THE COMEDIES OF WILLIAM CONGREVE

BY JAMES BRANCH CABELL

IT is an axiom in criticism that no author can be appreciated until his surroundings are thoroughly understood. In Congreve's case even more is necessary; one must also comprehend the nature and influence of that event which, taking place nine years before his birth, is called in histories the English Restoration. From a literary standpoint it might be more aptly termed the Invasion of the Epigram. For, accepting the well known definition of an epigram as "a platitude in its best clothes," it was, naturally enough, with Charles the Second—a monarch with a very pretty taste in dress—that the epigram first entered England.

If one is indeed known by the company one keeps out of, it came but ill recommended. Those dissolute, picturesque cavaliers of the Restoration were no fit companions for any self-respecting figure of speech. They came swaggering into England, swearing good mouth-filling oaths, and drove Mrs. Grundy out of the island for forty years or more. She has regained her own since then, but she has never quite forgiven her enemies; and even now, as the good lady peers curiously into some half-forgotten Restoration comedy, where scantily clad, pink-tighted sayings skip airily to and fro over the yellowed leaves, she smiles a little, and then, remembering her dignity, says sadly: "The most immoral period in English history, my dear."

The description is accurate; but it might be more so. For the difficulties of getting a camel into a needle's eye are small compared with those of getting a century into a sentence. Yet any book treating of the past is as it were a Museum of Unnatural History, wherein one finds the bones of long-dead epochs, carefully wired together and ticketed with some comprehensive phrase. Each era presents its own neatly printed label to the reader: this is designated as "adventurous," that as "degenerate"; one is marked "chivalrous" and another "lethargic." And of all these terms no one is better known than the adjective "immoral," attached to the period of the English Restoration.

One is told that this period was indecent. Well! it was; but unavoidably so. For 1660 is only the corollary of 1649; and, England being once firmly wedded to Puritanism, the union after enduring ten years was pretty sure to produce Rochester and Nell Gwynn.

When the king had finally stepped out of the window at Whitehall, Britannia, heaving a sigh of relief, eschewed for a time all varieties of cakes and ale. An epidemic of freshly invented religions laid waste the island, proclaiming that since life is short one should even matters by making a long face over it. Theological disputes succeeded the struggles of civil war, and, not satiated with Worcester and Marston Moor, men fought and re-fought the battle of Armaggedon. Life, regarded as the antechamber of a future existence, was reduced to a series of frantic attempts toward keeping out of hell. Vice, where it existed, went decently clad in hypocrisy, for piety, or at least the semblance thereof, was expected of every one. Religion has never received such universal encouragement, before or since. Children began life firmly impressed with the burden of original sin, and the responsibilities of Christianity and the first pinafore were assumed at the same time.

It was possibly by a not unnatural confusion of ideas that these children, growing older, were prone to lay both aside together. At any rate, no sooner is Cromwell buried than there comes treading over his grave an uproarious train, rustling in satin, rippling with laughter, magnificent in vice. It is the exiled Charles and his courtiers, his mistresses and his cooks, his panderers and his priests—mendicants to whom a kingdom has been given with which to amuse themselves. Ten years of beggary not being the best training for a king and

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his ministers, it is natural enough that they perform strange antics with their toy. England is topsy-turvy; decency is out of fashion—obsolete as the ruff. If there are any offences uncommitted against it, it is merely because no one has thought of them. Certainly no person of quality ever remembers its laws, save when debating with himself the most piquant manner in which they may be broken.

Rochester, for example, gains considerable reputation as a humorist by running naked through the streets of London: the idea of a male Godiva appeals to the town wits with irresistible originality. For decorum has gone unchecked for years, but at last the revolution has set in. It is what Thackeray has called the Pagan Protest. The Restoration is undeniably "immoral," but it is perfectly logical. As for condemning it, there is danger in hasty judgments; investigation has ere now suggested that Nero may have possessed many estimable traits of character, and that the dog in the manger was probably a nervous animal in search of rest and quiet.

Indeed, if the Englishmen of the day were somewhat lacking in morality, one could easily have found less attractive companions. The air they breathed was filled with animation, gayety, wit, excitement. These people enjoyed existence to the full, and laughed from mere joy of living. It was a period of Externals, and one of the most fascinating in history. A gentleman should be "amorous, but not too constant, have a pleasant voice and possess a talent for love letters." That was the whole duty of man: to make love gracefully, dress well and talk in the French manner.

For, as we have seen, the epigram had come, and conversation was now an art. One adopted it almost as a profession, and labored earnestly to penetrate its mysteries. Men of *ton*, who valued their reputations as sayers of clever things, would spend at least an extra hour in bed, meditating upon the impromptus of the coming day. They ornamented their language as carefully as their bodies, and the sting of an epigram was almost as important as the set of a periwig. One crowded all one's wit into a sentence, wistfully hoping that its rounded, compact malignance might rouse the laughter of the coffee houses.

For that was fame—a fame that we can hardly appreciate nowadays, when thoughts are polished off only for the puipose of making a book, and can scarcely be formulated without acquiring a strong odor of ink. When two or three are gathered together for the sake of conversation, it is a safe rule to remember that one had better discharge a blunderbuss into the midst of the group than an original idea. It would occasion no more excitement and far less alarm. But seemingly men's ears had not grown so tender in Restoration days, when Killigrew and Sedley jested together, and laughing, wine-flushed phrases leapt boldly across the tavern table, confident of applause and with no misgiving save that of meeting some more daring sister epigram on the other side.

Such, then, were the beaux who loitered through the park by day, and at night thronged the side boxes of the theatres. They were there to be amused, and in 1660 there was nothing in dramatic form in all England able to bring this about. There was only the Elizabethan and Jacobean drama; admirable enough, no doubt, but to them perfectly incomprehensible. Such an audience witnessing "Hamlet," say, is a repetition of the old fable—a group of splendid, shimmering cocks gathered around a jewel, which they find beautiful but tasteless. This Shakspere whom their fathers praised had evidently been vastly overrated: his tragedies were notoriously lacking in correctness, and certainly were not to be compared with those of Monsieur Corneille, as for his comedies, they were sadly insipid by the side of those which Monsieur Molière was producing every day in France.

So they demanded new plays—plays like the French ones that it was the fashion to admire. They wished for something they could comprehend: a colored reflection of their daily life; plays crowded with epigrams, swearing, paw sayings, mumping, drunkards; plays that would exalt the wits and make fun of the aldermen. They were bored by these tiresome thanes who clutched at imaginary daggers, and these out-of-date Moors who smothered their wives instead of allowing them a separate maintenance. They wished to see the stage bustling with people whose motives and actions they could understand: foolish knights, lying valets, blusterers. heroines who were honest for lack of an opportunity to be otherwise; heroes, flattered likenesses of themselves, who, scented and irresistible, should rise triumphant upon the shattered ruins of the

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Seventh Commandment to yet untrodden heights of glory.

The dramatists did their best toward satisfying these demands. A new style of comedy was improvised—which, for lack of a better term, we have since agreed to call comedy of manners—and Dryden, Shadwell, Wycherley and their followers labored unceasingly to perfect it. They did all in their power. They hammered out their epigrams, mixed them with breaches of decorum and divided the whole into five acts. The result, however well received in those days, seems, somehow, a trifle dreary now that two hundred years have passed. The life has gone out of it.

These witty sayings must have stirred men strangely, coming from the painted lips of Mrs. Barry or whispered by those of the Bracegirdle, when the beauty of the speaker gave color to the words, the very waving of her feathered fan suggesting vague, erotic things. But now, in the reading of them, the measured tread of the old-world phrases, the regular cadences of the filthy sentences, blend, somehow, into a death march, hollow and montonous, over the past. The printed words are as dead things upon the page, as unclean insects crushed between the leaves.

Wycherley fares somewhat better than the others. There is a certain vigor in his wit that defies even the lapse of time and the presence of explanatory notes. One may yet smile over the clever things said in his comedies, without, however, being particularly interested in those who say them. For these Horners, Pinchwifes, Gripes, Novels and the rest of the scandalous crew have nothing human about them. They are caricatures, their names attest the fact; one watches unmoved the grossness of these marionettes, who are dancing a wooden saturnalia. It is manifestly but a show of puppets. Wycherley, sitting up above, manipulates the strings in the very face of the audience, and reads the parts (all in the same harsh, strident voice) from a manuscript, where his own cleverness is judiciously mingled with that of Molière and Calderon.

He takes no especial pains to render the action lifelike; privately he is rather ashamed of his employment. It is ignoble to be classed with a starveling author, and be considered at the mercy of every twopenny critic. He tells his friends, yawning carelessly behind his long white fingers, that these plays were written for his own amusement; merely idle trifles, scribbled during a few waste hours and hastily strung together; nothing more, he assures them. And they, duly impressed, applaud this gentlemanly playwright who has depicted so vividly that which they understand and admire. For the age is but little interested in the great mysteries of existence that are too important to affect its daily life. Love, poetry, religion —these are the *x*, *y*, *z* of the equation, the unknown quantities carefully avoided on the stage and elsewhere.

Wycherley, perceiving this, has yielded to the taste of his audience; he has afforded his actors more or less plausible excuses for the display of elaborate scenery painted after French models, brilliant tableaux, a great deal of wit and an unlimited amount of indecency. After all, one may with practice make of these materials an effective acting play; and Wycherley has undoubtedly mastered the art sufficiently to lift him head and shoulders above his contemporaries.

But the fun of shouting out the gross names of things is apparent only to the young. It is only in youth that impropriety is the spice of life. And when the scented exquisites of Charles the Second's time, a little the worse for the wear and tear of years, a trifle shaken by the turmoil and uproar of 1688, crept out of the retirement into which the Revolution had thrust them, to lounge again on the shady side of the Mall, it was with a half-awakened consciousness that indecency, in speech at least, might sometimes be carried too far. The nation was jaded; they could not stomach the coarse fare of their youth so heartily as once. They needed it coated in sugar, wrapt in dainty words that would veil without concealing vice. And so after an existence of thirty years the new comedy, vastly bettered in its manners, though very little improved in its morals, passed into a second period. At the end of the seventeenth century it was still the fashion to speak well of "manly Wycherley"; but it was "the great Mr. Congreve" whose plays drew crowded houses.

For, beyond question, William Congreve, Esquire, was the foremost writer of the day; it was the opinion of his contemporaries and, incidentally, of Congreve himself. He is "the great Mr. Congreve," and leads fashion as well as literature; critics bow before him, even the surly Dennis; and no woman can resist him, from Mrs. Brace-

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girdle, the actress, to Henrietta, daughter of the Duke of Marlborough. He is "the great Mr. Congreve," and Dryden considers him the equal of Shakspere. He is "the great Mr. Congreve"—well, let us examine his greatness. It is well to leave footprints on the sands of Time, no doubt; but, as some one has acutely added, it is also well to make sure that they shall point in the right direction.

Now, as to Congreve's personal character, it will probably always remain a mystery. There have been many varying portraits drawn of him, all, however, having one point of similarity in that they prove on examination to be quite unlike the original. Mr. G. S. Street has perhaps come nearest to the mark in saying:

> He was a witty. handsome man of the world, of imperturbable temper and infinite tact, who could make and keep the friendship of very various men, and be intimate with a woman without quarrelling with her lovers. He had a taste for pictures and a love for music. He must have hated violence and uproar, and liked the finer shades of life. He wore the mode of his day, and was free from the superficial protests of the narrow-minded.

This is not (as the maker admits) a very definite portrait, compared, say, with the brilliant picture Thackeray drew of him in the 'English Humorists.' But it possesses at least one great advantage in not being flatly contradicted by all the known facts of Congreve's life. And it is the best that can be made. This plump, velvet-coated Sphinx still smiles out of Kneller's canvas, defying us (with an ill-concealed sense of superiority) to guess what manner of man he was.

The secret has certainly been well kept. That towering wig has been dust for many years, and gout—it was eminently characteristic of Congreve to die of the gout—has proved no respecter of fine gentlemen. We do not know why he ceased writing for the stage, nor are we positive whether or no his relations with the Duchess of Marlborough were all that they should not have been, as her mother charitably hinted. We know, in fact, nothing of the personality and very little of the actions of this man whom his contemporaries considered the great writer of the age. But we know that his contemporaries were right, for we have his comedies.

They are the best in our literature. Even their most ardent admirer, however, would prefer not reading them aloud in a mixed company. Fortunately, an admiration for Congreve entails no such consequences: and there are at least two good reasons for not blaming him for the rather unsavory freedom manifested by his characters in speech and action.

The first has been suggested in what has been said of Wycherley. Congreve, also, was writing for his audience (though for a somewhat different audience and in a very different spirit) and must give them what they wanted. And, as we have seen, this audience had long ago shown what subjects they considered suitable for comic treatment, and Wycherley had encouraged them in their belief by proving that from the materials they had chosen excellent comedies could be constructed. If Congreve was to write for the stage, he must abide by its traditions.

True, he laughed at the decisions of the pit; but—and the observation is not original—the joke somehow loses point when it is your own play they hiss. And so, rather than lack their applause, Congreve is quite willing to send Lady Froth star-gazing with Mr. Brisk, and let Bellmour play the old tricks on Alderman Fondlewife. This is, of course, very reprehensible. But even nowadays the *ménage à trois* is not wholly unknown upon the stage. It never has been. It is the foundation on which playwrights innumerable have builded, and on which they yet erect an occasional farce-comedy. Of late they may have learned to hide this foundation more or less skilfully, but it resembles Mrs. Wilfer's petticoat—"After all, ma'am, we know it's there."

There is, however, another reason for not finding fault with the grossness of Congreve's language. And that is because his language is not gross. For decorum in speech is merely a matter of chronology. There are certain things that exist in all ages; in discussing them one speaks openly in one era and whispers in the next. If Congreve spoke somewhat loudly, he at least ran no risks of either corrupting or embarrassing his contemporaries. They were surprised only by his nicety in the choice of words. Voltaire, who knew him personally, has written: "In his plays we do not meet with so much as one coarse or low jest. The language is everywhere that of men of fashion." Well! this has a strange sound. One can hardly help wishing, if only from curiosity, for a specimen of conversation among the lower classes. But it shows the attitude of the age: in the seven-

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teenth century ladies and gentlemen discussed subjects that one speaks of only in a problem novel, and divines told anecdotes in the pulpit that even an apple-cheeked boy of eighteen in the company of his fellows might hesitate to repeat.

Congreve has "worn the mode of his day." It is scarcely his fault that fashions have altered since, and that his plays, which were considered perfectly proper by every one save Jeremy Collier, have become a synonym for obscenity. He has "worn the mode of his day" in all things; in speech as well as dress. He has called a spade a spade, as was the custom of the time. And we who, wearing the mode of our own day, prefer to speak of it as a gardening implement, should regard his language much as we regard his periwig. Both are out of fashion; and that is the worst that can with justice be said of either.

But, passing over his selection of material, there yet remains the question of Congreve's attitude toward it. His tone is one of cynical acquiescence, moralists have complained, toward the misdoings of which he treats. Of course it is. Congreve was young when these plays were written. He is distinctly cynical, but one would hardly expect a young man fresh from Shropshire to be anything else in writing of the London life of the day. No one likes to appear countrified and prudish in the eyes of one's friends. Cynicism is, under the circumstances, the affectation most natural to youth, besides being in Congreve's case an affectation which the audience expected. For comedy of manners had taken its cue from the court of Charles the Second, and the views of the court were materially affected by those of the numerous ladies whom the king delighted to honor. And these—the Duchess of Cleveland, the Duchess of Portsmouth and others of that ilk—duchesses though they were, were no duchesses of Lewis Carroll's creation, bent on finding a moral in everything.

WILLIAM CONGREVE

From the painting by Sir Godfrey Kneller

One of them had, indeed, bestowed considerable favors on Wycherley in return for some verses he had made praising her ancient calling; and he, remembering it was Lady Castlemaine who had lifted him into fame, felt, perhaps, that common gratitude demanded of him a little rough treatment of virtue, and especially of that virtue whose triumph would mean the downfall of his benefactress. At any rate, whatever were his motives, he has certainly manifested very litttle respect for the integrity of the Seventh Commandment, or indeed for integrity of any sort.

Congreve has imitated him in this, though with a difference. For, while the cynicism of Wycherley is brutal, that of Congreve is merely frivolous. Wycherley assails virtue; Congreve brushes all considerations thereof lightly aside, seeing in them only the tricks of a pretty woman who wishes to enhance her value, or the excuses of an ugly one who attempts to explain her enforced chastity. And, having once formed this opinion, it was not likely that he would discover anything in the conduct of the women of the time which would induce him to alter it.

It is not difficult to defend Congreve in this matter; but is scarcely necessary. For this moralizing and serious minded discus-

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sion is, after all, a trifle ridiculous when applied to that which was never meant to be taken in earnest. Congreve wrote for an audience who regarded theatres as places of amusement. One may lament such frivolity, but it must be borne in mind in reading the plays of the period. "The Old Bachelor," for instance, was written for such an audience; if one can yet approach it in the spirit of those for whom it was intended, well and good. If not, one had best leave it alone. That is the conclusion of the whole matter.

Meantime, the breaking of these seventeenth century butterflies on the wheels of criticism is an unremunerative employment. There are few subjects concerning which a greater number of foolish remarks have been made. As a typical case, take the charge which Thackeray has brought against these comedies. He allows them wit: "But ah," he exclaims with an anxious eye cast toward the Young Person, "it is a dreary feast, that banquet of wit where no love is." Now this deserves attention as a complaint that has frequently been repeated in other words; and yet it is quite unfounded. In the first place Congreve, whatever he may be, is not "dreary." This is a self-evident proposition to any one who has read his plays, and Thackeray in denying it is manifestly stating that which is not.

In the second place, if one requires any consolation for the absence of love from this banquet, it is speedily obtained by considering the logical effects of his presence. Eros would scarcely be at ease among these light-hearted profligates, in whose eyes the world was created solely that they might say clever things about its contents. Moreover, epigrams are always most appetizing when served with a sauce of ill-nature; as Sheridan said long afterward, "The malice of a good thing is the barb that makes it stick." If Love be introduced among the *dramatis personæ*, he must share the common fate of all the characters. He must be ridiculed, and not necessarily in a merciful manner. And this is equally true of honor or faith or any of the other estimable qualities that Congreve, acting with discretion, has not attempted to depict.

He makes no effort toward elevating or instructing his audience. This may of course be considered a fault, though there are at least two ways of regarding the matter. At any rate, Congreve's claim is remarkable that in each of his comedies is hidden a fable. If this be so, the disguise is certainly most efficient; and until it is penetrated, one is at perfect liberty to consider this statement of Congreve's as illustrating either a pose or a delusion, as one may select. For unquestionably no one save Congreve has ever suspected his plots of being constructed with a view of pointing a moral. In fact, one would hardly have suspected them of being constructed at all: they are apparently convenient frames on which he has hung a vast number of clever speeches. After finishing a play of his, one has no idea of the story; there is a confused recollection of animation, masks, mock marriages and general improbability. One remembers, clearly enough, that the young people have outwitted the old ones, and that the wives have deceived the husbands; but the moral of it all seems a little vague in spite of the Latin on the title page.

Congreve to the contrary, the author cares less for the contents of the dish than the manner in which it is served; his object is not so much comedy as conversation. Provided his characters talk their best, it does not matter much how they behave. Unreality is immaterial in those who were created only to express clever thoughts in the most attractive style. And such style! inimitable, if not perfect. There is nothing quite like Congreve's etherealized prose: one is tempted to call it poetry, remembering Matthew Arnold's dictum that poetry is "the best words in the best order." Certainly here if anywhere the definition is realized with every sentence carried to the utmost point of mechanical refinement, with each entrance bringing a fresh shower of bewildering conceits, a new triumph of diction. It is the utter repulsion of dulness, the foe against whom Congreve marshals his forces.

And truly the battle is a glorious one which he directs; paradoxes, marching and countermarching upon the page, relieve each other, as it were, in iridescent squadrons, while through the steady musketry of epigrams one hears the clash of contending repartees, the explosion of verbal pyrotechnics. So the conflict continues, scintillant, tireless, unceasing, until the arrival of the *deus ex machina* ends the contest. He is a raddled-faced, improbable deity at best, and one has little desire to overlook his weaknesses as he bows us out from this goodly battle field. We feel that no one in

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the world ever talked, quarrelled and made love in such a perfect manner; but we are no longer in the world. Congreve has invented a much more pleasant place, and we are loath to leave it.

It is the country that Lamb has fittingly called the Utopia of Gallantry. And by all means let us occasionally give conscience a half-holiday and purchase a ticket to this delectable land. There is no longer any religion, any purity, any sacred tie of any sort; they do not belong in this country and must be left at the frontier. This is the Utopia of Gallantry; virtue and vice are both contraband. It is a beautiful country, and one that has been not infrequently maligned—or at least misrepresented. Detractors have complained that the sun never shines here; may be, but his place is filled—and well—by the light of many glittering priestlike candles. It is an enchanted land where it is always night, and where the lives of the inhabitants are unvexed with long, dreary mornings and dubious afternoons. After all, mornings are but necessary evils for which only poets and energetic people have a good word. One is well rid of that yawned-through period of the day when one's body has been up for hours and one's wits have not yet finished their toilet.

Nor is an endless night an unendurable institution when one has a sufficiency of candles; their softer glow is even preferable to the glaring sunlight when one is rouged—as all the dwellers in this Utopia are. We are in a new Arcadia, where Strephon wears powder and Phyllis is arrayed in the latest mode from the court of Versailles; a new Arcadia, between whose close-clipped hedges roam laughing nymphs in patches, pursued by magnificent shepherds with red-heeled shoes and wonderful clouded canes. It is an ideal country, where life, untrammelled by the restrictions of morals or civilization or the police, has no legitimate object save the pursuit of pleasure.

These sophisticated nymphs and shepherds are certainly among the most entertaining company in literature. One may reasonably except Lady Touchwood and Maskwell, devils strayed out of hell with the odor of brimstone yet clinging about them. They are intruders in this country, evidently, having nothing in common with the inhabitants. But for the rest, there are the fine gentlemen, Careless and Scandal and Bellmour; the fops, Brisk and Tattle—delightful "Turk Tattle," who, being accidentally married, is genuinely grieved on his wife's account: "The devil take me if I was ever so much concerned at anything in my life . . . Poor woman! Gad, I'm sorry for her, for I believe I shall lead her a damned sort of life." And Lady Froth, the dainty, babbling *precieuse*, and Belinda and the dear sisters Frail and Foresight and the immortal Bodkin. And Witwould and Ben Legend and Prue—one could go on forever calling the names for pure love of the pleasant memories they evoke.

They are all delightful, these people; and not least of them Lady Wishfort, wrinkled, bedizened, unvenerable. And to her (reads the Play Bill) enter Mrs. Millamant. What can one say of Millamant? There is nothing that approaches her in all comedy. She is adorable—adorable from the moment she appears upon the stage "in full sail, with her fan spread and her streamers out, and a shoal of fools for tenders" till the very fall of the curtain, when she has promised to have Mirabell on condition that "we never visit together, nor go to the play together, but be very strange and well-bred." So she vanishes, trailing her long robes through the alleyways of the park. One envies the lucky fellow as she passes with mincing, affected steps, painted and frail under her nodding bows, adorable to the very tips of her slender fingers, heavy with rings, that clasp the verses of Suckling. It is not strange that he was as indulgent to her faults as to his own. One cannot resist even now the splendor of her eyes, set off by an artful patch or two, the spell of the tinted lips, the sweet, insolent laughter, the genuine tenderness.

English comedy has produced nothing since to rival this brilliant figure. Indeed, "The Way of the World" marks both the apex and the end of comedy of manners. After Congreve, and his colleagues Vanbrugh and Farquhar, follows that dreary interval in the history of the stage wherein comedy flounders, hopeless, gasping for breath, drowning, in a dingy ocean of morality. It is the era of "do-me-good, lackadaisical, whining, make-believe comedies." Comedy of sentiment was becoming popular even in Congreve's day, and comedy of manners, sinking under the attacks of this new rival, at last gave up the ghost.

True, its funeral pyre blazed up brill-

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iantly in the wit of Sheridan. "The Rivals" and "The School for Scandal," however, good as they are, can scarcely be compared with "The Way of the World" and "The Double Dealer." Nor is the comparison worth making. In the first place, it has already been made several times, and always with one decision—that there is more wit in a scene of Congreve's than in a whole comedy of Sheridan's. In the second place, the comparison is hardly a fair one. Sheridan's plays are irretrievably handicapped by the strivings of their author to perform the impossible. He has made, in some scenes at least, a bold attempt to blend the old school with the new; to infuse a wholesome sentiment into the essentially unsentimental atmosphere of comedy of manners. It was a remarkable experiment, and one which on the face of it was predestined to failure.

Still, these scenes have a value of their own. After reading them one perceives, clearly enough, two facts: first that any audience who applauded them (and, strange as it may seem, an audience did) was no longer able to appreciate comedy of manners; second that Sheridan, who owed a great deal to Congreve, has here repaid the debt in full. For he has exposed, at his own expense, the fallacy that Congreve's plays suffer for lack of "some healthy human emotion." Here at last is love introduced in comedy of manners. The results are the scenes between Julia and Faulkland—the scenes that we pardon nowadays because they are invariably omitted in representation, and because there is no law compelling us to read them. And most of us are not a little grateful for the fact that in writing "The School for Scandal" Sheridan, steering on an ingenious middle course, has wisely caused Charles and Maria to conduct their love-making behind the scenes. Their brief meeting at the end is comparatively inoffensive; for, in the bustle of folding up the programme and looking for one's hat, one may easily pass over the sop thrown to sentiment in Charles's outburst of virtuous pentameters.

No! Congreve has had no successor in his peculiar field. Indeed, it was not likely that he should have; for his comedies are no less the products of his surroundings than of his genius. The era being ended, Congrevean comedy was—and is—no longer possible. We have long ago passed beyond his point of view, and it is difficult to retrace our steps. But it is well worth the trouble; and it can be done. His attitude toward life may be regained, or at least understood, even by those rigid moralists who lament that his dialogue is not more closely modelled on the questions and answers in the Shorter Catechism. This attitude once comprehended, one may still, of course, consider it objectionable. That is a matter of taste. And if there are those who, in reading his comedies, can really find no sympathy for Congreve's point of view—and this, after all, is not imposed as a duty on any one—why, all such had best follow Petulant's advice, and "either show their innocence by not understanding what they hear, or their discretion by not hearing what they would not be thought to understand."

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STILSON'S FINISH

BY DAVID H. TALMADGE

STILSON'S suicide was a matter of deliberate process. It began with an over-indulgence in strong waters, and ended neatly with a razor. The regiment did not like him so well after that. They questioned the excellence of his judgment, and preserved a morbid silence upon his good points. Some of them, who were subject to queer sensations in their heads, attempted to analyze the conditions which had led him from the sunshine of war into the blackness of everlasting peace. They decided with definiteness upon nothing but climate and nostalgia.

They looked upon him with forced cheerfulness as he sat with his head upon the rough table, his hands outstretched stiffly on either side. There was a mirror upon the tent pole in front of him, over the face of which flies were crawling, trailing blood. At his feet lay a crumpled newspaper. A bit of charred envelope fluttered beneath the chair.

The muss was cleared up presently—part of it tossed upon the garbage heap, the remainder crowded into a tight box and carried like freight to the homebound boat. The men who had conducted the exercises washed their hands twice, and smelled of them afterward. They never did this when the blood was that of a Filipino. It was an evidence of consideration. One or two of them showed white about the gills, and manifested an inclination to sing a hymn. They had been brought up in communities where death is contemplated in a serious light, and where people weep at funerals as a matter of form. They could not accustom themselves readily to an order of things which precludes death from among the sadnesses. In war it is life that is sad; death is an anodyne for the pain of it.

Grimes was one of these. He stretched himself wearily upon the grass after the box had gone over the gang-plank, and groaned softly in spirit. At intervals he blinked rapidly. Between blinks he gazed longingly to the eastward, and mentally calculated the number of months that must elapse before he might follow his thoughts in person.

To him, after a time, came Munton, and the twain contemplated each other disgustedly. Munton was lacking in the finer sensibilities, and he did not choose his words well, nor his tobacco. The dark blue clouds from his pipe were wafted directly to the sensitive nostrils of Grimes. An expression of annoyance came upon Grimes's face.

"Well," said Munton, seating himself and puffing furiously, alternating sentences with the puffs, "Stilson's done with it, and a nice, easy, cowardly way he took out, too."

"He's dead; shut up," said Grimes.

"No, thanks. I feel like talking. I've got the razor. It's a beauty. I always envied Stilson that razor. He willed it to me. They found the will in his pocket. Several of the boys were remembered. You got his testament. Fine eye Stilson had for appropriateness. Thompson came in for a book of poems. Funny thing all through. The testament was his mother's, and he gave it away. You may have it by going to the sergeant. Poems belonged to a girl somewhere named Edith. Says so on the fly-leaf. Thompson's gone after 'em now."

Grimes shuddered slightly. "The poor fellow was crazy," he said.

"Very likely he was. We all are, more or less, at times. But it's usually our own fault. A man is in his right mind at the beginning of it. He knocks out a nerve prop here and a nerve prop there deliberately. By and by he reaches the limit, and chops down the stairway that leads to his dome of thought, as Stilson did. Then we say he was not responsible, and sigh like steam tugs. It is foolishness; he is responsible."

Grimes turned over, presenting his back to the speaker. "What of it?" he said damply.

"Nothing of it; only if it be admitted that he is responsible, there is nothing to