances and exits, movements of any kind, are visibly motivated in life. A newcomer does not enter a house or a room without an obvious reason. If the reason is not obvious, he states it, and even if it is obvious he is likely to state it. He does not turn upon his heel and walk off without similar justification. He does not retire into another room and emerge at intervals without some show of pretext.

If he has come to pay a social call, or to keep an appointment, or in obedience to a request; if he is leaving, because he has paid his call, or has an appointment elsewhere, or is asked to leave; if he goes to another room to fetch something, and returns to show it, the dialogue — his and that of the other persons present — will leaven the proceedings with sanity. If he is a member of the family he will come and go with greater freedom. But unless he is distracted he will make clear the reasons for his movements. There are reasons, and if they are obscure he will clarify them.

The audience, habituated to such reasonableness in daily life, demands equally good sense in the play. The motivation may precede, coincide with, or follow the action; may be obvious or may require a word of explanation. But to omit it altogether is a very grave defect.

It is not necessary to examine in detail what constitutes an effective entrance or an effective final exit. The methods of emphasis and flattening, already discussed, indicate how the dramatist may direct interest to his characters in what proportion he pleases. But it may be well to suggest that psychological factors have not a little to do it. An entrance may be striking from a physical point of view, may, as in simple-minded musical comedy, project the "star" in a flaming gown — or none at all — against a background of less conspicuous choristers. But for such theatricalism the one-act playwright has next to no use. By taking

advantage of psychological factors, by making an entrance itself a complication in his story, he can make it as forcible as it ever need be. The first entrance of his principal character may itself be a minor crisis; may suggest questions, bring about a dramatic situation. It carries only the weight which the addition of the character, at a given moment, attaches to it, but that weight may be made very great indeed without resorting to claptrap devices.

Perhaps the most effective first entrance in modern drama, that of Cyrano in the first act of "Cyrano de Bergerac", owes the major part of its power to the emphatic crisis which his appearance precipitates. On the physical side it is handled with consummate skill: first the voice; then the brandishing of the cane; finally the disclosure of the man himself, mounted on a chair, arms crossed, hat cocked at a martial angle, mustache bristling, and nose terrible. But it is the psychological that invests these externals with power.

The most effective final exit is that which answers the questions of the play. Coming thus, it is the visible certification of the mental action. The Toff's exit in Lord Dunsany's "A Night at an Inn", Sam's in Mr. Brighouse's "Lonesome-Like", and Emma's in Mr. O'Neill's "Diff'rent", to cite three sharply contrasting plays, express the resignation of humanity, happy or unhappy, to the forces of destiny. It is not the mere act of going through a door that is effective: it is the meaning that is implicit in it. The play is at an end and its problem is solved.

One of the greatest tasks in the long play is to dispose of characters who are not needed temporarily. Even if the difficulty of providing reasons for exits and reentrances is overcome, it is not often that the surplus characters can be herded together in the single offstage room or balcony or hall upon which the door in the scene itself opens. The early French drama solved

the problem by inventing rooms which were nearly all doors: one opened upon the street or upon the passage leading to it; two or three others gave access to interior rooms; an archway at the rear connected with a dining room through folding doors, and French windows scattered through the little that remained of the wall space provided still other entrances. In reaction against this theatricalism

> Some years ago, a little band of playwrights and would-be playwrights . . . tried to lay down a rule that no room on the stage must ever have more than one door.[1]

The one-act playwright need go to neither of these artificial extremes. The smallness of his cast renders great difficulties improbable; but the question of doors must be solved by a consideration of what is natural in real life. To equip a hovel with half a dozen entrances is as absurd as to restrict a ballroom to one. To furnish a room in a tenement with French windows is as unnatural as to deny them to a room on the ground floor of a country villa. A determination to stick to the truth from the very outset will suggest means by which the difficulties inseparable from it may be overcome.

A second room or an alcove, supplied with folding doors or curtains, permits the dramatist to enlarge or diminish his stage at will. In such diverse plays as Mr. C. M. S. McLellan's "The Shirkers", Mrs. E. B. Brunner's "The Spark of Life", and Maeterlinck's juvenile "The Miracle of Saint Anthony", alcoves are employed with excellent effect alternately to conceal and reveal. But a word of caution is necessary: each of these three plays ventures only to place a dead body in the alcove. To place a living person in it would make him an involuntary eavesdropper, and unless this peculiarly disagreeable offense is to enter

[1] William Archer: "Play-Making", 405.

into the play, the dramatist is faced with the awkward if not impossible task of exculpating his characters.

Only actual familiarity with the stage itself can suggest how even its limitations may occasionally be turned to a profit.

My "The Unseen Host" makes much of the tramp of a regiment of ghostly warriors. To duplicate this tramp upon the stage was a problem: by no possible device could it be made other than hollow. Again, the sound would inform the audience that the soldiers were tramping upon wooden boards and not upon the pavement of a street. These obstacles were turned into advantages when it occurred to me that the peculiar sound might be built boldly into the play. These lines, early in its action, turned one difficulty into an asset:

THE VISITOR. Aren't you afraid of the Zeppelins?
THE SURGEON. Too much of a fatalist for that. They were here a week ago.
THE VISITOR. And didn't hurt you?
THE SURGEON. Blew up yards and yards of pavement with the result that we had to lay wooden boards in the street. The hospital wasn't damaged.

These, after the surgeon has told of the ghostly regiment which, according to the dying man, tramped into the heavens, did as much for the greater obstacle:

THE VISITOR (*emphasizing the inconsistency*). Tramping ghosts! . . . Ghosts don't tramp!
THE SURGEON (*gently bantering*). Not even a ghostly tramp? They clank chains, I am told. Why shouldn't their steps have a sound? A sort of a hollow, ghostly sound?

Another peculiarity of the stage was deliberately utilized in my "The Finger of God." The human eye cannot be focused upon two places at once. If compelling action is placed at one side of the stage, almost anything can take place at the opposite side without

an audience being any the wiser. Stage magicians, for years, have taken advantage of this simple truth openly to conceal what they pleased upon their persons while an assistant monopolized the attention of the spectators by pretending to have difficulties with a struggling animal, or with a bowl of flaming liquid, at the opposite side of the stage.

In the play a supernatural visitant was to disappear. It might have been accomplished by dimming the lights; but it was effected with greater naturalness and with greater shock to the audience by allowing the principal character to act the most emotional scene of the play at extreme right, while the supernatural character quietly walked off at extreme left. In the many productions the play has had no audience has ever actually observed the exit.

These two are but typical of dozens of possible illustrations which might be adduced. The setting is an integral part of the play. Consideration of it, its peculiarities, its advantages and disadvantages, the entrances and exits which will be conditioned by it, should enter into the dramatist's thoughts early in the incubating period.

Lack of familiarity with the stage leads to curious absurdities. A play in my collection directs:

[*The entrances and exits must be so contrived that they appear to be from and to space.*

It does not state how this is to be "contrived." Another contains:

[*Henry, listening at the door, wonders if this can be his dear wife who is speaking thus.*

Henry, it will be observed, is entirely off the stage, and as a matter of fact has yet to make his first entrance. Another directs:

GERALDINE (*flushing and growing pale by turns*).

Perhaps it might be managed by the use of baby spotlights. But the results would be first-rate farce. The art of acting has not yet advanced to a degree permitting an actress, however accomplished, to comply with this last direction, nor even to allow Henry, in the preceding, to convey his interesting reactions to the audience despite the fact that he is neither visible nor audible to it.

Stage directions, in an acting text, are necessary whenever their omission might permit a misinterpretation. They may indicate the manner in which a line is to be delivered, the pause which may follow or precede it, or the stage business which may accompany it or take place independently. They need not be very elaborate. On the other hand, stage directions in the printed play often have every reason to be copious.

After quoting the lengthy paragraph in which Mr. Granville Barker tells us Julia's history at the beginning of the published text of "The Madras House", Professor Baker comments:

> Such characterizing is an implied censure on the ability of most readers to see the full significance of deft touches in the dialogue.[1]

Admitting the "implied censure", I believe most readers deserve it. I doubt if one individual in a hundred can appreciate the full significance of deft touches if unaided by stage directions intended for his express benefit. Quite cheerfully I class myself among the ninety-nine who profit by the extraordinarily full stage directions in the printed plays of Sir J. M. Barrie and Mr. St. John Hankin. Mr. Shaw, as usual, overdoes the thing.

If next best to witnessing the play upon the stage is the mental re-creation of it in the study, then the reader

[1] "Dramatic Technique", 278.

has every right to demand such help as may be necessary to make his visualization accurate.

Mr. P. P. Howe expresses it thus:

> Every play that can be read — (and every good play can be read, make no mistake about that) — must make plain to the reader by means of commentary upon the words and actions of the persons all those things which, in the theater, would be made plain to the spectator by the actor's art and by the constant co-operating service of the stage. Drama is one-half a matter of visual demonstration: a blind man sitting in a theater could take away only one-half of a true play's content; and to read the bare printed words of a play is to be in the position of the blind man. The function of the printed stage directions is to supply all that difference between what would be apprehended by the blind man and what would be apprehended by the spectator with the whole quintette of his senses about him But their function is not to supply more.[1]

"Not to supply more." There's the rub. The rise of the curtain in the theater discloses actors who represent the characters of the play as nearly as possible. If the reader is to visualize them correctly the stage directions, at the very beginning, must supplement the dialogue in so far as necessary. Perhaps the characters are simply conceived and the dialogue mirrors them sufficiently. Perhaps the characters are such that only an excursion into their past histories can conjure up the faces which, in the acted play, would greet us. The judgment of the dramatist must decide. The reader, unaided, will doubtless form a tolerably correct conception of the characters by the time that he reaches the end of the play; but unless he reads it a second time he may not appreciate the full force of its earlier scenes.

Characterization, it goes without saying, does not belong in the program or in the list of characters which,

[1] "Dramatic Portraits", 173.

in the printed play, corresponds to it. To follow each printed name with a thumb-nail description not only imposes an impossible burden upon the memory but places an essential part of the play outside of the play proper. The thumb-nail sketch has its place at the first entrance of each character. Supplementary stage directions, scattered through the dialogue, will prevent the sketch from becoming too lengthy by carrying part of its burden.

In the acting text stage directions help the actors to reproduce the characters and the action that the author has in mind; in the printed text their function is similar, with the important modification that the reader, lacking the help of an alert director, turns naturally to the author for assistance at every doubtful point. Simple courtesy demands that that assistance be given graciously.

If it is the duty of the stage direction to help the reader's visualization, it ought not, when it can possibly be avoided, be of a nature to destroy illusion. Lord Dunsany, consummate craftsman that he is, is occasionally careless. This is from "The Gods of the Mountain":

> [*Halfway to the footlights they left wheel. They pass in front of the seven beggars, now in terrified attitudes, and six of them sit down in the attitude described, with their backs to the audience.*

For the sake of the illusion the action should have been described without mention of either footlights or audience.

A similar literalness injures the printed text of "The Queen's Enemies":

> QUEEN (*beats again with her fan*). Harlee, Harlee, let in the water upon the princes and the gentlemen.
>
> [*A green torrent descends from the great hole. Green gauzes rise up from the floor; the torches hiss out. . . .*

"Green gauzes!" Of course we know that on the stage real water is not let in upon the actors, and that they are not really drowned, and that the King of the Four Countries is actually named Higginbotham. We know, even though the stage directions do not go so far, that the princes and the gentlemen now lie down on the stage and pretend that they are dead. But why, oh, why, remind us of it?

Chapter XXXVI: Setting and Scenario

SOME years ago a talented Little Theater group produced a one-act play at a total cost of less than twenty dollars. The scene was an interior with two doors. Ample hangings of dark cloth, against which the doors were picked out in contrasting colors, and a simple chaise-longue, near the center of the stage, constituted the entire setting.

The production was so successful that a well-known theatrical magnate decided to present the play in vaudeville. For it he had built what probably still holds the record for being the costliest set ever designed for such a purpose. Decorated in the Pompeiian manner, gorgeous with gold and purple, and equipped with elaborate period furniture made to order, the room was more than sumptuous. Two ornate doors, solidly built and set into magnificent frames, and a richly colored window of leaded glass opposite the more important door carried out the note of splendor expressed in every detail.

Produced with this gorgeous setting, the play promptly failed. The spectators, overcome by the magnificence, could hardly gaze long enough. Having finished surveying the room, the cloak and gown worn by the leading lady, both "created" by a famous dressmaker, came in for their share of attention. In the meantime the two actors, who were resolutely delivering lines, were totally ignored.

Presently it struck the beholders that a play was being acted, and they graciously turned their attention to it. At about that time the curtain fell. The play was my "A House of Cards."

The first production subordinated the setting to the play, and in every detail complied with what Professor Matthews calls

> The unchanging law which declares that it is the perfection of a woman's dress to make its wearer look her best without in any way attracting attention to itself.[1]

The second production subordinated the play to the setting, decked it out so extravagantly that both story and actors were somehow lost sight of. The setting might have made an admirable background for a full-length play running an entire evening; it was utterly ruinous to the unpretentious one-act play for which it was designed.

The production was rescued from the jaws of disaster by applying the heroic remedies so clearly indicated. Neither setting nor costume, being monstrously costly, could be discarded. Alterations had to be confined to the play.

The curtain was raised on an empty, well-illuminated stage, and the audience allowed to gaze its fill. Four actors were substituted for the two of the original text, both to subdue the setting and to direct greater emphasis to the central characters. The opening, tripled in length, was carefully revised to guide the attention of the audience to each striking feature of the background in turn. The Pompeiian furniture and the ornate window were dealt with *seriatim*. The leading lady's cloak, of flame-colored velvet, and her gown, a wonderful thing, were deliberately shown off in the very beginning. Not until the audience's curiosity on the subject of externals was completely satisfied did the action venture to commence. The length of the play and the number of its characters had been doubled; the setting had been subjected to intensive negative

[1] "The Principles of Playmaking", 249.

preparation; something approaching a correct balance was struck, and the revised play was able to complete a season's run.

The tale, I hope, will be found instructive. The rival advantages of elaborate and simple settings for the long play do not concern us; but there can hardly be a doubt which is preferable for the one-act play. Within bounds, the elaborate setting is unobjectionable: the extended opening can deal with it. But when its elaboration becomes so great that the dramatist must deliberately fight it to give his play any chance at all, it defeats its own ends; the play which it handicaps is not likely to hold the boards long enough to permit the work of the scene designer to be shown to many audiences. Until plays are written to fit settings,[1] settings should be devised to fit plays, to help the totality of effect by losing themselves first of all in the harmony of the whole.

For precisely the same reasons I am a fervid believer in the "new scenery" for the one-act play, provided only that it sticks to its keynotes: suggestion and subordination.

Mr. Arthur Hopkins is vehement on the subject of scenery in general:

> What is all the discussion about? How can there be any discussion? Isn't it a palpable fact that the only mission of settings is to suggest place and mood, and once that is established let the play go on? Do we want anything more than backgrounds? Must we have intricate wood-turning and goulash painting? If so, we have no right in the theater. We have no imagination. And a theater without imagination becomes a building in which people put paint on their faces and do tricks, and no trick they perform is worth look-

[1] This does occasionally happen. Mr. Percy MacKaye's "A Thousand Years Ago" was written, with astonishing virtuosity, to utilize an expensive set of scenery which the producers had on their hands due to the failure of Karl Vollmoeller's "Turandot."

ing at unless they take a reasonable chance of being killed in the attempt.

The whole realistic movement was founded on selfishness —the selfish desire of the producer or scene painter to score individually, to do something so effective that it stood in front of the play and shrieked from behind it.[1]

The "new scenery" starts from simplicity. Beginning with a stage plainly draped or marked out boldly by simple masses, it adds what little is necessary to make the whole suggestive.

The "realistic scenery" starts from complexity. Beginning with faithful reproduction of life, it gradually cuts out the non-essentials. Intelligently handled, it arrives at the same point of subordination.

Mr. David Belasco, greatest of realists, expresses himself thus:

I believe in setting plays upon the stage with the nearest possible fidelity to nature. To copy faithfully the light of the sun and moon and stars that God Almighty has made for us, may well exercise our greatest skill. To have the plays we set upon the stage acted with close fidelity to that humanity which it has pleased God to put upon earth, will, I think, tax the utmost capabilities of producer and actor, working together. All that transcends this I cheerfully and willingly leave to others.[2]

Here, surely, is no "selfishness." His exquisite setting of Mr. Edward Knoblock's "Marie-Odile" could have been described as a meeting-place for realism and impressionism. On the one hand, it was exactly what such a place, a refectory in a convent, might be. On the other hand,

The architecture was indefinite, — so indefinite that the observer could not even determine whether it was Ro-

[1] "How's Your Second Act?", 48–49.

[2] Speech at banquet of Society of American Dramatists and Composers, March 20, 1921.

manesque or Gothic or Renaissance. The furniture was of the simplest; and not a single article of furniture or decoration was placed upon the stage that was not required by some exigency of the action. . . . Mr. Belasco devised a setting that was simple and summary and suggestive.[1]

Impressionism, carried too far, becomes eccentric and distracting. Realism, carried too far, becomes microscopic and distracting. Overdone, there is but a choice of evils. In intelligent hands either can be made to serve.

Simplicity, however achieved, is the greatest of all virtues in a one-act play setting. For the sake of the reader, the author often describes his scene with great minuteness. For the sake of the spectator, the director need not hesitate to strip everything to the essentials dictated by the play itself. Miss Glaspell's "Trifles" demands realism of a degree great enough to prevent the physical details which enter the play from standing out too conspicuously at the beginning. Miss Winifred Hawkridge's "The Florist Shop", on the other hand, can be played either in the elaborate setting detailed by the author or in an impressionistic setting consisting only of draperies, a white-enameled counter, the necessary furniture, and flowers.

The one-act playwright, however, foreseeing eccentricities of setting, will do well to avoid the abrupt opening wherever possible. Even the simplest scene may be worth a moment's inspection, and if the scene designer has done his worst, may demand a much lengthier examination. If the action must commence immediately, the expedient of bringing up the curtain on an empty stage, and allowing the characters to enter after a pause, is likely to counter-balance the scenic excesses of occasional directors. Whether the setting be good or bad, the audience may well be given an opportunity to inspect it.

[1] Clayton Hamilton: "Problems of the Playwright", 219.

With a description and scene-plot of the setting, the scenario may commence. Consideration of the scene ought not be postponed until the play has been written: its connection with the visible action is too intimate. The playwright is to visualize. He cannot do so with maximum success if he conceives of his characters as moving against no background at all. It is not necessary for him, at the earliest stage, to go into the minutiae unless, as occasionally happens, objects on the stage are to enter prominently into the action. But some conception of the scene itself, of the location of its entrances, and of the other rooms or places with which it is supposedly connected is necessary at the start. It is rarely that the playwright can go back over the finished work and inject omitted mechanics as they would have developed with it.

The scenario will list the characters, and, if the playwright wills, will jot down a few notes upon each for his guidance. Extensive notes should not be necessary. The characters should be at least as real as some of the author's acquaintances; should have acquired distinct personality of their own before the scenario is begun. If voluminous notes are needed it is fair to presume that they have not yet reached this highly evolved stage, and that the writing of the play should accordingly be postponed.

On the other hand, elaborate notes as clarification of the author's conceptions may have their uses: one very distinguished dramatist makes it a rule, before beginning actual composition, to ask and to answer, about each of his characters, such questions as these: "Where was he born? When? Who were his parents? Where and how was he educated? What is his religion? His politics? His occupation? His income? His hobbies? His dominant traits? His weaknesses? His views upon women?"

These questions, it will be observed, are all by way

of orientation: they set the individual in cogent relationship with life. The ability to answer them is certainly a test which an author cannot pass honestly unless his characters are solidly conceived.

The scenario will detail the action, stating each of its essentials, and making clear both its mechanics and its deliberate craftsmanship.[1] Every entrance and exit will be noted, along with the reasons for it. Every preparational element will be mentioned, and if it is sufficiently important to occur more than once for the sake of cumulative emphasis, each repetition of it will be duly indicated. Preparation by repeated emphasis is a delicate art, and it is a difficult and unsatisfactory task to take apart a tightly written play and insert what should have been present from the beginning. It is simpler and better to cover the technical side so exhaustively in the scenario that in the actual writing an occasional glance will assure the author that he is omitting no essential. Carried away often in the heat of composition, he may venture upon a wrong track: the scenario waves the danger signal before he has gone too far.

While the finished play will cover up the craftsmanship that has gone into it, the scenario cannot expose it too plainly. It stands at the side of the author, reminding him, cautioning him, warning him. It does not ask him to abandon truth for the sake of a cut-and-dried program; but it suggests that the broader truth which came to fruition in his mind is now embodied in its brief sentences, and that a departure, at one point, may vitiate the artistry of the whole.

The scenario makes it possible to scrutinize the craftsmanship of the play before it is cast into final form. Professor Matthews suggests "a series of ques-

[1] Throughout I refer to the working scenario, designed for the dramatist's private use in composing the play, and intended for no other purpose whatsoever.

tions which the student can put to himself when he begins to study any play, ancient or modern." The dramatist may apply them with equal profit if he will study his own play while there is yet time for changes.

I quote a few of the questions:

A. Has this play a single plot? — or is the story double or even treble? If there is more than one story, which is the main-plot? Is the under-plot worked into the structure of the play, or is it independent, being merely juxtaposed? Does the existence of more than one plot divide the interest of the play, or scatter it, or does the under-plot sustain the main story by adroit contrast?

B. With which character do you find yourself sympathizing? Why? Does the outcome o the struggle satisfy you? If not, why not? Has the author played fair with his characters? Or has he obviously intervened to make them do what they would not do?

C. At what point in the story does the author choose to begin and at what point to end? Was he well advised in both choices? How has he conveyed to you what you need to know about the past to enable you to follow the play from the beginning?

D. Does the play contain any scene which could be omitted? Does the author fail to present any scene which he ought to have shown in action? Has he led you to expect any scene which he has not given you?

E. Does the interest of the play rise steadily from the beginning to the end? If not, where does it droop?

. . . . . .

I. Are the characters veracious? Could they have existed? If so, would they have acted as they do in the play? Is the end inevitable or is it arbitrary? Is the story warped by the obvious effort of the author? [1]

I have quoted but a small part of what I feel is the most valuable questionnaire of the kind ever brought

[1] "A Study of the Drama", Appendix.

to my notice. To it I would add but a single question: If you were not the author, would you pay admission to see this play?

For some writers the use of a scenario will not be necessary. Given an accurate and a retentive memory, and, above all, great experience in play-writing, it is possible to develop the entire one-act play mentally, setting pen to paper for the first time with the writing of the first draft. No one rule may hope to cover: each dramatist will decide the question for himself.

In my own writing, I have used scenarios of some kind for at least half of my plays, and have resorted to highly detailed scenarios for perhaps a dozen of them. When technical difficulties are moderate I am able to work without scenarios, but in the face of real obstacles I find them nearly indispensable. The first and wholly unsatisfactory version of the play which became "The Unseen Host" was written from a perfunctory scenario. The printed version, which, good or bad, I have never been able to improve, was evolved from a series of four increasingly lengthy and increasingly detailed scenarios. The actual writing and revision of the play occupied only a few days; but six months elapsed between the first scenario and the final one.

The principal questions concerned in the writing and polishing of the play have been examined in the chapters on dialogue. The effort must always be towards clarity and truth, towards the phrase that is both well put and naturally put, towards the action that is both dramatic and veracious.

If the play is to be light in vein, compromise is permissible. But if we are dealing in facts, if we are writing seriously about the serious business of living, compromise is intolerable. Truth must come first: the character must say precisely what he would say, and

do precisely what he would do. If that is satisfactory, the result may be a good play. But if it is not satisfactory, and the dramatist refrains from writing rather than set down lies, all the more honor to him.

Even though he never write a line, he is an artist.

Chapter XXXVII: The Future of the One-act Play

VARIOUS have been the vicissitudes of the one-act play. As a "curtain raiser" it has been and is still being used, particularly in England, to while away the half hour separating the arrival of the prompt from the grand entry of the fashionable. Like the "interference" in football, it is charged with the duty of sacrificing itself so that the lengthier play which follows it may proceed without interruption.

In vaudeville, ruthlessly compressed, it has made gallant but not wholly successful attempts to come into its own. It has been handicapped — and probably always will be handicapped — by the fact that the audience is not attracted by the play, but by the other "acts" on the bill, between which it is sandwiched. The fact that one-act plays of the high calibre of "The Twelve-Pound Look", "Overtones", "The Clod", and "How He Lied to Her Husband" have held the boards must be credited either to the prominence of the "stars" who played in them, or to the prescience of booking offices, which have occasionally given their audiences entertainment better than they deserved.

The spectator who pays seventy-five cents or a dollar to hear the latest bit of jazz and to witness the performance of the trained seals is not likely to respond with any particular enthusiasm to such plays as "The Golden Doom" or "The Little Stone House." Either slap-stick farce or violent melodrama is more apt to "hit him where he lives." In simple, honest portrayal of life and in the visionings of romance he is not at all interested: the sensational, the ludicrous, the side-

splitting, — these, however illogical, are more to his taste. Were the bill simply "four one-act plays" he would go elsewhere for his amusement. Vaudeville is the history of a long struggle between a unique type of audience and well-meaning and ambitious managers, whose efforts towards rational entertainment are doomed to failure from the start.

In the Little Theater the one-act play has entered into the house of its friends. Profiting by the atmosphere of intimacy, and profiting still more by the natural selection which has determined its audience, it has dealt with any and every subject, and, according to its excellence, has found warm welcome. It does not ask for an assemblage of "high-brow" spectators: it makes but the reasonable request that its auditors have come to see plays, and would not be satisfied with the antics of acrobats, "rapid-fire comedians", and black-face clog dancers.

The Little Theater is the expression of a rational demand for rational entertainment in a rational community. A number-four company, playing "the sensational hit", "Ten Nights in a Bar-room", or "Uncle Tom's Cabin", "after a year's run in New York" — long, long, after — or even those justly celebrated successes, "The Roly-Poly Girls" or "The Parisian Models", is not invariably able to supply just what is wanted. All of the intelligent persons in these United States do not reside in New York, Boston, and Chicago. There are a few in Seattle — and in Detroit — and in Tulsa, Oklahoma — and in Red Oak, Iowa. Perhaps there is a larger percentage of them in the smaller cities than in the greater: the frankly pornographic plays which meet with huge success in the enlightened metropolis do not always "turn 'em away" when they offer their salacities to the inhabitants of our smaller towns. Whoever may be the typical intelligent American, he is not, I submit, a New Yorker.

It is his demand that the one-act play is filling, and filling well. Given but average talent and a small body of sincere workers, and any community may entertain itself, and entertain itself better, more cheaply, and more satisfactorily than can the fifth-rate company which, like the measles or the boll weevil, comes occasionally to visit it.

The one-act play is easy to stage. Its scenery is simple, and even its further simplification helps, oftener than hurts it.

It is easy to act. The participants are not required to memorize four acts of dialogue. It can be made ready for production in a fraction of the time required by the longer play — and the labor is correspondingly less.

It is easy to direct. Three or four plays may make up a bill. The work is often divided between three or four directors.

It is satisfactory to an audience. It speaks the language of the people; is simple, true, and honest; and in it there is something in which a spectator may set his teeth, a nourishing thought, however various, which he can take away with him.

The Little Theater, beginning often as an amateur organization, sometimes becomes professional. A process of natural selection brings to the front the individuals who have talent as actors, designers, directors, authors. The result is that the theater begins to reflect the life of which it is a part, and by doing so becomes an educational force second to none. In the professional Little Theater, well equipped, and above all, well supported, the one-act play will reach its zenith.

The one-act play has been the standard bearer of the modern drama. Breaking away from the stereotyped theatrics which ruled the stage before its coming, it has experimented — and the success of its experiments has encouraged dramatists to embody them in

full-length plays. Twenty years ago such plays as Mr. O'Neill's "Anna Christie", Mr. Owen Davis' "The Detour", and Mr. Arthur Richman's "Ambush" could not have been produced. The pioneer work of the one-act play made it apparent, long in advance, that the public was ready for them.

However radical the idea, however notable the departure from theatrical convention, however daring the movement towards truth, the one-act play offers itself not only as a trial balloon but as an independent art form, worth while and enduring in itself. It has copied little from the long plays which were the vogue when it came into being. It has solved its own problems as they have arisen. Far more, the simplicity and the subtlety of its craftsmanship have most profoundly influenced the longer form.

In place of the disjointed, episodic, far-fetched drama of but a generation ago has come the tightly written, logically connected, intensely honest drama of to-day. Whether realistic or romantic, it has become simpler, truer, and more sympathetic. That some of the best of the longer plays are the work of men who have achieved distinction in the one-act form is no coincidence: it is the one-act technique that is advancing the modern drama to the plane upon which it rightly belongs.

To the dramatist that technique is a means both to the longer play and to its briefer companion. It is far easier to write at length than to compress. The writer who has the ability to do the latter often possesses the ability to do the former, and his four-act play, incidentally, is likely to be well written.

The one-act play form offers itself to the dramatist as a simple means of perfecting his craftsmanship, and, what is more important, testing it before an audience. To obtain production for a first four-act play is not easy; but if the one-act play is promising, the local

Little Theater will afford the beginner the invaluable opportunity of discovering what his instincts are really worth. He may choose to attempt the longer drama; he may decide to remain a one-act playwright. Either goal is supremely worth while.

Lord Dunsany, with but a single full-length play to his credit, has achieved fame with a handful of one-act plays. Maeterlinck, for all the many works that have flowed from his pen, has never surpassed the impressive sweep of the three one-act plays that date from his early youth. Sir J. M. Barrie has enriched dramatic literature with "The Admirable Crichton", "What Every Woman Knows", and "Peter Pan." But "The Twelve-Pound Look", and "The Old Lady Shows Her Medals" need not blush by comparison. "Riders to the Sea", and not "The Playboy of the Western World" is likely to make J. M. Synge immortal.

Perhaps the most striking development in the modern drama may be expressed in the phrase, "Exit the hero." In place of the paragon of all the seven deadly virtues of our forefathers, we have man, uncertain, dazed, sure of nothing but his own resolve, facing the mystery which surrounds him with equanimity and with courage. If there is a villain, his name is Destiny. If there is a hero, his name is Logic. Man, infinitesimally small, the plaything of the two, may come to a happy or an unhappy ending. That is merely incidental if Truth is the winner in the end.

To the interpretation of that Truth the dramatist must bring neither arrogance, nor lofty confidence in his own powers, nor unworthy disdain of the theater in whose temple he is a priest. It is for him to consecrate himself to his labors, to come to their performance with humility — and with reverence.

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