(November 23rd, 1916.)

The Importance of Humor in Tragedy

By Sir Herbert Tree.*

AT a special luncheon of the Club held on the 23rd November, Sir Herbert Tree said:

Mr. President and Gentlemen,—I feel greatly honored in having been invited to address an assembly of the Canadian Club. Your President has said that he hoped you would bear your burden with equanimity. I can only fervently second that resolution.

In proceeding to talk to you, and largely to read to you, about the Importance of Humor in Tragedy,—and in doing so the most facile orators occasionally have to refer to notes when they have not learned their impromptus by heart,—I am reminded of advancing age. There are three symptoms which remind one that one is reaching the years of—shall I say indiscretion?—when one should really settle down to a respectable life and accept the world as it is—a thing, alas! which I have never been quite able to accomplish. The three symptoms are these: the worst one of all is when people meeting you in the street say "How young you are keeping!" That is a danger symptom! Then there is another symptom, when publishers ask you to write your reminiscences;—I am bombarded with applications from publishers who are waiting for the words that shall drop from me before my demise. The third symptom is the use of glasses when one is not short-sighted—and that is one of the compensations of life for short-sighted people, that their vision gets normal as they grow older. I have been endeavoring for these few months, gentlemen, to emancipate myself from the tyranny of these glasses, but I haven't emancipated myself yet, so bear with me, with equanimity.

Were I asked what companion I would choose to start on life's journey in quest of happiness, I would unhesitatingly summon to my side humor—humor, the darling love-child of intelligence. As instinct is greater than learning, as intelligence is greater than intellect, so is humor greater than wit. Wit has

*Sir Herbert Tree, the eminent Shakespearean actor, was in Toronto for the week giving us the pleasure of seeing him as Cardinal Wolsey and Lyn Harding as the King in Henry VIII.

its birth in the head of intellect, humor in the heart of intelligence. Humor is the power of self-criticism—it enables us to estimate men and events at their true value. It is the touchstone which distinguishes the real from the sham in art. As in art so in life. Humor helps us to bear with injustice, to laugh at pretension, to behave with modesty in success, and to face adversity with calm. The man who has it will not lose his dignity in emergency. In the great tragedy of life's end he will meet even Death with a smile.

It always seems to me that there is a fine spirit of humor in the famous epitaph in Hull churchyard on the grave of one Martin Elginbrod:

> "Here lie I, Martin Elginbrod,
> Have mercy on my soul, O God,
> As I would if I were God
> And thou wert Martin Elginbrod."

People are too apt to treat God as if He were a minor royalty.

I take it that the main object of man is to find happiness—each after his own fashion. By happiness I do not mean pleasure, for which it is sometimes mistaken—indeed, in pursuing the phantom of pleasure we often lose the substance of happiness. Happiness is a condition of the mind, and does not depend on conditions of pleasure. It is in ourselves, it is a kind of self-hypnotism. Humor helps us to attain this condition of mind which we call content. Some will find happiness in a debauch of pessimism—they "enjoy bad health," as the charwoman said. Persons of a certain order of mind will extract a perverse kind of joy from attending the funeral of a complete stranger. Such an event becomes a holiday treat to the born pessimist. To what base uses do the poor resort in quest of happiness—but I suppose the only joy of life vouchsafed to many of these is the cessation of pain. Thank God, the toiling masses are given to-day greater opportunities of human joys than in the "good old days" when their nearest approach to sweetness and light was to be found in the public house.

Humor being an attitude of mind, it can to a certain extent be developed—given the seed it can be cultivated. I remember a valued friend once said, "Life is a mirror—smile at it and it will smile back, frown at it and it will frown again."

Children should be taught lessons in happiness: that, for instance, it is not a sin to be joyous, any more than it is a

virtue to be miserable. A kind of Pagan spirituality has of late years taken the place of the "Fee, fi, fo, fum" brimstone teaching of our Victorian childhood—though I confess that long before I had ceased to crack nuts with my teeth I had given up the doctrine of "open your mouth and shut your eyes."

It may at once be granted that like every other precious force (like radium and electricity) the force of humor can be misapplied, and so become dangerous; it is undeniable, too, that an absence of humor will enable men to reach the goal of their ambition more quickly, for they who see only what is immediately in front of their noses will often outstrip in the race those who are hampered with humor and the sensitiveness and love of life which that humor implies. The earnest worldling keeps his eye on his main chance, blinkered to the life that passes him, and sallies forth on his way undismayed by snubs, impervious to criticism, undaunted by ridicule, deaf to the song of the siren, unmindful of the by-lanes where primroses beckon the passer-by to linger in pleasant dalliance.

"A primrose by the river's brim
A yellow primrose was to him,
And it was nothing more."

"And what in the name of common sense should it be more?" exclaims the man in the street—who is generally the man *of* the street. There let us leave him.

Certainly humor may be a clog in the game of life. On the other hand, he who is gifted with it will laugh at the bludgeonings of fate. The man who yields to the assaults of adversity is often stronger than he who offers them a rigid resistance. Iron breaks, steel bends, and recovers its equipoise.

Humor assuages pain, though I am bound to say I have found it inefficacious in toothache or in sea-sickness. Thus we see that philosophy has its limitations. Our humor is apt to stop short at ourselves—that is the tragedy of life. The misfortunes of others we bear more philosophically. The supreme test of humor is in its personal application. It is the quintessence of humor which enables a man to laugh at himself and gives him his highest dignity, for he who can laugh at himself must needs be gifted with a tolerance, a pity for others. None so sensitive to criticism as those whose business it is to ridicule others. True humor is rarely cruel, cruelty and sarcasm belong rather to the domain of wit. Nothing will appeal to an audience's sense of the ridiculous so much as the fall of the decrepit pantaloon on the butter-slide prepared by the wily clown. But that is not humor.

A homely illustration of the difference between wit and humor came within my knowledge. I have two friends—one a wit, the other a humorist. They were staying at a country inn and retired to their rooms in high spirits. A. conceived the brilliant idea of changing all the boots that were put outside along the passage. He did so. (That was wit.) B. thought of the inconvenience that this derangement would entail on the victims of his friend's ingenuity, and without telling A., lest he should deprive him of his triumph, changed all the boots back to their rightful owners' doors. (That was humor.) You will say these are not brilliant examples of wit or humor—you are right. 'Tis but a homespun fable.

Humor, like love, cannot be bought—it is common to the peasant and the king, to the prelate and the 'bus-conductor. Between those who have it there exists a kind of freemasonry—it is the touch of nature which makes the whole world kin. I believe that humor is unofficially and secretly possessed by both political parties. I remember sitting at a table at which were gathered distinguished men—Conservatives and Liberals. Turning to my neighbor I said: "Is it not curious that all these sitting here appear to think alike to-night on every conceivable subject, while in their public utterances they differ so violently?" "Yes," replied my friend, "but this is our holiday. Here we are allowed to speak the truth, for humor is in the chair—*and there are no reporters.*" In public life nothing is so suspect as humor. Perhaps that is why so many men scruple to tell the truth in public.

One blessing the war has brought to us—the abolition of parties. I have never been able to understand why parties should exist. If every man acted according to his conscience, clarified by humor, there would be no necessity for the barbed red-tape entanglements which divided Englishmen in deadly enmity. If a plain man ventured before the war to express a merely human opinion on some great social question which came within the range of politics, he was liable to be dubbed a "ruddy Radical" on the one side or a "gory Tory" on the other. A common cause and a common humor unites all classes in a great brotherhood to-day.

In saying that our sense of humor stops short at ourselves in the ordinary affairs of life, I recall an instance which was related to me by one who has the medical care of the inmates of Broadmoor. This story shows that the points of view of normally sane persons is apt to lapse from sanity at the lure of vanity. My medical friend escorted on two successive occasions two distinguished visitors who were interested in the

condition of his patients. The first visitor (Mr. Smith) was a young man who expressed a desire to be presented among others to one whose ambition in life had proved to be a too wholesale extermination of the human race. "Be polite to him," said my friend, "for he is the most dangerous inmate of this asylum." "Mr. Gallstone," he proceeded, "let me present to you my friend, Mr. Smith." "Take off your hat, sir," said the criminal. Mr. Smith took off his hat. "Turn your profile, sir," continued Mr. Gallstone. Mr. Smith turned his profile. Mr. Gallstone exclaimed, "A truly noble Aryan type, the forehead of a poet laureate, nobility of feature, a generous mouth, a personality which should be the cynosure of womanhood, a born leader of men. You have an eye, sir, which shows the fire of the idealist held in check only by the power of logic. You will go far, sir; you will go far. Put on your hat, damn you, and pace forth to victory!"

Mr. Smith replaced his hat. In leaving the premises he turned to my doctor friend and said, "I have been greatly interested by all I have seen; but there is one case in which I think the patient may be unjustly detained. Is it not possible that a grave error of judgment may have been committed?"

"To which case do you refer?" inquired the doctor.

"I refer to the case of a Mr. Gallstone, who appeared to me remarkably intelligent," said the young man sympathetically as he took his leave.

The next week a distinguished permanent official of the public service paid a visit to the prison. He, too, was escorted by my friend. "Mr. Gallstone," said he, "allow me to present to you my friend, Mr. William Jones."

"Take off your hat, sir," said Mr. Gallstone, "and make yourself at home here."

Sir William removed his hat and tried to look at home.

"Any relation of the celebrated thinker and philosopher of that name?" inquired Mr. Gallstone.

"Yes," replied Sir William; "I am his son."

"Remarkably paltry head for the son of so great a man. Put on your hat, sir," said Mr. Gallstone, as he turned to finish a game of solo dominoes.

Sir William, in bidding farewell, took the doctor aside and said, "I have been deeply interested in all I have seen, but I have never been so shocked with the depraved criminality of a fellow-being as I was to-day."

"To what case do you refer?" asked the doctor.

"I refer to the case of Gallstone. I wonder you don't put him in irons." . . . Points of view differ. Our humor stops short at ourselves!

It is a fact, by the bye, which I have observed in life, that all madmen are singularly deficient in the quality of humor. I have noticed that an inordinate conceit characterises that sad state. I presume it is because the sense of proportion is distorted. Persons without a sense of humor always write long letters; and I have noticed, too, that all madmen write letters of more than four pages. I will not venture to assert that all persons who write more than four-paged letters are mad. Still, the symptom should be watched.

One of the most alarming signs of insanity, it has often seemed to me, is that of writing to the newspapers (invariably more than four written pages) to prove that Hamlet was mad, and that Bacon wrote Shakespeare. Yet the same writers who scorn the idea that Hamlet pretended to be mad, generally assert with equal vehemence that Shakespeare pretended to write the works of Bacon. I am satisfied that many of the learned commentators have only been kept out of lunatic asylums by the energy which they have expended in the harmless occupation of discussing these two kindred subjects in print. In many cases it has proved a most valuable safety-valve.

Though the subject of the Shakespeare-Bacon controversy is somewhat musty, I will ask you to bear with me while I wander down a bye-lane of parenthesis in order to prove to my own entire satisfaction that, tested by the touchstone of humor, the Bacon theory vanishes into the air. If there is one quality which characterises the writings of Shakespeare more than another it is humor. He cannot resist it—it is irresistible. Humor, like murder, will out. Had Bacon humor? I think not.

Bacon had learning, Shakespeare not much. But he had instinct. Some people are born educated; Shakespeare inherited the knowledge of his forefathers, and he possessed an unexampled power of assimilating all that came in his way. He made precisely the mistakes that Bacon would never have made. Book-learning is not wisdom. Shakespeare himself ridicules this most whimsically in "Love's Labours Lost":

> "Study is like the Heaven's glorious sun
> That will not be deep-searched with saucy looks;
> Small have continual plodders ever won
> Save base authority from others' books."

The King replies:

"How well he is read to reason against reading!" How small a thing is education save for those who have the imagin-

ation to illuminate it. Too much reading is certainly a hindrance to the development of the imagination. Indeed of giving birth to original thoughts, the man who has only reading gets to think by quotation— he relies on the cold storage of memory.

Many years ago I met at the house of a friend an eminent cryptogrammatist who had written a work proving by algebra that Bacon wrote Shakespeare. I made so bold as to ask him whether Bacon wrote the Shakespeare Sonnets. He replied that his case rested on that certainty. I pointed out to him that while it was conceivable that Francis Bacon, for political reasons, did not wish to acknowledge the authorship of the plays, it was inconceivable that in the outpourings of his soul in the Sonnets he should call himself "Your own sweet will," constantly punning on the Christian name of his paid "ghost"—the vulgar poacher-butcher-actor-manager.

Again, look here upon this picture and on this: Could he who had proved himself a heartless advocate, who sacrificed the Earl of Essex, and after the grave had closed over him published a vile attack upon his dead friend and benefactor, "like wrath in death and envy afterwards"—could he whose meanness was aggravated by respectability, who had paddled long in the putrescent puddles of politics, till right and wrong were merged in the melting-pot of expediency—could he have written these words:

"Tired with all these, for restful death I cry,
As, to behold desert a beggar born,
And needy nothing trimm'd in jollity,
And purest faith unhappily forsworn,
And gilded honor shamefully misplaced,
And maiden virtue rudely strumpeted,
And right perfection, wrongfully disgraced,
And strength by limping sway disabled,
And art made tongue-tied by authority,
And folly, doctor-like, controlling skill,
And simple truth miscall'd simplicity,
And captive good attending captain ill:
Tired with all these, from these would I be gone,
Save that, to die, I leave these my love alone."

Is there in any of Bacon's works one hint of this sweet humor, this noble scorn, this glowing melancholy which breathes throughout the works of Shakespeare? I think not. Writers more dissimilar than these two cannot be found.

There is one thing quite certain, that if Bacon wrote Shakespeare, then Shakespeare must have written Bacon!

But to return to my text. In its essentials, the oil of humor is the same throughout the world as is the essential vinegar of wit; but each nationality has its own characteristic humor, and though it is perhaps pre-eminently developed in the Anglo-Saxon race, I have found it in the Arab and the Japanese. The Japanese are a peculiarly smiling people. There is a Japanese proverb which says, "A melancholy face is stung by the bees." Another Japanese proverb contains excellent advice to intending suicides: "When you take poison, don't lick the plate."

Humor is everywhere; it can be picked off the hedges of the highway. A gipsy was asked by a friend of mine, "How do you decide which way to go next?" "I turn my back to the wind," replied the gipsy. An excellent piece of philosophy! Yes; humor is a gipsy—it has no country; though there *are* Englishmen who deny true merit to the humor of America, whose peculiarly attractive characteristic is that it leaves something to the imagination of the listener. A curious instance of this British intolerance was given me by a brilliant American friend. A stolid Englishman was his guest, and would listen to the American's prolific anecdotage with the mild and surprised courtesy of fatigue. On his way to the station at the conclusion of his visit, the Englishman, while thanking his host for his hospitality, confided to him that he deeply regretted that he had been unable to appreciate the characteristic humor with which the American had sought to outvie the Englishman's brilliant flashes of silence.

"Now tell me," said the taciturn Saxon, "one story which you really consider a true sample of American humor and I give you my word of honor as an English gentleman that I will do my best to appreciate it."

My American friend drew up his dogcart and proceeded: "Well, it was a rainy Sunday at St. Louis and the public houses were shut. A stranger stood on the corner of the street wanting to post a letter home. 'Do you know where the post office is?' he inquired of a passer-by. 'Yes,' replied the man, and walked on. But on reflection he took pity on his fellow-man, and retraced his steps to the place where the stranger was still standing in the rain, disconsolately whistling to the wind. 'Do you really want to know where the post office is?' he asked. 'No,' said the stranger, and walked on."

"Well," said the Englishman, "I think they were both extremely rude." There ensued a silence so deep that you could almost hear it.

In life humor enables us to rate ourselves and our own acts at their true value; it helps us to discount flattery. Flattery makes the great little, the little never great. "Oh, that men should be to counsel deaf, but not to flattery." We are none of us entirely proof against flattery, which is the cheapest form of bribery; it is largely employed by lower organisms as a means of self-propulsion. Flattery is a passport to the human heart; few of us can resist its gilded key. I have known people of quite mediocre intelligence who have managed to succeed in life by judicious flattery.

An instance of humor in tragedy (conscious or otherwise) came within my knowledge. I had constantly relieved the importunities of one who claimed to be a literary man, on the ground, I subsequently discovered, that he addressed envelopes for an advertising firm. His constant plea with me was that he wanted to get a glass eye out of pawn. So frequently were his applications on this head that at last my secretary revolted. I received a letter couched in these terms: "Sir, unless I receive ten shillings this evening, by ten o'clock my body will be floating down the Thames. On your head be it! I will call at the stage door!" I was placed in a most invidious position, and told my secretary that he had better send out the ten shillings. At the end of the evening I thought of my friend. "Did you send out the money to that deserving suicide?" I asked. "No," replied my secretary, "I did not." A horrible picture presented itself to my mind. I felt myself guilty of manslaughter at the least. I was much relieved on leaving the stage door to find the importunate literary man outside, dancing a hornpipe to keep himself warm. "Good evening, my friend," I said, in cynical revulsion, "I thought you were in the Thames!" "Don't be flippant, sir," he said, "I did mean to submerge myself—but on gazing on the dark river my better feelings conquered, and I've come back—for the ten shillings." I think he deserved them.

One should be sparing in the use of humor.

Humor is the onion of the human salad; and like the onion it should only be half-suspected. The very possession of this quality will prevent its too frequent use. Good wine should not be wasted—it should not be uncorked to those who gulp it down unthinkingly. In the same way it is dangerous to tell a story against yourself to those who have not humor, for they will always use it as evidence against you.

Flippancy is not humor. There are few things more tragic in life than to be a "funny man." Many a man learns to his cost that it is undesirable to stand on his head at the street-corner too long.

Like every other natural force humor should be man's slave and not his master.

If humor is important as a guide in life, it is no less potent a factor in art. In art humor is our best critic—it guards us from exaggeration. Tragedy, even more than comedy, needs this sweet sanity to hold us in check. Humor is the tingling sense which stays us from over-stepping the modesty of nature and prevents us from thinking out of tune—it is the delicate ear of the mind. It exercises the quality of restraint in tragedy: thus we avoid bathos. The man who pities himself is not a heroic figure. In art or in life one should never weep in the soup. In comedy humor guards us from degenerating into caricature. In the comedian humor is not so essential as it is in the tragedian, for a funny personality, an awkward gait, an impediment of speech, are often a substitute for comic genius. We are so liable to mistake for a gift of God what is, after all, only a visitation of providence.

Humor in comedy guards from degenerating into buffoonery. This, of course, applies also to pictorial art. Nor should one allow one's sense of humor to run away with one's sense of the fitness of things. The originators of Futurism are overburdened with humor. They have too much—their disciples too little. A great deal of nonsense is always talked about new art—there is no such thing as new art. There are always two kinds of art— good art and bad art. There is a certain difference between Art and Science. Science is always advancing upward in a straight line—Art moves in a circle—or shall I say as a fountain which, when it reaches its height, drops back into its basin and thence rises again.

There has been no "advance," for instance, in the art of sculpture— that of the Greeks cannot be excelled. Literature has not "advanced"—it is simply good or bad. The same may be said of acting.

During the war, it is but natural that classic drama, in common with all the arts, should be in abeyance—for art is essentially a pastime of peace—it can only flourish in repose.

In confirmation of what I have said of the psychology of audiences, I may recall a saying of Mr. Gladstone's: "The work of the orator is cast in the mould offered by the mind of his hearers. It is an influence principally received from his audience (so to speak) in vapor, which he pours back upon them in flood." Mr. Gladstone was himself, of course, a great orator, and had that power of self-excitation which made the waves of his passion vibrate in his audience—he had, in fact, the histrionic gift in an extraordinary degree. If that states-

man lacked something of ultimate greatness it was that he fell short of the humor which his great opponent Disraeli was gifted so supremely. It was with the shafts of his humor that Disraeli made his great effects with deadly certainty.

Of all writers he whose works are most charged with an all-informing, all-pervading humor is William Shakespeare, alike in his comic as in his tragic creations.

This brings me to the question as to the possession or non-possession of humor by great men. As I suggested a little while ago, humor may be a help or a clog in life. Many great men have been without it. I think it may be broadly stated that men of action, the great destroyers, the men who take, are as a rule devoid of humor; while men of imagination and contemplation, those who create, who give, *have* the gift of humor.

Among those pre-eminently gifted with humor are: Abraham Lincoln, Disraeli, Goethe and Heine, the late Lord Salisbury, Arthur Balfour, Dickens, Thackerary, Fielding, Shakespeare, Queen Elizabeth, Henry VIII., Charles II., Dr. Johnson, Charles Lamb, Emerson and Byron.

I could enlarge upon this theme until *your* eyelids would no longer wag. But I will content myself with contrasting as typical examples of the yea and nay of humor two of the worlds greatest men—Shakespeare and Napoleon: the arch-creator and the arch-destroyer. I take it that the greatness of a man must be gauged by his output for good—the measure of his greatness is, in fact, in proportion to what he gives to the world, his lack of greatness by what he takes or destroys. Shakespeare gave an abiding joy, one that will contribute to the happiness, the education, and the ennobling of mankind throughout the ages, "in states unborn and accents yet unknown"; Napoleon, on the other hand, took from mankind millions of lives and set humanity wailing. What of his work remains behind? The flower of France was destroyed and the French race is suffering to this day from the depletion it suffered at the hands of a would-be ruler of the globe. Shakespeare enriched the world, Napoleon impoverished it. Which is the greater, the giver or the taker-away? The Poet or the Emperor? The man of humor, or the man of worldly ambition? Shakespeare with humor, or Napoleon without? Napoleon was somewhat of a vulgarian with a mighty brain—and sane to the core; but he lacked humor. He may have had the imagination to visualise the terrors of the war and the suffering he inflicted on mankind—he did not possess the humor to ask himself: "Is this worth while?" And he might

have been the head of a great Republic with a Government which should have been the model of the world. As is was he died in exile and misery; while Shakespeare, who was content to employ his genius in comparative obscurity, died at Stratford-on-Avon in sweet content, let us hope. The game is not worth the candle of fame.

Is it not time that the great ones of the earth learned the lesson, or were made to learn the lesson, which the religion of humanity teaches?

It is difficult to think of the Emperor Napoleon without thinking of the Emperor Wilhelm. The resemblance between these two great criminals is not one of person, for two men could hardly be more unlike; the likeness is in their monstrous ambition.

Before the war, Wilhelm II. had always appeared to me as the best thing made in modern Germany—not the Germany whose rich soul gave us philosophy, the freedom of thought, and great music; but the modern materialistic Germany—the Germany laid low by luxury. To the *nouveau riche* nothing is so disconcerting as luxury. They say that decadence is a product of peace. Is this wholly true? In modern Germany the foul weed of decadence has grown with the growth of a military materialism. They say that war is noble. Has the military spirit ennobled the German nation? No; it has murdered the soul of Germany.

The Kaiser seemed a link with the old Germany—the Germany of Goethe, of Beethoven, and of Wagner. He appeared to be an idealist; his eloquence, the man himself, seemed to possess a certain ethical glow, a mediaeval splendor of feudal egoism—a sincere "I am I," he seemed a true believer in himself and his God whom he made in his own image. Every man has the God he deserves. Had he had the imagination to see that his true *rôle* was to place himself in front of mankind as the champion of peace, he would have gained an immortality above all conquerors; he would have gone down the ages as the temporal savior of mankind. But the temptation of earthly glory was too great.

But even in this great tragedy the importance of humor has asserted itself, for surely it may be said that the force which more than any other has kept up the spirit of our soldiers at the Front has been their unconquerable humor. It is this national gift which has constantly baffled and disconcerted the enemy hordes. While they were singing the Hymn of Hate, the British were singing "Tipperary." But for this good humor the tragedy of those trenches would have been intolerable.

It is this that has enabled the men at the Front to preserve their calm. To be calm in crisis, that is the test of men. Let us hope that this spirit will prevail at peace time among the nations who are vindicating the freedom of the world. Meantime we must fight on.

There could only have been one greater tragedy than the war—the greater tragedy would have been if England had not joined in the war. The proudest thing England has ever done is to have fought for the ideal of the world's right. She went into the war with clean hands, as she may elect to go out with empty. In that great hour it is Britain that should be destined to take the lead among the nations—it is those who have with noble calm guided her in the tremendous times through which we are now passing who will guide us in the hour of victory with a moderation which is stronger than violence. And when the hour strikes, let the note be solemn. Let us have the humor to go forth to greet the Angel of Peace with anthems rather than with comic songs.

Let us hope that the end may come sooner than many of us fear, and that through all, with that dawn, there may be the rainbow, whose arch shall span the seas, from the coast of England to the shores of Canada, and that hereafter, after this peace, England and Canada and Australia and all the other states may stand together as one man, to give a great example to the world. and to tell them all, "We fought for peace!"