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STAGE-LAND

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# Jerome K. Jerome

## Stage-Land

### THE HERO

His name is George, generally speaking. "Call me George!" he says to the heroine. She calls him George (in a very low voice, because she is so young and timid). Then he is happy.

The stage hero never has any work to do. He is always hanging about and getting into trouble. His chief aim in life is to be accused of crimes he has never committed, and if he can muddle things up with a corpse in some complicated way so as to get himself reasonably mistaken for the murderer, he feels his day has not been wasted.

He has a wonderful gift of speech and a flow of language calculated to strike terror to the bravest heart. It is a grand thing to hear him bullyragging the villain.

The stage hero is always entitled to "estates," chiefly remarkable for their high state of cultivation and for the eccentric ground plan of the "manor house" upon them. The house is never more than one story high, but it makes up in green stuff over the porch what it lacks in size and convenience.

The chief drawback in connection with it, to our eyes, is that all the inhabitants of the neighboring village appear to live in the front garden, but the hero evidently thinks it rather nice of them, as it enables him to make speeches to them from the front doorstep – his favorite recreation.

There is generally a public-house immediately opposite. This is handy.

These "estates" are a great anxiety to the stage hero. He is not what you would call a business man, as far as we can judge, and his attempts to manage his own property invariably land him in ruin and distraction. His "estates," however, always get taken away from him by the villain before the first act is over, and this saves him all further trouble with regard to them until the end of the play, when he gets saddled with them once more.

Not but what it must be confessed that there is much excuse for the poor fellow's general bewilderment concerning his affairs and for his legal errors and confusions generally. Stage "law" may not be quite the most fearful and wonderful mystery in the whole universe, but it's near it – very near it. We were under the impression at one time that we ourselves knew something – just a little – about statutory and common law, but after paying attention to the legal points of one or two plays we found that we were mere children at it.

We thought we would not be beaten, and we determined to get to the bottom of stage law and to understand it; but after some six months' effort our brain (a singularly fine one) began to soften, and we abandoned the study, believing it would come cheaper in the end to offer a suitable reward, of about 50,000 pounds or 60,000 pounds, say, to any one who would explain it to us.

The reward has remained unclaimed to the present day and is still open.

One gentleman did come to our assistance a little while ago, but his explanations only made the matter more confusing to our minds than it was before. He was surprised at what he called our density, and said the thing was all clear and simple to him. But we discovered afterward that he was an escaped lunatic.

The only points of stage "law" on which we are at all clear are as follows:

That if a man dies without leaving a will, then all his property goes to the nearest villain.

But if a man dies and leaves a will, then all his property goes to whoever can get possession of that will.

That the accidental loss of the three-and-sixpenny copy of a marriage certificate annuls the marriage.

That the evidence of one prejudiced witness of shady antecedents is quite sufficient to convict the most stainless and irreproachable gentleman of crimes for the committal of which he could have had no possible motive.

But that this evidence may be rebutted years afterward, and the conviction quashed without further trial by the unsupported statement of the comic man.

That if A forges B's name to a check, then the law of the land is that B shall be sentenced to ten years' penal servitude.

That ten minutes' notice is all that is required to foreclose a mortgage.

That all trials of criminal cases take place in the front parlor of the victim's house, the villain acting as counsel, judge, and jury rolled into one, and a couple of policemen being told off to follow his instructions.

These are a few of the more salient features of stage "law" so far as we have been able to grasp it up to the present; but as fresh acts and clauses and modifications appear to be introduced for each new play, we have abandoned all hope of ever being able to really comprehend the subject.

To return to our hero, the state of the law, as above sketched, naturally confuses him, and the villain, who is the only human being who does seem to understand stage legal questions, is easily able to fleece and ruin him. The simple-minded hero signs mortgages, bills of sale, deeds of gift, and such like things, under the impression that he is playing some sort of a round game; and then when he cannot pay the interest they take his wife and children away from him and turn him adrift into the world.

Being thrown upon his own resources, he naturally starves.

He can make long speeches, he can tell you all his troubles, he can stand in the lime-light and strike attitudes, he can knock the villain down, and he can defy the police, but these requirements are not much in demand in the labor market, and as they are all he can do or cares to do, he finds earning his living a much more difficult affair than he fancied.

There is a deal too much hard work about it for him. He soon gives up trying it at all, and prefers to eke out an uncertain existence by sponging upon good-natured old Irish women and generous but weak-minded young artisans who have left their native village to follow him and enjoy the advantage of his company and conversation.

And so he drags out his life during the middle of the piece, raving at fortune, raging at humanity, and whining about his miseries until the last act.

Then he gets back those "estates" of his into his possession once again, and can go back to the village and make more moral speeches and be happy.

Moral speeches are undoubtedly his leading article, and of these, it must be owned, he has an inexhaustible stock. He is as chock-full of noble sentiments as a bladder is of wind. They are weak and watery sentiments of the sixpenny tea-meeting order. We have a dim notion that we have heard them before. The sound of them always conjures up to our mind the vision of a dull long room, full of oppressive silence, broken only by the scratching of steel pens and an occasional whispered "Give us a suck, Bill. You know I always liked you;" or a louder "Please, sir, speak to Jimmy Boggles. He's a-jogging my elbow."

The stage hero, however, evidently regards these meanderings as gems of brilliant thought, fresh from the philosophic mine.

The gallery greets them with enthusiastic approval. They are a warm-hearted people, galleryites, and they like to give a hearty welcome to old friends.

And then, too, the sentiments are so good and a British gallery is so moral. We doubt if there could be discovered on this earth any body of human beings half so moral – so fond of goodness, even when it is slow and stupid – so hateful of meanness in word or deed – as a modern theatrical gallery.

The early Christian martyrs were sinful and worldly compared with an Adelphi gallery.

The stage hero is a very powerful man. You wouldn't think it to look at him, but you wait till the heroine cries "Help! Oh, George, save me!" or the police attempt to run him in. Then two villains, three extra hired ruffians and four detectives are about his fighting-weight.

If he knocks down less than three men with one blow, he fears that he must be ill, and wonders "Why this strange weakness?"

The hero has his own way of making love. He always does it from behind. The girl turns away from him when he begins (she being, as we have said, shy and timid), and he takes hold of her hands and breathes his attachment down her back.

The stage hero always wears patent-leather boots, and they are always spotlessly clean. Sometimes he is rich and lives in a room with seven doors to it, and at other times he is starving in a garret; but in either event he still wears brand-new patent-leather boots.

He might raise at least three-and-sixpence on those boots, and when the baby is crying for food, it occurs to us that it would be better if, instead of praying to Heaven, he took off those boots and pawned them; but this does not seem to occur to him.

He crosses the African desert in patent-leather boots, does the stage hero. He takes a supply with him when he is wrecked on an uninhabited island. He arrives from long and trying journeys; his clothes are ragged and torn, but his boots are new and shiny. He puts on patent-leather boots to tramp through the Australian bush, to fight in Egypt, to discover the north pole.

Sometimes he is a gold-digger, sometimes a dock laborer, sometimes a soldier, sometimes a sailor, but whatever he is he wears patent-leather boots.

He goes boating in patent leather boots, he plays cricket in them; he goes fishing and shooting in them. He will go to heaven in patent-leather boots or he will decline the invitation.

The stage hero never talks in a simple, straightforward way, like a mere ordinary mortal.

"You will write to me when you are away, dear, won't you?" says the heroine.

A mere human being would reply:

"Why, of course I shall, ducky, every day."

But the stage hero is a superior creature. He says:

"Dost see yonder star, sweet?"

She looks up and owns that she does see yonder star; and then off he starts and drivels on about that star for full five minutes, and says he will cease to write to her when that pale star has fallen from its place amid the firmament of heaven.

The result of a long course of acquaintanceship with stage heroes has been, so far as we are concerned, to create a yearning for a new kind of stage hero. What we would like for a change would be a man who wouldn't cackle and brag quite so much, but who was capable of taking care of himself for a day without getting into trouble.

## THE VILLAIN

He wears a clean collar and smokes a cigarette; that is how we know he is a villain. In real life it is often difficult to tell a villain from an honest man, and this gives rise to mistakes; but on the stage, as we have said villains wear clean collars and smoke cigarettes, and thus all fear of blunder is avoided.

It is well that the rule does not hold off the stage, or good men might be misjudged. We ourselves, for instance, wear a clean collar – sometimes.

It might be very awkward for our family, especially on Sundays.

He has no power of repartee, has the stage villain. All the good people in the play say rude and insulting things to him, and smack at him, and score off him all through the act, but he can never answer them back – can never think of anything clever to say in return.

"Ha! ha! wait till Monday week," is the most brilliant retort that he can make, and he has to get into a corner by himself to think of even that.

The stage villain's career is always very easy and prosperous up to within a minute of the end of each act. Then he gets suddenly let in, generally by the comic man. It always happens so. Yet the villain is always intensely surprised each time. He never seems to learn anything from experience.

A few years ago the villain used to be blessed with a hopeful and philosophical temperament, which enabled him to bear up under these constantly recurring disappointments and reverses. It was "no matter," he would say. Crushed for the moment though he might be, his buoyant heart never lost courage. He had a simple, child-like faith in Providence. "A time will come," he would remark, and this idea consoled him.

Of late, however, this trusting hopefulness of his, as expressed in the beautiful lines we have quoted, appears to have forsaken him. We are sorry for this. We always regarded it as one of the finest traits in his character.

The stage villain's love for the heroine is sublime in its steadfastness. She is a woman of lugubrious and tearful disposition, added to which she is usually incumbered with a couple of priggish and highly objectionable children, and what possible attraction there is about her we ourselves can never understand; but the stage villain – well, there, he is fairly mashed on her.

Nothing can alter his affection. She hates him and insults him to an extent that is really unladylike. Every time he tries to explain his devotion to her, the hero comes in and knocks him down in the middle of it, or the comic man catches him during one or the other of his harassing love-scenes with her, and goes off and tells the "villagers" or the "guests," and they come round and nag him (we should think that the villain must grow to positively dislike the comic man before the piece is over).

Notwithstanding all this he still hankers after her and swears she shall be his. He is not a bad-looking fellow, and from what we know of the market, we should say there are plenty of other girls who would jump at him; yet for the sake of settling down with this dismal young female as his wife, he is prepared to go through a laborious and exhaustive course of crime and to be bullied and insulted by every one he meets. His love sustains him under it all. He robs and forges, and cheats, and lies, and murders, and arsons. If there were any other crimes he could commit to win her affection, he would, for her sweet sake, commit them cheerfully. But he doesn't know any others – at all events, he is not well up in any others – and she still does not care for him, and what is he to do?

It is very unfortunate for both of them. It is evident to the merest spectator that the lady's life would be much happier if the villain did not love her quite so much; and as for him, his career might be calmer and less criminal but for his deep devotion to her.

You see, it is having met her in early life that is the cause of all the trouble. He first saw her when she was a child, and he loved her, "ay, even then." Ah, and he would have worked – slaved for her, and have made her rich and happy. He might perhaps even have been a good man.

She tries to soothe him. She says she loathed him with an unspeakable horror from the first moment that her eyes met his revolting form. She says she saw a hideous toad once in a nasty pond, and she says that rather would she take that noisome reptile and clasp its slimy bosom to her own than tolerate one instant's touch from his (the villain's) arms.

This sweet prattle of hers, however, only charms him all the more. He says he will win her yet.

Nor does the villain seem much happier in his less serious love episodes. After he has indulged in a little badinage of the above character with his real lady-love, the heroine, he will occasionally try a little light flirtation passage with her maid or lady friend.

The maid or friend does not waste time in simile or in metaphor. She calls him a black-hearted scoundrel and clumps him over the head.

Of recent years it has been attempted to cheer the stage villain's loveless life by making the village clergyman's daughter gone on him. But it is generally about ten years ago when even she loved him, and her love has turned to hate by the time the play opens; so that on the whole his lot can hardly be said to have been much improved in this direction.

Not but what it must be confessed that her change of feeling is, under the circumstances, only natural. He took her away from her happy, peaceful home when she was very young and brought her up to this wicked overgrown London. He did not marry her. There is no earthly reason why he should not have married her. She must have been a fine girl at that time (and she is a good-looking woman as it is, with dash and go about her), and any other man would have settled down cozily with her and have led a simple, blameless life.

But the stage villain is built cussed.

He ill-uses this female most shockingly – not for any cause or motive whatever; indeed, his own practical interests should prompt him to treat her well and keep friends with her – but from the natural cussedness to which we have just alluded. When he speaks to her he seizes her by the wrist and breathes what he's got to say into her ear, and it tickles and revolts her.

The only thing in which he is good to her is in the matter of dress. He does not stint her in dress.

The stage villain is superior to the villain of real life. The villain of real life is actuated by mere sordid and selfish motives. The stage villain does villainy, not for any personal advantage to himself, but merely from the love of the thing as an art. Villainy is to him its own reward; he revels in it.

"Better far be poor and villainous," he says to himself, "than possess all the wealth of the Indies with a clear conscience. I will be a villain," he cries. "I will, at great expense and inconvenience to myself, murder the good old man, get the hero accused of the crime, and make love to his wife while he is in prison. It will be a risky and laborious business for me from beginning to end, and can bring me no practical advantage whatever. The girl will call me insulting names when I pay her a visit, and will push me violently in the chest when I get near her; her golden-haired infant will say I am a bad man and may even refuse to kiss me. The comic man will cover me with humorous opprobrium, and the villagers will get a day off and hang about the village pub and hoot me. Everybody will see through my villainy, and I shall be nabbed in the end. I always am. But it is no matter, I will be a villain – ha! ha!"

On the whole, the stage villain appears to us to be a rather badly used individual. He never has any "estates" or property himself, and his only chance of getting on in the world is to sneak the hero's. He has an affectionate disposition, and never having any wife of his own he is compelled to love other people's; but his affection is ever unrequited, and everything comes wrong for him in the end.

Our advice to stage villains generally, after careful observation of (stage) life and (stage) human nature, is as follows:

Never be a stage villain at all if you can help it. The life is too harassing and the remuneration altogether disproportionate to the risks and labor.

If you have run away with the clergyman's daughter and she still clings to you, do not throw her down in the center of the stage and call her names. It only irritates her, and she takes a dislike to you and goes and warns the other girl.

Don't have too many accomplices; and if you have got them, don't keep sneering at them and bullying them. A word from them can hang you, and yet you do all you can to rile them. Treat them civilly and let them have their fair share of the swag.

Beware of the comic man. When you are committing a murder or robbing a safe you never look to see where the comic man is. You are so careless in that way. On the whole, it might be as well if you murdered the comic man early in the play.

Don't make love to the hero's wife. She doesn't like you; how can you expect her to? Besides, it isn't proper. Why don't you get a girl of your own?

Lastly, don't go down to the scenes of your crimes in the last act. You always will do this. We suppose it is some extra cheap excursion down there that attracts you. But take our advice and don't go. That is always where you get nabbed. The police know your habits from experience. They do not trouble to look for you. They go down in the last act to the old hall or the ruined mill where you did the deed and wait for you.

In nine cases out of ten you would get off scot-free but for this idiotic custom of yours. Do keep away from the place. Go abroad or to the sea-side when the last act begins and stop there till it is over. You will be safe then.

## THE HEROINE

She is always in trouble – and don't she let you know it, too! Her life is undeniably a hard one. Nothing goes right with her. We all have our troubles, but the stage heroine never has anything else. If she only got one afternoon a week off from trouble or had her Sundays free it would be something.

But no; misfortune stalks beside her from week's beginning to week's end.

After her husband has been found guilty of murder, which is about the least thing that can ever happen to him, and her white-haired father has become a bankrupt and has died of a broken heart, and the home of her childhood has been sold up, then her infant goes and contracts a lingering fever.

She weeps a good deal during the course of her troubles, which we suppose is only natural enough, poor woman. But it is depressing from the point of view of the audience, and we almost wish before the evening is out that she had not got quite so much trouble.

It is over the child that she does most of her weeping. The child has a damp time of it altogether. We sometimes wonder that it never catches rheumatism.

She is very good, is the stage heroine. The comic man expresses a belief that she is a born angel. She reproves him for this with a tearful smile (it wouldn't be her smile if it wasn't tearful).

"Oh, no," she says (sadly of course); "I have many, many faults."

We rather wish that she would show them a little more. Her excessive goodness seems somehow to pall upon us. Our only consolation while watching her is that there are not many good women off the stage. Life is bad enough as it is; if there were many women in real life as good as the stage heroine, it would be unbearable.

The stage heroine's only pleasure in life is to go out in a snow-storm without an umbrella and with no bonnet on. She has a bonnet, we know (rather a tasteful little thing); we have seen it hanging up behind the door of her room; but when she comes out for a night stroll during a heavy snow-storm (accompanied by thunder), she is most careful to leave it at home. Maybe she fears the snow will spoil it, and she is a careful girl.

She always brings her child out with her on these occasions. She seems to think that it will freshen it up. The child does not appreciate the snow as much as she does. He says it's cold.

One thing that must irritate the stage heroine very much on these occasions is the way in which the snow seems to lie in wait for her and follow her about. It is quite a fine night before she comes on the scene: the moment she appears it begins to snow. It snows heavily all the while she remains about, and the instant she goes it clears up again and keeps dry for the rest of the evening.

The way the snow "goes" for that poor woman is most unfair. It always snows much heavier in the particular spot where she is sitting than it does anywhere else in the whole street. Why, we have sometimes seen a heroine sitting in the midst of a blinding snow-storm while the other side of the road was as dry as a bone. And it never seemed to occur to her to cross over.

We have even known a more than unusually malignant snow-storm to follow a heroine three times round the stage and then go off (R.) with her.

Of course you can't get away from a snow-storm like that! A stage snow-storm is the kind of snow-storm that would follow you upstairs and want to come into bed with you.

Another curious thing about these stage snow-storms is that the moon is always shining brightly through the whole of them. And it shines only on the heroine, and it follows her about just like the snow does.

Nobody fully understands what a wonderful work of nature the moon is except people acquainted with the stage. Astronomy teaches you something about the moon, but you learn a good deal more from a few visits to a theater. You will find from the latter that the moon only shines on heroes and heroines, with perhaps an occasional beam on the comic man: it always goes out when it sees the villain coming.

It is surprising, too, how quickly the moon can go out on the stage. At one moment it is riding in full radiance in the midst of a cloudless sky, and the next instant it is gone! Just as though it had been turned off at a meter. It makes you quite giddy at first until you get used to it.

The stage heroine is inclined to thoughtfulness rather than gayety.

In her cheerful moments the stage heroine thinks she sees the spirit of her mother, or the ghost of her father, or she dreams of her dead baby.

But this is only in her very merry moods. As a rule, she is too much occupied with weeping to have time for frivolous reflections.

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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