

the fatal news. 'Fill up glasses,' he said; 'yours too, Rose.' Willie Waugh lifted his own glass. 'Well, I 'm not a chapel-going feller, never was. I never said a prayer in my life (did I, Ivy?); but here's to God Almighty

who allus sends us a good harvest — ' 'Amen,' whispered Mrs. Dogtrees. ' — and my daily drop,' added he. Oh, Willie Waugh was a rough chap; he liked hearty food, and he called a spade a spade; that was his hobby.

## PERFECT MOMENTS<sup>1</sup>

BY LASCELLES ABERCROMBIE

'YES, my dear, I tell you, it was a Perfect Moment!'

The lady was moved; more than you would have thought possible in a person of her superb decorum; far too deeply moved to attend to my modest requirements, until the other superbly decorous lady had sufficiently relished the story. A glance put me in my place. I was not a passenger demanding refreshment, I was an inopportune and (I felt) distinctly undersized intruder into the private affairs of two important ladies. Nothing for it but to wait; and anyhow, this was the Great Western Railway: the train was sure to be late.

But the story was at its climax. 'Yes! No explanations this time, and no back doors neither — not on your life! There they stood, and there was I. "How do you do?" I says; and, my dear, you'd never believe what a sheep he looked. "Caught this time!" I says. And did either of them say a word? Not a single word! It could n't have been better if it had been done on the stage. It was just a Perfect Moment.'

Clearly. Whatever all this was about, there was no mistaking the lady's gusto, especially as it spilled

a good quarter of the half-pint she at length slapped down on the bar in front of me. And then the way she tossed my coppers into the till! Clearly, she was still living in that Perfect Moment of hers — living in it and reveling in it.

She gave me something to think about. But I had got into my train, and the engine was at full speed, and I was only just becoming aware of my sole fellow traveler, before I realized precisely what it was she had given me to think about. These Perfect Moments, I was saying, these brief, dazzling gleams that come sparkling into our lives and absorb our whole consciousness in a single unquestioning delight, and leave us incalculably enriched with their distinct and shining images, and the remembered sense of what it is to live, though but for an instant, beyond the reach of dissatisfaction — what dead stuff life would be without them! And what wretched stuff this whimsical life of ours chooses to fasten on for its Perfect Moments! "Caught this time!" I says'; the voice of the superbly decorous lady rang in my ears. Oh, she was wholly beyond the reach of dissatisfaction then, I went on. And how many of us

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find our rare ecstasies of blissful absorption in the Perfect Moment on just such a level as hers! How many of us get our glimpses of the Empyrean from the common nonsense of life, instead of from the upper regions of philosophy and beauty and nobility!

Now when a person asks, How many of us do so-and-so? it's a hundred to one his meaning is that he himself is one of the few to whom such a question would be quite superfluous. Anyway, it was just when I got to asking myself that question that I began to be aware of my sole fellow traveler. He sat in the diagonally opposite corner; and his face seemed to have been at some time of his life submitted to great vertical pressure; at least, when he brought up his lower jaw the distance from his chin to the root of his nose was almost negligible; and from in between these two points sprouted, or rather spouted, the hairs of an electrified moustache. And his nose was preternaturally long and slender, and protruded like an index finger; and he was eating sandwiches, with a great champing, up and down, of his lower jaw. And as he champed he looked steadfastly out of the window; and at every champ the end of his nose moved up and down. I mean, it moved most distinctly and conspicuously. It moved not only in exact sympathy with, but exactly commensurably with, the machining of his jaw; I watched the tip of his nose describing, against the windowpane, the sector of a considerable circle. It was like the tail of a wagtail.

The Perfect Moment! Not a doubt of it. Nothing more perfect had ever happened to me in my life than the sight of that chewing nose. And the radiance of the moment is still with me. Well, we cannot help ourselves. We do not choose our Perfect Moments; they choose us. And however earnestly we train ourselves to live on the

heights, they will not always concern themselves with our lofty aspirations. At least, that is what I find. I have had Perfect Moments that I would willingly confess to in the most serious and enlightened society. For instance, it is a defect in the constitution of this world that one can hear the Seventh Symphony for the first time only once. I know too well, from many occasions of bitter self-reproach, that I might have found myself saying, when the introduction danced off into the allegro: 'How lovely! How too delicious! Could anyone have believed it?' But I did n't say anything at all. I simply existed in delight that did not need to say anything, that could not say anything, that was nothing but me listening to an unspeakable tune. Neither did the Perfect Moment pass me by the first time I saw, from the height of Arenig, the towering snow of Eryri.

I can be eloquent about such moments as these. But then — the moments that should have been perfect, and were n't! And, what I ought to keep darker still, the moments that should not have been perfect, and were! But what is one to do? One lovely summer evening I had bicycled down that enchanted road cut halfway up the Malvern Hills, with the English Arcady — I mean, of course, Herefordshire — gleaming up at me through the sunlit haze (and, by the way, it is all downhill); and I had got off for a rest and a drink outside that hotel which, as far as situation goes, is the nearest thing I am likely to find to the hotels of Paradise. Everything was right for a Perfect Moment — everything, if I had been the chooser! But I was n't; and the proof of it was that, shambling round the corner, came three dreadful comic men — loathsome, leering men; men beneath contempt; men with trousers made out of curtains, wearing imbecile hats; erect vermin. One had

done his face with whitewash, one with brickdust, one with burned cork. They stood in front of me, between me and that adorable Herefordshire. Slouching clumsily in, before the innumerable sunlit counterpoint of miles and miles of visibly melodious Herefordshire hills, these comic brutes began their music, one with a banjo, one with the bones, one with a hoarse, knowing bray — how a certain man had some painting to do on the dome of St. Paul's, and in the midst of his painting fell off the dome: 'and I don't suppose he'll paint again for months and months and months.'

Abysmal vulgarity! Inconceivable idiocy! Why did I not spit in their faces, stone them from me? Why? Because my whole being went out to them! Did they suit my mood? Not that I was aware of. But they gave me what sunset over Herefordshire could not give me — they gave me a Perfect Moment. Or was it, perhaps, that Herefordshire was altogether too much what it ought to have been, and they with their hideous urbanity made an exquisitely excruciating discord?

I begin to wonder, though, what my books would say, supposing they could speak and an absolute sincerity were imposed on them. I like to score with my pencil the things that take me, but how many of these have really been my

Perfect Moments, and how many have I marked because I knew they ought to have been Perfect Moments? I decline to say; I decline even to ask myself the question — because I know it is one that might be answered. But I am sure of this — the sublimities of the art of Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, and Keats have, I do believe, given me more lavishly, but not, I equally believe, more securely, Perfect Moments than the imbecilities of literature: Lavater, for example, comparing the physiognomy of fishes and lions, much to the advantage of the lions; or Dr. Caius, in his treatise of 'Englishe Dogges,' classifying house dogs into those which 'barcke only with free and open throate but will not bite,' those 'which doe both barcke and byte,' and those 'which bite bitterly before they barcke.' 'The first are not greatly to be feared . . . the second are daungerous, it is wisdom to take heede of them . . . the thirde are deadly. . . .'

But how does this bear on the Principles of Criticism? I think we have come to the point when the doctrine of the Perfect Moment had better be dropped. There is something a little disturbing in it; it is both too equalizing and too discriminating — and neither in what Mrs. Petulengro called the certificated line.

## LIFE, LETTERS, AND THE ARTS

### THE MOTHER OF LEONID ANDREEV

RIMMA ANDREEV, the sister of the Russian writer, has published a letter in the monthly *Rossia* in which she gives an interesting sketch of Andreev's mother. Of her six children, all of whom she loved dearly, Leonid seems to have been by far the most indispensable to her. 'When I learned of my brother's death,' the sister writes, 'knowing mother's inordinate love for him, I feared that she would not survive him. And indeed, the night after his death she attempted suicide, hanging herself near his death-bed. She was rescued, blue in the face and hardly alive, and kept under close surveillance. This is what she wrote to us: "Dearest children . . . He was the whole world to me, and when I lost him I lost everything. I did not think I could survive him — and so it happened. Only your absence and the reproaches of others who said that I must live for you, that I ought to be ashamed of myself, keep me here. . . ." And again, in a month's time: "My dearest children, I remained in life only for your sake: my conscience would n't allow me . . . I am very lonely; the people here have left for abroad, and I shall stay alone. . . . I am afraid I shall be blind from tears and shall never see you again."

'And in fact she died without having seen us again.

'Before Leonid's coffin was closed, mother wrote a small note and put it into his pocket. What she wrote there remained a secret. But we knew her way of writing small notes to him

whenever he happened to hurt her feelings unwittingly. The chapel where the corpse was temporarily deposited was at a distance from the house, in a dense park. Every day for a whole month, regardless of storm and rain, she went there and read to her son aloud from the newspapers and books she received. Often our friend Mrs. F——, calling for her to take her home, used to find her lying unconscious near the coffin; but it was impossible to dissuade her from going there. Finally, when her health and mind were greatly endangered, she was forcibly taken away from Neivolo; but shortly before that, so another friend tells us, she burst into her house with an English paper in her hands, saying: "They tell me here is a telegram with expressions of sympathy for me. Translate it to me quickly! How shall I read it to him tomorrow, since I cannot read English?" She could not be quieted down until the message was translated to her.

'Before long Leonid's widow left Neivolo with her children. But mother would not leave the place. She moved over into a small house and stayed there entirely alone. This was near Leonid's deserted home, in which — in his study — she arranged a sort of shrine. She fastened his picture to the back of the armchair in which he used to sit at his desk, adorned it with flowers, gathered his books and letters on the desk, and would come there every day to pray and speak to the son who, for her, remained alive. She could not bring herself to leave the