

FACT AND FICTION.

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The elements of tragedy are very simple; at least they are not necessarily complex. We praise and admire the author of a celebrated composition, for his plot, when perhaps he had not to imagine a single leading event, but only to use some artistic skill in combining. This is the whole secret of the author's invention; for fiction cannot possibly surpass fact in the representation of detached single scenes, or even in remarkable sequences of events. It is the natural gift to discover the relation of events, and so to place them as to have them fall into what every one recognizes as their proper situation, as precedent and consequence, that makes the successful playwright or novelist. The unused elements of tragedy lie about us in every neighborhood, almost in every family. The poet and the novelist have not far to look; sometimes, indeed, have to use very little invention. We propose to prove our proposition by two different instances.

Some years ago—fifteen or twenty—a man lived down the Columbia, in the neighborhood of St. Helen. He was young, but had a wife and two or three children, and was in the employ of a person owning a lumber-mill. Nothing in particular was known or observed of him while in this situation. Having occasion to go upon some errand in a row-boat, he never returned. The boat, with his hat in it, was picked up, but his body was not found. His wife, believing him drowned, gave him up forever, and he was long since forgotten by those who had once known him.

A number of months ago, a small boat was landed in an obscure part of Scappoose Bay, to the south of St. Helen. A man rather past middle life, and a dark-complexioned boy, sprang upon the shore, and securing their little craft, took their way through the woods inland. The man evidently remembered the country, and was shaping his course to reach some certain point of destination. The boy was more doubtful, and followed the lead of his companion. The man said little, but appeared to reiterate some instructions, which the lad listened to with down-cast face.

A smart walk of half an hour, brought them to the dwelling of a family whom we shall name Parsons. But the man did not enter, or show himself to the inmates; he remained at a little distance away, and sent the boy to the house. Only Mrs. Parsons and her children were within.

If we were writing a novel, we should defer the discovery we are about to make. But here we have not space for high art. The boy soon sought an opportunity to confess to Mrs. Parsons the object of the visit, and the fact that he was a woman, expecting ere many months to be crowned or cursed, as the case might be, with motherhood, and soliciting the shelter of a home and a woman's sympathy and care, until the pains and perils of that event should have been passed. We must now call our boy by the name of Laura, as not only indicating his change of sex, but as being more convenient.

The man had calculated well when he brought his companion to the house of Mrs. Parsons, whose charitable feeling was well known to the neighborhood. To make more sure, he had instructed Laura to promise ample payment for all the care and expense she might occasion or receive. The result of the interview was, that Mrs. Parsons agreed to undertake to find a place where the girl—who was a half-breed—might be boarded for a time, for such

service as she was able to render; and also to furnish the requisite care and nursing, when it should be needed. This matter settled, the countenance of Laura, which had been troubled, became more calm; and Mrs. Parsons, who could not well find room for another member in her family, started to St. Helens to procure a temporary home for her protegee.

As she walked along the road that runs through groves of fir and oak, she unexpectedly encountered—the man who had been drowned twenty years ago!

"How do you do, Mr. Ward?" she said; while he, finding that the hasty slouch he had given his hat did not conceal from her his identity, was forced to reply with civility.

Frightened at finding herself alone with this man, whom now she instinctively felt to be a villain, and the betrayer of her strange guest, she still had the courage to test him by a pretended revelation of the singular visitation that was taking her to town. To her story he lent an attentive ear, taking care to ask if the girl had mentioned the name of any one in connection with her history. When he found that she had not, he was evidently relieved, and shortly after taking leave, hastened back, as Mrs. Parsons believes, to seek a final interview with Laura, and further instruct her to silence and secrecy.

The efforts of the good woman were successful; a place for the girl was found in a small family; feminine apparel was furnished her, and for several months she served acceptably her new mistress; in the meantime so quietly and modestly conducting herself as to win the hearty sympathy of the people about her. For a few days the resuscitated Ward kept about in her vicinity, but without ever being seen to speak with her. Finally he disappeared; but with the restlessness of guilt, that is ever seeking to betray itself, he sent a letter to a citizen of St. Helen, asking him to furnish the money that might be required by Laura, and promising payment. Since then nothing is known of Ward.

Now for the culmination of this tragedy. In due time Laura returned to Mrs. Parsons, and a girl-babe opened its eyes on this sorrowful world; of whom the poor, silent girl-mother, seemed as fond as other mothers are of soft and helpless infancy. But despite the uncomplaining bravery with which Laura had endured her condition up to this time, her heart was breaking. Frequently she asked her kind nurse if she really should get well; and as frequently was assured that there seemed nothing in the way of a perfect and speedy recovery. But the burden was greater than could be borne, and one day, when her babe was a week old, she sat up, and showed an inclination to talk of herself and her circumstances. Motherhood had opened her eyes more than ever to the sin of complicity with guilt, and she wished to rid herself of her sins by confession.

According to the story of Laura, she had been adopted and brought up by a family living a few miles from Roseburg. The man Ward came to her home, from she knew not where, and remained for some time at the place in the capacity of hired man; but as for some reason became partially crippled, she was often required to wait upon him, which at first she very much disliked doing, from something repulsive about him that she did not understand. However, she became accustomed to him, then attracted to him by his strong and subtle magnetism, and finally so under his influence that she consented to a secret engagement, and at last to

an elopement, he having promised to take her to Roseburg, where the marriage service should be performed.

On leaving the house of her protectress, by whom she had been well taught in all that the ordinary country girl is expected to know, she felt considerable shame and regret at the duplicity and ingratitude of her conduct. This feeling was increased to alarm when she found that Ward had no intention of going with her to Roseburg. In reply to her remonstrances, he plainly told her that it was impossible for him to go to Roseburg, where he was likely to be arrested for horse-stealing; and equally impossible for him to allow her to return to her home, for he had stolen from her mistress a large sum of money, and he would run no risks of discovery. His intention was to go into the mountains, and to take her with him. If she attempted to escape or to betray him, he would not hesitate to take her life.

Here, again, the novelist would find occasion for the use of strong imagery. We have not room nor inclination for it. The boldest imagination can easily picture the struggle of a girl's mind under these circumstances, even while giving credit to the wild impulses of her Indian blood that naturally crept towards the mountain fastnesses. To the mountains they went—but of their life there, Laura was not able to say much, except that they kept themselves hidden, and that Ward was not personally hard or cruel to her, though always giving her to understand her life would pay the forfeit of his exposure. She knew that if she lived he would be revenged upon her for the exposure she was now making, but she did not expect to live. She seemed to have given up life almost as soon as her baby came. It was the thought that she could not return to such a life with her child, and that she was in Ward's power, and would be required to do so, that killed her. In spite of the constant encouragement given by Mrs. Parsons, she continued from the first to talk of dying.

When Laura's confession was ended, her brain all at once seemed to give way, and she commenced to rave wildly. In her delirium, her broken utterances still further inculpated the author of her misery. Over and over she cried out that she "could not smother her little babe, nor throw it into the river to drown; no, he might kill her if he chose, but kill her babe she could not;"—showing that she had been instructed to rid herself of the child in some such way. In the few days that she lived, after her mind lost its balance, there were lucid intervals when she gave directions about her child's future, leaving the poor little wail a ring, as a dying gift from her mother, and even taking a few stitches with her own fingers in a trifling article for the child, that she might some time see her mother's handiwork. In two or three days she was dead, and the sympathizing neighbors aided the county to bury her.

Such is the true story, than which very few poets have put together a more touching one. The elements of tragedy are all there;—the girl's instinctive dislike, conquered by the man's stronger magnetism; the betrayal; the wild forest life of a skulking criminal; the selfish and natural love of the lonely man for the woman, which led him to think of his old employer's kind wife as a proper nurse for her; the mingled attraction towards, and horror of her paramour, on the part of the helpless victim of his cunning; her silent endurance and final revolt under circumstances showing the mother love, and "pure womanly" nature, all brought to the fitting conclusion by her death.

Only one thing is lacking—the punishment of the criminal, which we hope time and the law will yet furnish.

Our second instance, showing how plots are furnished ready to the author's hand, is equally striking, but much more mysterious. A popular story-writer, a friend of our own, was just commencing to convalesce from a tedious illness. She was rather anxious and worried because her publisher was waiting for a story contracted for before she fell ill, and was casting about in her brain for a plot. One morning the *New York Times* was laid upon her bed, and upon running her eye over the news columns she noticed a brief paragraph giving an account of a very mysterious murder—an assassination that could not be accounted for—the victim being a young man of good family, residing in New York, but at the time of his death being on a visit to some friends at Poughkeepsie. He was stabbed in the back, on his way from the railroad station to his friend's house; the evening being dark, and the walk rather a lonely one. Nothing being taken from the body, showed that robbery was not the motive for the act. What then was it? So far as the public ever knew, neither motive nor murderer were ever discovered.

But there was a partial discovery made to certain persons in the following very singular manner: The lady who was wanting a plot for her story, was struck by the mystery attached to the assassination, and haunted for several days by its recurrence to her mind. At last it suggested itself to her as a hint for her story—the story of course to unravel all this mystery, and furnish the train of events that created the motive for a murder; and giving besides the consequences to many people concerned in the story's plan.

Accordingly, the novelette was written, and commenced a very successful issue in the new magazine. But suddenly the publishers found their magazine enjoined, and by the very people in Poughkeepsie that the murdered young man was about to have visited. Now ensued a curious struggle between the publishers, the author, and the Poughkeepsie people. Of course a magazine could not be enjoined, and a publisher ruined, without sufficient reason; therefore, a reason was required. With much caution it was given. The author of the story, it was charged, knew more than she had any right to know about the family history; must have obtained her knowledge in a clandestine manner, and was evidently making use of it in this story to annoy them.

The author was then called to an account by the publishers, and was filled with astonishment at the charge. "I know nothing whatever," was the reply. "The short paragraph I read was the merest suggestion; simply on account of the mystery. I never was in Poughkeepsie in my life, and know nothing about these people that say I know their family history. Everything in my story, but the fact that a young, popular, and handsome man, was mysteriously assassinated while walking from the railroad station to a friend's house, in a town on the Hudson river, was conceived in my own brain."

But this statement did not convince the parties interested in suppressing the story. They still declared that there *must have been* some knowledge of the circumstances, even of their house and its surroundings, in possession of the writer of the obnoxious story. They asserted that a certain apple-tree, standing near the library window, was correctly described; and even the name of the private detective employed by them given; as also the name of a sewing-