

THE MASTERY OF SURPRISE

BY BLANCHE COLTON WILLIAMS

"WE MUST have stories with a 'punch,' " declares the editor.

"An unexpected twist at the end—that's what I like!" says the average reader.

"Give me some shock of heaven or hell!" demands the critic.

The reader of short stories expects, nowadays, the surprise ending. Rather is he surprised if he fails to find it. He feels as insipid, and judges as commonplace, the ending, which however strong and logical, contains not some unlooked for element. The ideal dénouement is striking yet natural; the unexpected, unnatural ending is as absurd as the simple, natural solution is too "easy." Yet notwithstanding that this is the era of the surprise dénouement—for it finds its greatest development in the twentieth century—it made classics of at least two stories long before 1900. Thomas Bailey Aldrich's "Marjorie Daw" is nigh unto fifty years of age; de Maupassant's "Necklace" is somewhat younger. Among the masters following Aldrich and de Maupassant are O. Henry, Leonard Merrick, William Wymark Jacobs, and a few prominent disciples. Hosts of minor writers are learning this trick of the trade.

Everybody knows the letters that Edward Delaney, "at the Pines, near Rye, New Hampshire," wrote to his friend John Flemming, who lay abed of a broken leg, in West Thirty-eighth Street, New York. And everybody knows that the young woman so delicately yet so powerfully described as to catch the fancy of Flemming did not, after all, exist. And nearly everybody remembers that it is the very last sentence which reveals the hoax Delaney has played, and the consequences of which he has fled to escape: "For oh, dear Jack, there isn't any colonial mansion on the other side

of the road, there isn't any piazza, there isn't any hammock—there isn't any Marjorie Daw!"

Not everybody recognises, however, nor for some time did story writers themselves seem to recognise, that this dénouement is but an instance of a general method. It is being used frequently now. Deceit practised by one character upon another need not be revealed until the end of the story. Such deceit may be unpleasant or pleasant. Now, the reader of "Marjorie Daw" just escapes the bitterest disappointment; but, fortunately, he may guess before the dénouement what Flemming did not foresee—and will, therefore, find compensation in his own superiority, or in Flemming's discomfiture. Even if he does not begin to suspect Delaney's ruse, still he finds consolation in the fact that Flemming was hoaxed: Misery loves company.

This first general means of creating surprise, O. Henry employed—with variations—in "The Furnished Room," "The Caballero's Way" (wherein disguise enters, by way of carrying out the deceit), "Lost on Dress Parade," and elsewhere. The best example of the type, perhaps, is "The Furnished Room." The story opens with a young man who is searching among the tenements in a squalid section of New York. At the last house he takes lodgings.

As the housekeeper moved away he put for the thousandth time the question that he carried at the end of his tongue:

"A young girl—Miss Vashner—Miss Eloise Vashner—do you remember such a one among your lodgers? She would be singing on the stage, most likely. A fair girl of medium height and slender, with reddish, gold hair, and a dark mole near her left eyebrow."

"No, I don't remember the name, . . ." the housekeeper deliberately replies.

The story continues with the young man's despair, the visitation of the mignonette ghost and the suicide.

Then comes the revelation of the deceit:

It was Mrs. McCool's night to go with the can for beer. So she fetched it and sat with Mrs. Purdy in one of those subterranean retreats where housekeepers foregather and the worm dieth seldom.

"I rented out my third floor back this evening," said Mrs. Purdy across a fine circle of foam. "A young man took it. He went up to bed two hours ago."

"Now, did ye, Mrs. Purdy, ma'am?" said Mrs. McCool with intense admiration. "You do be a wonder for rentin' rooms of that kind. And did ye tell him, then?" She concluded in a husky whisper laden with mystery.

"Rooms," said Mrs. Purdy in her furriest tones, "are furnished for to rent. I did not tell him, Mrs. McCool."

"'Tis right ye are, ma'am; 'tis by renting rooms we keep alive. . . . There be many people will rejict the rentin' of a room if they be tould a suicide has been after dyin' in the bed of it."

"As you say, we has our living to be making," remarked Mrs. Purdy.

"Yis, ma'am, 'tis true. 'Tis just one wake this day I helped ye lay out the third floor back. A pretty slip of a colleen she was to be killin' herself with the gas—a swate little face she had, Mrs. Purdy, ma'am."

"She'd a-been called handsome, as you say," said Mrs. Purdy, assenting but critical, "but for that mole she had a-growin' by her left eyebrow. . . ."

The shock of this ending is dependent on Mrs. Purdy's lie. The reader is not hoaxed, or cheated, however; for the tragedy she concealed, outweighing the secondary consideration of the falsehood, staggers one by its importance and impresses by its fitness. Moreover, the narrator dares use abundant clues. The personality of the woman is such that one may suspect her of lying, even before the act; the suggestion in the fragrance of mignonette confirms the suspicion that Eloise Vashner has occupied the third

floor back. Further, by keeping the spotlight on the young man—until the final shift—the author makes easier the working of the deceit.

The influence of "Marjorie Daw" is traceable also in the stories of Leonard Merrick. This English writer's own testimony indicates as much:

I never hear the absorbing art of the conte mentioned without my thoughts darting to a short story that I read more than twenty years ago and have never seen since. Sometimes I wonder whether I have been unconsciously influenced by it in determining the form of several of my own experiments in this field of fiction. It happens occasionally that I am paid the high compliment of being told that as a short-story writer I "owe much to an attentive study of the methods of Maupassant and Anatole France." And then I have not the least hesitation in saying that I owe nothing at all to it. But I would not declare with such certainty that I owe nothing to the swirl of enthusiasm that I felt as a boy on the afternoon that I read Thomas Bailey Aldrich's *Marjorie Daw*. . . . —*New York Times*, Jan. 25, 1914.

Mr. Merrick's surprises, as mere exercises of the technical gymnast, are marvels of cleverness. Consider, for example, his "Tragedy of a Comic Song." Before summarising the plot and discussing the dénouement let us glance at the beginning and observe the whimsical manner:

I like to monopolise a table in a restaurant, unless a friend is with me, so I resented the young man's presence. Besides he had a melancholy face. If it hadn't been for the piano-organ, I don't suppose I should have spoken to him. As the organ that was afflicting Lisle Street began to volley a comic song of a day that was dead, he started.

"That tune!" he murmured in French. If I did not deceive myself tears sprang to his eyes.

I was curious. Certainly, on both sides of the Channel we had long ago had more than enough of the tune. That the young

Frenchman should wince at the tune I understood. But that he should weep!

. . . I smiled sympathetically. "We suffered from it over here as well," I remarked.

"I did not know," he said in English that improved my French, "it was sung in London, also—*Partant pour le Moulin?*"

. . . "Monsieur, it is my 'istory, that comic tune!"

The narrative told by the gentleman centred about three young people: the poet Tricotrin, the composer Pitou, and the singer Paulette Fleury. Poet and composer, each in love with the girl, made for her the song, "*Partant pour le Moulin.*" The *raconteur* concluded:

"Listen! when they have gone to call on her one afternoon, she was not at 'ome. What had happened? I shall tell you! There was a noodle, rich—what you call a 'Johnnie in the Stalls'—who became infatuated with her at the Ambassadeurs. . . . Well, she was not at 'ome because she had married him. . . .

"What a moment! Figure yourself what they had suffered—both! They had worshipped her; they had made sacrifices for her; they had created for her her grand success; and as a consequence of that song, she was the wife of the 'Johnnie in the Stalls'!"

As he finished, he heard again the strains of the tune floating up from the street.

"I cannot bear it," he murmured. "The associations are too pathetic."

"They must be harrowing," I said. "Before you go, there is one thing I should like to ask you, if I may. Have I had the honour of meeting Monsieur Tricotrin, or Monsieur Pitou?"

He stroked his hat and gazed at me in sad surprise. "Oh, but neither, Monsieur," he groaned. "The associations are much more 'arrowing than that—I was the 'Johnnie in the Stalls'!"

It is clear that the surprise in this last line results from a new turn. The man who told the story did deceive, it is true, but he did so by implication, trusting to a false inference on the part of his auditor. The reader does not

enjoy the story less because—on retrospect—he indulges the suspicion that the stranger was "working off" a trick, quite consciously, upon his friend of the restaurant. But more important with respect to the surprise of the reader are these truths: First, the author has skilfully employed the "angle of narration" or "point of view"—in the technically narrative sense; second, he has calculated on the reader's expectancy of a more conventional conclusion. As the story progresses the reader is sure—as the auditor was sure—that the tearful gentleman is one of the rejected suitors. All the details seem to bear him out in this assurance. But the ending offers an entirely different reason for the tears.

This means of effecting surprise has been employed recently in a story by Holworthy Hall ("*The Luck of the Devil,*" *Century*, June, 1916); it was thoroughly understood by O. Henry, as anyone may deduce from a study of "*The Hiding of Black Bill.*" The tactics in all three stories are identical. O. Henry elsewhere takes advantage of the well-known principle that a reader helps to invent the story. O. Henry grants this privilege, and then by his own actual ending shows the reader that he, the author, has not fallen back on the hackneyed situation and obvious conclusion the reader has constructed in a too conventional way. "Girl" is an excellent illustration.

The first scene is in the law office of Robbins and Hartley. A man with an air of mystery about him enters and speaks to Hartley: "I've found out where she lives." Then he presents the name, Vivienne Arlington, and the address. Hartley shortly afterward leaves the office and makes his way to the Vallobrosa apartment house. He finds Vivienne in. Observe the description of Vivienne:

[She] was about twenty-one. She was of the purest Saxon type. Her hair was a ruddy golden, each filament of the neatly gathered mass shining with its own lustre and delicate gradation of colour. In per-

fect harmony were her ivory-clear complexion and deep-sea blue eyes.

Hartley reproaches her for not having answered his letter. By this time the reader is somewhat puzzled, wondering whether Hartley's design is laudable. When he recalls meeting her at the Montgomerys', he gives the reader a clue, "I shall never forget that supper!" There is a hint of complication in the question he puts to her:

"Is there anybody else?"

There is. Mr. Rafford Townsend is coming for his answer. Hartley goes out, meets Townsend in the hall, and declares by the law of the jungle that the kill is his.

After he goes back "to his wooing" there is a hint of further complication.

"Do you think I would enter your house while Heloise is there?"

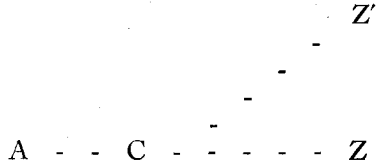
"She shall go," he declares, "I will send her away to-night."

Then follows the dramatic climax, "My answer is yes; come for me when you will!"

The swift drop to the dénouement shows Hartley one hour and forty minutes later at his suburban home. He is met by a woman who runs gladly to meet him. Hartley whispers to her, "Oh, Mamma!" she cries ecstatically, "Vivienne is coming to cook for us. . . . Go down, Billy, and discharge Heloise. She has been drunk again the whole day long."

Now, there is no earthly reason why two servants should not have the names of Vivienne and Heloise. But conventions in literature, which follow conventions in life, do not usually regard these as instances of typical nomenclature. Bridget and Becky are the conventional representatives. But O. Henry caught his opportunity for securing material out of the incongruous. It is incongruous that a beautiful cook should live in the Vallombrosa. So far as fairness to the reader is concerned, the surprise is better than that of "Marjorie Daw"; so far as possibilities are concerned, the

result is better than "Goliath." There, the origin is out. For Aldrich's story by this title counts for its effect on the reader's assumption that a dog by the name of Goliath must of necessity be a giant. O. Henry repeated this surprise formula in "October and June." Gouverneur Morris played with it brilliantly in "Suffrage in the Wild-wood" (*Cosmopolitan*, March, 1916). The method may be represented in diagram:



A Z is the course of the story as the author devised it. But the reader falling upon a false clue at C, let us say, a clue derived for the most part from his reliance on the hackneyed, constructs the story in his own manner and foresees an ending at Z'. He receives a shock on leaping from Z' to Z.

Besides, open deceit, implied deceit, clever management of the "angle of narration," and the reliance on a reader's sense of convention to finish the story differently from the author's plan, there is a final patent trick. It may be regarded, even, as a blanket method, covering under its folds the cases mentioned above. A surprise may be effected by lifting an event or fact out of its natural order, and placing it at the end of the story. There, if suspense has been adequately handled, its effect is in proportion to the time it has been withheld. Plot order and method of narration are both responsible for the shock. If A, B, C and so on down to Z represent the regular sequence of events, then an important point—represented by any letter—may be deferred and placed after Z. Thus:



This is the method which is most outstanding in "The Necklace," in O.

Henry's "Double Dyed Deceiver," and in Jacobs's "The Third String." The former as the pioneer deserves attention. Madame Loisel borrowed from Madame Forestier a diamond necklace. Having lost it, she replaced it with another. For the new necklace she paid a large sum, and then worked ten years to repay it. At the end of the time she learned that the first necklace was paste. She would have found this out in the usual course of events, when she borrowed the necklace, or when she replaced it. Why was it that she did not find out? A careful reading of the story will justify the assertion that although there are two "scenes" between the ladies, there is no reason why, in either, Madame Forestier should have mentioned that the necklace was not genuine. On the other hand, it would have been natural enough had Madame Forestier said, "It's only paste; your delay does not matter." If she had done so, however, the story would not have existed. It is, then, the withholding of the fact that makes the astounding dénouement, joined, as it is, to the method of narration which keeps in prominence the figure of Madame Loisel.

These, then, are the chief methods of

creating surprise* They are found usually in combination—as the adduced examples indicate—but they may operate singly; they are employed again and again, but not always with ease or distinction. Obviously, some character in the story may be surprised, and with him the reader; or the reader may be the only one not "in the secret"; again, the reader may find out what some character never learns. But whatever the nature of the surprise, pleasant or unpleasant, to character alone or reader alone, or both, it should enhance the comedy of a humorous story and the tragedy of the one that is gruesome. Though unexpected, it should be natural. It should stand the test, always, by a second reading of the story which will corroborate fair dealing on the part of the author.

*It is true that a pun may be at the basis of surprise; for example, see O. Henry's "Ransom of Mack." It is also true that a character's forgetfulness may be exaggerated, to end a farcical story in a humorously fitting style; as, for example, in "The Romance of a Busy Broker." But these causes for surprise are trivial, and usually so work as to leave the reader with a "sold out" feeling. By their very nature they have not been adapted to the more pretentious conte. Some of these narratives dependent on lapse of memory are mere farcical anecdotes, as "From the Cabby's Seat."

SNAP-SHOTS OF AMERICAN NOVELISTS

DELAND

BY RICHARD BUTLER GLAENZER

How thrilling but hard
 For the spirit of old New England
 To act young,
 For the rock to compromise
 With the moss,
 Warm heart of a woman
 Smiling through granite lips.