

Essays Concerning Letters

By

John Galsworthy

*Free*editorial 

ESSAYS CONCERNING LETTERS,

A NOVELIST'S ALLEGORY

Once upon a time the Prince of Felicitas had occasion to set forth on a journey. It was a late autumn evening with few pale stars and a moon no larger than the paring of a finger-nail. And as he rode through the purlieu of his city, the white mane of his amber-coloured steed was all that he could clearly see in the dusk of the high streets. His way led through a quarter but little known to him, and he was surprised to find that his horse, instead of ambling forward with his customary gentle vigour, stepped carefully from side to side, stopping now and then to curve his neck and prick his ears—as though at some thing of fear unseen in the darkness; while on either hand creatures could be heard rustling and scuttling, and little cold draughts as of wings fanned the rider's cheeks.

The Prince at last turned in his saddle, but so great was the darkness that he could not even see his escort.

"What is the name of this street?" he said.

"Sire, it is called the Vita Publica."

"It is very dark." Even as he spoke his horse staggered, but, recovering its foothold with an effort, stood trembling violently. Nor could all the incitements of its master induce the beast again to move forward.

"Is there no one with a lantern in this street?" asked the Prince.

His attendants began forthwith to call out loudly for any one who had a lantern. Now, it chanced that an old man sleeping in a hovel on a pallet of straw was, awakened by these cries. When he heard that it was the Prince of Felicitas himself, he came hastily, carrying his lantern, and stood trembling beside the Prince's horse. It was so dark that the Prince could not see him.

"Light your lantern, old man," he said.

The old man laboriously lit his lantern. Its pale rays fled out on either hand; beautiful but grim was the vision they disclosed. Tall houses, fair court-yards, and a palm grown garden; in front of the Prince's horse a deep cesspool, on whose jagged edges the good beast's hoofs were planted; and, as far as the glimmer of the lantern stretched, both ways down the rutted street, paving stones displaced, and smooth tessellated marble; pools of mud, the hanging fruit of an orange tree, and dark, scurrying shapes of monstrous rats bolting across from house to house. The old man held the lantern higher; and instantly bats flying against it would have beaten out the light but for the thin protection of its horn sides.

The Prince sat still upon his horse, looking first at the rutted space that he had traversed and then at the rutted space before him.

"Without a light," he said, "this thoroughfare is dangerous. What is your name, old man?"

"My name is Cethru," replied the aged churl.

"Cethru!" said the Prince. "Let it be your duty henceforth to walk with your lantern up and down this street all night and every night,"—and he looked at Cethru: "Do you understand, old man, what it is you have to do?"

The old man answered in a voice that trembled like a rusty flute:

"Aye, aye!—to walk up and down and hold my lantern so that folk can see where they be going."

The Prince gathered up his reins; but the old man, lurching forward, touched his stirrup.

"How long be I to go on wi' thiccy job?"

"Until you die!"

Cethru held up his lantern, and they could see his long, thin face, like a sandwich of dried leather, jerk and quiver, and his thin grey hairs flutter in the draught of the bats' wings circling round the light.

"'Twill be main hard!" he groaned; "an' my lantern's nowt but a poor thing."

With a high look, the Prince of Felicitas bent and touched the old man's forehead.

"Until you die, old man," he repeated; and bidding his followers to light torches from Cethru's lantern, he rode on down the twisting street. The clatter of the horses' hoofs died out in the night, and the scuttling and the rustling of the rats and the whispers of the bats' wings were heard again.

Cethru, left alone in the dark thoroughfare, sighed heavily; then, spitting on his hands, he tightened the old girdle round his loins, and slinging the lantern on his staff, held it up to the level of his waist, and began to make his way along the street. His progress was but slow, for he had many times to stop and rekindle the flame within his lantern, which the bats' wings, his own stumbles, and the jostlings of footpads or of revellers returning home, were for ever extinguishing. In traversing that long street he spent half the night, and half the night in traversing it back again. The saffron swan of dawn, slow swimming up the sky-river between the high roof-banks, bent her neck down through the dark air-water to look at him staggering below her, with his still smoking wick. No sooner did Cethru see that sunlit bird, than with a great sigh of joy he sat him down, and at once fell asleep.

Now when the dwellers in the houses of the Vita Publica first gained knowledge that this old man passed every night with his lantern up and down their street, and when they marked those pallid gleams gliding over the motley prospect of cesspools and garden gates, over the sightless hovels and the rich-carved frontages of their palaces; or saw them stay their journey and remain suspended like a handful of daffodils held up against the black stuffs of secrecy—they said:

"It is good that the old man should pass like this—we shall see better where we're going; and if the Watch have any job on hand, or want to put the pavements in order, his lantern will serve their purpose well enough." And they would call out of their doors and windows to him passing:

"Hola! old man Cethru! All's well with our house, and with the street before it?"

But, for answer, the old man only held his lantern up, so that in the ring of its pale light they saw some sight or other in the street. And his silence troubled them, one by one, for each had expected that he would reply:

"Aye, aye! All's well with your house, Sirs, and with the street before it!"

Thus they grew irritated with this old man who did not seem able to do anything but just hold his lantern up. And gradually they began to dislike his passing by their doors with his pale light, by which they could not fail to see, not only the rich-carved frontages and scrolled gates of courtyards and fair gardens, but things that were not pleasing to the eye. And they murmured amongst themselves: "What is the good of this old man and his silly lantern? We can see all we want to see without him; in fact, we got on very well before he came."

So, as he passed, rich folk who were supping would pelt him with orange-peel and empty the dregs of their wine over his head; and poor folk, sleeping in their hutches, turned over, as the rays of the lantern fell on them, and cursed him for that disturbance. Nor did revellers or footpads treat the old man, civilly, but tied him to the wall, where he was constrained to stay till a kind passerby released him. And ever the bats darkened his lantern with their wings and tried to beat the flame out. And the old man thought: "This be a terrible hard job; I don't seem to please nobody." But because the Prince of Felicitas had so commanded him, he continued nightly to pass with his lantern up and down the street; and every morning as the saffron swan came swimming overhead, to fall asleep. But his sleep did not last long, for he was compelled to pass many hours each day in gathering rushes and melting down tallow for his lantern; so that his lean face grew more than ever like a sandwich of dried leather.

Now it came to pass that the Town Watch having had certain complaints made to them that persons had been bitten in the Vita Publica by rats, doubted of their duty to destroy these ferocious creatures; and they held investigation, summoning the persons bitten and inquiring of them how it was that in so dark a street they could tell that the animals which had bitten them were indeed rats. Howbeit for some time no one could be found who could say more than what he had been told, and since this was not evidence, the Town Watch had good hopes that they would not after all be forced to undertake this tedious enterprise. But presently there came before them one who said that he had himself seen the rat which had bitten him, by the light of an old man's lantern. When the Town Watch heard this they were vexed, for they knew that if this were true they would now be forced to prosecute the arduous undertaking, and they said:

"Bring in this old man!"

Cethru was brought before them trembling.

"What is this we hear, old man, about your lanthorn and the rat? And in the first place, what were you doing in the Vita Publica at that time of night?"

Cethru answered: "I were just passin' with my lanthorn!"

"Tell us—did you see the rat?"

Cethru shook his head: "My lanthorn seed the rat, maybe!" he muttered.

"Old owl!" said the Captain of the Watch: "Be careful what you say! If you saw the rat, why did you then not aid this unhappy citizen who was bitten by it—first, to avoid that rodent, and subsequently to slay it, thereby relieving the public of a pestilential danger?"

Cethru looked at him, and for some seconds did not reply; then he said slowly: "I were just passin' with my lanthorn."

"That you have already told us," said the Captain of the Watch; "it is no answer."

Cethru's leathern cheeks became wine-coloured, so desirous was he to speak, and so unable. And the Watch sneered and laughed, saying:

"This is a fine witness."

But of a sudden Cethru spoke:

"What would I be duin'—killin' rats; tidden my business to kill rats."

The Captain of the Watch caressed his beard, and looking at the old man with contempt, said:

"It seems to me, brothers, that this is an idle old vagabond, who does no good to any one. We should be well advised, I think, to prosecute him for vagrancy. But that is not at this moment the matter in hand. Owing to the accident—scarcely fortunate—of this old man's passing with his lanthorn, it would certainly appear that citizens have been bitten by rodents. It is then, I fear, our duty to institute proceedings against those poisonous and violent animals."

And amidst the sighing of the Watch, it was so resolved.

Cethru was glad to shuffle away, unnoticed, from the Court, and sitting down under a camel-date tree outside the City Wall, he thus reflected:

"They were rough with me! I done nothin', so far's I can see!"

And a long time he sat there with the bunches of the camel-dates above him, golden as the sunlight. Then, as the scent of the lyric-flowers, released by evening, warned him of the night dropping like a flight of dark birds on the plain, he rose stiffly, and made his way as usual toward the Vita Publica.

He had traversed but little of that black thoroughfare, holding his lantern at the level of his breast, when the sound of a splash and cries for help smote his long, thin ears. Remembering how the Captain of the Watch had admonished him, he stopped and peered about, but owing to his proximity to the light of his own lantern he saw nothing. Presently he heard another splash and the sound of blowings and of puffings, but still unable to see clearly whence they came, he was forced in bewilderment to resume his march. But he had no sooner entered the next bend of that obscure and winding avenue than the most lamentable, lusty cries assailed him. Again he stood still, blinded by his own light. Somewhere at hand a citizen was being beaten, for vague, quick-moving forms emerged into the radiance of his lantern out of the deep violet of the night air. The cries swelled, and died away, and swelled; and the mazed Cethru moved forward on his way. But very near the end of his first traversage, the sound of a long, deep sighing, as of a fat man in spiritual pain, once more arrested him.

"Drat me!" he thought, "this time I will see what 'tis," and he spun round and round, holding his lantern now high, now low, and to both sides. "The devil an' all's in it to-night," he murmured to himself; "there's some'at here fetchin' of its breath awful loud." But for his life he could see nothing, only that the higher he held his lantern the more painful grew the sound of the fat but spiritual sighing. And desperately, he at last resumed his progress.

On the morrow, while he still slept stretched on his straw pallet, there came to him a member of the Watch.

"Old man, you are wanted at the Court House; rouse up, and bring your lantern."

Stiffly Cethru rose.

"What be they wantin' me fur now, mester?"

"Ah!" replied the Watchman, "they are about to see if they can't put an end to your goings-on."

Cethru shivered, and was silent.

Now when they reached the Court House it was patent that a great affair was

forward; for the Judges were in their robes, and a crowd of advocates, burgesses, and common folk thronged the careen, lofty hall of justice.

When Cethru saw that all eyes were turned on him, he shivered still more violently, fixing his fascinated gaze on the three Judges in their emerald robes.

"This then is the prisoner," said the oldest of the Judges; "proceed with the indictment!"

A little advocate in snuff-coloured clothes rose on little legs, and commenced to read:

"Forasmuch as on the seventeenth night of August fifteen hundred years since the Messiah's death, one Celestine, a maiden of this city, fell into a cesspool in the Vita Publica, and while being quietly drowned, was espied of the burgess Pardonix by the light of a lanthorn held by the old man Cethru; and, forasmuch as, plunging in, the said Pardonix rescued her, not without grave risk of life and the ruin, of his clothes, and to-day lies ill of fever; and forasmuch as the old man Cethru was the cause of these misfortunes to the burgess Pardonix, by reason of his wandering lanthorn's showing the drowning maiden, the Watch do hereby indict, accuse, and otherwise place charge upon this Cethru of 'Vagabondage without serious occupation.'

"And, forasmuch as on this same night the Watchman Filepo, made aware, by the light of this said Cethru's lanthorn, of three sturdy footpads, went to arrest them, and was set on by the rogues and well-nigh slain, the Watch do hereby indict, accuse, and otherwise charge upon Cethru complicity in this assault, by reasons, namely, first, that he discovered the footpads to the Watchman and the Watchman to the footpads by the light of his lanthorn; and, second, that, having thus discovered them, he stood idly by and gave no assistance to the law.

"And, forasmuch as on this same night the wealthy burgess Pranzo, who, having prepared a banquet, was standing in his doorway awaiting the arrival of his guests, did see, by the light of the said Cethru's lanthorn, a beggar woman and her children grovelling in the gutter for garbage, whereby his appetite was lost completely; and, forasmuch as he, Pranzo, has lodged a complaint against the Constitution for permitting women and children to go starved, the Watch do hereby indict, accuse, and otherwise make charge on Cethru of rebellion and of anarchy, in that wilfully he doth disturb good citizens by showing to them without provocation disagreeable sights, and doth moreover endanger the laws by causing persons to desire to change them.

"These be the charges, reverend Judges, so please you!"

And having thus spoken, the little advocate resumed his seat.

Then said the oldest of the Judges:

"Cethru, you have heard; what answer do you make?"

But no word, only the chattering of teeth, came from Cethru.

"Have you no defence?" said the Judge: "these are grave accusations!"

Then Cethru spoke:

"So please your Highnesses," he said, "can I help what my lantern sees?"

And having spoken these words, to all further questions he remained more silent than a headless man.

The Judges took counsel of each other, and the oldest of them thus addressed himself to Cethru:

"If you have no defence, old man, and there is no one will say a word for you, we can but proceed to judgment."

Then in the main aisle of the Court there rose a youthful advocate.

"Most reverend Judges," he said in a mellifluous voice, clearer than the fluting of a bell-bird, "it is useless to look for words from this old man, for it is manifest that he himself is nothing, and that his lantern is alone concerned in this affair. But, reverend Judges, bethink you well: Would you have a lantern ply a trade or be concerned with a profession, or do aught indeed but pervade the streets at night, shedding its light, which, if you will, is vagabondage? And, Sirs, upon the second count of this indictment: Would you have a lantern dive into cesspools to rescue maidens? Would you have a lantern to beat footpads? Or, indeed, to be any sort of partisan either of the Law or of them that break the Law? Sure, Sirs, I think not. And as to this third charge of fostering anarchy let me but describe the trick of this lantern's flame. It is distilled, most reverend Judges, of oil and wick, together with that sweet secret heat of whose birth no words of mine can tell. And when, Sirs, this pale flame has sprung into the air swaying to every wind, it brings vision to the human eye. And, if it be charged on this old man Cethru that he and his lantern by reason of their showing not only the good but the evil bring no pleasure into the world, I ask, Sirs, what in the world is so dear as this power to see whether it be the beautiful or the foul that is disclosed? Need I, indeed, tell you of the way this flame spreads its feelers, and delicately darts and hovers in the darkness, conjuring things from nothing? This mechanical summoning, Sirs, of visions out of blackness is benign, by no means of malevolent intent; no

more than if a man, passing two donkeys in the road, one lean and the other fat, could justly be arraigned for malignancy because they were not both fat. This, reverend Judges, is the essence of the matter concerning the rich burgess, Pranzo, who, on account of the sight he saw by Cethru's lantern, has lost the equilibrium of his stomach. For, Sirs, the lantern did but show that which was there, both fair and foul, no more, no less; and though it is indeed true that Pranzo is upset, it was not because the lantern maliciously produced distorted images, but merely caused to be seen, in due proportions, things which Pranzo had not seen before. And surely, reverend Judges, being just men, you would not have this lantern turn its light away from what is ragged and ugly because there are also fair things on which its light may fall; how, indeed, being a lantern, could it, if it would? And I would have you note this, Sirs, that by this impartial discovery of the proportions of one thing to another, this lantern must indeed perpetually seem to cloud and sadden those things which are fair, because of the deep instincts of harmony and justice planted in the human breast. However unfair and cruel, then, this lantern may seem to those who, deficient in these instincts, desire all their lives to see naught but what is pleasant, lest they, like Pranzo, should lose their appetites—it is not consonant with equity that this lantern should, even if it could, be prevented from thus mechanically buffeting the holiday cheek of life. I would think, Sirs, that you should rather blame the queazy state of Pranzo's stomach. The old man has said that he cannot help what his lantern sees. This is a just saying. But if, reverend Judges, you deem this equipoised, indifferent lantern to be indeed blameworthy for having shown in the same moment, side by side, the skull and the fair face, the burdock and the tiger-lily, the butterfly and toad, then, most reverend Judges, punish it, but do not punish this old man, for he himself is but a flume of smoke, thistle down dispersed—nothing!"

So saying, the young advocate ceased.

Again the three Judges took counsel of each other, and after much talk had passed between them, the oldest spoke:

"What this young advocate has said seems to us to be the truth. We cannot punish a lantern. Let the old man go!"

And Cethru went out into the sunshine

Now it came to pass that the Prince of Felicitas, returning from his journey, rode once more on his amber-coloured steed down the Vita Publica.

The night was dark as a rook's wing, but far away down the street burned a little light, like a red star truant from heaven. The Prince riding by descried it for a lantern, with an old man sleeping beside it.

"How is this, Friend?" said the Prince. "You are not walking as I bade you, carrying your lanthorn."

But Cethru neither moved nor answered:

"Lift him up!" said the Prince.

They lifted up his head and held the lanthorn to his closed eyes. So lean was that brown face that the beams from the lanthorn would not rest on it, but slipped past on either side into the night. His eyes did not open. He was dead.

And the Prince touched him, saying: "Farewell, old man! The lanthorn is still alight. Go, fetch me another one, and let him carry it!"

SOME PLATITUDES CONCERNING DRAMA

A drama must be shaped so as to have a spire of meaning. Every grouping of life and character has its inherent moral; and the business of the dramatist is so to pose the group as to bring that moral poignantly to the light of day. Such is the moral that exhales from plays like 'Lear', 'Hamlet', and 'Macbeth'. But such is not the moral to be found in the great bulk of contemporary Drama. The moral of the average play is now, and probably has always been, the triumph at all costs of a supposed immediate ethical good over a supposed immediate ethical evil.

The vice of drawing these distorted morals has permeated the Drama to its spine; discoloured its art, humanity, and significance; infected its creators, actors, audience, critics; too often turned it from a picture into a caricature. A Drama which lives under the shadow of the distorted moral forgets how to be free, fair, and fine—forgets so completely that it often prides itself on having forgotten.

Now, in writing plays, there are, in this matter of the moral, three courses open to the serious dramatist. The first is: To definitely set before the public that which it wishes to have set before it, the views and codes of life by which the public lives and in which it believes. This way is the most common, successful, and popular. It makes the dramatist's position sure, and not too obviously authoritative.

The second course is: To definitely set before the public those views and codes of life by which the dramatist himself lives, those theories in which he himself

believes, the more effectively if they are the opposite of what the public wishes to have placed before it, presenting them so that the audience may swallow them like powder in a spoonful of jam.

There is a third course: To set before the public no cut-and-dried codes, but the phenomena of life and character, selected and combined, but not distorted, by the dramatist's outlook, set down without fear, favour, or prejudice, leaving the public to draw such poor moral as nature may afford. This third method requires a certain detachment; it requires a sympathy with, a love of, and a curiosity as to, things for their own sake; it requires a far view, together with patient industry, for no immediately practical result.

It was once said of Shakespeare that he had never done any good to any one, and never would. This, unfortunately, could not, in the sense in which the word "good" was then meant, be said of most modern dramatists. In truth, the good that Shakespeare did to humanity was of a remote, and, shall we say, eternal nature; something of the good that men get from having the sky and the sea to look at. And this partly because he was, in his greater plays at all events, free from the habit of drawing a distorted moral. Now, the playwright who supplies to the public the facts of life distorted by the moral which it expects, does so that he may do the public what he considers an immediate good, by fortifying its prejudices; and the dramatist who supplies to the public facts distorted by his own advanced morality, does so because he considers that he will at once benefit the public by substituting for its worn-out ethics, his own. In both cases the advantage the dramatist hopes to confer on the public is immediate and practical.

But matters change, and morals change; men remain—and to set men, and the facts about them, down faithfully, so that they draw for us the moral of their natural actions, may also possibly be of benefit to the community. It is, at all events, harder than to set men and facts down, as they ought, or ought not to be. This, however, is not to say that a dramatist should, or indeed can, keep himself and his temperamental philosophy out of his work. As a man lives and thinks, so will he write. But it is certain, that to the making of good drama, as to the practice of every other art, there must be brought an almost passionate love of discipline, a white-heat of self-respect, a desire to make the truest, fairest, best thing in one's power; and that to these must be added an eye that does not flinch. Such qualities alone will bring to a drama the selfless character which soaks it with inevitability.

The word "pessimist" is frequently applied to the few dramatists who have been content to work in this way. It has been applied, among others, to Euripides, to Shakespeare, to Ibsen; it will be applied to many in the future. Nothing, however, is more dubious than the way in which these two words

"pessimist" and "optimist" are used; for the optimist appears to be he who cannot bear the world as it is, and is forced by his nature to picture it as it ought to be, and the pessimist one who cannot only bear the world as it is, but loves it well enough to draw it faithfully. The true lover of the human race is surely he who can put up with it in all its forms, in vice as well as in virtue, in defeat no less than in victory; the true seer he who sees not only joy but sorrow, the true painter of human life one who blinks nothing. It may be that he is also, incidentally, its true benefactor.

In the whole range of the social fabric there are only two impartial persons, the scientist and the artist, and under the latter heading such dramatists as desire to write not only for to-day, but for to-morrow, must strive to come.

But dramatists being as they are made—past remedy it is perhaps more profitable to examine the various points at which their qualities and defects are shown.

The plot! A good plot is that sure edifice which slowly rises out of the interplay of circumstance on temperament, and temperament on circumstance, within the enclosing atmosphere of an idea. A human being is the best plot there is; it may be impossible to see why he is a good plot, because the idea within which he was brought forth cannot be fully grasped; but it is plain that he is a good plot. He is organic. And so it must be with a good play. Reason alone produces no good plots; they come by original sin, sure conception, and instinctive after-power of selecting what benefits the germ. A bad plot, on the other hand, is simply a row of stakes, with a character impaled on each—characters who would have liked to live, but came to untimely grief; who started bravely, but fell on these stakes, placed beforehand in a row, and were transfixed one by one, while their ghosts stride on, squeaking and gibbering, through the play. Whether these stakes are made of facts or of ideas, according to the nature of the dramatist who planted them, their effect on the unfortunate characters is the same; the creatures were begotten to be staked, and staked they are! The demand for a good plot, not unfrequently heard, commonly signifies: "Tickle my sensations by stuffing the play with arbitrary adventures, so that I need not be troubled to take the characters seriously. Set the persons of the play to action, regardless of time, sequence, atmosphere, and probability!"

Now, true dramatic action is what characters do, at once contrary, as it were, to expectation, and yet because they have already done other things. No dramatist should let his audience know what is coming; but neither should he suffer his characters to, act without making his audience feel that those actions are in harmony with temperament, and arise from previous known actions, together with the temperaments and previous known actions of the other

characters in the play. The dramatist who hangs his characters to his plot, instead of hanging his plot to his characters, is guilty of cardinal sin.

The dialogue! Good dialogue again is character, marshalled so as continually to stimulate interest or excitement. The reason good dialogue is seldom found in plays is merely that it is hard to write, for it requires not only a knowledge of what interests or excites, but such a feeling for character as brings misery to the dramatist's heart when his creations speak as they should not speak—ashes to his mouth when they say things for the sake of saying them—disgust when they are "smart."

The art of writing true dramatic dialogue is an austere art, denying itself all license, grudging every sentence devoted to the mere machinery of the play, suppressing all jokes and epigrams severed from character, relying for fun and pathos on the fun and tears of life. From start to finish good dialogue is hand-made, like good lace; clear, of fine texture, furthering with each thread the harmony and strength of a design to which all must be subordinated.

But good dialogue is also spiritual action. In so far as the dramatist divorces his dialogue from spiritual action—that is to say, from progress of events, or toward events which are significant of character—he is stultifying the thing done; he may make pleasing disquisitions, he is not making drama. And in so far as he twists character to suit his moral or his plot, he is neglecting a first principle, that truth to Nature which alone invests art with handmade quality.

The dramatist's license, in fact, ends with his design. In conception alone he is free. He may take what character or group of characters he chooses, see them with what eyes, knit them with what idea, within the limits of his temperament; but once taken, seen, and knitted, he is bound to treat them like a gentleman, with the tenderest consideration of their mainsprings. Take care of character; action and dialogue will take care of themselves! The true dramatist gives full rein to his temperament in the scope and nature of his subject; having once selected subject and characters, he is just, gentle, restrained, neither gratifying his lust for praise at the expense of his offspring, nor using them as puppets to flout his audience. Being himself the nature that brought them forth, he guides them in the course predestined at their conception. So only have they a chance of defying Time, which is always lying in wait to destroy the false, topical, or fashionable, all—in a word—that is not based on the permanent elements of human nature. The perfect dramatist rounds up his characters and facts within the ring-fence of a dominant idea which fulfils the craving of his spirit; having got them there, he suffers them to live their own lives.

Plot, action, character, dialogue! But there is yet another subject for a

platitude. Flavour! An impalpable quality, less easily captured than the scent of a flower, the peculiar and most essential attribute of any work of art! It is the thin, poignant spirit which hovers up out of a play, and is as much its differentiating essence as is caffeine of coffee. Flavour, in fine, is the spirit of the dramatist projected into his work in a state of volatility, so that no one can exactly lay hands on it, here, there, or anywhere. This distinctive essence of a play, marking its brand, is the one thing at which the dramatist cannot work, for it is outside his consciousness. A man may have many moods, he has but one spirit; and this spirit he communicates in some subtle, unconscious way to all his work. It waxes and wanes with the currents of his vitality, but no more alters than a chestnut changes into an oak.

For, in truth, dramas are very like unto trees, springing from seedlings, shaping themselves inevitably in accordance with the laws fast hidden within themselves, drinking sustenance from the earth and air, and in conflict with the natural forces round them. So they slowly come to full growth, until warped, stunted, or risen to fair and gracious height, they stand open to all the winds. And the trees that spring from each dramatist are of different race; he is the spirit of his own sacred grove, into which no stray tree can by any chance enter.

One more platitude. It is not unfashionable to pit one form of drama against another—holding up the naturalistic to the disadvantage of the epic; the epic to the belittlement of the fantastic; the fantastic to the detriment of the naturalistic. Little purpose is thus served. The essential meaning, truth, beauty, and irony of things may be revealed under all these forms. Vision over life and human nature can be as keen and just, the revelation as true, inspiring, delight-giving, and thought-provoking, whatever fashion be employed—it is simply a question of doing it well enough to uncover the kernel of the nut. Whether the violet come from Russia, from Parma, or from England, matters little. Close by the Greek temples at Paestum there are violets that seem redder, and sweeter, than any ever seen—as though they have sprung up out of the footprints of some old pagan goddess; but under the April sun, in a Devonshire lane, the little blue scentless violets capture every bit as much of the spring. And so it is with drama—no matter what its form it need only be the "real thing," need only have caught some of the precious fluids, revelation, or delight, and imprisoned them within a chalice to which we may put our lips and continually drink.

And yet, starting from this last platitude, one may perhaps be suffered to speculate as to the particular forms that our renascent drama is likely to assume. For our drama is renascent, and nothing will stop its growth. It is not renascent because this or that man is writing, but because of a new spirit. A

spirit that is no doubt in part the gradual outcome of the impact on our home-grown art, of Russian, French, and Scandinavian influences, but which in the main rises from an awakened humanity in the conscience of our time.

What, then, are to be the main channels down which the renascent English drama will float in the coming years? It is more than possible that these main channels will come to be two in number and situate far apart.

The one will be the broad and clear-cut channel of naturalism, down which will course a drama poignantly shaped, and inspired with high intention, but faithful to the seething and multiple life around us, drama such as some are inclined to term photographic, deceived by a seeming simplicity into forgetfulness of the old proverb, "*Ars est celare artem*," and oblivious of the fact that, to be vital, to grip, such drama is in every respect as dependent on imagination, construction, selection, and elimination—the main laws of artistry—as ever was the romantic or rhapsodic play: The question of naturalistic technique will bear, indeed, much more study than has yet been given to it. The aim of the dramatist employing it is obviously to create such an illusion of actual life passing on the stage as to compel the spectator to pass through an experience of his own, to think, and talk, and move with the people he sees thinking, talking, and moving in front of him. A false phrase, a single word out of tune or time, will destroy that illusion and spoil the surface as surely as a stone heaved into a still pool shatters the image seen there. But this is only the beginning of the reason why the naturalistic is the most exacting and difficult of all techniques. It is easy enough to reproduce the exact conversation and movements of persons in a room; it is desperately hard to produce the perfectly natural conversation and movements of those persons, when each natural phrase spoken and each natural movement made has not only to contribute toward the growth and perfection of a drama's soul, but also to be a revelation, phrase by phrase, movement by movement, of essential traits of character. To put it another way, naturalistic art, when alive, indeed to be alive at all, is simply the art of manipulating a procession of most delicate symbols. Its service is the swaying and focussing of men's feelings and thoughts in the various departments of human life. It will be like a steady lamp, held up from time to time, in whose light things will be seen for a space clearly and in due proportion, freed from the mists of prejudice and partisanship. And the other of these two main channels will, I think, be a twisting and delicious stream, which will bear on its breast new barques of poetry, shaped, it may be, like prose, but a prose incarnating through its fantasy and symbolism all the deeper aspirations, yearning, doubts, and mysterious stirrings of the human spirit; a poetic prose-drama, emotionalising us by its diversity and purity of form and invention, and whose province will be to disclose the elemental soul of man and the forces of Nature, not perhaps

as the old tragedies disclosed them, not necessarily in the epic mood, but always with beauty and in the spirit of discovery.

Such will, I think, be the two vital forms of our drama in the coming generation. And between these two forms there must be no crude unions; they are too far apart, the cross is too violent. For, where there is a seeming blend of lyricism and naturalism, it will on examination be found, I think, to exist only in plays whose subjects or settings—as in Synge's "Playboy of the Western World," or in Mr. Masfield's "Nan"—are so removed from our ken that we cannot really tell, and therefore do not care, whether an absolute illusion is maintained. The poetry which may and should exist in naturalistic drama, can only be that of perfect rightness of proportion, rhythm, shape—the poetry, in fact, that lies in all vital things. It is the ill-mating of forms that has killed a thousand plays. We want no more bastard drama; no more attempts to dress out the simple dignity of everyday life in the peacock's feathers of false lyricism; no more straw-stuffed heroes or heroines; no more rabbits and goldfish from the conjurer's pockets, nor any limelight. Let us have starlight, moonlight, sunlight, and the light of our own self-respects.

MEDITATION ON FINALITY

In the Grand Canyon of Arizona, that most exhilarating of all natural phenomena, Nature has for once so focussed her effects, that the result is a framed and final work of Art. For there, between two high lines of plateau, level as the sea, are sunk the wrought thrones of the innumerable gods, couchant, and for ever revering, in their million moods of light and colour, the Master Mystery.

Having seen this culmination, I realize why many people either recoil before it, and take the first train home, or speak of it as a "remarkable formation." For, though mankind at large craves finality, it does not crave the sort that bends the knee to Mystery. In Nature, in Religion, in Art, in Life, the common cry is: "Tell me precisely where I am, what doing, and where going! Let me be free of this fearful untidiness of not knowing all about it!" The favoured religions are always those whose message is most finite. The fashionable professions—they that end us in assured positions. The most popular works of fiction, such as leave nothing to our imagination. And to this craving after prose, who would not be lenient, that has at all known life, with its usual predominance of our lower and less courageous selves, our constant hankering after the cosey closed door and line of least resistance? We are continually

begging to be allowed to know for certain; though, if our prayer were granted, and Mystery no longer hovered, made blue the hills, and turned day into night, we should, as surely, wail at once to be delivered of that ghastliness of knowing things for certain!

Now, in Art, I would never quarrel with a certain living writer who demands of it the kind of finality implied in what he calls a "moral discovery"—using, no doubt, the words in their widest sense. I would maintain, however, that such finality is not confined to positively discovering the true conclusion of premises laid down; but that it may also distil gradually, negatively from the whole work, in a moral discovery, as it were, of Author. In other words, that permeation by an essential point of view, by emanation of author, may so unify and vitalize a work, as to give it all the finality that need be required of Art. For the finality that is requisite to Art, be it positive or negative, is not the finality of dogma, nor the finality of fact, it is ever the finality of feeling—of a spiritual light, subtly gleaned by the spectator out of that queer luminous haze which one man's nature must ever be to others. And herein, incidentally, it is that Art acquires also that quality of mystery, more needful to it even than finality, for the mystery that wraps a work of Art is the mystery of its maker, and the mystery of its maker is the difference between that maker's soul and every other soul.

But let me take an illustration of what I mean by these two kinds of finality that Art may have, and show that in essence they are but two halves of the same thing. The term "a work of Art" will not be denied, I think, to that early novel of M. Anatole France, "Le Lys Rouge." Now, that novel has positive finality, since the spiritual conclusion from its premises strikes one as true. But neither will the term "a work of Art" be denied to the same writer's four "Bergeret" volumes, whose negative finality consists only in the temperamental atmosphere wherein they are soaked. Now, if the theme of "Le Lys Rouge" had been treated by Tolstoy, Meredith, or Turgenev, we should have had spiritual conclusions from the same factual premises so different from M. France's as prunes from prisms, and yet, being the work of equally great artists, they would, doubtless, have struck us as equally true. Is not, then, the positive finality of "Le Lys Rouge," though expressed in terms of a different craftsmanship, the same, in essence, as the negative finality of the "Bergeret" volumes? Are not both, in fact, merely flower of author true to himself? So long as the scent, colour, form of that flower is strong and fine enough to affect the senses of our spirit, then all the rest, surely, is academic—I would say, immaterial.

But here, in regard to Art, is where mankind at large comes on the field. "Flower of author," it says, "Senses of the spirit!" Phew! Give me something I

can understand! Let me know where I am getting to!" In a word, it wants a finality different from that which Art can give. It will ask the artist, with irritation, what his solution, or his lesson, or his meaning, really is, having omitted to notice that the poor creature has been giving all the meaning that he can, in every sentence. It will demand to know why it was not told definitely what became of Charles or Mary in whom it had grown so interested; and will be almost frightened to learn that the artist knows no more than itself. And if by any chance it be required to dip its mind into a philosophy that does not promise it a defined position both in this world and the next, it will assuredly recoil, and with a certain contempt say: "No, sir! This means nothing to me; and if it means anything to you—which I very much doubt—I am sorry for you!"

It must have facts, and again facts, not only in the present and the past, but in the future. And it demands facts of that, which alone cannot glibly give it facts. It goes on asking facts of Art, or, rather, such facts as Art cannot give—for, after all, even "flower of author" is fact in a sort of way.

Consider, for instance, Synge's masterpiece, "The Playboy of the Western World!" There is flower of author! What is it for mankind at large? An attack on the Irish character! A pretty piece of writing! An amusing farce! Enigmatic cynicism leading nowhere! A puzzling fellow wrote it! Mankind at large has little patience with puzzling fellows.

Few, in fact, want flower of author. Moreover, it is a quality that may well be looked for where it does not exist. To say that the finality which Art requires is merely an enwrapping mood, or flower of author, is not by any means to say that any robust fellow, slamming his notions down in ink, can give us these. Indeed, no! So long as we see the author's proper person in his work, we do not see the flower of him. Let him retreat himself, if he pretend to be an artist. There is no less of subtle skill, no less impersonality, in the "Bergeret" volumes than in "Le Lys Rouge." No less labour and mental torturing went to their making, page by page, in order that they might exhale their perfume of mysterious finality, their withdrawn but implicit judgment. Flower of author is not quite so common as the buttercup, the Californian poppy, or the gay Texan gaillardia, and for that very reason the finality it gives off will never be robust enough for a mankind at large that would have things cut and dried, and labelled in thick letters. For, consider—to take one phase alone of this demand for factual finality—how continual and insistent is the cry for characters that can be worshipped; how intense and persistent the desire to be told that Charles was a real hero; and how bitter the regret that Mary was no better than she should be! Mankind at large wants heroes that are heroes, and heroines that are heroines—and nothing so inappropriate to them as unhappy endings.

Travelling away, I remember, from that Grand Canyon of Arizona were a young man and a young woman, evidently in love. He was sitting very close to her, and reading aloud for her pleasure, from a paper-covered novel, heroically oblivious of us all:

"'Sir Robert,' she murmured, lifting her beauteous eyes, 'I may not tempt you, for you are too dear to me!' Sir Robert held her lovely face between his two strong hands. 'Farewell!' he said, and went out into the night. But something told them both that, when he had fulfilled his duty, Sir Robert would return" He had not returned before we reached the Junction, but there was finality about that baronet, and we well knew that he ultimately would. And, long after the sound of that young man's faithful reading had died out of our ears, we meditated on Sir Robert, and compared him with the famous characters of fiction, slowly perceiving that they were none of them so final in their heroism as he. No, none of them reached that apex. For Hamlet was a most unfinished fellow, and Lear extremely violent. Pickwick addicted to punch, and Sam Weller to lying; Bazarof actually a Nihilist, and Irina——! Levin and Anna, Pierre and Natasha, all of them stormy and unsatisfactory at times. "Un Coeur Simple" nothing but a servant, and an old maid at that; "Saint Julien l'Hospitalier" a sheer fanatic. Colonel Newcome too irritable and too simple altogether. Don Quixote certified insane. Hilda Wangel, Nora, Hedda—Sir Robert would never even have spoken to such baggages! Mon sieur Bergeret—an amiable weak thing! D'Artagnan—a true swashbuckler! Tom Jones, Faust, Don Juan—we might not even think of them: And those poor Greeks: Prometheus—shocking rebel. OEdipus for a long time banished by the Censor. Phaedra and Elektra, not even so virtuous as Mary, who failed of being what she should be! And coming to more familiar persons Joseph and Moses, David and Elijah, all of them lacked his finality of true heroism—none could quite pass muster beside Sir Robert Long we meditated, and, reflecting that an author must ever be superior to the creatures of his brain, were refreshed to think that there were so many living authors capable of giving birth to Sir Robert; for indeed, Sir Robert and finality like his—no doubtful heroes, no flower of author, and no mystery is what mankind at large has always wanted from Letters, and will always want.

As truly as that oil and water do not mix, there are two kinds of men. The main cleavage in the whole tale of life is this subtle, all pervading division of mankind into the man of facts and the man of feeling. And not by what they are or do can they be told one from the other, but just by their attitude toward finality. Fortunately most of us are neither quite the one nor quite the other. But between the pure-blooded of each kind there is real antipathy, far deeper than the antipathies of race, politics, or religion—an antipathy that not circumstance, love, goodwill, or necessity will ever quite get rid of. Sooner

shall the panther agree with the bull than that other one with the man of facts. There is no bridging the gorge that divides these worlds.

Nor is it so easy to tell, of each, to which world he belongs, as it was to place the lady, who held out her finger over that gorge called Grand Canyon, and said:

"It doesn't look thirteen miles; but they measured it just there! Excuse my pointing!"

WANTED-SCHOOLING

"Et nous jongleurs inutiles, frivoles joueurs de luth!". . . Useless jugglers, frivolous players on the lute! Must we so describe ourselves, we, the producers, season by season, of so many hundreds of "remarkable" works of fiction?—for though, when we take up the remarkable works of our fellows, we "really cannot read them!" the Press and the advertisements of our publishers tell us that they are "remarkable."

A story goes that once in the twilight undergrowth of a forest of nut-bearing trees a number of little purblind creatures wandered, singing for nuts. On some of these purblind creatures the nuts fell heavy and full, extremely indigestible, and were quickly swallowed; on others they fell light, and contained nothing, because the kernel had already been eaten up above, and these light and kernel-less nuts were accompanied by sibilations or laughter. On others again no nuts at all, empty or full, came down. But nuts or no nuts, full nuts or empty nuts, the purblind creatures below went on wandering and singing. A traveller one day stopped one of these creatures whose voice was peculiarly disagreeable, and asked "Why do you sing like this? Is it for pleasure that you do it, or for pain? What do you get out of it? Is it for the sake of those up there? Is it for your own sake—for the sake of your family—for whose sake? Do you think your songs worth listening to? Answer!"

The creature scratched itself, and sang the louder.

"Ah! Cacoethes! I pity, but do not blame you," said the traveller.

He left the creature, and presently came to another which sang a squeaky treble song. It wandered round in a ring under a grove of stunted trees, and the traveller noticed that it never went out of that grove.

"Is it really necessary," he said, "for you to express yourself thus?"

And as he spoke showers of tiny hard nuts came down on the little creature, who ate them greedily. The traveller opened one; it was extremely small and tasted of dry rot.

"Why, at all events," he said, "need you stay under these trees? the nuts are not good here."

But for answer the little creature ran round and round, and round and round.

"I suppose," said the traveller, "small bad nuts are better than no bread; if you went out of this grove you would starve?"

The purblind little creature shrieked. The traveller took the sound for affirmation, and passed on. He came to a third little creature who, under a tall tree, was singing very loudly indeed, while all around was a great silence, broken only by sounds like the snuffling of small noses. The creature stopped singing as the traveller came up, and at once a storm of huge nuts came down; the traveller found them sweetish and very oily.

"Why," he said to the creature, "did you sing so loud? You cannot eat all these nuts. You really do sing louder than seems necessary; come, answer me!"

But the purblind little creature began to sing again at the top of its voice, and the noise of the snuffling of small noses became so great that the traveller hastened away. He passed many other purblind little creatures in the twilight of this forest, till at last he came to one that looked even blinder than the rest, but whose song was sweet and low and clear, breaking a perfect stillness; and the traveller sat down to listen. For a long time he listened to that song without noticing that not a nut was falling. But suddenly he heard a faint rustle and three little oval nuts lay on the ground.

The traveller cracked one of them. It was of delicate flavour. He looked at the little creature standing with its face raised, and said:

"Tell me, little blind creature, whose song is so charming, where did you learn to sing?"

The little creature turned its head a trifle to one side as though listening for the fall of nuts.

"Ah, indeed!" said the traveller: "You, whose voice is so clear, is this all you get to eat?"

The little blind creature smiled

It is a twilight forest in which we writers of fiction wander, and once in a way, though all this has been said before, we may as well remind ourselves and others why the light is so dim; why there is so much bad and false fiction; why the demand for it is so great. Living in a world where demand creates supply, we writers of fiction furnish the exception to this rule. For, consider how, as a class, we come into existence. Unlike the followers of any other occupation, nothing whatever compels any one of us to serve an apprenticeship. We go to no school, have to pass no examination, attain no standard, receive no diploma. We need not study that which should be studied; we are at liberty to flood our minds with all that should not be studied. Like mushrooms, in a single sight we spring up—a pen in our hands, very little in our brains, and who-knows-what in our hearts!

Few of us sit down in cold blood to write our first stories; we have something in us that we feel we must express. This is the beginning of the vicious circle. Our first books often have some thing in them. We are sincere in trying to express that something. It is true we cannot express it, not having learnt how, but its ghost haunts the pages the ghost of real experience and real life—just enough to attract the untrained intelligence, just enough to make a generous Press remark: "This shows promise." We have tasted blood, we pant for more. Those of us who had a carking occupation hasten to throw it aside, those who had no occupation have now found one; some few of us keep both the old occupation and the new. Whichever of these courses we pursue, the hurry with which we pursue it undoes us. For, often we have only that one book in us, which we did not know how to write, and having expressed that which we have felt, we are driven in our second, our third, our fourth, to warm up variations, like those dressed remains of last night's dinner which are served for lunch; or to spin from our usually commonplace imaginations thin extravagances which those who do not try to think for themselves are ever ready to accept as full of inspiration and vitality. Anything for a book, we say—anything for a book!

From time immemorial we have acted in this immoral manner, till we have accustomed the Press and Public to expect it. From time immemorial we have allowed ourselves to be driven by those powerful drivers, Bread, and Praise, and cared little for the quality of either. Sensibly, or insensibly, we tune our songs to earn the nuts of our twilight forest. We tune them, not to the key of: "Is it good?" but to the key of: "Will it pay?" and at each tuning the nuts fall fast! It is all so natural. How can we help it, seeing that we are undisciplined and standardless, seeing that we started without the backbone that schooling gives? Here and there among us is a genius, here and there a man of exceptional stability who trains himself in spite of all the forces working for his destruction. But those who do not publish until they can express, and do

not express until they have something worth expressing, are so rare that they can be counted on the fingers of three or perhaps four hands; mercifully, we all—or nearly all believe ourselves of that company.

It is the fashion to say that the public will have what it wants. Certainly the Public will have what it wants if what it wants is given to the Public. If what it now wants were suddenly withdrawn, the Public, the big Public, would by an obvious natural law take the lowest of what remained; if that again were withdrawn, it would take the next lowest, until by degrees it took a relatively good article. The Public, the big Public, is a mechanical and helpless consumer at the mercy of what is supplied to it, and this must ever be so. The Public then is not to blame for the supply of bad, false fiction. The Press is not to blame, for the Press, like the Public, must take what is set before it; their Critics, for the most part, like ourselves have been to no school, passed no test of fitness, received no certificate; they cannot lead us, it is we who lead them, for without the Critics we could live but without us the Critics would die. We cannot, therefore, blame the Press. Nor is the Publisher to blame; for the Publisher will publish what is set before him. It is true that if he published no books on commission he would deserve the praise of the State, but it is quite unreasonable for us to expect him to deserve the praise of the State, since it is we who supply him with these books and incite him to publish them. We cannot, therefore, lay the blame on the Publisher.

We must lay the blame where it clearly should be laid, on ourselves. We ourselves create the demand for bad and false fiction. Very many of us have private means; for such there is no excuse. Very many of us have none; for such, once started on this journey of fiction, there is much, often tragic, excuse—the less reason then for not having trained ourselves before setting out on our way. There is no getting out of it; the fault is ours. If we will not put ourselves to school when we are young; if we must rush into print before we can spell; if we will not repress our natural desires and walk before we run; if we will not learn at least what not to do—we shall go on wandering through the forest, singing our foolish songs.

And since we cannot train ourselves except by writing, let us write, and burn what we write; then shall we soon stop writing, or produce what we need not burn!

For, as things are now, without compass, without map, we set out into the twilight forest of fiction; without path, without track—and we never emerge.

Yes, with the French writer, we must say:

"Et nous jongleurs inutiles, frivoles joueurs de luth!" .

REFLECTIONS ON OUR DISLIKE OF THINGS AS THEY ARE

Yes! Why is this the chief characteristic of our art? What secret instincts are responsible for this inveterate distaste? But, first, is it true that we have it?

To stand still and look at a thing for the joy of looking, without reference to any material advantage, and personal benefit, either to ourselves or our neighbours, just simply to indulge our curiosity! Is that a British habit? I think not.

If, on some November afternoon, we walk into Kensington Gardens, where they join the Park on the Bayswater side, and, crossing in front of the ornamental fountain, glance at the semicircular seat let into a dismal little Temple of the Sun, we shall see a half-moon of apathetic figures. There, enjoying a moment of lugubrious idleness, may be sitting an old countrywoman with steady eyes in a lean, dusty-black dress and an old poke-bonnet; by her side, some gin-faced creature of the town, all blousy and draggled; a hollow-eyed foreigner, far gone in consumption; a bronzed young navvy, asleep, with his muddy boots jutting straight out; a bearded, dreary being, chin on chest; and more consumptives, and more vagabonds, and more people dead-tired, speechless, and staring before them from that crescent-shaped haven where there is no draught at their backs, and the sun occasionally shines. And as we look at them, according to the state of our temper, we think: Poor creatures, I wish I could do something for them! or: Revolting! They oughtn't to allow it! But do we feel any pleasure in just watching them; any of that intimate sensation a cat entertains when its back is being rubbed; are we curiously enjoying the sight of these people, simply as manifestations of life, as objects fashioned by the ebb and flow of its tides? Again, I think, not. And why? Either, because we have instantly felt that we ought to do something; that here is a danger in our midst, which one day might affect our own security; and at all events, a sight revolting to us who came out to look at this remarkably fine fountain. Or, because we are too humane! Though very possibly that frequent murmuring of ours: Ah! It's too sad! is but another way of putting the words: Stand aside, please, you're too depressing! Or, again, is it that we avoid the sight of things as they are, avoid the unedifying, because of what may be called "the uncreative instinct," that safeguard and concomitant of a civilisation which demands of us complete efficiency, practical and thorough employment of every second of our time and every inch of our space? We know, of course, that out of nothing nothing

can be made, that to "create" anything a man must first receive impressions, and that to receive impressions requires an apparatus of nerves and feelers, exposed and quivering to every vibration round it, an apparatus so entirely opposed to our national spirit and traditions that the bare thought of it causes us to blush. A robust recognition of this, a steadfast resolve not to be forced out of the current of strenuous civilisation into the sleepy backwater of pure impressionism, makes us distrustful of attempts to foster in ourselves that receptivity and subsequent creativeness, the microbes of which exist in every man: To watch a thing simply because it is a thing, entirely without considering how it can affect us, and without even seeing at the moment how we are to get anything out of it, jars our consciences, jars that inner feeling which keeps secure and makes harmonious the whole concert of our lives, for we feel it to be a waste of time, dangerous to the community, contributing neither to our meat and drink, our clothes and comfort, nor to the stability and order of our lives.

Of these three possible reasons for our dislike of things as they are, the first two are perhaps contained within the third. But, to whatever our dislike is due, we have it—Oh! we have it! With the possible exception of Hogarth in his non-preaching pictures, and Constable in his sketches of the sky,—I speak of dead men only,—have we produced any painter of reality like Manet or Millet, any writer like Flaubert or Maupassant, like Turgenev, or Tchekov. We are, I think, too deeply civilised, so deeply civilised that we have come to look on Nature as indecent. The acts and emotions of life undraped with ethics seem to us anathema. It has long been, and still is, the fashion among the intellectuals of the Continent to regard us as barbarians in most aesthetic matters. Ah! If they only knew how infinitely barbarous they seem to us in their naive contempt of our barbarism, and in what we regard as their infantine concern with things as they are. How far have we not gone past all that—we of the oldest settled Western country, who have so veneered our lives that we no longer know of what wood they are made! Whom generations have so soaked with the preserve "good form" that we are impervious to the claims and clamour of that ill-bred creature—life! Who think it either dreadful, or 'vieux jeu', that such things as the crude emotions and the raw struggles of Fate should be even mentioned, much less presented in terms of art! For whom an artist is 'suspect' if he is not, in his work, a sportsman and a gentleman? Who shake a solemn head over writers who will treat of sex; and, with the remark: "Worst of it is, there's so much truth in those fellows!" close the book.

Ah! well! I suppose we have been too long familiar with the unprofitableness of speculation, have surrendered too definitely to action—to the material side of things, retaining for what relaxation our spirits may require, a habit of sentimental aspiration, carefully divorced from things as they are. We seem to

have decided that things are not, or, if they are, ought not to be—and what is the good of thinking of things like that? In fact, our national ideal has become the Will to Health, to Material Efficiency, and to it we have sacrificed the Will to Sensibility. It is a point of view. And yet—to the philosophy that craves Perfection, to the spirit that desires the golden mean, and hankers for the serene and balanced seat in the centre of the see-saw, it seems a little pitiful, and constricted; a confession of defeat, a hedging and limitation of the soul. Need we put up with this, must we for ever turn our eyes away from things as they are, stifle our imaginations and our sensibilities, for fear that they should become our masters, and destroy our sanity? This is the eternal question that confronts the artist and the thinker. Because of the inevitable decline after full flowering-point is reached, the inevitable fading of the fire that follows the full flame and glow, are we to recoil from striving to reach the perfect and harmonious climacteric? Better to have loved and lost, I think, than never to have loved at all; better to reach out and grasp the fullest expression of the individual and the national soul, than to keep for ever under the shelter of the wall. I would even think it possible to be sensitive without neurasthenia, to be sympathetic without insanity, to be alive to all the winds that blow without getting influenza. God forbid that our Letters and our Arts should decade into Beardsleyism; but between that and their present "health" there lies full flowering-point, not yet, by a long way, reached.

To flower like that, I suspect, we must see things just a little more—as they are!

THE WINDLESTRAW

A certain writer, returning one afternoon from rehearsal of his play, sat down in the hall of the hotel where he was staying. "No," he reflected, "this play of mine will not please the Public; it is gloomy, almost terrible. This very day I read these words in my morning paper: 'No artist can afford to despise his Public, for, whether he confesses it or not, the artist exists to give the Public what it wants.' I have, then, not only done what I cannot afford to do, but I have been false to the reason of my existence."

The hall was full of people, for it was the hour of tea; and looking round him, the writer thought "And this is the Public—the Public that my play is destined not to please!" And for several minutes he looked at them as if he had been hypnotised. Presently, between two tables he noticed a waiter standing, lost in his thoughts. The mask of the man's professional civility had come awry, and

the expression of his face and figure was curiously remote from the faces and forms of those from whom he had been taking orders; he seemed like a bird discovered in its own haunts, all unconscious as yet of human eyes. And the writer thought: "But if those people at the tables are the Public, what is that waiter? How if I was mistaken, and not they, but he were the real Public?" And testing this thought, his mind began at once to range over all the people he had lately seen. He thought of the Founder's Day dinner of a great School, which he had attended the night before. "No," he mused, "I see very little resemblance between the men at that dinner and the men in this hall; still less between them and the waiter. How if they were the real Public, and neither the waiter, nor these people here!" But no sooner had he made this reflection, than he bethought him of a gathering of workers whom he had watched two days ago. "Again," he mused, "I do not recollect any resemblance at all between those workers and the men at the dinner, and certainly they are not like any one here. What if those workers are the real Public, not the men at the dinner, nor the waiter, nor the people in this hall!" And thereupon his mind flew off again, and this time rested on the figures of his own immediate circle of friends. They seemed very different from the four real Publics whom he had as yet discovered. "Yes," he considered, "when I come to think of it, my associates painters, and writers, and critics, and all that kind of person—do not seem to have anything to speak of in common with any of these people. Perhaps my own associates, then, are the real Public, and not these others!" Perceiving that this would be the fifth real Public, he felt discouraged. But presently he began to think: "The past is the past and cannot be undone, and with this play of mine I shall not please the Public; but there is always the future! Now, I do not wish to do what the artist cannot afford to do, I earnestly desire to be true to the reason of my existence; and since the reason of that existence is to give the Public what it wants, it is really vital to discover who and what the Public is!" And he began to look very closely at the faces around him, hoping to find out from types what he had failed to ascertain from classes. Two men were sitting near, one on each side of a woman. The first, who was all crumpled in his arm-chair, had curly lips and wrinkles round the eyes, cheeks at once rather fat and rather shadowy, and a dimple in his chin. It seemed certain that he was humourous, and kind, sympathetic, rather diffident, speculative, moderately intelligent, with the rudiments perhaps of an imagination. And he looked at the second man, who was sitting very upright, as if he had a particularly fine backbone, of which he was not a little proud. He was extremely big and handsome, with pronounced and regular nose and chin, firm, well-cut lips beneath a smooth moustache, direct and rather insolent eyes, a somewhat receding forehead, and an air of mastery over all around. It was obvious that he possessed a complete knowledge of his own mind, some brutality, much practical intelligence, great resolution, no imagination, and

plenty of conceit. And he looked at the woman. She was pretty, but her face was vapid, and seemed to have no character at all. And from one to the other he looked, and the more he looked the less resemblance he saw between them, till the objects of his scrutiny grew restive.... Then, ceasing to examine them, an idea came to him. "No! The Public is not this or that class, this or that type; the Public is an hypothetical average human being, endowed with average human qualities—a distillation, in fact, of all the people in this hall, the people in the street outside, the people of this country everywhere." And for a moment he was pleased; but soon he began again to feel uneasy. "Since," he reflected, "it is necessary for me to supply this hypothetical average human being with what he wants, I shall have to find out how to distil him from all the ingredients around me. Now how am I to do that? It will certainly take me more than all my life to collect and boil the souls of all of them, which is necessary if I am to extract the genuine article, and I should then apparently have no time left to supply the precipitated spirit, when I had obtained it, with what it wanted! Yet this hypothetical average human being must be found, or I must stay for ever haunted by the thought that I am not supplying him with what he wants!" And the writer became more and more discouraged, for to arrogate to himself knowledge of all the heights and depths, and even of all the virtues and vices, tastes and dislikes of all the people of the country, without having first obtained it, seemed to him to savour of insolence. And still more did it appear impertinent, having taken this mass of knowledge which he had not got, to extract from it a golden mean man, in order to supply him with what he wanted. And yet this was what every artist did who justified his existence—or it would not have been so stated in a newspaper. And he gaped up at the lofty ceiling, as if he might perchance see the Public flying up there in the faint bluish mist of smoke. And suddenly he thought: "Suppose, by some miracle, my golden-mean bird came flying to me with its beak open for the food with which it is my duty to supply it—would it after all be such a very strange-looking creature; would it not be extremely like my normal self? Am I not, in fact, myself the Public? For, without the strongest and most reprehensible conceit, can I claim for my normal self a single attribute or quality not possessed by an hypothetical average human being? Yes, I am myself the Public; or at all events all that my consciousness can ever know of it for certain." And he began to consider deeply. For sitting there in cold blood, with his nerves at rest, and his brain and senses normal, the play he had written did seem to him to put an unnecessary strain upon the faculties. "Ah!" he thought, "in future I must take good care never to write anything except in cold blood, with my nerves well clothed, and my brain and senses quiet. I ought only to write when I feel as normal as I do now." And for some minutes he remained motionless, looking at his boots. Then there crept into his mind an uncomfortable thought. "But have I ever written anything without feeling a

little-abnormal, at the time? Have I ever even felt inclined to write anything, until my emotions had been unduly excited, my brain immoderately stirred, my senses unusually quickened, or my spirit extravagantly roused? Never! Alas, never! I am then a miserable renegade, false to the whole purpose of my being—nor do I see the slightest hope of becoming a better man, a less unworthy artist! For I literally cannot write without the stimulus of some feeling exaggerated at the expense of other feelings. What has been in the past will be in the future: I shall never be taking up my pen when I feel my comfortable and normal self never be satisfying that self which is the Public!" And he thought: "I am lost. For, to satisfy that normal self, to give the Public what it wants, is, I am told, and therefore must believe, what all artists exist for. AEschylus in his 'Choephoraë' and his 'Prometheus'; Sophocles in his 'Oedipus Tyrannus'; Euripides when he wrote 'The Trojan Women,' 'Medea,'—and 'Hippolytus'; Shakespeare in his 'Leer'; Goethe in his 'Faust'; Ibsen in his 'Ghosts' and his 'Peer Gynt'; Tolstoy in 'The Powers of Darkness'; all—all in those great works, must have satisfied their most comfortable and normal selves; all—all must have given to the average human being, to the Public, what it wants; for to do that, we know, was the reason of their existence, and who shall say those noble artists were not true to it? That is surely unthinkable. And yet—and yet—we are assured, and, indeed, it is true, that there is no real Public in this country for just those plays! Therefore AEschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Shakespeare, Goethe, Ibsen, Tolstoy, in their greatest works did not give the Public what it wants, did not satisfy the average human being, their more comfortable and normal selves, and as artists were not true to the reason of their existence. Therefore they were not artists, which is unthinkable; therefore I have not yet found the Public!"

And perceiving that in this impasse his last hope of discovery had foundered, the writer let his head fall on his chest.

But even as he did so a gleam of light, like a faint moonbeam, stole out into the garden of his despair. "Is it possible," he thought, "that, by a writer, until his play has been performed (when, alas! it is too late), 'the Public' is inconceivable—in fact that for him there is no such thing? But if there be no such thing, I cannot exist to give it what it wants. What then is the reason of my existence? Am I but a windlestraw?" And wearied out with his perplexity, he fell into a doze. And while he dozed he dreamed that he saw the figure of a woman standing in darkness, from whose face and form came a misty refulgence, such as steals out into the dusk from white campion flowers along summer hedgerows. She was holding her pale hands before her, wide apart, with the palms turned down, quivering as might doves about to settle; and for all it was so dark, her grey eyes were visible—full of light, with black rims round the irises. To gaze at those eyes was almost painful; for though they

were beautiful, they seemed to see right through his soul, to pass him by, as though on a far discovering voyage, and forbidden to rest.

The dreamer spoke to her: "Who are you, standing there in the darkness with those eyes that I can hardly bear to look at? Who are you?"

And the woman answered: "Friend, I am your Conscience; I am the Truth as best it may be seen by you. I am she whom you exist to serve." With those words she vanished, and the writer woke. A boy was standing before him with the evening papers.

To cover his confusion at being caught asleep he purchased one and began to read a leading article. It commenced with these words: "There are certain playwrights taking themselves very seriously; might we suggest to them that they are in danger of becoming ridiculous"

The writer let fall his hand, and the paper fluttered to the ground. "The Public," he thought, "I am not able to take seriously, because I cannot conceive what it may be; myself, my conscience, I am told I must not take seriously, or I become ridiculous. Yes, I am indeed lost!"

And with a feeling of elation, as of a straw blown on every wind, he arose.



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