

THE DRAMATIC UNITIES

BY BRANDER MATTHEWS

I

IN the ever-delightful pages in which Dickens describes the unexpected characters with whom Nicholas Nickleby is brought in contact during the days of his association with the strolling players under the management of Mr. Crummles, we are made acquainted with a worthy country gentleman, Mr. Curdle, who poses as a patron of the drama. When Mr. Curdle is informed that Nicholas Nickleby is the author of the new play in which the Infant Phenomenon is to appear, he expresses the hope that the young dramatist has "preserved the unities." He insists that incident, dialogue, and characters are "all unavailing without a strict observance of the unities."

"Might I ask you," said the hesitating Nicholas, "what the unities are?"

Mr. Curdle coughed and considered. "The unities, sir," he said, "are a completeness — a kind of universal dove-tailedness with regard to time and place — a sort of general oneness, if I may be allowed to use so strong an expression. I take those to be the dramatic unities, so far as I have been enabled to bestow attention upon them, and I have read much upon the subject, and thought much."

Very likely the creator of Mr. Curdle and Mr. Crummles would have found it difficult to give any better definition of the unities than this which he put in the mouth of one of his comic characters. But then Dickens himself did not pretend to have read much upon the

subject and thought much. Probably many a playgoer who has heard about the dramatic unities, and about the duty of "preserving" them, has no more exact idea as to what they really are than had Mr. Curdle. Indeed, we may find the term used by some dramatic critics of to-day with a haziness of meaning recalling the vagueness of Mr. Curdle's definition. Yet the term has a precise content, known to those who have really read much upon the subject and thought much; and the theory of the dramatic unities has a history which has been made clear only comparatively recently.

It is not uncommon to read references to the "unities of Aristotle"; and yet Aristotle knew them not and did not discuss them at all. It has happened of late that they have been termed the "unities of Scaliger"; and yet they were not completely declared by Scaliger. They are to be found formulated with the utmost sharpness in Boileau's *Art of Poetry*; but they were familiar to Sidney when he penned his *Defense of Poesy*. Ben Jonson "preserved" them; and Shakespeare refused to let them shackle him. Lope de Vega admitted their validity and yet evaded their rule, as he regretfully confessed. Corneille had never heard of them when he wrote his fieriest play; and they were at the bottom of the famous "Quarrel of the Cid," in which Richelieu involved the French Academy he had recently established. Lessing analyzed them unfavorably in the eighteenth century; and in the nineteenth Victor Hugo de-

ridden them in his flamboyant preface to *Cromwell*, wherein he raised the red flag of the romanticist revolt. And yet the dramatic unities are "preserved" once more in the *Francillon* of the younger Dumas, son of Hugo's early rival, and in the *Ghosts* of Ibsen, the austere Norwegian realist, — although in all probability neither of these latter-day dramatists had paid any attention to the theory which insisted that the unities must be preserved.

What then are these unities which some dramatic poets believe in but reject, and which others "preserve" without taking thought. What are they, and where do they come from? Why should anybody want to "preserve" them? How could anybody achieve this preservation without effort? To find the answer to these queries we must be willing to go on a loitering excursion through literature after literature: straying from French into Italian, and then wandering back into Greek, before strolling forward again into English, — an excursion which will force us to fellowship with Boileau and Aristotle, with Shakespeare and Ben Jonson, as well as with the ingenious critics of the Italian Renaissance, and with the ardent playwrights of French romanticism.

II

The clearest and most succinct declaration of the dramatic unities was made by Boileau when he laid down the law that a tragedy must show "one action in one day and in one place." It must deal with only a single story: this obligation is the Unity of Action. It must never change the scene, massing all its episodes in a single locality: this is the Unity of Place. And it must compact its successive situations into the space of twenty-four hours, into a single day: this is the Unity of Time.

When a tragedy presents a simple,

straightforward story without change of scenery, and without any longer lapse of time than a single revolution of the sun, then and then only are the three unities "preserved," as Boileau understood them. And in thus laying down the law which must bind the tragic poet, the French critic believed that he was only echoing the regulations promulgated by Aristotle, the great Greek, whose authority then overawed critics and poets alike. Yet Boileau would have held with the Abbé d'Aubignac, his predecessor as a critic, and with Corneille, his contemporary as a poet, that the strict observation of the three unities is demanded, not only by authority, but by reason also. Two and three hundred years ago, all men of letters seem to have agreed that even if the ancients had not prescribed these limitations, they would have been arrived at by the moderns independently, as a result of the strenuous search for the perfect form of the ideal play.

It was lucky for the theory of the three unities that its advocates sought to prop it up by this appeal to reason, since it was not actually supported by the authority of Aristotle. Although they were long called the Aristotelian Unities, only one of the three is formally set forth by the Greek philosopher, even if a second has been implied from one of his statements. Boileau and his contemporaries, like their Italian predecessors, made the natural mistake of thinking of Aristotle as a theorist, like unto themselves, as engaged in working out an ideal system for the drama. But this was just what Aristotle was not. Whether he was considering the constitution of Athens or the construction of the Attic drama, the Greek inquirer was unfailingly practical. He dealt with the thing as he saw it before his eyes, taking it as he found it, relishing the concrete and eschewing the abstract.

III

Of the three unities, only one is to be found formally stated in Aristotle's treatise. This is the Unity of Action; and it is as valid in the modern drama as in the ancient. The Greek critic declared that a tragedy ought to have a single subject, whole and complete in itself, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. This is true of every work of art, tragic or epic, pictorial or plastic. Every work of art ought to make a direct and simple impression, which it cannot make without a concentration upon its theme, and without a rigorous exclusion of all non-essentials. It is true that there are great works of literary art, in which we perceive two stories intertwined and demanding equal attention, — the *Merchant of Venice*, for example, and *Vanity Fair*, and *Anna Karénina*. But they are great in spite of this bifurcation of interest; and they number very few among the masterpieces of literature. In most of these masterpieces we find only a single theme, as in the *Œdipus* of Sophocles, and in the *Tartuffe* of Molière; in the *Scarlet Letter* of Hawthorne, and in the *Smoke* of Turgeneff.

Shakespeare is often careless in the construction of the plots of his romantic-comedies and of his dramatic-romances, — *Much Ado about Nothing*, for example, and the *Winter's Tale*; but he is very careful to give essential unity to the loftier tragedies in which he put forth his full strength, in *Othello*, and in *Hamlet*, in *Macbeth*, and in *Julius Cæsar*. In these supreme efforts of his tragic power he achieves not only the needful unity of plot, but also the subtler unity of tone, of color, of sentiment. With his customary acuteness Coleridge dwells on the "unity of feeling" which Shakespeare observes. "Read *Romeo and Juliet*," he declares; "all is youth and spring; — youth with all its follies, its

virtues, its precipitancies, — spring with its odors, its flowers, and its transiency; it is one and the same feeling that commences, goes through, and ends the play. The old men, the Capulets and the Montagues, are not common old men; they have an eagerness, a heartiness, a vehemence, the effect of spring; with Romeo, his change of passion, his sudden marriage, and his rash death, are all the effects of youth: — whilst in Juliet love has all that is tender and voluptuous in the rose, with whatever is sweet in the freshness of spring; but it ends with a long deep sigh like the last breeze of the Italian evening."

In asserting the necessity of the Unity of Action, the only unity which is to be found plainly set forth in his fragmentary treatise, Aristotle was anticipating the demand of Mr. Curdle that the dramatist should give to his work "a completeness, — a kind of universal dovetailedness, a sort of general oneness." Apparently the Unity of Action was the only one of the three unities that Mr. Curdle knew anything about, even though he had "read much upon the subject, and thought much." And it is the only one which has imposed itself upon all the greater dramatists, whether Greek or English, French or Scandinavian. It is the only one of the three which is now accepted as imperative beyond all question; and it is the only one the acceptance of which by the dramatic poet is everywhere and everywhen to his abiding advantage.

Thus we see that Boileau was justified in demanding that tragic poets should deal only with a single theme. Was he right also in insisting that they should limit the action to a single day and to a single place? And what was his warrant for believing that they should impose these limitations on their freedom? His justification was twofold: the appeal to reason and the appeal to authority, — to what had been

read into Aristotle's treatise, although it had not been explicitly expressed therein. Yet there is possibly some slight foundation for the belief that Aristotle had declared the Unity of Time, as well as the Unity of Action. The Greek drama was acted outdoors in the level orchestra of the theatre; and the single story of the play was unrolled before the audience without any such intermissions as our modern inter-acts. The Greek playwright was therefore under strong pressure to relate his successive episodes as closely as he could, to avoid distracting the attention of the spectators from his plot to the mere lapse of time. Therefore he tended to avoid all mention of time, and to present his situations as following swiftly one after the other.

IV

"Tragedy endeavors," so Aristotle tells us, "so far as possible to confine itself to a single revolution of the sun, or but slightly to exceed this limit." But the great critic is not here laying down the law; he is merely declaring the habitual practice of the playwrights whose works he was studying, to spy out their secrets. He is not asserting that this must be done; he is only informing us that it was done as far as possible. He could not help knowing that it was not always possible, and that when it was not possible the Greek dramatists did not hesitate to extend their plot over as long a period as they might think necessary. For example, the *Agamemnon* of Æschylus begins with the Watchman on the tower looking for the flaming signal which was to announce the fall of Troy, flashing from beacon to beacon, from hilltop to hilltop, across leagues of land and sea. At last the Watchman catches sight of the blaze, and he descends to tell Clytemnestra that her husband is that day set

free to depart on his long voyage homeward. It would be many more days before the hero could be expected to arrive; and yet in the middle of the play Agamemnon appears and enters his palace to meet his death. Here is a long lapse of time, foreshortened by the dramatist, because it was not possible otherwise to deal advantageously with the story.

It may be admitted that the *Agamemnon* is the only extant Greek play which covers so protracted a period. But that Æschylus should have ventured to do this is evidence that the Greeks themselves had accepted no hard-and-fast rule compelling them to limit the duration of the story to twenty-four hours. Now, if the Unity of Time was not always observed by the Greek dramatic poets, and if it was not formally prescribed by Aristotle, how did it come into being? Thanks to Professor Spingarn's illuminating investigation into Italian criticism during the Renaissance, this question is now easy to answer. Giraldo Cinthio — from one of whose tales Shakespeare was to derive the suggestion for his *Othello* — wrote a *Discourse on Comedy and Tragedy*, in which he limited the time of a play to a single day, thus converting Aristotle's statement of a historical fact into a dramatic law, and changing Aristotle's "single revolution of the sun" into a "single day." A little later, another Italian critic, Robortelli, cut down the time to twelve hours, "for as tragedy can contain only one single and continuous action, and as people are accustomed to sleep in the night, it follows that the tragic action cannot be continued beyond one artificial day." And a little later still, yet another Italian, Trissino, declared that the Unity of Time is imperative on all playwrights, although it is disobeyed "even to-day by ignorant poets."

This final sneer is very significant.

In the Italian Renaissance, all literature — and criticism more especially — was frankly aristocratic. It made its appeal, not to the many, but to the few; it was not for the plain people, but only for the cultivated, who were alone capable of understanding the artist. This attitude is not dead in America to-day; it was universal in Italy four centuries ago. The educated classes had come into the splendid heritage of the classics; and they felt themselves more than ever elevated above the common herd. What the common herd could enjoy was by that very fact discredited. The men of letters kept aloof from the vulgar throng; they were artists working for the appreciation of their fellow dilettantes. To take this attitude is ever dangerous, even for the lyric poet; for the dramatist it is fatal. The drama is of necessity the most democratic of the arts, making its appeal to the people as a whole, educated and uneducated alike. But the Italian critics despised the popular acted drama of their own day; and they deemed it wholly unworthy of consideration. However much they as individuals might enjoy the rollicking comedy-of-masks or the more primitive sacred-representations (as the Italians called their passion-plays), they as a class despised these unpretending folk-plays. So Sidney, who had been nurtured on Italian criticism, despised the popular drama, which was the connecting link between the rude mediæval mystery and the noble Elizabethan tragedy.

Here indeed is the difference between Aristotle and his Italian commentators. He was a regular playgoer; and the principles he sets forth are only the results of his study of a great dramatic literature as this was vividly revealed in the actual theatre. They had never seen a good play well acted. What they had beheld on the stage was not good according to their standards; and what

they esteemed good they could not behold on any stage. This explains their academic theorizing, their pedantry, their insistence upon conformity with arbitrary limitations. While Aristotle, with the hard-headed common sense of the Greek, had his eye fixed on the concrete as he saw it, they, with the super-ingenuous subtlety of the Italian, bent their gaze on the abstract.

V

The Unity of Action was proclaimed by Aristotle; the Unity of Time was elaborated into a rule from one of Aristotle's casual statements of fact; and the Unity of Place was deduced by the Italian critics from the Unity of Time, as Professor Spingarn has made plain. Almost suggested by Scaliger, it was actually formulated first by Castelvetro, who differs from his contemporaries in that he takes account of the desires of a possible audience. It is true that Castelvetro, in spite of his talk about the actual stage, knew quite as little about it as any of his contemporaries. Yet he declares it to be the duty of the dramatist to please the spectators, of whatever sort, and to consult always their capabilities. He has no high opinion of the intelligence of these spectators, believing that they cannot imagine a lapse of time or a change of scene. At least, he suggests that they would be annoyed if the action was not confined to one day and contained in one place.

The fallacy underlying Castelvetro's theory is the result of his assumption that the spectators, while sitting in their seats, suppose themselves to be witnessing reality. He fails wholly to appreciate the willingness of an audience to "make-believe" almost to any extent. And his own logic breaks down when he convinces himself that the spectators cannot imagine two or three

places in turn, just as well as one at a time, and that they are not ready to let the author pack into the three-hours traffic of the stage the events, not of twenty-four hours only, but of twelve months or more. He does not grasp the conventions which must underlie every art, and which alone make an art possible. Every artist must be allowed to depart frankly from the merely actual, if he is to please us by his representation of life as he apprehends it.

Probably the Unity of Place would not have taken its position by the side of the Unity of Time and the Unity of Action, if it had not seemed to be supported by the practice of the Greek dramatic poets. In the surviving specimens of Attic drama there are a few instances where the action is apparently transported from one spot to another. But in the immense majority of the Athenian pieces which have come down to us we note that the story begins and ends in the same place. And the reason for this is not far to seek. The Greek drama had been evolved out of the lyrics of the chorus; and to the end of the Athenian period the chorus continued to be a most important element of a tragic performance. When the chorus had once circled into the orchestra, it generally remained there until the end of the tragedy. Now, this presence of the chorus before the eyes of the spectators prevented the dramatist from shifting the location of his action even if he had desired to do so. He could ask his audience to imagine a change of place only when the orchestra was empty, which was very rarely the case. Furthermore, we must keep in mind the fact that the theatre at Athens was in all probability devoid of scenery, and that therefore there was no way of visibly indicating a change of place.

This, then, is the theory of the three unities, long credited to the great Greek

critic, but now seen to have been worked out by the supersubtle Italian critics of the Renaissance. Indeed, there is little exaggeration in saying that they evolved it from their inner consciousness. From Cinthio, Scaliger, Castelvetro, and Minturno, the theory passed to Sidney and Ben Jonson in England, to Juan de la Cueva and Lope de Vega in Spain, to the Abbé d'Aubignac and Boileau in France.

VI

For two centuries and more this law of the three unities, and also the other rules elaborated at the same time by the same Italians, were accepted throughout Europe by almost every critic of the drama. There was an established standard of "correctness," which imposed on all playwrights a strict obedience to the critical code. This body of laws was supposed to be supported by the inexpugnable authority of Aristotle; but it was also believed to have its basis in reason. It dominated the drama of France until early in the nineteenth century; and even if Corneille now and again chafed under it, Voltaire was insistent in supporting it. Yet it was not obeyed by the popular playwrights of Spain, not even by Lope, who frankly declared that he knew better than he practiced. And it was absolutely rejected by the Elizabethan dramatists in England, excepting only Ben Jonson.

And this raises two interesting questions. If the code of correctness, including the rule calling for the preservation of the three unities, was accepted by all those who discussed the art of the drama, why did the practical playwrights of England refuse to be bound by its behests? And why did the practical playwrights of France submit to be cribbed, cabined, and confined by its restrictions? The most obvious ex-

planation is to be found in the fact that the great expansion of the drama arrived in France at least half a century later than it had in Spain and in England. A really literary drama, rich in poetry and vigorous in character, had been developed out of the popular mediæval folk-play far earlier in Spain and in England than it had in France; and the Spanish and the English playwrights, having succeeded in pleasing the playgoing public with a large, bold, and free drama, saw no good reason why they should surrender their liberties, and risk their popularity, by conforming to a standard of correctness which might gratify the cultivated few, but which would deprive the uneducated many of the variety the main body of spectators had been accustomed to expect in the theatre. Indeed, this is the excuse which Lope de Vega makes for himself in his significant address on the *New Art of Writing Plays*.

While this may have been the main motive of the chief of the Spanish playwrights, there is no difficulty in surmising that the chief of the English dramatic poets had a better reason for rejecting the law of the three unities, and for refusing to submit himself to its chains. Shakespeare was pre-eminently a practical man, with a keen eye to the main chance. He could find no profit in foregoing any part of the liberty which had enabled him to catch the favor of the groundlings who welcomed his "native wood-notes wild." And he could not help fearing an obvious and immediate loss if he should choose to let himself be governed by the Unity of Time. No small part of Shakespeare's incomparable power as a dramatist is due to his understanding of the forces which modify character, transforming it under pressure or disintegrating it under stress of recurring temptation. Now, character is not modified in the twinkling of an eye,

nor can it disintegrate in twenty-four hours. If Shakespeare had chosen to preserve the Unity of Time he would have been compelled to suppress all the earlier episodes of *Julius Cæsar*, for example, which are so significant and which revive in our memories when we are witnesses of the later quarrel of Brutus and Cassius; and he would have had to present Macbeth only in the final stages of his moral delinquency, without showing us the manly soldier before the virus of mean ambition had poisoned his nobler nature.

This concentration of action into the culminating moments of the story was not a disadvantage to the Greek dramatic poets, since they were expected to present a trilogy, three separate plays acted in swift succession on the same day to the same audience, whereby they were enabled to show the tragic hero at three different moments of his career. But the obligation to preserve the Unity of Time was a sad restriction upon the French dramatic poets, who had not the privilege of the trilogy, and who were compelled always to present characters fixed and unchanging. By his compulsory obedience to this rule Corneille was robbed of not a little of his possible range and sweep, although Racine, with his subtlety of psychological analysis, may even have gained by an enforced compacting of his story and by a limitation to its culminating moments.

Shakespeare did not care to discuss the principles of his craft, as Ben Jonson was wont to do. He digressed in *Hamlet* into a disquisition on the art of acting; but he nowhere expressed his personal opinions on the art of play-writing. He was no more a theatrical reformer than he was a dramatic theorist. He was content to take the stage as he found it, and to utilize all its conventions, and all its contemporary traditions. If he declined to listen to the

precepts of the critics, and if he refused to "preserve" the unities, he had his own reasons; and we can see that they were sufficient. But it is unimaginable that he did not know what he was doing, or that he was ignorant of these theories. It is simply inconceivable that he had not in his youth read Sidney's *Defense*, in which the rule of the three unities is stated for the first time in English. It is most unlikely that in his maturity, and when he and Ben Jonson were engaging in their wit-combats at the Mermaid, he had not had occasion to hear the whole code of the drama proclaimed again and again by his robust and scholarly friend.

We have seen that an Italian critic dismissed the playwrights who failed to preserve the unities as "ignorant poets." Probably the reproach of ignorance of the rules was one that Shakespeare would bear with perfect equanimity. Yet, although he himself drew no attention to it and, for all we know, may not even have bidden Jonson to remark it, he was moved once in the later years of his labors in London to "preserve the unities," as if to show that it was not ignorance, but a wise choice, which had led him to reject them in all his other plays, tragic and comic. The *Tempest* is in all likelihood the last play which Shakespeare wrote without collaboration; and in the *Tempest* he chose to "preserve the unities," — as they were then understood in England, and as they were then preserved by Ben Jonson in his comedies. The Unity of Place required that the action should be confined to a single place, but place was interpreted liberally. A single place meant one palace or one town, not necessarily a specific room in this palace or a specific house in this town. It meant a single locality, but not a single spot. The action of *Every Man in his Humor* passes in London, which is a single locality, but it is not restricted to

a single room or even to a single house in that city.

The *Tempest* sets before us, as Professor Lounsbury has pointed out, a single story, direct and swift and uncomplicated; and therefore it preserves the Unity of Action. It is compassed within a single revolution of the sun, as the author takes care to tell us more than once; and therefore it preserves the Unity of Time. It has for its locality an island with the waters immediately surrounding that island; and therefore it preserves the Unity of Place (as that was then liberally interpreted). As we study the *Tempest*, it is as though we could hear its author saying, "Go to! I can play this game as well as any of you. And if I have not been willing to play it hitherto, that is not from any ignorance of the rules, but simply because I did not deem the game worth the candle!"

That Shakespeare wrote the *Tempest* is plain proof, if any were needed, that he knew the "rules of the drama" quite as well as Lope de Vega did. That both the English and the Spanish dramatic poets refused to abide by them is equally evident. And this brings up again the question why the doctrine of the unities should have been accepted willingly by the professional playwrights of France after it had been rejected by the professional playwrights of England and of Spain. One answer to this query has already been suggested, — that the outflowering of dramatic poetry was later in France than in England or in Spain, and therefore after the doctrine of the three unities had hardened into a dogma. Another answer might be, that the French are the inheritors of the Latin tradition, that they like to do things decently and in order, and that they relish restraint more than the English or the Spaniards. We might go further and say that the French are naturally the most artistic of the three

ances, and that to an artist there is always a keen joy in working under bonds and in grappling with self-imposed obligations. But there is a third explanation of the apparent anomaly, which comes nearest to being adequate.

VII

The drama of every modern literature is the outgrowth of the drama of the Middle Ages, — of the passion-play, and of the popular farce. But the development from this unliterary folk-drama into true tragedy and true comedy is different in the different countries; and it is only by tracing back this evolution in France that we can lay hold of the chief reason why the Unity of Place was accepted in France even though it had been rejected in England, where the theatre had followed a slightly different line of development.

The full-grown passion-play was the result of putting together the several episodes of the gospel-story, which had been shown in action in the church on different days, more especially Christmas and Easter, as an accompaniment of the service. Each of these episodes had been set forth in the most appropriate part of the edifice, — the Holy Child in the manger on the chancel-steps, the Raising of Lazarus near the crypt, the Crucifixion near the altar. These scattered places where the separate parts of the sacred story were represented in action and in dialogue were known as "stations"; and when the overgrown religious drama was finally thrust out of the church and confided to laymen, the useful device of the stations was taken over by the new performers. In England the several stations became ambulatory, each of them being set up on a platform on wheels, a "float," such as we still see in Mardi Gras parades; and they were known as "pageants." In France another plan

was adopted, and the passion-play was presented on a long and shallow platform with the successive stations ranged side by side at the back; and they were known as "mansions." In a mystery acted at Valenciennes in the sixteenth century, the spectators had in view on their extreme left Heaven, and on their extreme right Hell, with summary indications of the stable at Bethlehem, the Temple at Jerusalem, the sea of Gennesaret, and so forth, ranged in between. In other words, all the important places in the play were set on the stage at once, each coming into use in its turn and as often as need be, while most of the acting was done in the neutral ground further forward on the platform.

After the performance of the mysteries in Paris had been confided to the Brotherhood of the Passion, this body established itself in the Hôtel de Bourgogne, the stage of which was prepared to accommodate as many mansions as the story might demand. In time, dramatizations of the lives of the saints followed the dramatization of the life of Christ; and after a while these were succeeded by dramatizations of the lives of heroes, at first of history, and afterward of romance. Thus the sacred drama gave way to the profane, which had been slowly developed out of it. Yet the lay playwrights, though they might borrow their plots from modern legends, retained the mediæval device of the mansions, finding it very convenient, since it enabled them to show on the stage all the many places where their hero met with his manifold adventures. However incongruous this simultaneous set may seem to us, accustomed as we are nowadays to a succession of sets, it was familiar to French audiences, and acceptable to them well into the seventeenth century. But in time its disadvantages became more and more obvious. The spectators who

had not found it hard to follow the well-known Bible story, and to identify the Temple at Jerusalem, the House of the High-Priest, and the other mansions it demanded, began to be a little confused when Hardy put before them unknown stories acted amid mansions only summarily indicated by the carpenter and decorator. Hardy cluttered the stage with all sorts of strange places, bringing together in one play a ship, a palace, a bedroom, and a cave on a mountain; and the audience had to strain its ingenuity to recognize all these localities.

It was for a stage thus fitted up that Corneille composed the *Cid*, the action of which takes place in a neutral ground, backed by the residences of the chief characters. When he wrote this play he had never even heard of the doctrine of the unities, which had been ignored by the Spanish dramatist from whom he borrowed his plot. He soon found himself severely criticised for his ignorance of the rules of the drama; and, although his play was overwhelmingly successful, he confessed his error. In all his following plays he preserved the Unity of Place, discarding the medley of mansions that he had employed freely in his earlier pieces; and we cannot doubt that this simplification of the scenery on the stage was most welcome to the spectators, who were no longer forced to guess at the significance of accumulated bits of scenery. And so powerful was the prestige of Corneille that his contemporaries and his successors followed his example, and showed one action in one place in one day.

Corneille himself often found it rather irksome to conform to the rules; and Molière, in his adaptation of the laxly constructed Spanish piece, *Don Juan*, was forced for once to disregard them. But they imposed no painful bonds on

Racine, who was satisfied to deal only with the tense culmination of a tragic complication.

What Corneille and Racine had done, Voltaire was glad to do, although he and his contemporaries might be reduced to the absurdity of making conspirators hold their meetings in the palace of the monarch they were leagued against. For two centuries the serious drama of the French was chained in the triple-barred cage of the unities; and it was not released until Victor Hugo brought out *Hernani*, long after freedom had been won in other countries.

After *Hernani* had blown his trumpet, and the hollow walls of classicism had fallen with a crash, the doctrine of the three unities was finally disestablished; and Mr. Curdle is easily excusable for not knowing exactly what it was. Perhaps its evil effect even upon the drama of France has been overestimated; at least we may doubt whether Molière and Racine, Marivaux and Beaumarchais, really lost anything by accepting it. On the other hand, we have reason to rejoice that it was rejected by the dramatic poets of England and of Spain.

In our own time no playwright ever gives a thought to the "preservation of the unities." And yet even to-day, when a dramatist is dealing with the result of a long series of events, and when he seeks to set this forth as simply and as strongly as he can, we find him compacting his single action into a single day, and setting it in a single place. This is what the younger Dumas did in *Francillon*, and what Ibsen did in *Ghosts*. Probably either of them would have been not a little surprised if he had been told that in these plays he had "preserved the unities."

OUT OF THE DEEP

BY PAUL MARIETT

CERTAINLY it was not a beautiful room — according to modern traditions of simplicity and severity; yet it reflected a personality as simpler rooms might not, for every wall bore a book-case filled with rare editions and costly bindings; and, above these, in riot and incongruity, were tiers upon tiers of pictures, pictures of many times, lands, and schools, yet all — like the books — chosen with unerring taste. For the rest, a very disorderly table, piled perilously with manuscripts, themes, blue-books, bound notes, and such scholarly débris, bespoke both masculine neglect and the college instructor.

The spirit of the room was sitting in a far corner, deep in a comfortable chair, removed from light, silent. He too was incongruous — a short, fat man, past the prime of life, his face, unhealthily pallid, graven with sober, pondering lines. He was relaxed in the chair, in an attitude of exhaustion, fat hands sprawled on bulky knees. His eyes were closed; but this could not be seen, for he wore heavy dark glasses — glasses like automobile goggles, that completely covered his eyes, excluding every ray of light not sobered by their smoky lenses.

Edward Sayward at fifty years of age was going blind. There was no denying the fact, no avoiding the cruel issue coming so surely, inexorably. He had always worn glasses, — true; but not until a year previous, after a severe illness, had he been conscious of anything more serious than ordinary weak sight. Then, illusive spots, black and elfish,

dancing before his vision, caused him to seek his oculist. Then it was another oculist. Finally, a great specialist. The verdict had been the same. His sight was worn out. A man does not spend with impunity twenty years of his life busied all day, almost all night, reading and writing. He would become perfectly blind. The specialist had even been able to set the date. It was now two weeks hence, crawling slowly toward you when you watched it; when you forgot it, hastening hideously.

As an instructor he had done his work efficiently. He had gone up in his department steadily, reassuringly. Another sabbatical would have seen him a full professor, quoted and respected — a power in the university where already he was well recognized. Now all was swept away by a force greater than he, a force impossible to combat, unlike the other forces he had fought, in his struggle up from penury, where a good issue was at least likely. Somehow, in those keen battles, he had never dreamed of treachery, never thought that the body he was trying to stay with flagons and apples would so disastrously turn against him, making all his work supererogation.

It was the extra work. Had he been content, as were so many of his colleagues, merely to plod the daily path of an English instructor, correcting the daily themes (a monstrous task), marking the blue-books, attending to the conferences and the reading-assignments; and, after this his work was