

Scene-Shifting

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I HOLD that a man's work should take colour from his surroundings, so writing as I do from the painting room of the — Theatre, I start out on these meditations with a title flavouring of their origin. 'Tis noon, and the air is laden with the peculiarly horrible smell of burnt size that Tommy, in a moment of absent-mindedness, has allowed to boil over on to the stove. Before me is my morning's work, the apparently hopeless mess that distemper painting always looks when it is half wet and half dry. There is nothing to be done for the moment but hope for luck in the drying, and it is clearly the time to turn to a pile of sandwiches at my elbow and, like an honest British workman, take my dinner as a right. There is a charm about this informal feeding in front of one's work, like that of looking out on the storm from a sheltered anchorage, and for myself I shall always prefer it to the more protracted repasts of the upper-class Englishman, to whom by a slip of spelling dinner has come to be a *rite*, a stately ceremonial, dignified and slow, to which coffee is a kind of "Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace." Yet on us also who eat sandwiches without such benediction descends the after-dinner calm, and it is in this mood, my dear Baillie, that I call to mind my promise to send you a bundle of the meditations, bitter or sweet, of a poor artist condemned by the impecuniosity appropriate to his profession to remain in town during August.

Wrapt in a digestive peace I now perceive that all is for the best. "Hath not old custom (and long drainage) made this town more sweet" than the average village in Normandy? "Are not these courts more free from peril than the rheumatic woods?" Above all, are not one's thoughts freer to roam when one is surrounded by the type of scenery that one is so accustomed to as to have quite left off seeing it? Travelling lulls the imagination to sleep, and by the clumsy device of carting the spectator about bodily (a device discarded in the theatrical world for many centuries) achieves at best but the hollow pretence of a change of scene: for after all, go where you will it is the habitual surroundings of your past life that dictate what you shall see. Take my own case, for example. The public building with which I was most intimately associated for the longest period of my youth is probably Chalk Farm station. When I try to call to mind the style or decoration or structure of this monument I fail

completely: passing it by I simply do not see it. None the less does it enter in a subconscious fashion into everything I see and paint. For observe that all *other* buildings having similar characteristics have a share in this, on the whole, happy oblivion, and it will be just the qualities "complementary," so to speak, of the Chalk Farm station qualities that will appeal to me, and that I shall express in art to the best of my ability. If I should travel in Italy, Spain or Kamschatka, the one constant quality in my work, the personal factor that art critics assure us is alone valuable, would be the shadow, dimly felt, but gigantic and ever present, of Chalk Farm station.

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The appetite for travel would seem, therefore, to have its origin in mere shallow craving for variety, the result, probably, of that ill-regulated dramatic instinct that troubles all of us who possess any vitality. Tommy, the labourer who grinds our colours and boils (so noticeably) our size in this painting room, possesses this instinct in most robust quality, and is universally beloved for his untiring efforts towards doing something to break the monotony of existence. He loves to carry a rude message. Sent just now to borrow a straight-edge from one of my confrères, he comes back to me beaming with delight. "Mr X, he says, sir, you may go to blazes, sir, but you have to wait till he's finished wiv it." Now no doubt something to this effect was said in the heat of artistic creation, but it is equally certain that Mr X, the politest of men, never intended it to be repeated to me; it is a clear case of that appetite for dramatic events that, could we but know it, is at the bottom of almost all domestic quarrels. "Happy (perhaps) is the woman whose history is dull"; it is very certain, though, that her husband's isn't, not if she knows it. Think of a wife conscious of latent dramatic power, who never has any better lines to say than "My lord, the dinner waits," or by way of variety "The dinner waits, my lord." Surely it is the part of wise husbands to furnish, even at the cost of a little invention, occasions for declamation of more colour and volume, as "Little did I think, when you asked me to be yours, that the day would come, etc." An outbreak of this sort, or a scene of passionate upbraiding with the cook, gives to a woman's life that pleasing variety that to a man is usually supplied by outside events, like knighthood or being put on the Black List or being made Master of his Lodge: indeed the

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recent knighthood conferred on Sir Charles Holroyd was, I believe, deliberately *designed* by the powers that be as an alternative. His always frail physique was giving way under the strain of living with the Chantry pictures. The mention of knighthood leads naturally to another aspect of this subject of "scene-shifting" to which the essayist is adhering with so classic a constancy. I must confess to a sense of disappointment in meeting several of my friends recently so honoured, at finding them so very like the plain Misters of yesterday; and I would plead that we should be vouchsafed some physical sign, some *changement de décor*, to indicate the inner and spiritual transformation. Suppose, for example, after the accolade, a perpendicular tuft of hair should grow spontaneously from the middle of the head, what a beautiful corroboration it would be of the reality of that change! What a confounding of the scoffer! It would be like that touching law governing the behaviour of the hair of the female of our species which, hanging down the back for the first fifteen years or so, manifests first a gradual tendency to curl up at the ends, and then suddenly, with a flip, coils up on the neck and announces to all and sundry the coming of womanhood. When I was a little chap in knickerbockers, with a boy's precocious curiosity I ardently desired to witness this transformation, and used to haunt the society of ladies in whom the change was foreshadowed with as much assiduity as I could without raising in their breasts hopes not destined to be realised (in those days I had no pocket-money to speak of and strong opinions on the wickedness of marrying on an insufficient income). Well! never did I accomplish that desire. There was no visible transition between the companionable girl of one day and the unapproachable young woman of the morrow. Here, as in all the crucial moments of our physical life, the instinct is for secrecy. It probably occurs at night, the girl herself not knowing, except from a vague feeling of unrest, when the thing will happen.

I have since found reason to believe that for certain of my elders the change was the other way, and it was the *woman* who became approachable for the man that as a girl she hated. The important point is that we neither had reason to complain of her inconsistency; the inward change was visibly expressed. Now more and more our powers of expressing ourselves by our external appearance tend to be curtailed, and I contend that many

of what we call the faults and vices of our fellows would become harmless if we were thus duly warned of their existence. The curse of the uniformity of male costume and carriage falls of course with a very varying weight on different people, for the principle of "one man one vote" has not been followed in the distribution of individualities. On the one hand we find whole hordes of people who have to all intents and purposes only one personality among them, while others more fortunate or unfortunate have two or three individualities apiece, each of which he has to take out in turn and exercise like a man who has three horses and only one pair of legs to bestride them, and each of which, when it is in the ascendant, demands a special diet, different surroundings and a different wife. This in some respects superior being, of whom the bigamist is the typical example, is at present accused of inconsistency, infidelity and the like; but I look forward confidently to the day when, instead of tamely pleading guilty and being execrated as a scoundrel, he will bring boldly forward the plea of dual identity. When he does so the enlightened judge will undoubtedly recognize this fact—that what is objectionable in the accused is—*not* the variety that is charming—but the deception, and there will speedily be introduced into Parliament "a Bill for the better regulation of bigamy," which shall permit a plurality of wives on condition that the mercurial husband shall indicate his change of identity by a corresponding change of attire, wearing now large checks, now pepper-and-salt, and anon the suit of terra-cotta cashmere that Mr Bernard Shaw's heroes affect. This singularly, or rather plurally, blest individual will then no longer be expected when he puts off his big check suit to be faithful to his big check wife (my married friends assure me that all wives approximate to this category). Why should he be faithful to her when it was not he that wooed her, and she probably wouldn't care about him? All will be peace and love.

If this reform of male costume be not speedily carried out, the alternative is painful to every modest man. Our clothes, deliberately made insignificant, monotonous and unmeaning, will become as invisible as Chalk Farm station is to me. We shall unconsciously train ourselves to observe nothing but the infinitesimal variations that show the body beneath, and before that penetrating gaze clothes will become transparent, and we shall walk the London streets each mother's son of us naked to every eye.

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Always eager for the public good, I made a commencement of reform the last two summers by wearing a low-necked cycling jersey, but the other day the heinousness of my conduct was revealed by a passage that I chanced on in a religious paper. Describing an extreme example of the class attacked by the City Missionary were these words: "He was idle, vicious—good for nothing—he had never worn a collar." This was the *combe*, and yet the case of a man brought up to wear a collar who of his own motion renounces it would seem to be even worse.

It is unfortunate that just as my meditations are culminating in conclusions of some value to the race, a devastating catastrophe forces me to lay aside my pen. Tommy has got the sack, and in the excitement of the moment has upset on the stove a whole pot of size, of an excruciating odour, that makes the room untenable. Holding my nose with one hand, with the other I hastily record the sorrowful details. It was some days back that Tommy, balancing on his head a palette as big as a small dining table, ascended the stairs leading from the stage door just as Miss Susie Blank, the leading lady, was coming down. They passed with beaming smiles, for Tommy is a bit of a dog with women, and Susie is not proud. Arrived at the top Tommy turned and cocked his head with an appreciative wink. As he did so the palette—how shall I tell it?—described a graceful curve and discharged its sloppy contents on the glorious creature below. Enough that Susie retired into the privacy of her rooms, where for some hours she maintained the shrinking privacy of a damaged cruiser in a neutral port. But she didn't disarm. When she sallied forth it was to fly to her most powerful admirer demanding vengeance on the man whom she referred to with quick reversion to the idioms of her youth and absolute disregard for accuracy as "that stinking hile painter." My lord appealed to the manager, and the blow has fallen.

Tommy says he doesn't care a damn. He is, it appears, engaged to marry a buxom widow who, moreover, owns a public house. To her bar parlour will he retire, there to pass the remainder of his days in dignity and intoxication: let beauty heal the wounds that beauty has caused.

His loss to the painting-room is irreparable. He was the only man who really knew how to handle the straight-edge. For

think not that the only use to which a straight-edge can be put is to rule straight lines. No, it has another and higher, so to speak an esoteric, use. One of the principal expenses of a painting-room is the gas, and the amount consumed is recorded inexorably on a dial, full in view of the unfortunate scenic artist. Now it has been found that by tapping smartly the face of this dial with some flat instrument, e.g., a straight-edge, the fingers may be made to fly backwards to the great economy of gas. In this act Tommy had a touch that was unique, and with the enthusiasm of the artist he gave the thing such a whack last week that the fingers spun back and registered a much less consumption of gas than last time the inspector called. We've been burning gas night and day ever since to make up the deficit.

My painting after the manner of distemper has "dried out beautiful." It is not what I meant, but so much better that I mask my surprise.

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