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Melodrama

At the Grand—temple of Melodrama—"the villain still pursues her." From this you infer that he has been at it for a somewhat protracted period, as is only too true. Curse him!—he has hounded that angelic creature for more than two centuries. He began it in France, when *les mélodrames* introduced the "brigand chieftain, stained with all the vices" pursuing an "innocent heroine endowed with all the virtues"; while from the *poulailler* (which is French for "chicken-roost") there descended, I doubt not, the gallery-god's cries of "Cheese it!" and "Sick 'em!" And in those days, even as now, all ended sweetly. "Saved, mon Dieu!"

But why the term "melodrama"? Rinuccini, who invented it, applied it to the opera. Later, the Germans used it to denote plays in which instrumental accompaniment to spoken lines heightened the thrill. The French borrowed it from the Germans because the new *tragédie du peuple* had orchestral interludes and a ballet. We retain it, lax Grecians that we are, and may defend the practice by adducing the "chills-and-fever music" that rages *molto tremoloso* while Sam, the assistant villain, says boldly to Sir Lionel Crowninshield, "I'll lie for you, I'll steal for you, I'll fight for you, but I'll be damned if I'll kill that beautiful little girl for you!"

Now, I take it that, when any artistic genre has persisted for two hundred years, it deserves your contemplation. In this case, happily, you can't altogether escape. The monster besieges your very porch, flinging upon it a prospectus intended for the housemaids but appealing irresistibly to their employer's sense of fun. One such prospectus I have by me now. It affords a synopsis of that solemn and awful melodrama, "Red-Handed Bill, the Hair-Lifter of the Far South-West." Read here the synopsis, and tremble:—

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ACT I. A Mountain Pass in the Rockies. In Pursuit. Kate saved by the Cattle King. The Assault of Red-Handed Bill and his Brazen Bandits. "Avaunt! This lady is under my protection."

ACT II. Golden Gulch and Exterior of the Bucket-of-Blood Saloon. The Rustic Lover. Bob accused of Horse-stealing. The Struggle and Capture of the Cattle King. "Coward, I'll do for you yet!"

ACT III. A Mountain Gorge. The Captives. Preparing for Death. The Equine Friend to the Rescue of his Master. "Saved!"

ACT IV, *Scene 1*. Don Pedro's Ranch. Red-Handed Bill's Visit. The Attack. *Scene 2*. Bob and the Irishman. "An eye for an eye." *Scene 3*. Interior of the Bucket-of-Blood Saloon. Playing for High Stakes. "Come and take them if you dare!"

ACT V, *Scene 1*. Interior of Don Pedro's Ranch. Red-Handed Bill and Barney. *Scene 2*. Heart of the Rockies. The Marriage Ceremony. Terrific Knife-fight on Horseback between Red-Handed Bill and Nebraska Jim. "At last!"

ACT VI. Parlor in Don Pedro's Ranch. The Threat. Timely Arrival of the Cattle King. Carlotta's Dying Confession. Bob and Kate happy.

And, as if this were not enough, the promoter of melodramas declares that "the breakage of costly bric-a-brac during the fight in the Bucket-of-Blood Saloon makes a weekly expense equal to the entire salary list of some companies."

Charming, is it not? Equally charming, and not less insistent, are the gaudy lithographic "eight-sheets" that assail your eye from a hundred bill-boards, foretelling hair's-breadth 'scapes, miraculous rescues, and scenes that freeze the blood. Sometimes the producer designs the lithographs first and orders up "script" to match. For a docile crew are his dramatists. They have to be. Early in life they learn submissiveness. The very laws of their craft forbid originality, since blood-and-thunder, like architecture, adheres of necessity to established principles. Attempt variation, and you cease to please. In fact, the following clever jingle by Mr. Franklin P. Adams might almost have been written in French during the earliest days of melodrama:—

"If you want a receipt for a melodramatical,
    Thrillingly thundery popular show,

Take an old father, unyielding, emphatical,
Driving his daughter out into the snow;
The love of a hero, courageous and Hacketty;
Hate of a villain in evening clothes;
Comic relief that is Irish and racketty;
Schemes of a villainess muttering oaths;
The bank and the safe and the will and the forgery—
All of them built on traditional norms—
Villainess dark and Lucrezia Borgery
Helping the villain until she reforms;
The old mill at midnight, a rapid delivery;
Violin music, all scary and shivery;
Plot that is devilish, awful, nefarious;
Heroine frightened, her plight is precarious;
Bingo!—the rescue!—the movement goes snappily—
Exit the villain and all endeth happily!
Take of these elements any you care about,
Put 'em in Texas, the Bowery, or thereabout;
Put in the powder and leave out the grammar,
And the certain result is a swell melodrammer."

Unhappily this prescription overlooks a most essential detail, the title. Authors of "hurrah stuff" (so they call their creations) comprehend that the Grand's patrons never choose the player first and the play afterward, as we do; with them it is not Mr. Sothern in what-you-will, it is "Red-Handed Bill" performed by whom-you-will; the title is everything. Alluring, compelling titles, it appears, array themselves in four categories:—

1. *The Blunderbuss Title*. Examples: "Red-Handed Bill," "Queen of the Outlaw Camp," "The Card King of the Coast."

2. *The Another-Girl-Like-You Title*. Examples: "Lottie, the Poor Saleslady," "Nellie, the Beautiful Cloak-Model," "Bell, the Typewriter Girl."

3. *The Heart-Throb Title*. Examples: "For His Sister's Honor," "For Her Children's Sake," "For His Brother's Crime."

4. *The Too-Dreadful-for-Anything Title*. Examples: "His Terrible Secret," "Why Girls Leave Home," "The Worst Woman in London."

But dear me, how we tarry in realms of theory, while yonder

at the Grand concrete realities will so soon be thundering with unstinted fury. Come! what ho for the Grand!

Reduce the conventional theatre to a state of dog-eared shabbiness; write commercial advertisements on the curtain; borrow a whiff or so of the Dime Museum's aroma, and fill the house with office-boys, bell-boys, messengers, common laborers, factory-girls, shop-girls, waitresses, and "generals." There you have the Grand, wanting only the music, in which the drum predominates. To you, its incessant throbbing becomes oppressive. Not to those about you, though. One and all, they would indorse the sentiment if you quoted:—

"Bang-whang-whang! goes the drum. Tootle-te-tootle, the fife!
No keeping one's haunches still; it's the greatest pleasure in life!"

And now the curtain goes up. It little matters what scene it discloses. Be it Chinatown or the Riverside Drive, New Orleans or the Bad Lands, the same thrilling deeds of derring-do will be enacted by the same conventional machine-made characters as in the famous "Boulevard du Crime" two hundred years ago. Milieu may vary, types never.

Consider those types, those presumably immortal types, so dear to the popular heart. First the heroine:—

She is "in-no-cent." With "quivering lips and moistened eye, her hands clasped meekly across her breast as though life was too heavy to bear," she tremulously reiterates the fact. Yet upon her, despite that aureole of angelic hair, those eyes so virtuously limpid, that rounded, maidenly figure, and the madonna-like sweetness of her ways, they have fastened accusations of arson, safe-cracking, forgery, and the murder of her husband. She is driven from home and kin. She is hounded by detectives. As the plot thickens, she grows eloquent. "Oh misery, misery!" she sobs. "I am alone forever! The thought will drive me frantic! I am wretched, mad! What is left to me now but the deepest, darkest despair? Oh, I cannot bear it! My heart will break! Why do I not die?—why do I not die?" She has life in her, though; lots of it. Wait till the villain sets about feeding her baby to the stone-crusher. It is with no little vigor, then, that she shrieks, "Me child! Me chi-i-i-ild!!!"

Or wait till he makes love to her. Zounds, what a counter-

blast! "Thou cur!" she snaps. "Unhand me, coward! The devilish cunning of your nature makes me shudder!" In moments like these she towers up in a physical grandeur well suiting her moral sublimity. And she needs a quite marvelous vitality, you discover, to go through the harrowing and terrific adventures this villain prepares for her. He loves her furiously and would be gentler if he understood. But villainy is not to be ranked among the learned professions. It is singularly without intellect. In "Nellie, the Beautiful Cloak-Model," the villain begins by causing the heroine to fall from the Brooklyn Bridge. Next,

he pitches her overboard in mid-Atlantic. After that, he throws her under a freight elevator. Ultimately he says to her, “Why do you fear me, Nellie?”

What made him a villain, “no fellow can find out.” He is a villain out of a clear sky, without motive or provocation, a “bold bad man” by nature, who has done all in his power to cultivate the gift. Hence a huge and horrid unpopularity, which he persistently augments till even the tiniest, tenderest gallery-god thirsts for his gore. The audience becomes so enraged that it hisses every time he comes on. Some cherish an abiding hatred; meeting him on the street next day, they openly insult him. In Texas, villains have been shot at. And as a final proof of villainy, the fiend glories in his shame, taking obloquy as a sort of laurel-crown, a tribute to his art.

Art it is, gadzooks! To be called “liar,” “scoundrel,” “puppy,” “toad,” yet never reply in more ferocious terms than “A time —will—come! Ha! Ha!”—this, methinks, argues that self-command which is the soul of virtuosity. Splendid, too, is the villain’s talent for dropping flat when only half poked at by the hero; for never recognizing a detective disguised in a Piccadilly collar; for falling back foiled, although armed to the teeth, when the “comic relief” comes at him with bare knuckles, and for purloining wills and looting safes only at moments when witnesses swarm at his elbow. Moreover, if “genius is patience,” this demon possesses a really dazzling brand of genius. “Foiled again”—and again and again—he pursues the evil tenor of his way.

And now the hero. Whereas the villain is completely and exhaustively villainous, the hero is completely and exhaustively heroic. You know it by his grand-opera stride, his righteously erect carriage, and the ring in his voice. Also by the creditable sentiments he exclaims while posing like any Olympian. “What! tell a falsehood? Let me die first!” “Fear a treacherous foe? Never, while a brave heart beats within me bosom!” “I swear that with the last drop of me blood I will defend yonder hunted but innocent girl!” To live up to this last proclamation requires a certain acrobatic nimbleness and a downright marvelous clairvoyance. Just when the heroine is about to be disintegrated by the sausage-machine, or reduced to longitudinal sections by the buzz-saw, or run over by the express-train as

she lies bound across the rails, or blown to bits by the powder-barrel as the fuse sputters nearer and nearer, then—whoop-la!—in jumps the hero, who has foreseen all and turned up not a second too late. Down chimneys he comes, up woodchuck-holes, over yawning chasms, across tottering bridges, and along the ridge-poles of flaming buildings, to thwart the villain and succor beauty in distress. A demigod, that hero! He will maul a villain twice his size; in "His Terrible Secret; or, Melmoth, the Man Monkey," the hero mauls two tremendous villains simultaneously.

But discerning melodramatists have discovered that our world is not wholly composed of the incurably good and the incurably bad. Ah, no! Witness the adventuress—the terrible, man-eating adventuress—who was once as "in-no-cent" as the heroine, yet who now sports a diabolical red gown, a nefarious plumed hat, and exceedingly devilish high-heeled slippers. Having depicted the facile Avernus-ward tendency of human character, our author shows us how facile is return thence. The ogress reforms. "It was you," she shrieks—"it was you, you, Sir Lionel Crowninshield, who dragged me down into the mire! Puppy! Snake! I was happy till I met you. And to-day you would cast me off—ha! ha!—to marry Violet St. Claire! Curse you! Leave me forever! I will return to the paths of virtue. Ay—ha! ha!—I will have revenge! I will fly to Violet St. Claire and say to her, 'Come, let me prove his perfidy to you!'" A jolly enterprise, and one likely to succeed,—especially when you recall the vigor with which Sir Lionel has pitched poor, tearful Violet about.

And in real life, as the melodramaturge has noticed, one finds here and there a character part good and part bad. So, if Blaney's learned sock be on,—or Ried's, or Kremer's, or Owen Davis's,—we shall expect from the assistant villain some up-spoutings of ethical fervor. Sam will do Sir Lionel's will until bidden, let us say, to strangle Violet St. Claire, or boil the baby in oil. Then his conscience asserts itself. He rebels, while storms of applause acclaim his extraordinary delicacy of feeling. He would leave Sir Lionel's service altogether but for past crimes that his employer might then make known to the constable.

A few more characters will complete the cast. We shall en-

counter that hard-hearted father who so eagerly drove Violet from home the moment suspicion fell upon her. We shall meet a friend of the hero, who extricates him from the various blast-furnaces, prison cells, and bottomless pits into which a man of honor is so prone to fall. We shall track the lynx-eyed detectives as they hound the quivering heroine by day and by night. And, at fixed intervals, we shall welcome the "comic reliefs." Says Dickens, "It is the custom on the stage, in all good murderous melodramas, to present the tragic and the comic scenes in as regular alternation as the layers of white and red in a side of well-streaked bacon." When the hero has come ashore on the life-line, hanging by his teeth, with the heroine under his arm, then, sure enough, out prance the comedy-team—rustics, negroes, or merry Celts—to dance and sing and crack jokes. But for this happy intervention, the audience would blow up.

At times—arbitrarily, quite—the curtain drops, and they call it the end of an act. A hundred lads and lasses bolt for the doors, to flirt among themselves, gaze forth upon the passing multitudes, and get a breath of fresh air, while inside the Grand the orchestra plays "Harrigan" and the gallery sings the chorus. There is much neighborly stepping to and fro, a hum of conversation, and no little munching of caramels. Or perhaps, instead of music, the Grandscope displays a flickering film or so in hope to discourage the all too serious tendency of the fickle to desert melodrama for the motion-picture show. Then up goes the curtain, and blood-and-thunder resumes.

Where it left off? It were rash to say so. The same characters, to be sure, go at the same frightful, blood-curdling business,—villain pursuing, hero thwarting, heroine escaping by the skin of her innocent teeth. But how, pray, came this about? Absolutely without connection with the preceding act. The more you watch the thing, the more it is borne in upon you that a melodrama, far from being a play, is merely a vaudeville,—a string of hair-lifting playettes, with comic specialties interspersed. They no more constitute a play than the detached adventures of Mr. Sherlock Holmes constitute a novel.

Still, as the riot of incidents had a beginning, it must have an ending. The detectives handcuff the fainting Violet St. Claire,

when behold! the hero rushes on with a missive which the (reformed) adventuress has received from the Dead Letter Office. It was written by Violet's husband, shortly after his death, and declares that the combined charges of arson, forgery, safe-cracking, and murder should rest solely upon that black-hearted scoundrel, Sir Lionel Crowninshield. Violet comes to. The detectives loose the shackles. A policeman enters. The hero, with his left arm about the heroine and his right hand pointing at the villain, shouts majestically, "Mr. Officer, arrest that man!" Violet's father steps out from behind a boulder, and blesses the happy pair; the reformed adventuress falls upon the shoulder of the assistant villain, who has now no obstacle left between him and reform; the detectives slink off, cowering, R. and L.; and the villain is dragged away to the dungeon he so richly deserves. Tableau. Impassioned music. Slow curtain. Deafening and hilarious applause.

As the spectators rise up to go, you note in every face the gleam of triumph. Virtue victorious, vice vanquished,—such might be the perennial and suitably alliterative boast of melodrama. That, chiefly, is why the people love it. A crude motif? Say, rather, a primal,—the motif of old legends, of monkish morality plays, of fairy tales, of Sunday-school classics, of camp-meeting anecdotes. Vice, to be sure, gets frank statement, yet ever from virtue's point of view. Well may Blaney autograph his portrait, "Author of clean plays." Well may he exclaim, "I have never written a suggestive line, never allowed vice or wrong-doing to seem even temporarily to be in the ascendant!" How many dramatists in less lowly zones of art can say as much? Indeed, one recalls how a citizen once approached the box-office of a theatre and inquired, "Is this play a melodrama?" whereupon the official replied, "Mellow! It's rotten." No such fear at the Grand. The spectators, by long experience, know that invariably the wicked marionettes will be punished hideously, while the righteous marionettes will be sumptuously rewarded. What if, by reason of having baseless suspicions cast upon her, the heroine is compelled to wear black? In the last scene she will strut resplendent in a pink-and-blue evening gown (it is morning, there in the Klondike, but who cares?) and blaze with monstrous jewels. Then cries every

flaming heart, "I told you so!"—which is on the whole the most joyous and soul-satisfying sentence the tongue can fashion.

Have we caught our balance sufficiently to attempt criticism? Then let us begin with the actors, who are the worst—and the best—in the world: the worst because their machine-made technique misinterprets reality; the best because it is their mission to misinterpret reality, and they fulfill that mission sublimely. They personify those theoretic types which the densely ignorant audience accepts as lifelike. The hero writes heroism in bill-board capitals, the heroine weaves lachrymose innocence into a motto to go on the wall, the villain does villainy into scare-heads. It is clean-cut, unequivocal acting, blatant and megaphonic. It takes the citadel of stupidity by a frontal attack, covered by artillery. As well might each player wear a label denoting his quality, and light the label with electricity.

Such players, methinks, would hardly shine in a drama like "Why They Felt as They Did Instead of Slightly Differently," though even there they might introduce a merit now rare and little prized,—the merit, I mean, of clear utterance. With them, no affected, incomprehensible chirpings or cooings; instead, a fine, bold vocalization, straight from the diaphragm and audible in the very garret. Sometimes, however, noise were better if muffled; in "His Terrible Secret," one regretted the bluster with which the actors kept addressing the adventuress in two syllables,—"Salome!"

And melodrama itself,—I find it perfect. Consider its problem. Wanted: By an incredibly dull audience, ten thousand thrills. To deliver those thrills takes something stronger, quicker, and simpler than the conventional play. Something stronger because the very dull require powerful stimulants to stave off torpor. These are they who love Salvationist rantings and whoopings, the yellow journal's tom-tom, and the dime novel's inspired hydrophobia; mild appeals leave them listless. Hence the merits of melodrama's wild and outrageous fury, a fury which no one but Mr. Franklin Adams, who is as skilled in mathematics as in song, has ever dared to compute. Writing of Mr. Owen Davis's thrillers, he declares, "If all the blood spilled in the one hundred and seventeen Davidramas were put into one caldron, it would equal the average rainfall for Asia, Rhode Island, and Tasmania. The blank cartridges shot off in

those same plays would supply the Bulgarian army for 1342 years, 7 months, and 12 days. All the curse-yous and other oaths, placed end on end, would reach from Oneonta, New York, to Nashotah, Wisconsin, while the virtue triumphant on a field of vice scarlet would—" But here even an Adams gives over, and one doubts if any statistician, however valiant, would have the hardihood to continue.

Tepid, anæmic, and neutral-tinted by comparison, is our aristocratic drama, though the poor thing can't help it. We bring to the theatre a fastidiousness that precludes the grander flights of art. That "terrific knife-fight on horseback in the Bucket-of-Blood Saloon" is not for natures depleted by a false culture; neither is "the breakage of costly bric-a-brac" that "makes a weekly expense equal to the entire salary list of some companies." I question, too, whether Mr. Winter or Mr. William Archer could appreciate the scene in "Chinatown Charley" where a troop of little girls ascend a telegraph pole, and form a sort of chain which swings across to the window and affords a human bridge for the heroine to escape by when tragically cornered by the villain. They have small compunction in melodrama; they go it strong.

Note, I beg you, the vigor displayed by the author of "The White Squadron." His hero, as I remember, has been enslaved by the heroine's cruel father, and made a brother to the ox,—quite literally, for he has his head through the yoke, side by side with the beast. Worse, he burns with thirst. He cries piteously for water. His master refuses, but at last, when the fiend has turned his back, the girl brings a cooling cup and presses it to the lips of the captive, who cries, "O, thou dove, sprung from the loins of a tiger!"

Now I call that genuinely remarkable. Barrie at his best has given us nothing at all resembling it. Or again, recall the avalanche scene in "The Card King of the Coast." A cabin containing hunted innocence and predatory stealth is buried in the snow. After a moment of harrowing suspense, in bursts the hero, who has easily won to the door and smashed it through. Forthwith he assists the heroine to ascend the red-hot stove, stands beside her on top of it, and little by little pokes a hole in the ceiling. Through this and the forty feet of snow overhead the pair make their escape.

But for the very thriller of thrillers, I point you to "His Terrible Secret; or, Melmoth, the Man Monkey." I consider it indubitably "the limit." Melmoth's father, it appears, was erroneously believed to have been strangled by a gorilla. Consequently, Melmoth resembles an ape. Mr. Charles E. Blaney, who made that shilling-shocker, is too honest to claim originality; he confesses that his plot is "based on Darwin's theory of evolution." Obviously, for Melmoth cherishes a desire to "return to the jungle and live among his forefathers." By allowing the mind to dwell upon this idea, one obtains a degree of æsthetic satisfaction equaled only by the exultancy with which one watches the many displays of ultra-simian ferocity afforded by fight after fight, as the ape nature periodically reasserts itself to the detriment of the villain. Besides, there's the pathos of it all. "A great mind, a great heart, and a monkey face." Think of it,—and it might have happened to any one of us! Never shall I forget that final scene, in which, just as the curtain is about to fall, the sweet heroine asks, "And Melmoth, Melmoth, what will *you* do?" He replies, "I will return to the jungle, where alone is peace and contentment for the Man Monkey!" So this was the "terrible secret,"—this circumstance of having had a father who wasn't strangled by a gorilla, and of having consequently the visage of a gorilla,—rather a difficult secret to keep, which was why Melmoth told it to everybody in the play at the outset.

Situations sufficiently appalling and incidents sufficiently cataclysmic are not wholly wanting upon our own stage. To Melmoth one may oppose that other unfortunate curio, the Sieur de Bergerac, whose nose was as astonishing in its way as Melmoth's ape-like visage. Yet in general our dramatists are but a timid race. For often they conduct their most awesome horrors behind the scenes. Not so here, where one gets the full effect, helped out not infrequently by those ministrants to realism, the live horse, the live dog, the bona fide waterfall, and such hurricanes and thunderings as cause one's head to duck. These crude phenomena "take the skin off," as the saying goes; as the saying ought to go, they take most of the flesh along too. And the crowd adores them. It especially adores the shower of "fire-proof theatrical snow" (I quote from the dealer's catalogue), and will enjoy deathly pangs of compas-

sion as the heroine, hatless and without her shawl, exposes herself to the cold.

Let us do the square thing by that snow. Addison has said that it consists of dismembered manuscripts of unsuccessful playwrights,—which is misleading. Mr. Jerome K. Jerome remarks, "One thing that must irritate the stage heroine very much, on these occasions, is the way the snow seems to lie in wait for her, and follow her about. It is quite a fine night before she comes on the scene; the moment she appears, it begins to snow. The way the snow 'goes' for that poor woman is most unfair. It always snows much heavier in the particular spot where she is sitting than it does anywhere else in the whole street. We have even known a more than usually malignant snow-storm to follow a heroine three times round the stage, and then go off R. with her. A stage snow-storm is the kind of snow-storm that would follow you upstairs and want to come into bed with you." Clever, this, and once true. Now, however, the snow-storm behaves much better. Though it still times its precipitation so as to afford the lady a foregone pneumonia, and though it still contrives to let up as soon as she has withdrawn, it yields a fine, even, undiscriminating shower of highly realistic flakes, whose verisimilitude may rank among the most praiseworthy shockers of melodrama.

Next to shock, in the technique of thrill-carpentry, comes quickness. In "Ten Nights in a Bar-Room," two gentlemen sit playing at cards. The ensuing tragedy runs thus, if I recall.

"You cheated!"

"You lie!"

"You die!"

Bang!!!

Such alacrity, one appreciates, is in principle only a response to a natural requirement of stagecraft. Once, when Sarah Bernhardt had been rehearsing a death-scene, her uncle expostulated, "But don't you know, Sarah, that rigor mortis doesn't set in till six hours after death?"—"Yes, yes," cried the divine Sarah, "I know that,—*ah, parfaitement!* But do you expect an audience to wait six hours to see me stiffen?" At the Grand, the audience can scarce wait six minutes, so, however grave the business in hand, there's not a moment to lose. You should see them make love at the Grand. One proposes, there, with

the brevity and abruptness of a brakeman bawling the name of the next station. Without preliminary hoverings or flutterings or hesitant, lyrical circumlocutions, one hurls a declaration straight from the shoulder. "Will you marry me?" The impact, as it hits the lady, must be terrific, yet she replies firmly, "I will!" Which closes the incident.

And think not that transitions from scene to scene demand delicate shading. The more sudden and extreme, the better. In a delicious melodrama I remember, the curtain falls upon the pursuit of a murderer; immediately the murderer comes before the curtain and disports himself in song and dance. The spectator's mood will change in a twinkling. A gifted melodramatist of my acquaintance has accomplished the feat of turning a hanging into a wedding. "Think of that!" he exclaims. "Never was done before. Here I have the hero with the rope around his neck and the black cap drawn down and the drop about to fall. You get ready for the dull, sickening thud. Then—wow!—in an instant, I have the bridal party rush on, breathless, and I marry that hero before he knows where he's at!"

Meanwhile, in the nine-and-twenty hair's-breadth-escape scenes of a melodrama, rapidity is everything. For three reasons. First, the audience knows what's coming; familiarity with "hurrah stuff" enables it to keep always at least a minute ahead of the action. In the next place, it absolutely forgets itself. "Save her!" it shrieks. "Save her!" Or even, "Look out, Bill, he's under the sofa!" They tell how Salvini once choked his Desdemona in good faith; here it is the audience that is run away with by the convincing potency of art. And that mood won't last; one must strike while the iron is hot. Finally, melodrama is not got up for psychologists. Its devotees care nothing for the portrayal of the inner life, save in its crudest, most ferocious manifestations; a few wild cries suffice. They want "sump'n doin'." Strip the action, therefore, of all those interpretative, significant, philosophic touches that make it human. Give it go. Give it noise and bluster as it goes. Let it career madly, in a cloud of dust and with sparks flying.

And make it simple. The reason, really, why blood-and-thunder has for two centuries adhered to the rules set by the French *mélodrames*, is that their simplicity was absolute and final. They reduced character, incident, structure, and ideas to

their lowest terms, enabling the Neolithic mind (and such is the Grand's) to comprehend. A *reductio ad absurdum* for you, "hurrah stuff" becomes for the housemaid and the office-boy a vehicle of truth.

To that coterie of ridiculously simplified and outrageously overdrawn types—hero, heroine, villain, and the rest—you exclaim, as did Alice in Wonderland, "Who cares for you? You are nothing but a pack of cards!" Nevertheless, it is beyond the power of the Neolithic mind to distinguish between the visible representation and the thing it claims to represent. At a much higher stage of development, men were wont to adduce the clincher, "Is it not written?" At the Grand one encounters the clincher, "Is it not acted?" Why question the existence of characters as completely virtuous or as completely infamous as those of melodrama? Can't you see them, yonder on the stage, performing at this moment the so-called impossibilities, exemplifying the so-called impossible humanity? Trust your eyes! And, to a degree, even the educated fall prey to this pleasing fallacy. Cartoons, however irrational, have still their persuasiveness. If you scorn the Grand for accepting Red-Handed Bill, ask yourself if you can think of Senator Hanna as clad otherwise than in dollar signs.

The incidents, too,—despite their magnified, galvanized outlandishness, they are the simplest of all imaginable thrillers. Into a scrape and out of it. *Voilà tout!* Call them false and you err. False they may be, to life as it commonly runs and to life as you see it. Meanwhile they are true, to life as it occasionally runs and as the Neolithic see it; for only the glaringly sensational gets through their armor of stupidity to leave a vivid impression. And have I not with these eyes beheld melodrama turned loose in the public street? For instance, when the old-time firemen were marshaling their parade. Let me sketch it for you.

A city square, packed with people. Battalions of red-shirted braves waiting the order to march. Suddenly, a distant cry. Then more cries and louder. Then the throng split in twain, and through the gap dashed a runaway horse, foam-flecked and without a driver. At his heels swung a coupé, now tilted to left and now to right, with a woman and a baby girl inside. An instant later a red-shirted fellow sprang tigerlike from among

the terror-stricken crowd. With one terrific bound he seized the bridle and clung. He was dragged—oh yes,—and hurt. But he had saved two lives; and I was there and saw it. It is the livest, cleanest-cut recollection of my boyhood. Never till I die shall I forget the red flash of that leap or the ring of applause that followed it. It was melodrama, real and perfect.

In the Grand's audience, pray notice, there are many who have had first-hand—or at least second-hand—acquaintance with the melodramatic. From among the Neolithic come firemen, policemen, seamen, and those who gain their bread in trades replete with danger and daring. Meanwhile the tenement street has its daily melodramas, such as they are,—melodramas of crime, drunkenness, and frightful vice, though generally lacking the completeness that would fit them for the stage. You know what happens when philanthropists transplant a family from the slum to the village. The family returns. It returns because its removal has involved an exchange of melodrama for "the legitimate."

While the life of the people gives a tremendous reality to the melodramatic, their reading superemphasizes that reality. In your evening newspaper, somewhere among the items under inconspicuous headlines, you are told that when Mrs. Ahearn, who dwells in a certain remote city, stood shrieking at the window of a blazing tenement, it was her own son, Terence (of Hook-and-Ladder Three), who carried her fainting to the ground. In the Neolithic newspaper, on the other hand, the story fills half a page, with colossal headlines and thrilling illustrations. A dozen despatches of international importance are "killed" to make room for it. So you need hardly marvel that, when the Grand presents incidents familiar through experience and reading, the people accept them. They are plausible, stirring, and readily comprehended.

But the way melodrama combines its incidents—is that so simple? For the Neolithic, yes, though not for you. Conceived as a play, "Red-Handed Bill" involves non sequiturs, discrepancies, contradictions; it makes your head swim. Conceived as a random series of playettes, it exactly suits the short-distance intellect, which would droop with exhaustion should it attempt to follow the plot of "The Hypocrites," for instance, or even of "Leah Kleschna." It wants not dramas but scenes, and

the Grand's stage is peopled with characters who have little hesitation about making scenes. Nobody cares if there are too many scenes. Nobody cares if the scenes won't hang together; they should of right "hang separately." Mr. Owen Davis, author of "Nellie, the Beautiful Cloak-Model," says, "Frankly, I wrote it as a burlesque. Often, while working on it, I had to laugh at its incongruities and impossible situations,—Nellie faced certain death seventeen times from curtain to curtain,—but it was a big financial success and is now in its third season." Mr. Davis, being a Harvard graduate, might well deride Nellie's seventeen escapes; he could view the performance in its entirety, get all seventeen into his mind at once. His audience, on the contrary, took the performance one inning at a time, each new shocker obliterating its predecessor. And it is precisely this brevity of perspective that makes a series of unrelated episodes more facile of interpretation than the sustained elaboration we demand of a play. Make scene depend upon scene and you cruelly overtask the Neolithic mentality.

That mentality demands likewise an extreme simplicity and perspicuity of idea, a stripping of truth to the bone. I say truth advisedly. However wild and unrepresentative the incident, and however crude (even to grotesquerie) the depiction of character, the underlying notions must consist solely of platitudes,—or, to put it more genially, of fundamental verities. Mr. Chesterton remarks with absolute justice, "Melodrama is popular because it is profound truth; because it goes on repeating the things which humanity has found to be central facts. This endless repetition profoundly annoys the sensitive artist inside you and me. But it ought to profoundly please the realist. The melodrama is perpetually telling us that mothers are devoted to their children, because mothers are devoted to their children. Humanity may in time grow tired of hearing this truth; but humanity will never grow tired of fulfilling it. The melodramas say that men are chiefly sensitive upon honor and upon their personal claim to courage. Men are. It bores one to hear one's honor reiterated; but it would startle one to hear it denied. In so far as the melodrama is really bad, it is not bad because it expresses old ideas; it is bad because it so expresses them as to make them seem like dead ideas."

Dead ideas? So they may seem to Mr. Chesterton while

"hurrah stuff" rages before his eyes and chills-and-fever music rings in his ears. So they most emphatically do not seem to the Neolithic. In "A Wife's Secret," the heroine flees to a belfry at dead of night. The villain, still pursuing, climbs the roof of the church and enters the belfry. "Ha!" he cries, "at last I have got you alone!" The heroine answers, "Ah, no! Not—not alone! For God is ev-er-y-where!" A dead idea? Then why the exultant tempest of applause, which swells, and bursts, and, were it only a little louder, would lift the very roof?

Mr. Charles E. Blaney, author of many terrific melodramas, has now and then a half-repentant mood. He confesses that perchance he may have "over-stimulated young minds." I would bid him and all his guild be of good comfort. Young minds, of the grade they address, will seek overstimulation, Grand or no Grand, and it is the glory of melodrama that it preaches nightly a gospel that gives the mere platitudes of morals a glaring, thrilling intensity that finds the heart and sets it leaping.

And what, after all, is melodrama? The Ten Commandments in red fire.

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