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MOLIÈRE

HIS LIFE AND HIS WORKS

BY

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WITH PORTRAITS

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS
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TO MY WIFE

PREFATORY NOTE

In this biography I have striven specially for three things:—first, to set forth the facts of Molière's life, stripped of all the legends which compass it about; second, to trace his development as a dramatist, making it plain how cautiously he advanced in his art and how slowly he reached the full expansion of his power; and thirdly, to show his intimate relation to the time in which he lived, the glittering beginning of the reign of Louis XIV. I have endeavored always to center attention on Molière himself, the melancholy humorist who was companionable and friendly, and whose career was cut short before his genius had completely revealed itself.

In one important particular this biography differs from most of the more recent attempts to consider Molière's life. I have sought to establish it solidly on the admitted facts, and I have therefore resolutely refrained from utilizing two notorious libels, one on Molière and the other on his widow, "Elomire Hypocondre" and the "Fameuse Comédienne." Holding these abusive pamphlets to be wholly beneath credence, I have borrowed no hints and I have drawn no inferences from either of them.

Alfred de Vigny called a man fortunate who was able in his maturity to carry out a plan formed in his youth; and this much of happiness I may claim, as it is now nearly forty years since I first began to hope that I might one day be able to write a life of Molière.

BRANDER MATTHEWS.

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
IN THE CITY OF NEW YORK.

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MOLIÈRE

He was the first great modern. In his art
The very times their very manners show;
But for he truly drew the human heart
In his true page all times themselves shall know.

RICHARD WATSON GILDER.

MOLIÈRE

CHAPTER I

HIS FAMILY AND HIS EDUCATION

MOLIÈRE—to give to Jean Baptiste Poquelin the name by which he made himself known to posterity, just as Marie François Arouet is remembered only as Voltaire—Molière is in many ways the central figure in all French literature. He is the embodiment of certain dominant characteristics of the French people; in him we find its social instinct, its hatred of affectation, its lack of spirituality, its relish for the concrete, its girding humor and its dramatic ingenuity. But he is more than French, for his genius transcends the boundaries of race; it has the solid elements of the universal and of the permanent.

Molière is the great master of comedy in its finest not less than in its broadest aspects. He is the foremost of comic dramatists, the model of all who came after him and the superior of almost all who went before. The humorous fantasies of Aristophanes are not narrowly comedy,—rather are they lyrical-burlesque. The lauded comedies of Menander are lost to us, and they can now be dimly glimpsed only through Latin adaptations. Plautus, as robust a fun-maker as Molière, lacks elevation as he lacks breadth of outlook. Terence, with all his taste and delicacy, is remote from the hearty reality of large comedy. Shakspere put his supreme comic creation, Falstaff, into a loosely knit chronicle-play in two parts; and his lighter pieces, ever delightful as they are, must be classed, some as romantic-comedies and others as frank farces; and he never essayed the comedy-of-manners or the comedy-of-character, pure and simple.

Through the labor of many devoted students we have been put in possession of the more important facts of Molière's career. We know his family, his youth, and his education; we can follow his footsteps where he goes to and fro as a strolling player; we can analyze his modest efforts as a 'prentice playwright, and we can trace the growth of his genius after his return to Paris, when he brought out his later masterpieces in swift succession during the crowded fifteen years of life that were then left to him. We can observe his humble beginnings, his hesitations, his false starts; and we can perceive his slow recognition of the goal which he might attain. We can trace the steady enrichment of his method by which in time he was able to achieve the glorious result. As we go down the years with him, the man wins our admiration as much as the artist; and we give him our sympathy, loving him all the more for the enemies he made.

Then when the funeral procession has filed past in the darkness of the night, we have in our hands all that is needed for the understanding of his character; and we find that the three-fold explanation of what he was, and of what he did, lies in these things—he was a born playwright, a master-craftsman in the dramaturgic art; he was ever a humorist, with the underlying melancholy and the piercing insight that accompany richness of humor; and he was a hater of hypocrisy, with a scorn that was ever burning hot within him, when he beheld pretense, or affectation, or deceit.

I

Molière was born in Paris in 1622. There is a certain significance in the observation that only a few of the masters of Latin literature were natives of Rome itself, whereas a host of the chief figures of French literature first saw the light in the city by the Seine—Rutebœuf, Villon, Regnier, Scarron, Boileau, La Bruyère, Regnard, Voltaire, Beaumarchais, Béranger and Labiche, all of them exponents of characteristics that are essentially French. The literature of the French is more urban as well as more urbane than the literature of the Latins, more inclined to take its color from the capital. There is a special fitness therefore in the fact that Molière, the most representative of all French writers, was also born in Paris.

In the first quarter of the seventeenth century Paris was very unlike the smiling and embellished city of to-day, with its spacious avenues, its handsome squares and its elaborate parks. It was little better than any other more or less medieval town, with its scant half-million of inhabitants closely packed within the ramparts still needful to guard against domestic insurgents and foreign invaders. In Molière's youth, Richelieu made a breach in these walls to lay out the garden of what is now the Palais-Royal; and in the last years of Molière's life, Colbert cleared away the rest of these bulwarks to make the circle of the Boulevards. The center of the little city was still the island on which Notre Dame raises aloft its twin towers. The Louvre was separated from the Tuileries by a network of small streets, as crooked and as filthy, as little paved and ill-lighted, as all the other streets of the capital of France. Beyond the Tuileries there was open country, where we now can see the Garden, the Place de la Concorde and the long Champs Elysées. Opposite the Louvre the Tour de Nesle was still standing on the outskirts of the town. The houses were not yet numbered, being distinguished by their separate signs. Some of these houses clung to the Seine, built out on piles, and others lined the bridges that crossed the river, a fashion which once obtained in London, and which still survives in Florence.

13

When Molière was born Louis XIII was king; and two years thereafter the far-sighted and strong-willed Richelieu became his minister, to begin the arduous task of consolidating the royal authority, laying a firm foundation for the autocracy of Louis XIV. There was unceasing conspiracy, often followed by summary justice. It was ten years after Molière's birth that Richelieu sent Montmorency to the scaffold; and it was ten years later that he put Cinq-Mars to death. Between these two executions for high treason, Urbain Grandier had been burnt at the stake as a sorcerer. And yet amid all this turmoil, literature was flourishing again; the Marquise de Rambouillet and her cotery were striving to refine the language as well as the manners of the time; Corneille was slowly attaining the fit form for French tragedy; and the French Academy, at first only a private gathering of poets and scholars, was receiving royal recognition.

Molière was born only six years after Shakspere died; and Milton was his older contemporary, outliving him a year. Calderon also survived him, and Lope de Vega did not die until Molière was thirteen; Cervantes had died the same year as Shakspere. These illustrious figures of English and of Spanish literature seem far remoter from us than Molière; even though some of them outlived him, they are less modern than he is. In his own country, Hardy, the founder of the modern drama in France, survived until Molière was nine; Corneille, born fourteen years before him, lived eleven years after him; and Rotrou, born eleven years earlier, did not die till Molière was twenty-eight. La Fontaine was less than a year older than Molière, and Pascal was a year younger. Mme. de Sévigné was four years his junior, and Bossuet was born a year after the incomparable letter-writer. Boileau, always Molière's steadfast friend, was fourteen years younger; and Racine (whose first steps in the theater Molière was to encourage, as he was to bring out also two of the final efforts of the aging Corneille) was seventeen years his junior. Louis XIV himself was born sixteen years after Molière; and his reign covers that splendid epoch of French history and of French literature which extends from the rule of Richelieu almost to the fatal revocation of the Edict of Nantes.

II

Molière's father, Jean Poquelin, was born in 1595. He became a prosperous tradesman, an upholsterer and furniture-maker; and in 1631 he succeeded to an appointment as one of the king's eight *valets de chambre tapissiers*, to whom was committed the care of all the royal furniture and furnishings. Two of these officials were in constant attendance, serving in their turn for a quarter of the year, whether the monarch was residing in one of his palaces or going on a journey or to a campaign. These appointments could be held only by tradesmen of character and prominence; they conferred upon the holders the right to call themselves knights; and like most of the other offices in the royal household they could be sold or transferred by contract. It was in 1621 that Jean Poquelin married Marie Cressé, the daughter of another upholsterer and furniture-maker. The husband took his bride to his house in the rue St. Honoré on the corner of the rue des Vieilles-Etuves —a house destroyed only at the beginning of the nineteenth century. This dwelling, distinguished by a corner-post carved with climbing monkeys, stood on the site of the building numbered 76, which now bears a commemorative panel. Like most tradesmen in those days, Molière's father lived over his shop; and there in the first half of January, 1622, the eldest son was born. The exact date is uncertain, but the child was baptized on January 15, probably only a day or two at most after his birth. His paternal grandfather was his godfather.

Business was thriving and the household was well-to-do. The bride had brought a comfortable dowry. Of her character we know little, except that she possessed a Bible and a Plutarch. She bore five other children, of whom three survived her—a second son, also christened Jean, a third named Nicholas, and a daughter Madeleine, who was only five years old when the mother died, in 1633. The inventory taken at her death catalogues not only her clothing, her jewelry and her household linen, but also the abundant stock on hand in the shop. Almost exactly a year after her death her husband remarried, only to lose his second wife three years later, after she had borne him two more daughters, half-sisters of the future Molière. These brothers and sisters seem to have played small parts in the poet's later life, after he broke away from his family and went on the stage. From his mother he inherited five thousand livres, a goodly sum in those days; and this is proof that trade had been satisfactory during the eleven years of her married life.

In the same year that he remarried, Molière's father bought a house in the colonnade of the market, the Piliers des Halles, near the rue de la Réale (now the rue du Pont-neuf). Molière was only eleven years old when he lost his mother (as Voltaire was only seven when the same misfortune befell him); and it might be interesting to speculate on the effect this loss may have had upon the development of his character,—perhaps we can find here one reason why there is in his plays a notable absence of maternal love. He was only twelve when his father remarried and only fifteen when his stepmother died; here again we might question whether this second marriage of his father had any significant influence upon Molière's development. There is danger always in trying to cast light on the life of a dramatist by the characters and by the situations we may find in his plays; and in this case the attempt is impossible, since Molière has twice introduced a stepmother, once in 'Tartuffe,' where she is on the best of terms with her stepchildren, once again in the 'Malade Imaginaire,' where she is a self-seeking and hypocritical intriguer.

It was not until after the death of his stepmother that he was sent to school. He was about fifteen; and in all probability he had already served his apprenticeship to his father's trade, to which he was expected to succeed. Perhaps even at that early age the lad's thoughts were beginning to turn to the theater; at least there is a legend that his maternal grandfather, Cressé, who survived until Molière was sixteen, had delighted in taking the boy to see farce-actors of the time. It may be noted that the most amusing of them all, Tabarin, died only in 1633 and that another, Turlupin, lived until 1637. What is certain is that Molière's youth was passed in comfortable circumstances, and that his future seemed to be assured. His prosperous father was ready to give him the best possible education, to fit him to carry on the business and to acquit himself well in the honorable position near the person of the king. In 1637, six years after he had acquired the title of *valet de chambre tapissier du roi*, the elder Poquelin caused the reversion to be confirmed to his son. A few months earlier he had sent the lad to the foremost school then existing in Paris, the Collège de Clermont (now called the Lycée Louis-le-Grand), where he was to study for the next four or five years. The year when Molière probably entered the Collège de Clermont—1636—was the year in which Richelieu ceded to Louis XIII the sumptuous edifice now known as the Palais-Royal; it was the year in which Corneille produced his earliest masterpiece, the 'Cid,' which marked the dawn of a new day in the French drama; and it was also the year in which Descartes was privileged to publish in Holland his 'Discourse on Method,' the beginning of a new era in philosophy.

III

The Collège de Clermont was managed by the Jesuits; and Molière—like Calderon and Tasso, like Corneille and Goldoni, like Descartes and Montesquieu, Buffon and Voltaire—owed his training to those devoted instructors of youth. Their rigid program of studies, the famous *ratio studiorum*, had been finally promulgated in 1599, less than a quarter of a century before Molière was born; and it was in 1622, the year of Molière's birth, that Ignatius Loyola and Francis Xavier had been canonized. The school had been flourishing in the sixteenth century until the Jesuits were expelled from France, in 1574. They were allowed to return only in 1603; and the school was not reopened until 1618. The corner-stone of a new building was laid in 1628 and the edifice was completed in 1632, about four years before Molière first took his place on its benches. The Collège had quickly regained its prosperity; and it soon came to have two or three thousand scholars in attendance.

Instruction was given generally in Latin, although there was also careful training in the use of French. The pupils were expected to speak the Roman tongue even in conversation with each other. The teaching was oral and tutorial; and in the lower classes there was but little writing. Only in the higher classes were the pupils instructed in composition. The aim was first solidity of knowledge, and second flexibility of style,—although it has been charged that the former was often sacrificed to the latter. Special attention was paid to grammar and rhetoric, to the humanities and to philosophy; the masters held up as models were Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian. Verbal dexterity was highly esteemed; and the older students vied with the instructors in the effort to achieve elegance and euphony. Probably there was a tendency toward phrase-making and to the employment of mellifluous words for their own sake; but even this was a valuable gymnastic. The best pupils were made masters of the Latin language; and they studied the chief works of the leading Latin authors. The severe training in philosophy, as that was then understood, could not but broaden the mind and make its action swifter and suppler.

The Collège de Clermont had a teaching staff of nearly three hundred; and it received some four hundred boarders, including many boys of the best blood in France. The Prince of Conti, for example, the younger brother of the great Condé, was entered two years after Molière. We do not know whether Molière was only a day-scholar or whether he lived in one of the boarding-houses for pupils, of which there were several, more or less under the control of the school authorities; probably he resided at home, as the Jesuit institution, although it was on the other side of the Seine, was less than a mile from his father's house. Nor do we know with certainty how long he was a pupil of the Jesuits or exactly what his studies were. Probably he remained at college for four or five years at least, until he was eighteen or nineteen. His earliest biographer, La Grange, in the brief notice prefixed to the first edition of his collected plays, asserted that "the success of his studies was what might have been expected from a genius as happy as his," and also that "if he was a good humanist, he did even better in philosophy." The instruction in philosophy was based on the 'Logic,' the 'Ethics' and the 'Physics' of Aristotle and on the 'Institutes' of Porphyry. There is in Molière's comedies abundant evidence of his thorough training in the peripatetic philosophy; he became master not only of its vocabulary but also of its modes of thought.

Equally obvious is his acquaintance with the plays of Plautus and Terence. "The inclination he had for poetry," so La Grange declared, "made him apply himself particularly to the poets; and he possessed them perfectly." By the poets, the biographer meant, in all likelihood, the the Latin poets chiefly, since Molière's acquaintance with Greek is less apparent. It was perhaps while he was still on the benches of the Collège de Clermont that he undertook a translation of Lucretius, a few lines of which he utilized in the 'Misanthrope.' But we do not know how far he carried this task and whether it was ever more than the project of an ambitious schoolboy—although another contemporary translator of Lucretius informs us that Molière retained his interest in this undertaking, even in the busy years of his theatrical management, revising his translation constantly and trying certain passages in several ways. There is no doubt that he found in the Roman poet a kindred soul and that his own attitude toward the insistent problems of life is not unlike that of Lucretius. It may be noted as an interesting coincidence that Molière's younger contemporary, Dryden, had also a great liking for the austere Latin poet.

What is beyond all question also is that Molière's tendency toward the theater, if it had already shown itself, would not have been discouraged by the education he received. The Jesuits had always trained their pupils in declamation and even in acting. The rules required the annual performance of a tragedy written by the professor of poetry, accompanied by a lighter piece written by the professor of rhetoric. These plays, tragic and comic, were in Latin, of course; and they were intended to give the students experience and facility in the oral use of that tongue. The rules also forbade female characters and any love-interest whatsoever; and they prescribed subjects taken from the scriptures or from the annals of the church. Sometimes a play of Plautus was substituted for the original effort of a professor, more often a play of Terence. Although these comedies might be modified to suit a school-performance, the prohibition of female characters was not always enforced.

A Latin tragedy was acted in 1641 before Richelieu in his palace by the noble pupils of the Jesuits, the Prince de Conti being one of the performers. In the Collège itself the performances were given in a large court between three buildings, a stage being erected at one end and three galleries at the other. An awning covered the court; and the windows of the adjoining buildings served as private boxes. Admission tickets could be purchased; and the performances were evidently much relished by fashionable society. Probably the more serious Latin plays were not as attractive as the ballets which often accompanied them and in which the Jesuits took special pride. These ballets were not unlike the English masques which Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones devised for the delight of King James and his consort. They represented an allegoric or mythologic theme; and they did not demand the terpsichorean agility which we now associate with the idea of the ballet. Yet they called for not a little formal dancing, and the Jesuits paid great attention to this part of their educational scheme. After the Opéra had been established by Louis XIV, the authorities of the Collège de Clermont engaged its ballet-masters to instruct their pupils and to take charge of the ballets given in the school.

IV

We have no record that Molière took part either in the ballets of the Jesuits or in their Latin comedies and tragedies; but it is not at all improbable that he acted in some of the performances which were given while he was a student. It is also likely that while he was still a pupil of the Jesuits he formed his friendship with a group of clever young fellows, with some of whom he was to be closely knit for the rest of his life. One of these was the eccentric poet, Cyrano de Bergerac. Another was Bernier, the future traveler, afterward the physician of an Indian king. And a third was the gay good-liver Chapelle, who went through life lightly and carelessly. Even in their youth they were all frank and independent, in this respect fit companions for Molière; and, like him, they kept up to the end the habit of doing their own thinking.

Cyrano de Bergerac preserved his outspoken individuality as long as he lived; and Bernier, on his return from his far voyages, had the courage to answer a question of Louis XIV as to the happiest country he had visited with the unexpected assertion that it was Switzerland. Chapelle was the one whose friendship with Molière seems to have been most intimate; he was the illegitimate son of Lullier, the financier, who finally adopted him formally. Lullier, as it happened, was a friend of Gassendi, and he invited that philosopher to stay with him in Paris in 1641—the year when Molière was probably finishing his studies at the Collège de Clermont and when he had probably already formed the acquaintance of Chapelle.

Gassendi was a man of wide rather than deep learning. He was a correspondent of Galileo and of Kepler. Interested in every branch of science, he taught philosophy at one time and at another mathematics. Although always circumspect and tactful he was no respecter of tradition or of authority, being always more or less in advance of his time; and to many, no doubt, he seemed an iconoclast. The discoveries of Copernicus, Galileo and Kepler had convinced him of the inadequacy of the Ptolemaic system, still accepted absolutely, not only by the Jesuits but by nearly all who were then charged with the instruction of youth. He had an intense admiration for Lucretius, and he was then at work on his 'Apology for Epicurus.' He brought forward again the Epicurean theory of the constitution of matter, which has become the basis of modern physics. In return for Lullier's hospitality he seems to have given private instruction to Chapelle and to Chapelle's young comrades; and to these lessons, which could not fail to be suggestive and stimulating, Molière was admitted (so we are informed by his second biographer, Grimarest). How formal this teaching may have been we do not know, or whether it amounted to more than the privilege of listening to the philosopher's talk. Possibly it was Gassendi who first awakened Molière's interest in Lucretius. Possibly, also, Gassendi's habit of girding at the medical practitioners may have called Molière's attention to the pretentious arrogance of the doctors of his day. Certainly, the association with Gassendi could but exert a broadening influence upon the young pupil of the Jesuit fathers, opening his eyes to many things that the tutors of the Collège de Clermont would surely have kept from him. This must have been a critical epoch in his career, when he was finishing his studies with the Jesuits and at the same time profiting by the free and easy conversation of his ardent young friends, who were detached from prejudice and encouraged to bold speculation by the guidance of the unpedantic Gassendi.

It has been suggested that it was then Molière felt for the first time the attraction of the theater and that he helped Cyrano de Bergerac to sketch out one or more of the farces the ingenious Gascon was later to bring out on the stage; and it is a fact that from one of these farces Molière afterward took over one episode in the 'Fourberies de Scapin,' justifying his borrowing with the famous phrase, "I take my own where I find it."

V

But there is no reason to suppose that at this time, 1641, Molière had decided to write plays for a living or to go on the stage as an actor. The elder Poquelin was then a thriving tradesman; and in spite of the fact that the reversion of his post as *valet de chambre tapissier* had been confirmed to his son, he was apparently ambitious to have his first-born rise out of the burgher class and become a member of one of the learned professions. For medicine, Molière certainly had no liking. For theology, his call seems equally doubtful; and yet his gossiping contemporary, Tallement des Réaux, has asserted that Molière was for a season a student at the Sorbonne, the training-school for the church. It is unfortunate that, although our information as to the later and more important years of Molière's life is abundant and exact, there are still many obscure points in the history of his youth. Tallemant is not always a trustworthy witness, and it is probable that he blunders in making this assertion. Yet there is undeniable piquancy in the possibility that the future author of 'Tartuffe' may have begun to prepare himself for the church, even if he speedily changed his mind and gave up the uncongenial and inappropriate task.

Although it remains unlikely that Molière ever seriously undertook the study of theology, there is reason to believe that he did begin the study of law and even that he may have been admitted to the bar. In those days, as in our own time, the law was a profession that might lead to many a post of honor; and there is no improbability in the suggestion that Molière may never have intended to practise and that he mastered the principles of law only as a preparation for some other calling. We have no record of his matriculation at any law-school or of his admission to the bar; and yet his legal studies may be considered as beyond dispute. They are affirmed both by La Grange and Grimarest; and the latter declared that Molière's family was the authority for the assertion. The statement has been made that Molière took his law degree at Orléans, convoyed there by his father. At that time and in that place degrees were bestowed very liberally; and to those who were ready to pay the fees the stated residence was rarely insisted upon. The applicant was required only to maintain a thesis, upon a topic of his own choice; and even this formality might be filled for him by some good-natured and well-equipped friend. The ease with which a license might be obtained is amusingly described in the memoirs of Charles Perrault, who passed the examination at Orléans late on the evening of his arrival; this was in 1651, ten years after Molière is believed to have been admitted as a licentiate in law; and from Perrault's account it would seem that the diploma was practically sold to any applicant who was ready with the cash.

Additional evidence in favor of Molière's having studied the intricacies of the law may be found abundantly in his plays, in which he frequently employs legal technicalities, and in which he reveals his familiarity not only with the vocabulary of the courts but with their procedure also. His acquaintance with the principles and the practice of jurisprudence is both deeper and more exact than Shakspere's. The English dramatist dealt with law very freely indeed, bending it to his bidding, in accord with the necessities of the story he was handling and never hesitating to make use of quibbles, which a real court would have been very unlikely to countenance. The French dramatist thought in lawyer-like fashion and he took no liberties with code or with custom.

It must be noted, however, that the evidence drawn from in Molière's comedies does not carry as much weight as it might if he had shown his technical knowledge only in dealing with legal questions, since a little study makes it clear that he is almost equally expert in his use of the terminology of the other sciences, philosophy, for one, and medicine, for another. Apparently he took pride in the precision of the technical terms he put into the mouths of his characters, making it a matter of conscience to get the best professional advice, whenever he had to deal with an art or a science that he did not himself possess.

VI

If Molière received a law diploma at Orléans—or at Bourges, which has also been mentioned as the university where he made his legal studies—this must have been in 1641, after he had left the Collège de Clermont. And in 1642, there was a tragic event in the history of France of which Molière may have been a witness. In January, Louis XIII set out on a journey to the south of France, from which he did not return until late in July. The king's favorite, Cinq-Mars, was then engaged in a conspiracy to overthrow Richelieu; and in this he had enlisted the king's brother, Gaston d'Orléans. He had also a secret treaty with Spain, which pledged him the aid of a Spanish army. The cardinal was fully informed of the plot, but he bided his time until he could put into the king's hands a copy of the treaty which proved the treachery of the favorite. It was at Narbonne on May twelfth that Cinq-Mars was suddenly arrested, to be executed exactly four months thereafter.

In all the travels of the king there were in attendance on his person two of the eight *valets de chambres tapissiers*, whose duty it was to see to the comfort of the monarch wherever he might tarry. The quarterly term of service of Molière's father extended from the beginning of April to the end of June; it was during these three months that the arrest of Cinq-Mars took place. A *valet de chambre tapissier* had the privilege of substitution; he could get one of his colleagues to take his place. He could also send in his stead his future successor, the possessor of the survivorship of the post. In those days such a journey on such a duty was fatiguing; and a prolonged absence from the shop at home might be very inconvenient. Molière's father, who was getting on in years and who had a family of motherless children, may have had good reason to delegate his son instead of going himself; and he may well have thought that this early association with the sovereign could not but be advantageous to a well-educated young fellow of twenty. Furthermore, documents have been discovered which prove that the elder Poquelin was actually in Paris on the third of July; as his term of service did not come to an end until the first of that month he could not have returned to the capital from Lyons (where the king then was) in two days.

Grimarest is formal in his assertion that Molière "made the Narbonne journey in the train of the king." In April, and again in June, Louis XIII spent the night in the little town of Sigean, where the members of his household were lodged with a wealthy citizen named Dufort; and later in Molière's career we find him on friendly terms with this Dufort; to whom he was even under pecuniary obligations—a fact which possibly points to an earlier meeting. One narrator of the event immediately preceding the arrest of Cinq-Mars has told us that the frightened conspirator was hidden for a little while in a dark closet by a "young *valet de chambre* of the king." Of course, we have no right to accept this uncorroborated statement and to believe that this young *valet de chambre*, moved by sudden pity for a man in danger of his life, was Molière. But a weighing of all the evidence leads to the belief that in all probability Molière was a member of the king's household when Richelieu unmasked the conspiracy. It may be noted also that in Alfred de Vigny's historical novel, 'Cinq-Mars'—which seemingly served as the basis of Lord Lytton's long popular play, 'Richelieu'—the poet saw fit to introduce as minor characters in an earlier scene of the story not only Molière, but also Milton, then returning home from a visit to Italy.

VII

Whether Molière did or did not act as [illegible]ther's substitute in the spring of 1642 and make t[illegible]e to Narbonne in the train of the king, we know th[illegible]d not much longer aspire to the succession to his father's business. It was at that time, just as he was about to attain to man's estate, that he felt the lure of the theater to be irresistible and that he decided to go on the stage. For a little while after the execution of Cinq-Mars, Molière may have aided his father in the shop, or he may even have begun to practise as a lawyer; but not for long did he engage in these tasks which were becoming more and more uncongenial. It was in the first month of 1643, when he was just turned twenty-one, that his intention of giving up his father's trade and of striking out for himself was made manifest by a formal act. He ceded back to his father the right to dispose of the survivorship of the royal appointment as *valet de chambre tapissier*. And in July, only six months later, another formal act proves that he had chosen his new calling; he enrolled himself in a little band of actors. It cannot be said that he gave up law for literature, as Corneille had done and as Boileau was to do, since he seems in these years of his youth to have had no ambition for authorship.

His vocation may have been the delayed result of the boyish visits made with his grandfather to the farce-actors of his youth. It may have been stimulated by the tragedies and comedies and ballets of his school-days. It may have been intensified by contact with the strolling performers who enlivened the annual Fair of St. Germain, where his father always opened a branch shop for a few weeks in every year. It may have been heightened by admiration for the brisk and adroit Italian comedians then appearing in Paris, under the leadership of Tibero Fiorelli, the famous Scar[illegible]e (for whose portrait La Fontaine was later to rim[illegible]ain, declaring that nature had been his teacher as h[illegible]een Molière's). It may have been nourished by attendance at the two theaters then established in Paris, the Hôtel de Bourgogne and its younger rival, the playhouse in the Marais. It may have been encouraged by the royal edict of two years earlier, relieving actors from the outlawry which had oppressed them for years. It may have been due in some measure to the emulation excited by the growing fame of Corneille, who had produced in 1640 'Cinna,' 'Horace' and 'Polyeucte,' and in 1642 the 'Menteur,' the most popular of his comedies. It may even have had a simpler cause, a love affair with an actress, Madeleine Béjart, with whom he was to be closely associated for more than a score of years. Whatever might be the origin of the call, he heard it clearly and he obeyed. It was in 1643 that he cast in his lot with the company of players of which Madeleine Béjart was the chief, and that he entered on the first stage of the career which was to make him the best comic actor of his time and the foremost comic dramatist of all time.

For this career he was better fitted than the majority of the ambitious young fellows who are always ready to knock at the stage-door, believing it to be the portal of the temple of fortune. He had grown to manhood in a comfortable home and he had received an excellent education. The circumstances of his youth were not unlike Shakspere's; but his schooling had been far more thorough, and by his training he was better equipped for literature.

His turning to the theater in his early manhood may have been due to a woman, as Shakspere's may have been, with the significant difference that Molière was following a woman older than himself with whom he may have fallen in love, and that Shakspere was possibly seeki[illegible]her to get away from a woman older than himself wh[illegible]e had married. Like Shakspere, once more, Molière was to spend years in obscure struggle, wrestling with poverty and serving an arduous apprenticeship to a difficult art. Probably Molière's years of youthful striving were even less pleasant than Shakspere's; and certainly his period of probation lasted longer.

CHAPTER II

HIS APPRENTICESHIP AND HIS WANDERINGS

I

It was soon after he became a professional actor that Jean Baptiste Poquelin followed the practice of the time and took a stage-name. Why he chose to call himself Molièr[illegible] do not know; and Grimarest asserted that he would [illegible] explain the reason for this choice "even to his best friends." The name, it may be noted, was borne by at least one other person more or less connected with the theater—a musician of little importance.

In the beginning, for a brief season, Molière seems to have acted only as an amateur, if we may believe the account Grimarest has given us. "It was often the custom at that time," so this biographer asserted, "for a group of friends to act plays. A few citizens of Paris made up a company to which Molière belonged. They acted several times for their own amusement. Then having sufficiently enjoyed themselves, and convinced that they were good actors, they determined to make money by their performances." And therefore they resolved to establish themselves in a tennis-court owned by a man named Métayer, and situated near the Porte de Nesle.

Just as the strolling actors in England in Shakspere's youth were wont to perform in the court-yard of an inn, building out a stage from under the rear gallery, so the strolling actors in France in Molière's youth were accustomed to perform in a tennis-court, which could be transformed into an acceptable theater by the erection of a shallow stage at one end. Tennis-courts were admirably adapted for theatrical use; they were weather-tight halls, generally a little more than a hundred feet long and a little less than forty feet wide. They had galleries which could be divided into boxes for the ladies, for whose use there were sometimes erected a few tiers of seats at the back of the hall. The main body of male spectators stood on the open floor; and the stage was raised breast-high, often protected by a stout balustrade across the front. A few of the better sort of playgoers were accommodated with seats on the stage itself—a device for increasing the receipts of the performance which had first been employed [illegible] France in consequence of the overwhelming popularity of Corneille's 'Cid,' and which had its equivalent also in the English theater in Shakspere's time. The space left for the actors must have been unduly confined whenever there chanced to be a rush to see a new play. Often there was no scenery, but only a few hangings at the back and sides; and it was by parting the openings in these curtains that the actors made their entrances and their exits. The stage was ill-lighted by a few candles placed in sconces against the hangings and also on rude wooden chandeliers suspended over the front of the stage above the heads of the actors. When performances could be given under these primitive conditions it did not take long to transform a tennis-court into a theater; and the list of these transformations is endless. Indeed, so convenient was this method of making a playhouse that the practice persisted in France well into the nineteenth century, as late as the reign of Louis Philippe, when the tennis-court in the palace of Compiègne was made available for theatrical performances.

When the little company of amateur actors, of which Molière was a member, decided to become professionals, they organized in accordance with another custom of the time. In France, in Molière's day, as in England, in Shakspere's, a theatrical enterprise was rarely if ever the speculation of a single manager who was responsible for all the risks of the undertaking and who pocketed all the profits, as is the practice now. The chief performers were then their own managers, and their venture was co-operative. Chappuzeau, in his contemporary account of the French theaters in the seventeenth century, notes that although the actors "loved monarchy in the state, they rejected it in their own organization." All the leading tragedians and comedians, male and female, were equal sharers in the risks and in the profits, taking no salaries themselves, but paying wages to a few humbler assistants. This was the system under which the Globe Theater in London was governed when Shakspere was a sharer. This is still the system, only a little modified, to be found now at the Thèâtre Français in Paris—the Comédie-Française being the direct descendant of the little company of comedians which Molière helped to constitute in 1643, on the thirtieth of June.

It was also a custom in those days for a company of actors to bestow a sonorous and grandiloquent name on their organization; and Molière and his associates chose to entitle themselves the Illustre Théâtre. By good fortune the articles of association still exist; and from this document we learn that there were ten sharers, that all matters of importance were to be decided in general assembly, that no partner should withdraw without giving four months' notice; that Madeleine Béjart was to have the right of choosing the parts she might prefer, and that the heroes were to be taken alternatively by Molière and by two other leading performers. This last clause has an importance of its own, since it shows that Molière, who was later to be acknowledged as the foremost comic actor of the time, had not yet discovered where his genius lay, and that he aspired at first to heroic characters in serious plays. Perhaps this aspiration was due in the beginning to a desire to play opposite parts to Madeleine Béjart; but whatever its origin, it survived the long years of strolling, since we shall find him, even after the return of the company to Paris, attempting unsuccessfully the heroic character in his own romantic play 'Don Garcie de Navarre.' It is significant that the best portrait we have of Molière, that painted by his friend, Pierre Mignard, represents him in the tragic character of César in Corneille's 'Mort de Pompée.' It is a fact, frequently observed in the history of the stage, that comedians, however richly endowed with humor, often long for a chance to reveal themselves in pathetic, and even in tragic, characters. From this error of judgment apparently not even Molière was exempt, in spite of all his insight into human weakness.

II

Perhaps it is not quite accurate to describe the company of the Illustre Théâtre as consisting entirely of ambitious amateurs. One of the actors who was to divide the heroes with Molière was the brother of an actress, and he may very likely have had occasion to appear professionally. Assuredly, Madeleine Béjart was no novice; although then only twenty-five years of age, she had already acquired the theatrical experience which justified her claim to the choice of parts; and perhaps the elder of her brothers may also have seen service on the stage. But Molière himself was one of the amateurs; however rich in ambition, he was poor in experience. Although he was far better educated than any of the others, and although in time he rose to be the chief of the company, by force of character and ability, there is no doubt that at the start the dominant figure in the little band was Madeleine Béjart. She was the mainspring of the enterprise in all the early years of disheartening struggle. The other signers of the original contract of association might drop out and be replaced by newcomers, but the Béjarts, two sisters and two brothers, clung together, and Molière clung to them.

In many ways Madeleine Béjart was a remarkable woman. She was at least passably good looking, with luxuriant red hair. She became an excellent actress, winning the praise of La Fontaine, for one. She wrote verse not inferior to the average of French poetry at that time. She may even have composed a comedy or two. She was the daughter of a man of affairs, connected with the law; from him she seems to have inherited her clear head and her capacity for business. Certainly she had a full share of that shrewd common sense which is not unusual in French women. Various documents reveal that she managed the money affairs of the little company, and also those of Molière; that she did this with skill and with success is proved by the little fortune she was able to leave at her death, and by the ample means enjoyed by Molière in the later years of his life. Yet she had failed to manage her own life satisfactorily; five years before the organization of the Illustre Théâtre, when she was only a girl of twenty, she had borne an illegitimate daughter to the Comte de Modène, a rakish adventurer, who had soon left Paris in attendance on the Duke de Guise. As her lover had separated from his wife, who was known to be in failing health, and who died a few years later, it is likely that Madeleine Béjart had hoped to become a countess.

While they were waiting for Métayer's tennis-court to be made ready for them, the company of the Illustre Théâtre went down the Seine to Rouen and played there during the fair which began in October. Corneille was still residing in his native city; and Molière may then have made the acquaintance of the elder poet, two of whose later plays he was to produce more than a score of years thereafter. He may also have essayed more than one of the lyric heroes of Corneille's tragedies, then in the springtime of their success. He may even have acted in the 'Menteur,' which had opened a new vein in French comedy, that Molière was to cultivate himself in the years to come. But this is mere conjecture; and we have now no means of knowing whether or not the little band of actors prospered in this first engagement at Rouen.

Before the end of the year they were back in Paris; and in the first month of 1644 they opened the doors of the theater which had been made ready for them. The new organization had rivals long established in popular favor, the older companies at the Hôtel de Bourgogne and at the theater in the Marais. Very likely the young actors were not yet expert in their art, and assuredly they had not yet won public favor. Pretty certainly they were unable to bring out new plays by favorite authors, although they did what they could, buying pieces from du Ryer and from Tristan l'Hermite, and taking into the company an actor-playwright, Desfontaines, whose dramas they produced. Possibly also the situation of the theater was not well selected. Whatever the reasons, the enterprise failed, in spite of the fact that the associates acquired the right to entitle themselves the "comedians of the Duke of Orleans." It was the custom then in France, as it had been in England under the Tudors, for a company of actors to put themselves under the patronage of some great noble; the actors of the Hôtel de Bourgogne claimed the protection of the king himself.

The members of the Illustre Théâtre soon came to believe that the cause of their misfortune was the unsatisfactory situation of their theater; and at the end of the year they were able to cancel the lease. Early in 1645 they took possession of another tennis-court, that known as the Croix-Noire, which was not far from the Place Royale, and therefore nearer to the more aristocratic quarter of the city. But their bad luck followed them across the Seine; and they soon got deeper and deeper into debt. As the son of a prosperous tradesman, Molière had pledged his own credit for money owed; and in the middle of the summer, only two years after he had gone on the stage, he was arrested for various debts and locked up in the Grand-Châtelet. Here he remained for nearly a week; and he was set free at last only when a certain Aubry, with whom the Illustre Théâtre had had business dealings, agreed to stand security for the amount due. That the company continued in difficulties is shown by the fact that eighteen months after Molière's arrest, his father had to agree to indemnify Aubry, and that this debt was not cleared until 1649, long after the Illustre Théâtre had departed from Paris.

At last the ambitious young actors saw the futility of their attempt to establish themselves in rivalry with the two older companies; and they resolved to leave the capital and to see if provincial audiences might not be less exacting and more cordial. They had ceased to entitle themselves the "comedians of the Duke of Orleans." They were fewer in number than when they began; some of the original associates had deserted; and other performers, who had been welcomed in their ranks, had withdrawn after a brief experience. But the Béjart family was steadfast; and so was Molière.

He was now twenty-five, in the full strength of young manhood. With his native gift for acting, he had undoubtedly made rapid progress in the art of which he was later to be received as the chief ornament. Apparently he had shown no ambition as yet to become a playwright; he seems to have been content then to be only a player, probably practising himself rather in serious than in comic parts. He had been growing, not only in skill, but in authority; and his force of character, his shrewdness and his faculty for winning friends, were beginning to make themselves felt. His position in the little band was more important at the end of their stay in the capital than it had been when the company was originally organized.

The three years in Paris must have matured him and made him more resourceful. It was a stern apprenticeship; and it fitted him to undergo the adventures and the misadventures of the next twelve years, while he was strolling in the provinces, visiting the city of his birth only at rare intervals. From this inglorious wandering he was to come back, long before he was forty, an accomplished comedian and the chief of a company of highly trained actors, all devoted to him personally; he was to return ripe for the swift outflowering of his genius as a comic dramatist.

III

There were then a dozen or fifteen companies of actors traveling from one town to another. Several of these were more or less prosperous, settled in one or another of the chief provincial cities, from which they made frequent excursions into the neighboring country. Others had hard work to win a bare living and were often on the verge of disbanding in disgust. Few of them can have been as small in numbers or as poverty-stricken as the little band whose exploits and misfortunes are recorded in the 'Roman Comique,' the first part of which appeared in 1651 and the second in 1657, while Molière and his companions were still undergoing trials like those that befell the chief figures in the novel. In spite of its farce and its caricature, Scarron's story must be accepted as a fairly veracious portrayal of the existing conditions of a strolling player's career. This was a life of many privations, of many hardships and humiliations, of constant uncertainty and of occasional prosperity. We can see proof of Molière's adroitness and of his good judgment in the fact that after he became its chief the company, which had left Paris discouraged by defections and laden with debt, was able to gain the favor of the public, to win a wide reputation, and to acquire a comfortable reserve of money.

Although the theater had not been held respectable in the later Middle Ages and in the earlier Renascence, partly because of the violence and the crudity of its representations, it had risen in public esteem during Molière's youth. Especially had it been in less disrepute since Richelieu had honored it with his august protection and had even condescended to compose plays himself, for the performance of which he had built a sumptuous theater. The stage was attracting to itself as actors men of better character and more education, such as Molière himself; and the acted drama was regarded as more worthy of consideration since Rotrou and Corneille had lifted it into literature.

And yet most of the professional actors wandering through the provinces were little better than miserable wretches, ever on the ragged edge of poverty and rarely deserving a better fate. The performances given by these strollers were often inexcusably careless in tragedy and undeniably vulgar in comedy. Only infrequently did a company appear capable of presenting a serious play worthily and of acting a comedy without offence; and when it arrived unheralded in a new town, it had to overcome the prejudice left by less artistic and less conscientious predecessors. If it had the good fortune to approve itself and to win general approbation, it might be called upon to appear in the palace of the governor or to give a series of performances while the provincial assembly was in session, for which services it would be amply rewarded. But even when it had established its character and compelled recognition by its merits, it was dependent on the caprice of the civil authorities; and it might meet with the hostility of the clergy, who often forbade theatrical performances of all kinds during the long weeks of Lent. It was expected to give its services freely and frequently for charity, for the relief of the poor and for the support of the sick. Its members were regarded as vagabonds, having no social standing and no right of privacy. In the pages of Scarron's story we can see how bores of all sorts felt themselves at liberty to intrude into the greenroom and even into the private apartments of the performers.

This was the life Molière was to lead for twelve years, slowly acquiring such renown as the provinces could confer, slowly paying off the debts which had driven him from Paris, and slowly accumulating the reserve funds which might enable him to risk a return to the capital. That he visited Paris more than once during this long exile we know. He had to be there sometimes to attend to matters of business; and he may have had to go back on occasion to engage new members of the company, since it was at the capital that theatrical recruits could best be enlisted.

The record of the wanderings of the little company is not complete, although a tireless search has been made in the archives of many towns and in all sorts of law-papers preserved in the offices of notaries—marriage-contracts, baptismal records, death-certificates and the like; through these recent investigations our knowledge as to Molière's travels has been made far fuller than it was a few years ago. At first the company went to the west; and in 1647 they appeared at Bordeaux, then entitling themselves "the comedians of the Duke of Epernon." In 1648 they were at Nantes; and they also played at various places in the Vendée. Then they made their way further south; and in 1649 they performed at Toulon, at Limoges and at Angoulême. In 1650 they were for a while at Narbonne; and in 1652 they acted at Lyons, which was to be the center of their activities for the remaining years of their exile from Paris.

In the seventeenth century Lyons was relatively more important than it is in the twentieth. Its inhabitants had the southern relish for the theater, and they had delighted in the improvised plays of the Italian actors, who exhibited their ingenuity and their activity in the semi-acrobatic, semi-pantomimic comedy-of-masks. Perhaps it was because he had seen the unfailing popularity of these robust and boisterous Italian farces that Molière was led to take his first steps into dramatic authorship, by writing farces of his own of the same unpretending type, modelled closely upon Italian originals. Although they are but trifles, obvious imitations of Italian pieces, they reveal his instinct for theatrical effect. These modest attempts taught him how to put a play together so as to arouse and to hold the interest of an audience.

It was at Lyons that he first ventured on a more ambitious effort and produced the first play that he considered worthy of his signature. This was the 'Etourdi,' a comedy in five acts in rimed alexandrines; its structure shows the strong influence of the Italian comedy-of-masks, an influence which was to be evident to the very end of his career as a dramatist. In this same year, 1653, Molière and his comrades were authorized to style themselves "the comedians of the Prince of Conti." This brother of the great Condé, seven years younger than the dramatist, had been his school-fellow during the last months of Molière's attendance at the Collège de Clermont. At the time when he conferred his patronage on the company he was a wild young fellow, leading a scandalous life. Two years later he was converted; and his conversion was the cause of his insisting in 1657 that the actors should no longer bear his name. His religious fervor swelled until he was moved to write a diatribe against the theater, the 'Traité de la Comédie et des Spectacles,' published in 1667.

The company was now prosperous and its members were winning reputation. Madeleine Béjart was then rich enough to lend money to the province, perhaps her own and perhaps a part of the funds of the company. One of her brothers published a book on the heraldry of Languedoc. As they had no reason to leave the region where they were made welcome, the record reveals them in the next few years here and there in the same part of France. In 1654 they acted for a while at Montpellier; and in 1655 they are found at Pézénas. It was at Béziers in 1656 that Molière brought out his second play, the 'Dépit Amoureux,' also a comedy in five acts in verse. In this same year they were at Narbonne again; and the next year they visited Dijon, besides lingering once more for a while in Lyons. In 1658 they are known to have been at Grenoble. Their wanderings had then lasted twelve years and they were ready to return to Paris, where their reputation had preceded them and where they were to be warmly welcomed.

IV

During these years of Molière's provincial strolling many things had happened in France and in England. In Paris, in 1649, the first volume of the most popular tale of the time had been published, Scudéry's 'Grand Cyrus,' the tenth and final tome of which appeared in 1653; and in 1657 the Abbé d'Aubignac had put forth his 'Pratique du Théâtre,' a code of laws for all aspiring dramatic poets. In 1651, Louis XIV, then only thirteen, was declared to have attained his majority; and in 1654 he was crowned at Rheims. In this coronation year the elder Poquelin ceded his business to his second son; and a year later one of Molière's half-sisters took the veil. And in 1656 Port Royal was closed by royal edict, a triumph for the Jesuits, a fatal check to the Jansenists.

Although the Thirty Years War had come to an end in 1648, with the cession of Alsace to France, there had been constant intriguing and insurrection, which almost threatened the throne itself. Richelieu was dead; and during the minority of Louis XIV the adroit and avaricious

Mazarin ruled France by the grace of Anne of Austria, the queen regent, and in spite of his increasing unpopularity. Those were the weary years of the Fronde, the pettiest and meanest of civil wars, but not the least destructive and calamitous. It began as a guerrilla strife of epigrams and pamphlets, a faction fight of powerful nobles, and even of princes of the royal blood, who did not hesitate to conspire openly against the crown, gaily guilty of high treason and gladly enlisting the aid of foreign invaders. At first a mere paper warfare, it led soon to bloodshed and even to battles in the streets of the capital and to the devastation of the outlying country. In the year 1652, in the interval between the declaration of his majority and his coronation, Louis XIV had the humiliation of seeing the guns of a royal fortress, the Bastille, turned against the royal troops, when the insurgents were commanded by Condé and when the forces of the crown were under the orders of Turenne, who had himself been in armed revolt only two years earlier.

It was lucky for Molière and his companions that they had not lingered longer in Paris, and even that they had left Rouen and Bordeaux for the south. The territory around Paris and to the north and the west was grievously pillaged, first by one army and then by the other. The unpaid soldiers lived off the country and swept it bare, often maltreating and even torturing the unfortunate inhabitants. The tilling of the fields ceased and the peasants starved. Pestilence was the worst of camp-followers, as it was the most constant. At Rouen seventeen thousand perished in a single year. Farms went out of cultivation, sometimes for miles on end. Wide stretches of country were left unpopulated except by a few poor wretches hiding in the woods or living in caves. All this time the taxes were being increased remorselessly, and they were collected with pitiless ferocity. Mazarin kept Fouquet in charge of the finances and shared with him a portion of the moneys wrung from the helpless people. Fouquet himself declared that Mazarin had kept for his own pocket more than forty million livres. In many of the provinces agriculture was almost dead, manufactures were dying and commerce was decaying. The nation was worn out by this useless waste and by this suffering to no purpose; it was ready for the reforms of Colbert and for the rigorous autocracy of Louis XIV, whenever the death of Mazarin should leave the young king free to rule by himself and for himself.

Although Provence and Languedoc may not have suffered in these ignoble conspiracies as severely as Normandy, they were brought to the brink of ruin. Their peasants were pillaged and murdered by the partisans of both sides in turn; and in these provinces those in authority revealed themselves selfish and lawless. Molière must have seen many a crying denial of justice and many a bitter oppression revolting to his manhood. The memory of these misdeeds may have intensified the bitterness of the austere hero of his loftiest comedy, the 'Misanthrope,' the play in which the poet most amply expressed his melancholy and into which he put the most of himself. No account of the development of Molière's character and of his genius is adequate which does not allow full weight to the powerful impression made on him by the horrors he had been forced to witness in the hideous period of the Fronde.

V

These years of wandering, with all their vicissitudes and with their occasional spectacles of gloom, were years of arduous training for his future work. "In stillness talent forms itself, but character in the great current of the world," so Goethe declared; and although Molière was not in the capital he was never out of the great current of the world. Perhaps even his health was improved by his long sojourn, winter after winter, in the softer climate of the southern provinces, which must have been beneficial for that weakness of the chest from which he was to suffer increasingly after his return to Paris. Another benefit of these years of exile may be found in the friendships he formed, one of them with the painter, Pierre Mignard. Molière was good-humored and even-tempered, in spite of the melancholy which came to be his most marked characteristic; and he revealed early the gift for making friends, which was to gain for him his later intimacy with La Fontaine and Boileau.

As his character affirmed itself and as his powers ripened, he grew in authority, until the little band of strollers which had been called after Madeleine Béjart came to be known as the company of Molière. By force of personality and of varied ability he rose to be its chief, a leader to whom his comrades were devotedly attached and constantly loyal, often rejecting tempting proposals to join other companies. He proved to be possessed of the qualifications needed by a theatrical manager—qualifications far rarer than those of the actor or of the dramatist. He learned how to gage the taste of the playgoing public and how to retain its fickle approval. He acquired also the difficult art of the stage-director, finding out how to produce a new play so as to reveal its full value in the acting, and how to utilize every faculty latent in his actors. He became a marvelously successful trainer; one of his contemporaries asserted that he could make a stick act. He had ventured into playwriting, very modestly at first; in time he gained a mastery of its technic by actual experience, the only teacher that can impart the needful knowledge.

For dramatic authorship these years of wandering through France were the best possible preparation. Not only did they give him a wide acquaintance with playgoers of all sorts and of all degrees of culture, in towns and in villages, but they also brought him into contact with various ranks of society that he would never have met had he stayed in Paris. Born in the capital and familiar from his youth up with urban types of character, his strolling gave him an added knowledge of the peasants of several parts of France and of the inhabitants of several provincial towns—a knowledge broader and deeper than that of any contemporary author, most of whom had their horizon bounded by the walls of Paris or by the gates of Versailles. When Molière chose to depict a peasant girl or a country gentleman, he could draw on a store of personal observations not open to any other dramatist of his day. His equipment for comedy was astonishingly varied. As the son of a tradesman employing many artisans, he had a first-hand knowledge both of the burghers and of the working classes. As a pupil of the Jesuits, he had been privileged to see the ecclesiastics at their work. As a youthful substitute for his father as *valet de chambre* of the king, he may have had early occasion to observe the peculiarities of the courtiers; and his later opportunities for this were to be abundant after his return to Paris, when he had won the favor of the king and when he shared in the organization of the court spectacles.

Yet, valuable as his experience was to prove, the main advantage of Molière's twelve years' absence from Paris is to be found in the privilege it gave him of returning when his powers as an actor had ripened by constant practice and of revealing himself suddenly to audiences which had not been witnesses of the necessary hesitancies of his apprentice years.

For the tragic parts which he continued to impersonate almost to the end of his life, he lacked certain physical qualifications. He could not fairly be called good-looking; he was short and yet long-legged; his eyes were wide apart, his mouth was large with full lips. Of course, these defects were not disadvantageous in comedy, and they may even have been serviceable in certain of his more broadly comic characters. But they could hardly fail to interfere with his effectiveness as a heroic figure; and yet his long experience in undertaking serious parts may very well have given assurance and authority to his performances in comedy. As to the surpassing merit of these performances in comedy, the testimony of his contemporaries is unanimous. One of them declared that Molière "was all actor, from his feet to his head; it seemed as though he had several voices; everything in him spoke; and by a step, a smile, a glance of the eye or a shaking of the head he suggested more things than the greatest talker could have said in an hour."

There are many suggestive points of similarity between the careers and the characters of Molière and of Shakspere. As it happens they have both expressed their theories about the art of acting, Molière in the 'Impromptu de Versailles,' Shakspere in Hamlet's remarks to the Players. And it is pleasant to see that these two lessons in acting are in accord. Both actor-playwrights dwell specially on the duty of acting simply and sincerely, without exaggeration of voice and without vehemence of gesture. Perhaps we may discover here one reason why Molière failed to win popular approval as an actor of tragedy. The simple sincerity, which was appropriate in the performance of Shakspere's tragedies and of Molière's comedies, was not really appropriate in the performance of Corneille's tragedies, which were the chief vehicle for serious acting in France in Molière's early manhood. These loftily pitched pieces, lyric and fiery, did not lend themselves to his severely natural method; and in his performances of their fervid and exalted heroes his desire for veracity may have betrayed him. Certainly his method could not have been in compliance with the taste of his time, accustomed to the more emphatic acting to be seen at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, where tragedy was then held to be most fitly presented. Only at his peril can an actor go against the prejudice of his contemporaries. But even if Molière was unsuccessful in tragedy, he was triumphant in comedy.

VI

Molière was not only the best actor of his day, he was also one of the best speakers, always felicitous in the little addresses to the audience which it was then customary for one of the performers to make after every performance. The actor to whom this task was entrusted was called the "orator" of the company; and Molière had been promoted to this honorable post long before he returned to Paris. He seems to have delighted in the exercise of this function, always acquitting himself adroitly and effectively. In those days, before the newspaper had made publicity easy, the tact of the orator was most important to the prosperity of a theatrical enterprise. He was the press-agent of the company, so to speak; it was his province to preserve the good-will of the spectators and to excite their curiosity as to the delights which the company might have in store for them.

Molière's skill and ingenuity as the orator of the company was put to a severe test when the time came for them to return to Paris. They had left the capital after a disastrous failure to win the popularity there that they finally succeeded in acquiring abundantly in the provinces. Heavily in debt they had gone forth to wander; and they returned at last encouraged by prosperity, with rich costumes, with money in their pockets and out at interest, and with an approved repertory of plays. They had gone away little better than a band of ambitious amateurs; and they came back a company of accomplished comedians, having filled their ranks with recruits of varied talents.

The best account of all the circumstances of their return to the capital and of the success which attended their first performance before the king is to be found in the brief biographical sketch of Molière prefixed to the complete edition of his works, published seven years after his death, by his comrade, La Grange. This tells us that Molière's friends had advised him to draw near to Paris, settling the company in a neighboring city, so that he might profit by the credit his merit had won for him from various persons of distinction who felt kindly toward him. So the company left Grenoble, where they had been acting, and spent the summer at Rouen. In several private visits to Paris, Molière succeeded in gaining the protection of Monsieur, as the Duke of Anjou (the younger brother of the king) was entitled. The company was taken under the patronage of Monsieur, who commended it to the king and to the queen-mother. Its members came up from Rouen, and on

October twenty-fourth, 1658, it made its first appearance before their majesties, on a stage set up in the Louvre (in what is now known as the Hall of the Caryatides). The chief play was Corneille's 'Nicomède,' in which the actresses of the company seem to have carried off the chief honors. It is recorded that the performers of the Hôtel de Bourgogne were present, the company of the king himself, with which Molière and his companions were thereafter to engage in bitter competition.

When the tragedy was over Molière came forward on the stage, and after having very modestly thanked the king for the kindness with which his majesty had excused his defects and those of his company, who had all of them appeared trembling before so august an assembly, he asked humbly for permission to present one of the little interludes which had won him some reputation in the provinces. This compliment was so pleasantly turned that all the court applauded. A little farce, the 'Docteur Amoureux,' was then performed, to the delight of everybody, for this was a field in which Molière had to fear no rivalry. His performance in this little play, one of his own (and now lost), was so satisfactory that Louis XIV authorized the company to remain in Paris and accorded it the use of the royal theater in the Petit-Bourbon, which Molière and his companions were to share with the Italian comedians, playing on alternate nights. In this playhouse the newcomers made their first appearance on the third of November.

In Paris at this theater, or at another also belonging to the king, Molière was to remain with his company for the fifteen crowded years of life which were left to him. He had brought back with him half-a-dozen of his little farces and two rimed comedies in five acts, the 'Etourdi' and the 'Dépit Amoureux.' Firmly established at last in his native town, with the assured support of the king, he was to develop steadily with the passing years and to feel his way slowly toward a higher type of comedy than had been foreseen by any of his predecessors.

I. Footstep
II Essential Motivation
III Spanish input
IV Italian Style
V Comedy-of-work
VI. "Etourdi" (I)
VI - "Dépit Amoureux"

CHAPTER III

HIS EARLIEST PLAYS

I

THE theater of the Petit-Bourbon, in a wing of the Louvre, was the royal theater in which the court-ballets were performed; and four years earlier the young king had himself appeared in a ballet, made more effective by the ingenious machinery of the Italian Torelli. The company of Italian comedians, headed by the incomparable Scaramouche, continued to appear there on the three best nights of the week, Sunday, Wednesday and Friday, leaving to Molière and his companions the less popular evenings. The bare hall with its stage at one end and its narrow galleries along the walls had been fitted up by the Italians; and Molière's company paid them fifteen hundred livres toward the cost of these improvements.

The company then consisted of ten members, Molière, Madeleine Béjart, her sister, who was known as Mlle. Hervé, and her two brothers, Joseph and Louis, "Gros René" Du Parc and his wife, De Brie and his wife, and Du Fresne. They drew on the repertory which had been popular in the provinces; yet their performances of Corneille's 'Rodogune' and 'Mort de Pompée' did not win favor. But Molière soon brought out the two five-act comedies which he had produced successfully in the provinces, first the 'Etourdi' and then the 'Dépit Amoureux';

and these achieved immediate popularity, not only with the burghers of Paris but also with the courtiers and the people of fashion. By its acting of these comedies, the new company speedily established itself in favor.

The performances took place late in the afternoon—later than those given in London half a century earlier by Shakspere's associates, since the half-roofed English playhouse was dependent on daylight, whereas the Parisian theater was lit by candles. The regulations prescribed that the play should begin at two; but sometimes it was four or even five before the curtains parted. The standing playgoers in the pit were often boisterous and noisy; the many spectators seated on the stage often gossiped about their own affairs loudly enough to interfere with the actors—just as the seated spectators had often chattered in Shakspere's theater. Turbulent soldiers sometimes forced their way in without paying, insulting and maltreating the doorkeepers. Intoxicated roisterers sometimes thrust themselves on the stage itself and interrupted the performance. These disorders may not have been frequent but they were not uncommon; on occasion they ended in bloodshed and even in murder. They were not confined to the theater where Molière was playing; and they were a survival perhaps of the violent lawlessness of the Fronde, and perhaps of the disrepute of the theater in France before Corneille had lifted it up and before Richelieu had honored it with his protection.

While ill-bred intruders may now and again have destroyed the proper quiet of the playhouse, the audience consisted chiefly of the plain people of Paris, always devoted to the drama and trained by experience to enjoy it. It was this average citizen whose preferences and peculiarities Molière as a playwright had ever to keep in mind. His theater might win the fickle favor of the court and of the people of fashion; he might even find profit in devising special spectacles for performance before the king; but he was a playwright by instinct and therefore he wrote his comedies to amuse the broader body of his contemporaries who constituted the mainstay of his theater. The born dramatist never appeals to the chosen few alone, although he seeks for their suffrages also; he keeps his eye fixed on the average man, citizen or courtier, poor or rich, vulgar or refined, educated or uneducated.

Molière was himself a burgher of Paris and he understood the great middle class to which he belonged; he shared their ideas and even some of their prejudices; he had their hearty common sense. He knew that he had to rely on this middle class to support his enterprise—the middle class aërated and enlivened by an infusion of wits and scholars and courtiers. Yet in spite of this infusion he could not go too far in advance of them, or they might fail to follow; and he knew that they in their turn would not lag too far behind. The relation of the playwright with the playgoers must ever be close, since the audience as a whole condition the dramatic poet, and explain him. This was as true in Paris in Molière's day as it was in London in Shakspere's and in Athens in the days of Sophocles and of Menander. The Parisian burghers were not only fond of the theater, they had also the French liking for logic, for satire, and for the analysis of character. As George Meredith declared, "one excellent test of the civilization of a country, I take to be the flourishing of the comic idea and of comedy; and the test of true comedy is that it shall awaken thoughtful laughter." This is the test that Molière and the people of Paris in his time withstood triumphantly.

Because of this dependence of the dramatist upon the audience of his own time, the playwright begins always by giving the spectators what they have been accustomed to enjoy; and he is at liberty to develop his own individuality only as he can lead them and train them to like something better than they had been used to. He has to commence where his immediate predecessors and his elder contemporaries left off. He may profit by all their devices, but he must begin by accepting the theatrical conditions and the dramatic conventions of the period. In a word he cannot make a fresh start, he cannot expect at the very beginning to have his own way. This is just what Shakspere did when he modestly followed in the footsteps of Kyd, of Lyly and of Marlowe, and brought out 'Titus Andronicus,' 'Love's Labor's Lost' and 'Richard II'; he had to commence by doing very much the same things as the playwrights who had preceded him, in very much the same way, even though he may have done these things better.

This is what Molière did also in his turn. The immediate models before his eyes were not individual writers like Kyd and Lyly and Marlowe. Indeed, he seems to have been influenced very little by Corneille or by Scarron. The predecessors to whom he went to school were the forgotten French farce-writers, the prolific Spanish dramatists, and the ingenious devisers of the Italian comedy-of-masks. In literature as in life there is no spontaneous generation. There can be no flower without a seed; and the seedlings of even the most individual genius must have been grown in the gardens of those who toiled before he began to till the soil.

II

One of the most characteristic products of the later Middle Ages and of the earlier Renascence is French farce—full of frank fun and of exuberant gaiety, often robust beyond the borders of decency, and not infrequently insinuating a pungent satire of social conditions. Sometimes it is a monologue, like the boastful confession of cowardice, made by the 'Franc Archer de Baignolet.' Sometimes it is a simple dialogue of give-and-take repartee, punctuated with the slap-stick. Sometimes it is adroitly contrived with an ingeniously recoiling intrigue, as in the 'Cuvier.' The masterpiece of the species is the imperishable 'Maître Pierre Patelin,' prodigal in joyous situations and almost rich enough in character-delineation to be lifted up to the level of comedy. On the one side French farce has a kinship with the fabliaux, those piquant tales of clerical misdeeds and of marital misadventures from which Boccaccio often borrowed; and on the other, it has a likeness to the fantastic narrative of Rabelais, the boldest and broadest of humorists.

The sole object of the performers of these farces was immediate laughter, fun for its own sake, first of all, even if a satire might chance to be concealed inside the fun. They shrank from nothing in their efforts to arouse laughter, abundant and incessant; and what the farce lacked in length it often made up in breadth. Such a farce as the 'Meunier,' for example, although it was represented as a prelude to a pious mystery, cannot be kept sweet by any dose of Gallic salt.

The farce-actors, whether in the capital or in the country, could perform anywhere and anywhen. They had been received in the Hôtel de Bourgogne and the theater of the

Marais; and they had also drawn crowds for the quack-doctors on the Pont-Neuf. They had only to set up a platform and to hang a curtain at the back of this bare stage; they needed no scenery, scant furniture and few properties. They relied on themselves, on their native ability as fun-makers, and on the accumulated traditions of their craft. They were ready to appear as soon as they had thrust their slap-sticks into their girdles and had smeared their faces with flour (just as their modern equivalents, our negro-minstrels, smear their faces with burnt-cork).

These were the unassuming and vigorous performers Molière in his boyhood had seen in the open street, at the fair of Saint-Germain, and perhaps also in the playhouse itself (if it was a fact that he was taken to the theater by his grandfather); and it was from them that he received his first impression of the comic drama. But while he was wandering far from Paris the foremost of these farce-actors had died or left the stage; and farce itself had fallen out of fashion, as manners became more refined and as Scarron and Corneille showed how comedy might be less gross. Therefore, when Molière brought back from the provinces the 'Docteur Amoureux' and the half-score other little plays he had devised in his strolling for his own acting, he was reviving a type of humorous drama which the theater-goers were glad to see again. He purged farce of its more obvious indecencies; and although he remained frank he was generally decorous. He retained all the briskness of the farce, its unflagging swiftness of action, its sharply simplified characters, and its direct appeal to the risibilities. It was with these farces of his own that he first won the favor of the king and of the people; and to the end of his career he kept coming back to farce. Small wonder is it then that his contemporaries thought of him as essentially a farce-actor and that they failed to perceive at once the depth and the range of the larger comedies on which his fame now rests.

Closely akin to this influence of French farce is that of Rabelais, whose devices Molière also absorbed for his profit. Like Rabelais, Molière is not afraid of extravagance, of exaggeration, or even of caricature. Like Rabelais, he has not only humor in abundance, but also that sense of sheer fun, which is not quite the same as humor—the hearty fun, which brings before us the vision of "Laughter, holding both his sides," the fun which is uncontaminated by any hint of melancholy or by any suggestion of ulterior purpose. The humor of Molière, like that of Rabelais, is sustained by imagination; but Molière is more constantly restrained within the boundaries of decency, and he is free from the wanton cruelty not uncommon in Rabelais.

It may have been from Rabelais also that Molière got his racy vernacular, rich in energetic expressions and in full-colored phrases, aglow with the oral picturesqueness appropriate to lines written to be delivered on the stage. In his earliest plays Molière's style was bold and sturdy; it claimed the large liberty of the spoken word, which may disdain the formal precision of grammar and rhetoric, proper enough in what is intended for the eye rather than the ear. Even in his most ambitious and most carefully composed comedies Molière was never finicky and never pedantic. His style had always a swift certainty; and for his purpose as a playwright it was the best possible, although its seemingly careless vigor has often exposed it to the cavilings of those critics who insist on applying to the drama tests that are exclusively literary. Whatever his commentators may do, Molière never forgot that his plays were written to be acted.

III

While Molière owed much to Rabelais and to the early French farce-writers he was not a little indebted to the contemporary playwrights of Spain. At its fullest expansion, the drama of the Iberian peninsula was unrivaled in felicity and fecundity of invention; and it supplied a storehouse of plots on which the English, the Italians and the French drew at will. The burlesque and boisterous comedies of Scarron were borrowed from Spanish originals, the French comic writer taking over the intrigue only and rejecting the delicacy and airy grace often found in his originals. Hardy and Rotrou had refashioned Spanish stories; and Corneille had appropriated the plot of his first tragedy, the 'Cid,' from Guillem de Castro, and of his first real comedy, the 'Menteur,' from Alarcon.

During the reign of Louis XIII, and in the early years of Louis XIV, the Spanish influence was dominant at the court. The wives of both kings were Spanish; and the relation between the two kingdoms was very close. Companies of Spanish comedians were made welcome in Paris; and one of them was allowed to share the stage of the Hôtel de Bourgogne, shortly after Molière's return to Paris, just as his company shared the Petit-Bourbon with the Italian comedians. Spanish customs were in fashion in court circles; and so were the Spanish language and Spanish literature. The verse of Voiture and the prose of Balzac reveal Spanish affinities; even the friends of Madame de Rambouillet, the admirers and advocates of preciosity, were under the spell of Spain, and the verbal conceits and the sublimated expressions in which they delighted had analogues and perhaps even originals on the far side of the Pyrenees.

That Molière had mastered Spanish is not known certainly; but it is highly probable. With his quickness he could easily have picked up enough of the kindred tongue to be able to make out the meaning of the Spanish playwrights, of whose dramas he had a host of volumes on the shelves of his library when he died. Many a separate speech in his comedies has been paralleled with this or that passage in the Spanish dramatic poets; and this goes to show that he had studied these plays until characteristic turns of phrase lingered in his memory. It is very probable, for instance, that he had read Lope de Vega's 'Perro del Hortelano.' Many a theatrical effect and many an adroit situation that he employed had a Spanish origin, although most of these came to him indirectly and from the Italian adaptations. Possibly it was from an Italian version that he took over the plot of 'Don Garcie'; and certainly he used an Italian arrangement in shaping 'Don Juan,' although the ultimate originals of both plays are Spanish.

And yet, in spite of these borrowings, obvious and frequent as they are, Molière was wholly out of sympathy with the essential qualities of the Spanish dramatists. He might find his profit in taking from them adroit effects, ingenious situations and even entire plots; but his point of view, his attitude toward life, his artistic temperament, never resembled those of the peninsular playwrights, since he was always primarily interested in the realities of human nature, and they were often curiously unreal in their grandiloquence and in their highflown heroics. Here he stands in sharp contrast with Corneille, whose genius was more or less like that of the Spaniards. Corneille might simplify a Spanish plot and thereby strengthen it and elevate it to a loftier plane of tragedy; but he was akin to the authors he was adapting in that he delighted in the romantic, the unusual, the extraordinary and the arbitrary. But this artificiality and this emotional tensity were wholly foreign to Molière's genius, which relished reality and which sought to depict the normal rather than the exceptional. The Spanish poets were almost as lyric as they were dramatic; they set forth violent expressions of individuality and made these the mainspring of their stories; and in so doing they stimulated the kindred powers of Corneille. Molière was not lyric; he was solidly dramatic; and, above all, he was a true Frenchman, inheriting the Latin tradition of restraint and respecting the social bond which represses undue independence.

In reacting against Spanish example, Molière brought French comedy back to its bearings and piloted it to its future victories. His predecessors, Scarron and Corneille, had been taken captive by the Spaniards; but his successors were free to seek for comedy where it has its true home, in society as it actually is, and in the essentially comic struggle of character with social condition. That French comedy took this course, which was its salvation, and that the comedy of every other modern literature has followed its lead, was due mainly to the guidance it got from Molière, who might borrow many things from foreigners, but who stood ever steadfast for those qualities which have made French art what it is—clarity, simplicity and sanity.

IV

From no foreigners did Molière take over so much as he did from the Italians, with whom he was far more in sympathy than with the Spaniards. But even his borrowings from the Italians, important as they may be, are to be observed rather in the form he gave to his more broadly humorous plays than in the content of his ampler comedies. Yet the influence of the Italians was as beneficial to him as it was deep and enduring. He would have developed into a comic dramatist even if the Spaniards had never written plays; but his development would have been entirely different if he had not early mastered the methods of the Italian comedy-of-masks. It was from these exuberant fun-makers that Molière caught the knack of telling a story on the stage with unhesitating liveliness. In time he outgrew their simpler art and he engrafted on it a wiser humor and a more searching presentation of human nature; but the lesson he had learnt from them lingered long. Only once—in the 'Misanthrope'—did he seem to forget their teaching; and this was to his cost.

The improvised play of the Italians, performed by actors, each of them wearing a mask and a costume which identified him with an unchanging character, always the same in every play, may have had its distant origin in the rural farces of the Roman villagers in the days of the Republic. It survives to-day in Italy, more particularly in Naples; and it has bequeathed its types to various forms of the drama in other countries: Pantaloon, Harlequin and Columbine, Punch and Judy, Polichinelle and Pierrot. When this comedy-of-masks emerged into full view in the Renascence it revealed itself as a very special type of play presented by a specially organized company of players. Italy was not then a unit; and the inhabitants of the several cities had marked local peculiarities of speech and of character, not unlike those which we now personify in John Bull, Uncle Sam and Father Knickerbocker—and not unlike, again, those familiar figures of our variety-shows, the stage-Irishman with his red whiskers and his abundant brogue, the stage-German with his broken English, and the stage-negro with his plantation dialect. In the Renascence the typical Venetian was a merchant, ever ready to overreach himself in his greed for gain; the typical Neapolitan was an artful and palavering rascal; and the typical citizen of Bologna, which was renowned for its university, was a pedant, whose mouth was crammed with Latin quotations.

An actor in the comedy-of-masks chose one of these types and made it his own for life. He never played any other; and in every piece, whatever its plot, he was still the ponderous Bolognese or the intriguing Neapolitan. He kept always the same name, the Doctor or Pulcinella; and generally he wore a mask over the upper part of his face, a device which served to emphasize the type he was impersonating. The old women's parts were taken by men; and the young women, Isabella or Leonora, did not wear masks. If ten or twelve of these actors and actresses were banded together, they held themselves competent to present any plot, distributing the lovers' parts to the younger performers and the older characters to the Doctor from Bologna and to Pantaleone the Venetian, while the servants would fall to the lot of Pulcinella, the Neapolitan, and of the actress who was accustomed to appear as his partner in intrigue. These characters were as rigidly fixed in appearance and in mode of action as the king, the bishop, and the knight in a set of chessmen; and yet, as in chess, with these unvarying figures it was possible to obtain results of inexhaustible diversity. The types were not the same in the several companies; in fact, there seem to have been three or four score of them visible on the stage at one time or another, some of which died with the originator, while some became so established in popularity that they were inherited by a younger performer.

Italians are born actors; and they have also the gift of improvisation. Moreover, every one of the performers had accumulated a store of speeches suitable to the character he or she had always to impersonate. The lovers had a score of ways of making a declaration to a lady; and the ladies were furnished by long experience with a score of ways of receiving a declaration. The *zanni*, as the low-comedy actors were called, Harlequin or Scapin, had an immense repertory of jests and quips on which they drew incessantly while they moved through the intricacies of the comic imbroglio. The deviser of a new piece, who was generally also the chief performer, would call the actors together and outline the plot to them, scene by scene, distributing the personages of the play as best he could among the members of the company. He would also draw up a scenario, a detailed summary of the story; and this was hung up behind the scenes, so that the actors could consult it during the performance and refresh their memories as to the situations in which they were severally to take part. If a comedy-of-masks met with unusual success, its author was sometimes encouraged to write it out and even to publish it. Although these improvised performances were particularly well suited to the quick-witted and vivacious Italian comedians, similar attempts are recorded, at one time or another, both in England and in Germany, and also in far-away Hindustan.

The performers of the comedy-of-masks simplified the problem of scenery by choosing as the place where the action of most of their plays was supposed to pass, an open square at the meeting of several streets. This customary stage-setting was not unlike that permanently installed in the theater at Vicenza, built by Palladio; and two similar street vistas have been found useful in the later performances of the Oberammergau passion-play. As the *zanni* were often acrobats, able to amuse the audience as well by their agility as by their wit, the houses on these streets were solidly constructed, so that the performers might scale a balcony and take flying leaps through a window. In one or another of these houses most of the characters of a play were supposed to reside, thereby giving them occasion to meet in the square as frequently as the exigencies of the plot might demand; and here the actors were conforming to the customs of southern Italy, where the inhabitants are still to be seen carrying on all the affairs of life in the open air,—talking, eating, and even courting.

V

It is no wonder that this unliterary, unwritten, improvised, semi-acrobatic comedy-of-masks, however it might please the populace, was contemned by the fastidious scholars of the Italian Renascence, who held Terence to be the only true master of comedy. Probably they despised it all the more because of its popularity with the ignorant, upon whom they looked down with contempt. Certainly they failed to perceive its merits and the possibility of elevating it. They preferred to compose for their own delectation imitations of Latin comedy in which courtly amateurs could appear sporadically, without seeking the suffrages of the real public. Now and again a play by one of these men of letters, the 'Mandragora' of Machiavelli, for example, had genuine comic force; Taine even suggested that Machiavelli might have developed into a Molière, if circumstances had so willed it. But it is the special quality of the drama that it cannot be organized on any aristocratic basis; the condition of its vitality is that it shall be democratic in its appeal to all classes, the ignorant not less than the cultivated. Therefore the merely literary comic drama essayed by these dilettants, "erudite comedy," as it was called, was fated to be sterile, while the comedy-of-masks continued to flourish, not only in its native land but also in France, whither it had been transplanted by the traveling companies.

In France the comedy-of-masks had profoundly modified the methods of French farce long before Molière left Paris. He had early delighted in the French farce-actors and in their Italian rivals; and during the years of his strolling, chiefly in the south, where the Italian influence was strongest, he had again occasion to see the merit of the Italian methods. Himself a man of education, he had none of the scholarly aloofness from the populace which is fatal to the dramatic poet. He did not affect to disdain what the ordinary playgoers approved; he was like Shakspere in his willingness to begin by giving the spectators what they were accustomed to and what they liked; and when he commenced playwright, he unhesitatingly appropriated plots and principles from the comedy-of-masks. The titles of half-a-score of the unpretending little plays which he prepared have been preserved; and they all of them suggest an Italian original. Two of the little pieces have themselves been replevined from oblivion and are now generally included in the latest editions of his works. They are the 'Médecin Volant' and the 'Jalousie du Barbouillé' (the man whose face is smeared with flour).

These two playlets are very primitive indeed and quite unoriginal; and yet they are characteristic in their humble way. As George Sand once wrote to Flaubert, "Whatever a master has done is instructive, and we need not fear to exhibit his sketches and his studies." Neither of the little plays adds anything to Molière's reputation; they are at once too slight and too vigorous in their humor. But they reveal how completely he had accepted the methods of the Italian improvised play and how skilfully he had mastered them. Both pieces are in absolute accord with the traditions of the comedy-of-masks. The characters are fixed types, exactly like those in the Italian pieces; and in each the chief of them is an intriguing servant devised by Molière for his own acting. The story is but a thread on which to string episodes of robust fun and violent gaiety. There is in both a frank simplicity of exposition and a swift development of comic predicament. The dialogue is always adequate; it brings out fully the humor of the situation; but it is devoid of any special literary quality—which might indeed be out of place in pieces of this elementary sort. It was owing to the success of these Italian imitations that Molière, who had left Paris with a repertory almost wholly tragic, was able to return with comedies and with farces of his own, sufficiently attractive to establish the new company in spite of the opposition of the older theaters.

For Molière there could have been no better practice than the composition of these imitations of the Italian, in which there was incessant movement and in which speech had to be kept secondary to action. French comedy, even in the hands of Corneille, was then a little stiff; it tended to excess of mere talk; and it had no alert briskness and no exuberant gaiety. Molière, as some of his later plays were to show, inherited the fondness of the French for abundant discourse, which is evident even in their earlier mysteries and miracle-plays, which overwhelmed their later tragedy, and which survives in their problem-plays of the twentieth century. It was highly profitable for him to be convinced by experience of the supreme value of situation and of the prime importance of lively movement. These little pieces, not merely the two that have chanced to survive, but also the half-score others now lost to us, may be likened to the sighting shots which an expert marksman allows himself before he undertakes to plump his bullets into the bull's-eye; and by their aid Molière was able to ring the bell with absolute certainty when he attempted his more ambitious five-act comedies in verse.

VI

No dramatist was ever more liberal in borrowing from his predecessors than Molière, except Shakspere; and no dramatist, except Shakspere again, was ever more completely original. What both the French author and the English took from their predecessors was partly the outer form of the play that had proved its popularity, and partly the bare skeleton of story and situation. What they added of their own was their individuality, their wisdom, their personal outlook on life. They might be lazy as far as mere invention went, finding their profit in suggestions from all sorts of sources; but they were active enough in the larger interpreting imagination that sustained and transfigured their material.

In neither of the comedies which Molière produced in the provinces did he display originality of invention in the construction of his plot. For the first of them, the 'Etourdi,' he found the suggestion of his story in an Italian piece; and he drew on other Italian pieces for separate episodes. His play is so closely patterned on the comedy-of-masks that it might be selected for study as the best possible specimen of the species. It has the incessant activity of the Italian farces, their sudden reversals of situation, their unfailing gaiety, their spontaneous fun, and their exaggeration almost to caricature, but never to burlesque. Its scene is laid in Italy, at Messina, in the public square, where all the personages can come and go at will. Its characters are fixed types, sharply projected and highly colored. Its plot is artificial and arbitrary, in which the same situation is ingeniously varied throughout a sequence of episodes. It is wholly unpretentious; its sole aim is to evoke laughter; and it does not aspire in any way to arouse thought.

The 'Etourdi' takes its name from its hero, Lélie, who is a conceited and scatterbrained young fellow, forever doing the wrong thing, often from a right motive. He is the son of Pandolphe, who wishes him to marry Hippolyte, the daughter of Anselme. But Lélie is in love with a slave-girl, owned by Trufaldin; and this Célie is sought also by Lélie's friend, Léandre. Lélie fortunately has for a valet Mascarille (the part Molière devised for his own acting, and in reality the central figure of the play). Mascarille is an incomparable rascal, as ingenious as he is unscrupulous. He undertakes to get Célie for Lélie; and he arranges stratagem after stratagem to put the willing girl in his master's power. But no sooner has he successfully started an adroit scheme for bringing the lovers together than the babbling and blundering Lélie upsets it, to the increasing disappointment and the progressively comic disgust of Mascarille. By a report that Pandolphe is dead, the valet extracts money from Anselme; and then the feather-witted Lélie lets the spoil be taken back. Mascarille provides an opportunity for carrying off Célie during a masquerade; and then the unthinking Lélie must needs warn Trufaldin not to let the maskers in. During the five acts, nine several enterprises of the quick-witted valet are wrecked by the chuckle-headed master. At last, when Molière has got all the fun he could out of this shifting effect, he abruptly winds up the comedy, or, at least, cuts it short, by the careless expedient of a recognition—a discovery that Célie is really Trufaldin's daughter, and therefore a fit and proper bride for Lélie. So Léandre kindly pairs off with Hippolyte; and the play is done.

With such a story, the 'Etourdi' cannot be considered as anything but farce, in which situation conditions character—whereas in true comedy character creates situation. The figures are moved before us not by their own volition, but by the superior will of the playwright. What we admire are the dexterities of the mechanism, not the strokes of nature. The author is seeking to arouse the emotions of surprise rather than to awaken the emotions of recognition. Its humor is external to the character; and it arises solely from the predicaments in which they are placed. Molière was doing what the Italians had done before, even if he was doing it more cleverly. Indeed, cleverness is what this first play most abundantly displays, cleverness for its own sake. So Shakspere, in his first comedy, 'Love's Labor's Lost,' was satisfied with an empty theme lending itself to the parade of his youthful wit. The 'Etourdi' is like 'Love's Labor's Lost' in that it is the early effort of a brilliant young writer, who rejoices that he is young, and who is glad that he can be brilliant, and who reveals as yet no sign that he has observed life cautiously or reflected on it deeply. But it discloses his easy mastery of stage-craft; he has already learned his trade and he has all its tricks at the ends of his fingers. He is no longer an apprentice in play-making, and his experience in putting together his half-score little farces has taught him how to build a plot and how to maneuver his types therein with instinctive certainty.

Yet the immediate and enduring success of this earliest of Molière's comedies is as well deserved as it is easy to understand. The play is unpretending; but it does to perfection what it purports to do. It is captivating in its ingenuity; and it is irresistible in the torrent of its overflowing animal spirits. It is animated throughout by the superb vitality of Mascarille, who joys in his own inventiveness, carrying everything triumphantly on his shoulders and illuminating everything with his unquenchable energy. And, furthermore, the 'Etourdi' has great charm of style; it is written with a variety of vocabulary, a flexibility of expression, a full flow of words and a richness of rime, that even Molière never surpassed, and that extorted the admiration of Victor Hugo, the most accomplished of experts in all matters of meter and of rhetoric. At its best, Molière's verse is ampler and more vigorous than Racine's or even Corneille's; and in the 'Etourdi' it is at its best.

VII

II

The 'Dépit Amoureux,' the second of the five-act comedies in verse, which Molière brought back with him to Paris after they had approved themselves in the provinces, is at once superior and inferior to the 'Etourdi.' It is inferior, in that it lacks unity, since it contains two stories, juxtaposed rather than fused. It is inferior also in that the main story, also taken over from the Italian, is less simple and less plausible in its machinery. This main story sets forth the successive situations that result because a father had sought to bring up a girl as a boy; and it is not only less acceptable in its basis, it is also less profitable in comicality of episode. Yet the later play is superior to the earlier in the subordinate half of its plot, which gives the comedy its title and which presents to us the love-tiff of two pairs of young folks, a master and a mistress, humorously echoed by his valet and her maid, whose pleasant quarrel is only the reflection and reaction of theirs.

While the main story may be dismissed as an unreal make-believe, which we are almost ready to reject for its improbability, the secondary story is delightfully truthful. It may have come into existence by itself as one of the little farces Molière had earlier devised, and incorporated later in the more ambitious comedy because its author was certain of its success. Its several scenes are the first fruits of Molière's insight into human nature. They may have been suggested to him by a scene in a play of Lope de Vega's or by an idyl of Horace's; assuredly they owe nothing to any Italian example, since they are founded on a deeper observation of life than the Italians displayed in their improvised pieces. This subplot presents the eternal commonplaces of young love, ever touchy and ever self-torturing. The two couples meet and flirt; they quarrel and part; they make up almost against their wills, and yet in accord with their secret inclinations. And this presentation of the course of true love is as fresh to-day and as veracious and as delicious as it was two centuries and a half ago.

The scenes in which these young couples appear still ring true, whereas the other half of the comedy is hopelessly antiquated, since it belongs to a formula long out of fashion. Very wisely, therefore, has the Comédie-Française cast aside that part of the play which is no longer interesting, and preserved the episodes of perennial charm. For more than a hundred years now the 'Dépit Amoureux' has been acted on the stage of the Théâtre Français as a comedy in two acts and not in five, a comedy from which all of the extraneous matter has been cut out, leaving only the wooing and the bickering and the mating of the two pairs of lovers, the master and the mistress, tender, graceful, and almost lyric in their sentiment, the valet and the maid frankly comic in their equivalent misunderstandings and misadventures.

With these two comedies Molière was able to win the favor of the Parisian playgoers for his company, and to gain for himself the large opportunity for his own ensuing development as a dramatist. Yet there is little in either of these pieces which can be held to foretell or to prefigure the variety and the range of that swift development. These earlier plays revealed no more than that he was an ingenious playwright, a pupil of the Italians who could better their instruction. Even if the love-tiff might make it clear that Molière had begun to study life with his own eyes and to import into a play the result of his reflection, the two comedies taken together show chiefly that the new-comer had a vigorous vocabulary of his own, an unerring skill in handling comic situation and a hearty sense of fun. They contain small promise of his future mastery of comedy in its highest aspects. If Molière had died in that first winter after his return to Paris, no historian of French literature could have suspected the loss the drama would have sustained.

II. Historic Background for "Precieuses redicules"

III. 'Precieuses ridicules" (not yet)

IV. Success and enemies

CHAPTER IV

THE 'PRECIEUSES RIDICULES'

I

ALTHOUGH Molière and his fellow actors long continued to appear in the tragic repertory they had presented in the provinces, these performances were not so acceptable to the Parisian playgoers as were those at the two older theaters. That the company was able to win favor seems to have been due, partly to the popularity of the little farces which were played as after-pieces to the tragedies, and partly to the immediate success of Molière's two longer comedies, the 'Etourdi,' brought out in November, 1658, as soon as the company began to appear at the Petit-Bourbon, and the 'Dépit Amoureux,' produced for the first time in Paris in April, 1659. As author, as actor, as manager, Molière bore the burden of the enterprise, from his return to Paris until his death. 36 yr

He and his comrades were authorized to style themselves "the company of Monsieur, only brother of the king," who promised them an annual pension of three hundred livres—a subsidy which their princely patron always omitted to pay. The actors of the Hôtel de Bourgogne were entitled the "only royal company"; and those of the Marais theater called themselves the "comedians of the king." It is evident that Molière's company had a position inferior to the other two, who were more directly under the patronage of the sovereign. Perhaps this was one reason why two of the most popular players left the company toward the end of their first winter—at Easter, which was the season when theatrical engagements were made. The two deserters were Du Parc and his wife; she was a most attractive woman who received at one time or another the attentions of both Corneille and Racine; and he was a broadly humorous comedian known as "Gros René."

The defection of the Du Parcs was a loss; and Molière proceeded to strengthen his forces by engaging another comic actor of robust fun, Jodelet, who brought with him his brother, L'Espy. About the same time, Du Croisy and his wife joined the company. But the most important recruit was La Grange, upon whom Molière soon learned to rely and to whom he was able in time to confide the onerous duty of acting as orator of the company. La Grange was to play the lovers in all Molière's later plays; and he must have been a most accomplished actor in these parts, which required youth and ease, breeding and bearing, gaiety and tenderness. In his private life he was resolute, trustworthy and painstaking. It was he who piously collected Molière's plays in 1682 with a brief biography prefixed. And as soon as he joined the company, he began to keep a register, a day-book of the doings in the theater, with an exact record of receipts, payments and profits. This register, still in the possession of the Comédie-Française, is the basis of our solid knowledge of the remaining years of Molière's life.

At the end of this first season at the Petit-Bourbon the Italian comedians went home, leaving the theater in sole possession of the new-comers; and at the beginning of his second winter in Paris, Molière was able to shift his performances to what were considered to be the best nights of the week, Sundays, Tuesdays and Fridays. It was early in this fall that he brought out his third play, the 'Précieuses Ridicules,' the first of his comedies to be produced originally in Paris. Its success was immediate; and the profits were so satisfactory that the actors in assembly voted a present of five hundred livres to the author—as La Grange has recorded for us in his invaluable register.

In this new play in one act, which seemed to be only a farcical trifle, we discover Molière turning aside from the external and arbitrary method of fun-making which he had taken over from the comedy-of-masks. For the first time he ventured into social satire, finding a fit theme in the sayings and doings of a feminine cotery then in high repute throughout France.

II

The term *précieuses* is difficult to define with accuracy; but it was applied more particularly to the group of clever and cultivated women who were in the habit of frequenting the Hôtel de Rambouillet. The Marquise de Rambouillet was a woman of unusual refinement, possessing a delicacy of taste which was possibly excessive. She had shrunk from what seemed to her the rudeness of the court of Louis XIII; and she attracted to her own home the more polished courtiers and the more presentable men of letters—Balzac, the letter-writer, Voiture, the rimester of familiar verse, Ménage, the scholar. She and her daughters, these nobles and these wits, with a little group of ladies of like tastes, including Madame de Longueville, Madame de Sablé and, later, Mademoiselle de Scudéry, Madame de Lafayette, Madame de Sévigné, cultivated conversation as a fine art, setting topics for talk, and listening to poems and to papers prepared expressly for their appreciation. They vied with each other in the composition of madrigals, of maxims and of written portraits. They strove to avoid pedantry and to cast out vulgarity. They discussed the exact use and meaning of words, rejecting many which seemed to them coarse, and introducing others which they liked better. They held council over points of grammar and rhetoric; they desired even to improve orthography, seeking to simplify French spelling by dropping the useless letters which do not affect pronunciation, meaning or analogy.

In the early years of the sixteenth century French had been considered an inferior idiom, almost unworthy of cultivation and incapable of expressing accurately and abundantly anything more than the commonplaces of daily life; but by the middle of the seventeenth century, when Pascal and Corneille and Molière began to write, French had come into its own; it was accepted as a rich and varied tongue, fit for all uses. Its improvement had been due partly to the group of poets known as the Pleïade, partly to Malherbe (who corrected a grammatical error with his last breath), and partly to the exertion of the *précieuses.* There is no denying their influence in refining and polishing the language and in making it a better instrument of social intercourse.

Equally indisputable is the influence exerted by Madame de Rambouillet and her followers in the amelioration of manners. It was in the Hôtel de Rambouillet that there developed the Gallic type of perfect gentleman, the man of gallantry as distinguished from the more Italianate type of the courtier which had preceded it and made it possible. In the group which gathered about Madame de Rambouillet there was habitual deference to the gentler sex, almost a deification of woman, which resulted in giving her a more liberal standing in society than she had held before. Gentlemen were led to acknowledge the spiritual superiority of woman and almost to admit also her intellectual equality.

By the higher position allowed to women and by the larger share they were encouraged to take in society, French manners were purified and elevated; and in so far as the group that gathered around the Rambouillets helped to bring this about, its influence was wholesome. The language also benefited by the action of this cotery, which helped to develop the latent capabilities of French and to perfect it as an instrument of precision. The desire for more delicate expression and for decorative phrasing, which is identified with the *précieuses*, did not begin with them nor did it disappear when they ceased to be. It is a constant force in French literature, an ever-present reaction against that other French relish for frankness of speech, girding humor and Gallic salt. This latter tendency is displayed most abundantly in Rabelais, but it is visible even in Montaigne; whereas the former governs not only the letters of Balzac, the verses of Voiture, the interminable tales of the Scudérys, and on occasion even the tragedies of Corneille, but also the later sermons of Fléchier and the still later comedies of Marivaux, in which there is a kindred supersubtlety of sentimental analysis. Even in Montesquieu we can perceive a willingness to be witty at any cost, to show off, to subordinate substance to style. And a similar tendency is to be detected in the writings of the Parnassians and the Symbolists of the nineteenth century. Only the greatest of

French writers, Molière himself and Racine after him, have been able to make their profit out of both tendencies, and to combine taste and vigor, delicacy and freedom.

The movement headed by the *précieuses* in France has its analogies in other literatures. It was closely akin to the Asianism of Greek, to the Elizabethan Euphuism and to the Victorian Estheticism of English, to the Gongorism of Spanish, and to the Marinism of Italian. Indeed, it was from Italy that the impulse spread to France, since Madame de Rambouillet was herself half an Italian. She seemed to have shared the feeling not uncommon in Italy that the simple word is too simple, lacking, as Stendhal asserted, "that ingredient of pleasure which comes from difficulty conquered." There is an Italian flavor in the enjoyment which the *précieuses* took in their trivial toying with empty conceits, in their chase after metaphor, and in their deliberate search for unexpectedness of expression. There is an echo of the Italian Renascence in their distaste for plain speech and for the plain people, in their purism and their pedantry, obvious even at the very moment when they believed themselves to be waging war on the pedants and the purists.

Perhaps also the Italian influence was responsible for the pretentious prudery paraded by certain of the leading *précieuses*. Madame de Rambouillet herself was often shocked by words and phrases in which a less sensitive ear could perceive no impropriety. Her eldest daughter had a maiden modesty so excessive that it postponed for many years her wedding with the Duke of Montausier; and yet this prudish shrinking from a fit marriage to a devoted suitor did not prevent her later complaisance in facilitating the unlovely intrigues of Louis XIV, first with Mademoiselle de la Vallière and afterward with Madame de Montespan. As a wise humorist has declared, "there are no people so vulgar as the over-refined." It also needs to be noted here that two of the earlier *précieuses* were Madame de Longueville and Madame de Sablé, whose efforts to reform manners were without effect on their own morals.

When Molière brought out the 'Précieuses Ridicules' in 1659, the vogue of the cotery was declining, if it was not already decadent. Nearly half a century had passed since Madame de Rambouillet had first opened her house to her little circle of followers; and her daughter had withdrawn after her marriage to Montausier. The survivors of the clique still met at Mademoiselle de Scudéry's, but the movement had seen its best days and its glory was departing forever. Moreover, it had been vulgarized by cheap imitators in Paris and in the provinces. There was effort and affectation enough in the exercises of the clever women and witty writers who had clustered about Madame de Rambouillet; and these unfortunate characteristics of the movement were inevitably exaggerated almost to caricature by those who copied only the externals without having felt the original impulse. The delicacy of taste of Madame de Rambouillet and her daughters and of their friends might seem at times a little over-sensitive; but in their imitators, who lacked the real refinement of the originals, it stood revealed as a parody of itself. Copyists are rarely restrained by discretion; and the copyists of the *précieuses* distorted language and manners to the verge of violence, just as fashions in dress lose all their distinction when imitated by remote villagers with no sense of style and with no feeling for the fitness of things.

For affectation of any kind, in language or in life, Molière had ever a profound disgust. He disliked purists as well as puritans. He detested any insistence upon outer forms; he distrusted it as a disguised attempt to distract attention from the inner spirit. With the principle of the original *précieuses* Molière had little sympathy; and some of their practices could not fail to arouse his swift sense of humor. If he was ready to smile at the originals in Paris, the antics of the awkward imitators in the provinces must have evoked his frank laughter. He would have been no comic dramatist if he had not seen that he had here a fit topic for comedy. He seized the chance to expose the *précieuses* to ridicule, just as Shakspere had chosen to make fun of the euphuists.

III

We can understand the development of Molière as a dramatist only when we keep in mind the fact that he was also and always the manager of his company, the one on whose shoulders rested the duty of conducting the enterprise to prosperity, season after season. Here is the explanation of his clinging to the formula of the comedy-of-masks, which had an assured popularity, and of his frequent utilizing of its framework and its fixed types, and of his returning to it again and again to the very end of his career, even after he had taught himself how to construct comedy of a finer kind than the Italians had ever conceived. He had begun with little farces, aiming at laughter only and wholly without pretensions; and his first more ambitious comedy, the 'Etourdi,' although in five acts and in verse, is almost as barren of personal observation of life as these farces were, however ingenious the larger play might be in its episodes and however abundant in humorous situation. Even in his second comedy, the 'Dépit Amoureux,' the skeleton of the story is still Italian, although he put into its underplot a reality and a veracity wholly lacking in the 'Etourdi.'

In this third play, the 'Précieuses Ridicules,' only a farce in one act and in prose, he ventured for the first time to deal with contemporary manners. It was the earliest step in the career which was to be crowned with the 'Femmes Savantes.' For the first time he chose a theme which forced him to that criticism of life which is ever the mainspring of real comedy. Quite possibly it was his trained instinct as a manager which led the dramatist to see the attractiveness of a topical play certain to make talk and to lure outlying playgoers to the theater. In choosing this theme he could make sure at least of a success of curiosity.

But he had no desire to break with his past and to upset the expectations of his audience by overt novelty of form. So he retained the fixed characters of the comedy-of-masks, appearing himself as Mascarille, the voluble valet already seen in the 'Etourdi.' The scene was not laid in the open square customary in Italian pieces, but in the house of Gorgibus, who had come up to Paris with his daughter and his niece, Madelon and Cathos, the two *précieuses ridicules*, provincial imitators of Parisian originals. Affecting to be shocked by the straightforward wooing of La Grange and Du Croisy—for these actors appeared under their own names only—the girls rejected the advances of their lovers, hoping for the devoted attentions of gallants of a subtler delicacy. La Grange and Du Croisy decide to revenge themselves by sending their valets, Mascarille and Jodelet, to play the gallants that the girls are awaiting. This trick is like that which ruined the life of Angelica Kaufmann; it has served also as the basis of 'Ruy Blas' and of the 'Lady of Lyons'; and although it seems rather tragic in its possibilities Molière chose to deal only with its comic aspects.

Mascarille presents himself as a marquis, and he proceeds to captivate the two damsels by his intimate acquaintance with all the gossip of the town, by his knowledge of the jargon of the *précieuses*, by his unblushing flattery and by his imperturbable assurance. He is joined by his fellow valet, Jodelet, masquerading as a viscount. Then, when the two pretentious young ladies have been fooled to the top of their bent, La Grange and Du Croisy return and unmask their servants, forcing the fellows to strip themselves of their borrowed finery. Jodelet, after taking off his coat, has to remove waistcoat after waistcoat—the same primitive device for provoking laughter that used to be permitted to the Second Gravedigger in 'Hamlet,' and that probably was inherited by Molière's play, as well as by Shakspere's, from some long-forgotten medieval farce.

The plot of the little piece is nothing; it is only an excuse for the talk of the two girls and of the two valets—a conversation studded thick with all the affectations of the *précieuses*. But Molière managed to avoid the chilliness of merely literary satire and to give his assault on pretension a varied and vivacious dramatic form, holding the eye as well as the ear. The little play has an essential struggle; its simple structure arouses the interest of expectancy; it is sustained by a conflict of contending desires; it presents that clash of character on character which is ever the core of comedy. Its theme is now outworn, for the literary fashions it satirized have long faded from memory, and the verbal eccentricities of the *précieuses* are absolutely unknown to the playgoer of to-day. Yet, after two centuries and a half, the fun of Molière's piece is almost as fresh as ever; its aroma is as pungent, and its gaiety is as irresistible. Even those who have never heard of the cotery Molière held up to ridicule are now carried away by the contagion of laughter, by the high spirits, by the sheer fun of the modern performance.

Of course, it is by a droll exaggeration that is almost caricature that Molière made manifest the absurdities of those he was exposing to laughter. He drew in bold outline and he did not hesitate to lay on high color. After all, the 'Précieuses Ridicules' is only a farce—just as the 'Comedy of Errors' is only a farce. It lacks the reserve and the sobriety, as it is also without the elevation and the largeness, of his later comedies. In this little piece Molière revealed for the first time the union of his triple characteristics—his dramaturgic dexterity, his inexhaustible humor, and his hearty detestation of pretense and insincerity. Although it was only an outcropping that he had struck, it led to the vein of true comedy, and he had only to persevere to uncover the rich ore of the sterling plays that were to follow. He succeeded in putting into farce a veracity and a significance to which this humble form was unaccustomed; and thereafter his plays were to be as comic as this, but the best of them were to call forth a more thoughtful laughter.

IV

Although the vogue of the *précieuses* was passing and although the cotery was no longer sheltered in the Hôtel de Rambouillet, its members were still alive, in cordial relation with the chief figures of contemporary literature, and closely connected with people in power. It was a proof of Molière's daring that, even at the beginning of his career as a comic dramatist, he did not shrink from making enemies among the many friends of the *précieuses*. This was his earliest descent into the arena of contemporary society, where he was to fight valiantly against pretenders of all sorts; and it was by the 'Précieuses Ridicules' that he began to arouse against him the malignant hostility which was to pursue him to the grave.

Any attack on the exaggerations and excrescences of a movement cannot fail to have the appearance of an assault on the movement itself, since contemporary opinion is rarely able to disentangle the essential from the non-essential. This Molière could not help knowing; but it did not daunt him. Indeed, it is difficult to doubt that he saw plainly what he was doing and that he was well aware how his satire came home to the original *précieuses* in Paris, even if it seemed to be aimed solely at their provincial copyists. It is true that in the apologetic preface to the play when he printed it, he took pains to explain that he had sought to keep within the bounds of permissible satire, asserting that the most perfect things are likely to have vicious imitators who have always been the fit prey for ridicule. He declared that the real *précieuses* had no right to take offense at his parody of their extravagant imitators, any more than a truly brave man could properly resent the braggart coward who was a familiar figure in Italian comedy. But in spite of all this, we may be sure that Molière, with his relish for simplicity and with his hatred of insincerity, had no real liking for even the least pretentious of the real *précieuses*. Their theory of literature was the antithesis of his; and so was their theory of life. He was willing enough to have them think that he was aiming only at the copyists; but he had no objection to see his shafts flesh themselves in the originals who stood within range.

It is said that the whole cotery attended the first performance. One of the most sensible of them, Ménage, declared that he took another of the group by the hand as they all came out of the theater and said that they had both of them approved the absurdities which had just been criticised so keenly and with such common sense, and that now, as St. Rémi had said to Clovis, "We must burn what we have adored and adore what we have burnt." It is true that Ménage did not put this remark on record until a third of a century later, a score of years after Molière's death. It is true also that some other friend of the *précieuses* revealed immediate resentment and succeeded in having the little play prohibited at least for a fortnight. When its performance was again permitted, the rush to see it was so great that the company took advantage of a custom of the time and doubled the prices of admission.

It is asserted that the younger daughter of Madame de Rambouillet was always a partisan of Molière's. That Madame de Rambouillet herself did not bear malice against him for his irreverent audacity, is proved by the fact that she invited him later to perform two of his plays at her own house. The scenery, the furniture and the properties needed for the proper representation of a play were then so simple that performances could easily be given in the residences of the dignitaries of the court on the nights when the company was not acting in the theater. Less than a year after the production of Molière's little play, he was bidden to perform it before the young king. In his invaluable register La Grange records that the

'Etourdi' and the 'Précieuses Ridicules' were acted at the Louvre before Mazarin, who was ill in his chair. "The king saw the comedy standing, incognito, leaning on the back of the cardinal's chair." And Louis XIV was so much pleased with the performance that he rewarded the company with three thousand livres, thus early testifying to his liking for Molière, both as actor and as author. This regard may never have ripened into any real appreciation of Molière's genius; but the royal partiality was later to stand the dramatist in good stead when he ventured to deal with more dangerous themes.

V

Every one knows, so Voltaire declared, that things of little value may make a success on the stage, although we should despise them in the study. The art of the dramatist does not lie wholly within the limits of literature; and the immediate appeal of the playwright is to the eyes of the spectators and to the ears of the auditors in the playhouse itself. The dramatist is like the orator in that he is often satisfied by the success of this immediate appeal, and in that he cares little for the increase of fame which may result from the publishing of words composed to be spoken under special circumstances. Bossuet put into print only one of his powerful sermons; and both Lope de Vega and Calderon were almost as careless of purely literary reputation as Shakspere was.

Molière had the same feeling. He had not published any of his half-score of little farces; and he did not print either the 'Etourdi' or the 'Dépit Amoureux' until several years afterward. He had no intention of issuing the 'Précieuses Ridicules' as a book. But his hand was forced by a piratical publisher who made ready a stolen copy of the piece; and in self-defense the author was obliged to give his little play to the press, if he wished to prevent its being misjudged by a mangled perversion. In the clever preface which he prepared for it, witty and easy in its modesty, he declared that it was a strange thing for a man to be printed against his will. He asserted that he could not think ill of his work now that it had been praised by many. But, he added, "as a large part of the charm which had been found in it depends on the action and on the tone of the voice, I was greatly concerned that it should not be deprived of these ornaments; and I found that the success it had had in the performance was quite enough for me to be satisfied with that."

Whoever may have had the privilege of seeing Coquelin's performance of Mascarille in the 'Précieuses Ridicules' cannot fail to understand Molière's feeling. Amusing as the play is in the library, it is far more amusing in the theater. Molière had written the chief part for his own acting; and he had controlled and trained the other performers. Shakspere, also an actor, even if inferior to Molière in histrionic equipment, shared Molière's belief that the true life of a play is in its performance and that any perusal can be little better than a betrayal—at least we may assume that this was Shakspere's opinion, from the fact that he took no trouble to have his tragedies and his comedies preserved in print. It is partly because they were both actors and because they both possessed a mastery of the allied art of the stage-manager, that Shakspere and Molière reveal "the dramatic force that to-day animates their works," so Coquelin once asserted. "We feel that these plays were not written coldly in the silence of the closet, but thrown alive upon the stage.

This explains their indifference to the printing of their works. They did not recognize these on paper. 'Tartuffe' and 'Hamlet' existed for them only before the footlights. It was there only that they felt these plays to be bone of their bone and flesh of their flesh."

CHAPTER V

FROM ‘SGANARELLE’ TO THE ‘FACHEUX’

I

MOLIÈRE produced more than one new play by other authors, but few of them proved to be attractive to playgoers; and it was due solely to the success of his own comedies that the company was able to establish itself in rivalry with the two older organizations. Its membership remained substantially the same as it had been when it returned to Paris. La Grange had taken over the light-comedy parts previously acted by Louis Béjart, who had died just after the first performance of the ‘Etourdi,’ in which he had appeared as the blundering hero. Early in 1660 Jodelet also died; and his broadly comic characters were assumed by “Gros René” Du Parc, who returned to Molière at Easter with his fascinating wife, after having spent a year at the Marais theater. Thus reinforced, the company was probably superior to either of its rivals; certainly it was incomparably better equipped for comedy, even if contemporary opinion continued to consider it inferior in tragedy.

It was then the custom to bring out the more serious plays in winter, reserving the lighter pieces for the spring and summer; and in May, 1660, Molière produced his fourth play, another one-act comedy, which is now generally known as ‘Sganarelle,’ the name of the character impersonated by Molière himself. The piece is little more than a farce, wholly without the richness of satire which almost raised the 'Précieuses Ridicules' to the loftier level of comedy. Its fun is the result of an artful yet arbitrary plot, not derived directly from any Italian play, but still retaining the rapid movement and the full color of the comedy-of-masks. Its scene is that customary in the Italian pieces—an open street, with the house of Sganarelle on one side and on the other the house of Gorgibus. Molière was never a slavish copyist of the Italians, though he borrowed from them the briskness of these earlier plays. Their actors clung each of them to a single figure, never appearing in any other part. But Molière now changed from Mascarille to Sganarelle, as he was later to change to Scapin. Rather should it be said that after appearing as Mascarille in the 'Etourdi' and the 'Précieuses Ridicules' he returned to Sganarelle, which he had impersonated earlier in the little farce of the 'Médecin Volant.'

The reason for the change is not easy to declare. It may be that, as he was now thirty-eight and not in the best health, he found the exuberant buoyancy of Mascarille too fatiguing. It may be that he was merely seeking for variety, fearing to weary his audiences by too insistent a reappearance of the same fixed type. It seems more likely, however, that he wanted a richer character for his own acting. Mascarille is the cleverest of intriguers; but he is only a deviser of tricks, the number of which is limited, whereas Sganarelle is a fool, and there is no end to the multiplicity of ways in which folly may be revealed. It must be noted also that Mascarille, however brilliant he might be, was always playing jokes on others; and on the stage it is not the victimizer but the victim, the butt, who has the broader scope for acting.

In this play Sganarelle is his own butt, the victim of his own blunders, led by chance to deceive himself into a belief in the infidelity of his wife. Gorgibus (whose function in this piece is very much what it had been in the 'Précieuses Ridicules,' merely to be a father) has a daughter Célie, who is in love with Lélie, characters not unlike those bearing the same names in the 'Etourdi'—another resemblance to the fixed types of the comedy-of-masks. Gorgibus tells his daughter that he wishes her to marry the son of an old friend. Célie is so overcome by this that she almost faints, dropping a portrait of Lélie. The wife of Sganarelle finds the picture and admires it, which leads her husband to believe that she is in love with the original. When Lélie comes on the stage, accompanied by his valet, Gros René, Sganarelle recognizes him and tells him that the woman who had possession of the portrait is Sganarelle's wife, which makes the lover as angry as the husband is jealous. In time everybody is at cross-purposes, Sganarelle confirmed in his distrust of his wife, who is also suspicious of him, while Lélie and Célie are each of them convinced that they have been deceived in the other. And when Molière has extracted all possible fun out of this prolonged equivoke, everything is swiftly made clear; the old friend of Gorgibus turns up at the right moment to explain that his son has contracted a secret marriage, whereupon Gorgibus promptly consents to the wedding of Célie and Lélie; and Sganarelle brings the piece to an end by warning all husbands not to be suspicious.

'Sganarelle' is as unassuming as it is amusing; and it was long the most popular of all Molière's plays, provoking continuous laughter, generation after generation. But except in a single particular it marks no advance on

Molière's part. The plot is adroit yet artificial, the personages are drawn in outline only, without subtlety or depth—at least, with the sole exception of Sganarelle himself. In this character Molière first undertook the analysis of a passion, the ugly passion of jealousy, which recurs again and again in his later plays. In this earliest attempt Molière presents only the more comic aspects of jealousy; yet the sufferings of Sganarelle are sincere, even if they are both needless and exaggerated. The spectators know that Sganarelle is foolishly self-deceived; they are aware that there is no solid foundation for his misery; they laugh at him abundantly and incessantly; and yet he wins something of their sympathy and he retains it in spite of his persistent folly. The laughter of the audience is aroused by character as well as by situation; and this is evidence that Molière was making ready for his riper work. Yet there is in 'Sganarelle' scarcely a suggestion of the deeper aspects of his humor and hardly a hint of the melancholy that underlay it.

II

Not long after 'Sganarelle' had strengthened the hold of Molière's company on the Parisian playgoers, their career came near being cut short in spite of their prosperity. They found themselves unexpectedly and unceremoniously turned out of the playhouse the king himself had allotted to them. There had long been a project on hand for the reconstruction of the Louvre; and in October, 1660, without any warning, the royal superintendent of buildings began to tear down the theater of the Petit-Bourbon. There was neither reason for haste nor excuse for the discourtesy of not giving Molière ample time to make other arrangements. It is impossible not to suspect ill-will and an intention to inconvenience in this needlessly sudden dismantling of the playhouse assigned to Molière and his comrades. Probably the court functionary was gratifying the grudge of officious friends of the *précieuses* or aiding the acute animosity of rival actors.

Whatever the motive, this attempt to injure Molière turned to his advantage. At the request of Monsieur, the patron of the company, Louis XIV graciously gave it permission to take possession of the theater in the Palais-Royal, the sumptuous hall built by Richelieu regardless of cost for the performance of 'Mirame,' the tragedy he had himself inspired. This theater, far more spacious than that in the Petit-Bourbon, had fallen out of repair; and the superintendent of the royal buildings was ordered to make amends to Molière by putting it in order as speedily as possible. The actors were allowed to remove from their old playhouse to their new home the boxes and other appurtenances necessary for their enterprise.

The repairs consumed three months, during which time the company was deprived of its domicile. It made out as best it could, giving many performances before the king and in the private houses of the nobility; but this must have been a period of perplexity and impoverishment, since the company had to forego its regular takings at the door. Its members received flattering proposals to desert to one or the other of the older organizations, that at the Marais and that at the Hôtel de Bourgogne; but their loyalty to their leader led them to decline these offers. The devoted La Grange recorded in his register the result of these maneuvers: "The whole company kept together; all the actors loved the Sieur de Molière, their chief, who united to an extraordinary merit and capacity, an honesty and an engaging manner which compelled them all to protest to him that they wished to share his fortune and that they would never quit him, whatever proposal might be made to them and whatever advantages they could find elsewhere." It is touching to find this heartfelt appreciation in what is really a day-book, intended mainly for the recording of receipts and profits.

Only in January, 1661, was the company able to give its first performance in the Palais-Royal. It began with a double bill, composed of two of Molière's comedies, the ever-popular 'Dépit Amoureux' followed by the more novel 'Sganarelle.' The spaciousness of the theater where Molière was to act during the remaining twelve years of his life can be gaged by the fact that it was to shelter the Opéra for a century after Molière's death. The hall was a double square, a little more than fifty feet wide and a little more than a hundred feet long. There were two galleries on each side, one above the other. The level space immediately in front of the stage was called the *parterre*, where some three hundred spectators could find standing room. Behind the *parterre* the floor rose, step by step; and it had benches running in straight lines from one side-wall to the other. The house was very badly lighted, both before and behind the curtains. Tallow candles were the sole means of illumination; and they had to be snuffed frequently during the performances. There were no footlights; in their stead were chandeliers suspended a foot or so above the heads of the actors, upon whom awkward shadows must have been cast.

With the stage in semi-darkness and without the aid of the modern opera-glass it was not easy to follow the changing expression on the faces of the performers. Most of the fourteen or fifteen hundred spectators must have strained their eyes in vain. Probably this is one reason why the lovers of acting liked the privilege of sitting on the stage, for which a higher price was charged. The straw chairs of these intruding spectators filled the two sides of the stage for perhaps fifteen feet back of the curtain. As the scenery immediately behind them could never be used, since they blocked all approach to it, it seems probable that the first and second wings were permanent and purely architectural in character, continuations of the proscenium arch. If this was so, the scenery appropriate to the play which was being performed would extend from the third wing to the backcloth. The actors were expected to come forward into the neutral ground between the two groups of spectators on the sides of the stage and to play the more important scenes of the comedy as close to the chandeliers as possible. This practice prevented the playwright from relying on properties or on furniture. It deprived him of the possibility of relating character to environment in the modern fashion. And it exerted a constant pressure on the dramatist to subordinate essential action to mere conversation.

The audience was supposed not to see the spectators on the stage—just as the Japanese playgoer of to-day disregards the silent attendants clad in black who steal forward to tidy up and to hand whatever the performers may require. But in Paris in Molière's time, as in London in Shakspere's, this theatrical convention was rudely broken when these spectators on the stage talked to each other so loudly that the leading actor had to interrupt the play to call them to order. Nor was disorder confined to those sitting behind the curtain; often it extended to those who had to stand in the *parterre*. It was long after Molière's death before every spectator was provided with a seat, thus avoiding the occasional disturbance always likely to occur when men are kept standing for two or three hours, jostling each other in the effort to see and to hear.

III

All these earlier plays of Molière were tentative; and we can now perceive that he was feeling his way a little doubtfully to a larger and nobler form of comedy, for which he had no model in any modern literature or even in the classics. And then he turned from the Italians to the Spaniards. Corneille and Scarron had received inspiration from the playwrights of the more western peninsula; and Spain was once more in fashion at the court, since the king had just married a Spanish wife. A company of Spanish actors had recently arrived and had played both before the king and at the Petit-Bourbon. The younger Corneille was pleasing the public with tragi-comedies often Spanish in origin and generally Spanish in flavor. So in February, 1661, Molière brought out 'Don Garcie, ou le Prince Jaloux,' which he called a heroic-comedy, but which really belongs to the hybrid type known as tragi-comedy, a drama with a serious plot and yet a happy ending.

'Don Garcie' is a long-drawn piece in five acts, in polished verse, setting forth the transports of the hero's self-deceived and self-torturing jealousy, rendered with acute insight into his sufferings. But the story is thin and strained, dealing as it does with Don Garcie's suspicion of a woman in male attire and with a supposed rival turning out to be the heroine's brother. There is warm and genuine feeling beneath the sonorous declamation, phrased in the frigid vocabulary of contemporary gallantry, and there is subtle analysis of sentiment. But Molière did not display here the lyricism demanded by a drama of this kind. His genius could flower abundantly only when it had its roots in reality; and tragi-comedy, however highly colored it might be, was an orchid. He was not at ease in the exalted artificial fictions which lesser men could handle more profitably. He needed the concrete, the close grip on life as he saw it with his own eyes, keen to pierce below the surface. At his best he was not a lyric poet, but a burgher of Paris, dealing with the problems of life and character in straightforward fashion, sincerely and directly.

Every one of us is necessarily, even if unconsciously, either a Platonist or an Aristotelian, an idealist or a realist. It is true that an idealist, with a firm hold on things as they are, is separated by no wide gulf from a realist, who has a deep appreciation of the mysteries of existence; and yet the gulf is ever too broad to be bridged. Molière, beyond all question, was a realist, however much he may have brooded over the darker aspects of humanity. Although he could lift himself far above the externals of every-day life he was not essentially lyric; in fact, he could not fail to feel a certain distrust of the lyric mood with its basis of overt self-expression and excessive individualism. He was not only a realist, he was a humorist above all else, perhaps the greatest of modern humorists; and 'Don Garcie' is almost barren of laughter. In composing that heroic-comedy Molière entered a blind alley; perhaps it was fortunate for him that the piece did not please, for the failure forced him back into the straight road that was to lead to his comic masterpieces. It was his first disaster; and it was to be his last.

That it did not please the public is proved by its withdrawal after only seven performances. That Molière took this hard and hoped in vain for a reversal of the verdict is revealed by his presenting the play the next year before the king, and the year after before Condé, and again before the king, and by his attempting to revive it at the Palais-Royal in 1663, when he had to withdraw it finally after the second performance. Then he gave up the fight and accepted the decision. He did not publish the play, although he had taken out a permission to print it. He put it away; and when the public had completely forgotten it—and nothing slips from men's memories more swiftly than an unsuccessful drama—he went back to it for passages which he was able to utilize in later comedies, notably in the 'Misanthrope.'

It must be recorded also that 'Don Garcie' was for Molière a double failure—as an actor as well as an author. He had written the chief part for himself; and perhaps his success in portraying the jealousy of Sganarelle may have led him to believe that he would be favorably received when he depicted the jealousy of Don Garcie. But if this had been his calculation it was an error, for, although Sganarelle must be acted with intense seriousness if it is to be effective, the result is intentionally comic; whereas the appeal of Don Garcie is solely to the sympathy of the spectators, and even a hint of laughter would be fatal. Probably also this first appearance of Molière in a serious part in one of his own plays disappointed the audiences he had trained to smile as soon as he showed his face on the stage. Only by successive steps can an actor long welcomed as a laugh-maker get the playgoers to accept him in more heroic characters; and Molière's change from the comic to the serious was too sudden not to be disconcerting. Moreover, Molière as an actor strove always to be simple and natural and to avoid the over-emphasis and mouthing to which the tragedians of his time were accustomed. But if he applied his theory severely in his own acting of Don Garcie, he was violating the sound principle that every play must be presented in accord with its spirit. 'Don Garcie' itself is not simple and natural; it demanded a bravura method of acting, a more flamboyant manner than Molière was probably willing to give it.

IV

In spite of Molière's disappointment at the failure of his tragi-comedy he was not discouraged; he soon made ready another piece more in accord with the anticipations and preferences of his audiences. The 'Ecole des Maris,' a three act comedy in verse, brought out in June, 1661, met with instant success and it has retained its popularity to this day. It was frankly comic and it contained a frankly comic character for his own acting. The story is original, although he made use of hints from Boccaccio and perhaps also from Lope de Vega. The plots of Molière's own devising are generally better than those he borrowed—easier in their construction, and without the stiffness sometimes retained in those he took over ready-made. In this play he availed himself also of a suggestion which he found in Terence, who had derived it from Menander—the contrast of two brothers bringing up two wards, boys in the Latin comedy, girls in the French. Molière had studied Terence at school—just as Shakspere had possibly read Seneca at Stratford; he may have even taken part in a performance of the 'Adelphi' when he was a pupil of the Jesuits. The impression made upon him by his study of Plautus and Terence is as evident in certain of his later plays as the influence of the Italian improvisers upon his earlier pieces.

Original as it is in plot, the 'Ecole des Maris' is cast in the familiar form of the comedy-of-masks, with its fixed types, the lover and his valet, the pair of pretty girls, and the outspoken serving-maid—a figure Molière was often to employ again. He appeared himself as Sganarelle, for the second time, modifying the character to suit the new story, just as Mascarille had been modified a little to play his part in the 'Précieuses Ridicules.' So Falstaff is somewhat changed to fit into the intrigue of the 'Merry Wives'; and so Creon differs in the several plays of Sophocles in which he appears. One character only, Ariste, the elder and more tolerant brother of Sganarelle, has no relation to any of the fixed types of the Italians. Ariste is a burgher of Paris, the earliest of those embodiments of sturdy common sense whom Molière was frequently thereafter to introduce into his plays, to serve on occasion as the mouthpiece of his own sentiments and to afford a contrast to the more violent opinions voiced by the more strongly marked humorous characters. Ariste is an example of that burgher sobriety which Molière knew intimately from his youth up and which supplied France with administrators like Colbert and with poets like Boileau, La Fontaine and Racine. It is in this burgher class that Molière now began to seek subjects for comedy, reserving always the right to return to the large liberty of the comedy-of-masks whenever he was moved to compose a play intended chiefly to provoke laughter.

Even Sganarelle becomes more than the fixed type of the Italianate pieces; he is enriched by characteristics which relate him to his own class in Paris. The 'Ecole des Maris' is only a comedy of intrigue, yet it is almost a comedy of character. In fact, it might even be termed a problem-play, for in spite of its gaiety, its cheerfulness, its optimism, its healthy fun-making, it conveys its lesson, and the laughter it arouses leads to thought. Two theories of education are set over against each other; and their logical consequences are shown. Ariste and Sganarelle are the guardians of two sisters, and each of them wishes to marry his young ward. Ariste tries to win the love of Léonor by liberality of treatment; and he is rewarded by her affectionate regard. Sganarelle is narrow and hard and masterful; he is already a domestic tyrant; and Isabelle resents his domineering selfishness. With ingenuous ingenuity she encourages a younger lover; and it must be confessed that, absurd and odious as Sganarelle may be, Isabelle is not an entirely agreeable figure; she is too forward, too sly, too ready to fall into the arms of a lover whom she really does not know. A little more, and we might be tempted to dismiss her as no better than a flirtatious minx. As it is, she disguises herself as her sister and tricks her guardian into consenting to her wedding with Valère, making Sganarelle believe that he is aiding the elopement of Léonor. Voltaire was only just in praising the way in which Molière winds up this play, as "probable, natural, developed out of the plot, and what is even better, extremely comic."

The 'Ecole des Maris' has not only the fixed types of the comedy-of-masks, but also the customary public square for the single scene needed by its three acts, with the house of Sganarelle on one side and that of Valère on the other. It is here outdoors that Ariste and Sganarelle discuss their theories of education, and that Sganarelle and Isabelle talk over their private affairs. This open square that Molière took from the Italians (as they had taken it from Latin comedy, which had inherited it from the Greek) was a most convenient convention for the comic playwright. Molière was in time to learn how to forego its aid; but without it the plot of the 'Ecole des Maris' would have needed to be handled in very different fashion. In this comedy we see him using the framework and the fixed types of the Italians for a sincere portrayal of the manners and the people of his own time. He made a more or less farcical complication carry social criticism, vivid and veracious; and by so doing he took a long step in advance, allowing us already to foresee the day when he could afford to do without the devices of the Italians, from whom he had learnt how to give his earlier pieces the bustling animation the ordinary playgoer always delights in.

V

It was not for the ordinary playgoer that Molière prepared his next play, but for the king. Early in 1661 Mazarin had died; and Louis XIV was at last free to rule France according to his pleasure. Firmly resolved never to submit himself again to the control of any single minister, he had taken the reins of government into his own hands. The foremost of the cardinal's assistants in administration was Fouquet, superintendent of the finances, whose pockets were full to overflowing even when the coffers of the state were empty. Colbert had no difficulty in arousing the king's suspicion as to the source of Fouquet's wealth; and the superintendent began to feel that his position was insecure. In the misguided hope of retaining the royal favor, the ill-advised official invited the monarch to visit his palatial residence at Vaux, where he provided an entertainment of the utmost luxury and prodigality. This ostentatious magnificence so outraged the young sovereign that he was tempted to order Fouquet's arrest in the midst of the feast. Summary punishment was delayed only a few days; and the man who had misadministered the finances of France spent the remaining years of his life in confinement.

The young king was already known to delight in every form of theatrical entertainment; and Fouquet did not fail to supply actors and dancers who were to appear together in a comedy-ballet, a hybrid form not unlike the English masque, but perhaps a little less elaborate. Molière was called upon to devise a plot which would permit the frequent appearance of a group of dancers; and he had only a fortnight's notice in which to improvise his play. He worked against time and he was ready to the minute; and on August twenty-seventh the 'Fâcheux' was acted in the gardens of Vaux. Never did Molière display his sheer cleverness more adroitly or more abundantly than in this three act comedy in verse, written to order and written in haste. He made a virtue of necessity and chose the simplest of themes, which lent itself to the presentation of a series of contrasting characters. An ardent young lover, played by La Grange, is shown trying to get speech with his mistress; and his attempts to approach her are thwarted and his interviews with her are interrupted by a succession of bores, who thrust themselves upon him, each of them insisting upon the lover's attention while he talks about his own affairs with a prolixity which is as exasperating to the hero as it is amusing to the spectators. Three of these obtruding characters were undertaken by Molière himself, one in each act, allowing him to display his histrionic versatility.

Even in the intermission between the acts the unfortunate lover was not left in peace, since it was then the turn of the dancers who came on as gardeners, as cobblers, as players of bowls, and who kept on getting in his way, forcing him to join in their sports, and preventing him from overtaking his lady-love. Dancing did not then demand the terpsichorean agility expected in the theater to-day. There was no sharp difference between the dancing of the drawing-room and the dancing of the stage. Dancing then consisted of a series of rhythmic and stately movements to music, steps and gestures in unison, by groups suitably attired. It was closely akin to the court-quadrille and the minuet; and it was possible to amateurs. In fact the class of professional dancers could then scarcely be said to exist; and those who took part in the ballet at Vaux were probably the dancing-masters of Paris.

Molière was always willing enough to borrow a plot or a form suitable for his immediate purpose; but he was also fertile in finding new forms and in composing new plots. In the 'Fâcheux' he produced a play of a species never before seen on the stage. This unpretending piece, little more than a succession of episodic scenes, has a backbone of its own; it has the contrast and conflict of character which comedy calls for. Its separate incidents may have each of them a likeness to the self-revelatory monologue long popular in the Middle Ages; but there was unexpected novelty and unusual daring in presenting to the assembled courtiers a series of sharply etched portraits of their own class, bores of high degree, caught in the act and held up to laughter. Here was social satire brought home to the court itself, light yet firm, delicate yet vigorous. The production of the 'Fâcheux' marks another stride toward the high comedy that Molière was to attain in due season.

The little play pleased the king, who took occasion to present the author to a courtier renowned for long tales of his own prowess in the hunting-field; and the monarch slyly suggested that here was an original the satirist had overlooked. The playwright was prompt to take the royal hint; and when the 'Fâcheux' was again acted before Louis XIV at Fontainebleau a few days later, the gallery of bores had gained another portrait, for which Molière thanked the king in the neatly turned preface he put to the play when he published it. Here is yet another similarity of Molière's career to Shakspere's, in that they both had royal collaborators—if it is true that the exciting cause of the 'Merry Wives' was the desire of Elizabeth to see "the fat knight in love."

The 'Fâcheux' was the first play that Molière had written specially for the king; and in the following November he brought it out at the Palais-Royal, ballets and all, so that the ordinary playgoers might profit by what had been prepared for the court. Slight as it was in its texture, it hit the taste of the town. Perhaps at first there was chiefly an interest of curiosity to gaze at an entertainment devised for royalty. Perhaps there was also a satisfaction in seeing the courtiers themselves exposed to ridicule. Yet the little play proved to have merits of its own, and it held the stage for sixty or seventy years. It was profitable to the company; and it was profitable to Molière himself in that it brought him into closer relation with Louis XIV, whose support was to be necessary for his full expansion as a dramatist.

CHAPTER VI

HIS FRIENDSHIPS AND HIS MARRIAGE

I

MOLIÈRE had now attained the age of forty; and his outlook on the future was brighter than ever before. After long years of wandering and experiment he had come into his own. He had not yet revealed the full possibilities of his gift as a dramatist; and probably very few of his contemporaries in Paris so much as suspected that he was a genius—just as very few of Shakspere's associates in London had any intimation that he was to be revered later as the chief glory of Elizabethan literature. Very likely Molière had himself no inkling as yet of the heights to which he was soon to climb. In all probability he was for the moment well enough satisfied with what he had already accomplished.

He was recognized as the foremost comic actor of his time; his enemies even liked to suggest that his plays were in themselves poor things made acceptable only by his own surpassing skill as a comedian. He was the manager of a prosperous theatrical enterprise; and the men and women of the company were loyal and grateful. He had brought out in Paris, within three years, a series of six successful plays, interrupted only by one swift failure, speedily forgotten. He was already gathering about him a circle of friends, worthy companions of his leisure hours. And he was at last looking forward to a marriage with one whom he had long cherished. In 1661, at Easter, when the company held its annual meeting to plan for the next season and to engage new actors, he had asked his associates to allot him a double share of the receipts, this second share being "for himself or for his wife, if he should marry."

He seems to have been on excellent terms with his father. His younger brother, also named Jean, had died in April, 1660; and in time the reversion of the royal appointment as *valet de chambre tapissier*, which Molière had ceded back to his father, when he first went on the stage, was again confirmed to him. A few years later we shall find him lending money to his father, whose business was apparently less prosperous, although he had as customers many of the best people in Paris; and it was characteristic of Molière's thoughtful kindliness that this loan was made through a third person, so that the elder Poquelin might not know to whom he was indebted. What his relations were with his married sister we have now no information; but she survived only until 1665.

Among his intimate friends were not a few of the most interesting figures of Louis XIV's reign. Chapelle he had met in his youth; and the intimacy was promptly renewed on his return to the capital. During the wanderings in the south he had become acquainted with Mignard, who was the foremost French painter of his time. The earliest of the new friends he made in Paris was La Fontaine, who was always hearty in his regard for the man, and cordial as well as keen in his appreciation of the author. Even as early as the performance of the 'Fâcheux' at Vaux for Fouquet, La Fontaine was outspoken in his praise, declaring that Molière is "the man for me," comparing him with Terence and preferring him to Plautus. This high opinion grew with the years; and after Molière's death La Fontaine wrote an epitaph asserting that Molière was the equal of Plautus and of Terence put together. Perhaps the author of the incomparable 'Fables' was the earliest of all to catch a glimpse of the genius of the author of the 'Misanthrope.'

It may have been through La Fontaine that Molière was first brought into contact with Boileau, who became one of his best friends and who had many tastes in common with him. There are no more typical French authors than Boileau the critic and Molière the comic dramatist. They had the same intense relish for veracity and the same disgust for the unreal, the inflated and the exaggerated. They had neither of them any liking for excessive romanticism or for vulgar burlesque. What Molière had already done in the drama and what he was to do, were precisely what Boileau was best fitted to enjoy. What Boileau attacked in his satires was what Molière naturally detested and what he was likely himself to assail on occasion. Both of them recognized the importance of the social bond and distrusted excessive individuality. They both sought to set forth a general view of life, rather than a particular view. They both had a high regard for reality and sobriety, for balance and order and proportion.

Nisard insisted that the dominant quality of French literature is its imposing on the individual writer the duty of acting as the organ of the general thought. Every literature, like every language, reveals the characteristics of the race, of which it is the richest expression; but no literature and no language does this more completely than French. The literature of France is not lyrical; it is not ethereal; it is rarely emotional, except in its moral or esthetic fervor; it is preeminently practical, with little tendency toward romanticist exuberance. Of this national type, Boileau is the exponent in criticism and Molière in creation; they are the foremost representatives of these essential French characteristics. There is no reason for wonder that as soon as they met they understood and appreciated each other. They had the same foes and they fought side by side against pretenders of all sorts.

For a season or two the young Racine made a fourth with Molière and Boileau and La Fontaine; and the fabulist has left a record of their cheerful gatherings, a mutual admiration society, richer in genius than that earlier circle to which Vergil and Horace belonged. The four poets talked chiefly about the technicalities of their art, as artists are wont to do whenever they meet together with no alien spirits to misunderstand them. Different as they were in character and in conduct, they were united in holding the same artistic ideals. They were all lovers of veracity, of fidelity to nature as they severally saw it, of integrity in craftsmanship. They all accepted the code that Boileau was soon to declare in his 'Art of Poetry,' which may be regarded as the outcome and the summing up of their fraternal discussions. The ambitious young Racine could not fail to profit by the privilege of analyzing the technic of playmaking, the same in tragedy as in comedy, with Molière, who was master of all its secrets.

It was Molière the manager who a little later accepted and produced the first play that Racine wrote, and who also brought out the second tragedy 'Alexandre,' the earliest in which the young poet really revealed his great gifts. And Molière was repaid with ingratitude, since Racine, disappointed at the acting of the Palais-Royal company, better fitted for representing comic themes than tragic, surreptitiously took his play to the company at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, where it was performed more to his satisfaction. According to the usage of the time, this was not illegal; but it was a breach of custom as it was a breach of faith. It interrupted the friendship of the two dramatists, although Boileau managed to keep on good terms with both of them. Not long after, Racine again added to his ingratitude by persuading Mademoiselle Du Parc and her husband "Gros-René" to desert from Molière's company and to join that at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, to which he continued to give his plays. It is impossible not to find a narrow selfishness in these maneuvers of Racine, in marked contrast with the kindly generosity and the punctilious delicacy which always characterized Molière's conduct.

II

It was not only with his fellow poets that Molière made friends, now that he was settled in the capital; he won the esteem also of certain of the foremost men of France. During his strolling in the south he had been on terms of intimacy with the Prince of Conti, who delighted in having him at his table and in discussing with him the affairs of the day. In Paris, Molière came in time to be honored with the regard of Conti's elder brother, the great Condé, who found it easy to bridge the gap that separated a comic actor from a prince of the blood. Condé appreciated the simple dignity of Molière's character, as he enjoyed the full humor of Molière's plays. He was glad to have Molière with him and to engage in familiar conversation with a man who might think independently, but who never forgot the respect due to rank.

Grimarest went so far as to assert that Condé begged Molière to drop in whenever he had a spare hour: "just send up your name by a servant, and I will leave everything to be with you."

With his social superiors, as with his social equals, Molière was always simple and sincere, never self-assertive and never obsequious. He bore himself in manly fashion whether he was addressing Condé and the king himself, or whether he was talking shop with Boileau and La Fontaine. He was a stanch friend and a charming companion, loyal and broad-minded as a man, just as he was as an author. When he chose he could be a delightful talker; but more often he kept silent, listening intently, watching the several speakers, and storing up observations of human nature. It was Boileau who, noticing this tendency to taciturnity, called Molière "the contemplator." Shakspere also was good company and was highly esteemed by his many friends, who failed to suspect his overwhelming superiority. And Sainte-Beuve has dwelt on the curious fact that Shakspere, the tragic dramatist, seems to have been of a jovial temperament, taking life easily and lightly, so far as we know; whereas Molière, the comic dramatist, was rather melancholy in his disposition, given to silent brooding, although always finding pleasure in the society of his friends.

Molière was fond of good cheer as well as of good company. Several of those who were entertained by him in the later and more prosperous years of his wandering in the provinces, have recorded their appreciation of his hospitality and have testified to the abundance of his table. After his return to Paris and after the success of the company had given him ample means to gratify his wishes, he was glad to gather his friends about him and to treat them sumptuously. He lived largely and liberally. The inventory of his household goods disclosed a home of more than comfortable ease, almost of luxury, with abundant plate and linen and with a few pictures. Yet he was always abstemious himself; and no floating anecdote charges him with any undue indulgence in meat and drink, like that carouse with Ben Jonson which is said to have carried off Shakspere. Long before his early death his health was so enfeebled that he had to put himself on a milk diet. But even then he freely spread before his friends the creature comforts he had to deny to himself.

Condé was not the only one of the chief figures of the court with whom Molière had the friendliest relations. Another was the Marshal de Vivonne, who was also an intimate of Boileau. Later the austere Marquis de Montausier was pleased to make advances to him. Some of these noble friends invited him to their own tables; others accepted his hospitality at one or another of the taverns where it was then, as it is now, fashionable to entertain more liberally than one's own home might permit. Molière was no parasite, content to accept without giving. He was prompt in returning the courtesies he had received; and many of the most interesting men of France were glad to be his guests.

And yet a man of forty, however rich in friends and however absorbed in incessant labor in two different arts, may be lonely at his own fireside and may long for the companionship of a wife. That Molière felt this is shown by the fact that he married not long after he had produced the 'Ecole des Maris' and not long before he brought out the 'Ecole des Femmes.'

III

In the marriage-contract the bride is called Armande Béjart, daughter of Marie Hervé, widow of Joseph Béjart. She was therefore the sister of Molière's old companion, Madeleine Béjart, and of the three other Béjarts who were, or who had been, members of the company. Attempts have been made to maintain that she was not really the daughter of Marie Béjart, but her granddaughter, the second child of Madeleine. The evidence adduced in support of this contention is very flimsy; it is wholly circumstantial; and it has as its foundation only casual gossip. There is no real reason for disbelieving the various legal documents which declare her parentage. She was a woman of unusual charm if not of unusual beauty; and she became a very popular actress. From one cause or another she aroused bitter enmity; and a quarter of a century after her marriage and long after the death of Molière and her own remarriage, she was the victim of an atrocious libel, purporting to set forth her intrigues—a libel of a type not uncommon in the later history of the theater. The anonymous book in which she is insulted is absolutely untrustworthy; many of its specific assertions have been shown to be contrary to fact; and it may be dismissed as inspired by malignant envy. It deserves no credence; and yet it has stained her fame and even cast a shadow on the glory of Molière. And when all is said, she remains an enigmatic figure, not easy to portray.

At the time of her marriage she was scant twenty years of age, having been born after Molière went on the stage and before he began his strolling with Madeleine Béjart and her brothers. Apparently she was the favorite sister of Madeleine, who was later to leave her the most of her fortune. The elder sister may have undertaken to bring up the younger; but we do not know whether Armande's childhood was spent with her mother in Paris or with her brothers and sisters when they were wandering through the south. We have no information as to her education. She had a pleasing voice, singing charmingly both in French and in Italian, so that she could probably speak at least one other language. It is possible that Molière had seen her grow to girlhood and that he had himself attended to her instruction. He was on the most intimate terms with the whole family, making his home in Paris with her mother and her sisters. After they had settled again in the capital she had flowered into womanhood under his eyes and perhaps under his care.

She was not strictly beautiful, for her eyes were too small and her mouth was too large. But she was undeniably fascinating; and there can be no doubt that Molière was passionately in love with her. That she returned his ardent affection is unlikely. He was twice her age; and a man of forty was held to be far older then than he is now, as we can discover by a study of Molière's own comedies. He was not good-looking—at least he could not be accepted as distinguished for manly beauty. He was melancholy always, often moody, and even on occasion abrupt. He was very busy, being the manager of the theater and the stage-manager of the company, incessantly painstaking in his efforts to have his plays performed as he had conceived them. He was absorbed in his work as a dramatist, having to please both the king and the playgoers of Paris. There is no reason to suppose that this girl of twenty was competent to appreciate him. In other words, she was the ordinary wife of an extraordinary man, the commonplace companion of a genius.

Even if she felt no romantic attraction toward him, she may well have liked him, respected him and admired him. There is no reason to suppose that the marriage was other than welcome to her. Many a girl of twenty has been willing enough to marry a man of forty. And to wed Molière was for her a brilliant match. He was the most popular of actors; he was the most successful of comic dramatists; he was the skilful manager of a theater which he had established in the favor of the people. He was the friend of men of letters and of courtiers; he was encouraged by the king and in close relation to the court. He was making money, and he was living almost luxuriously. He could provide her with the appropriate background that a pretty girl longs for. Above all, he could give her a prominent position in the theater, for the wife of the manager who is also the chief author is not likely to be put off with bad parts. Whatever histrionic ability she might be endowed with was certain to be encouraged and displayed by an incomparable trainer.

Coquettish certainly and possibly a little flirtatious also, the stage would bring her the abundant admiration she delighted in. Young and gay, light-hearted and perhaps even light-headed, the stage-door was to be the portal of the realm wherein she might parade that original and excellent taste in dress which was to make her an innovator in fashions, often followed by the great ladies of the court. Since her sisters and her brothers had won success on the stage, she might well look forward to theatrical triumphs of her own. And this hope was abundantly justified. Although she had apparently never before appeared as an actress, she developed rapidly under her husband's guidance. Her native endowment must have been ample; and she was intelligent enough and docile enough to profit by Molière's instruction. For her he composed a series of characters, which called for undeniable versatility and which were fashioned to reveal the capabilities perceived by the keen and loving eyes of her husband. She became an incomparably brilliant actress of the most difficult characters in high comedy. She revealed herself capable of rising to any height of histrionic achievement which Molière pointed out to her.

She was equally effective in the keen-witted and hard-hearted coquettes and in the women of a gentler type, endowed with tenderness and delicacy. Not a few of Molière's biographers have seen fit to identify her with one or more of the characters that her husband devised for her acting, finding warrant for this in La Grange's assertion that Molière often put himself into his plays and those closest to him. No doubt, it is possible now and again to suspect that this passage or that in one play or another may have derived its piquancy or its poignancy from the poet's own experience or even from his own sufferings. But this is always a most dangerous pastime, likely to lead us astray, since the playwright is never a lyric poet dissecting his own soul; he is and he must be always a dramatist, making his characters speak out of the fulness of their own hearts.

Moreover certain of these critics have chosen to identify Molière's wife only with the repellent characters he caused her to impersonate, and have refused to see her in the more attractive figures which make up the majority of her parts in his plays. It is true that she appeared as the unworthy heroine of the 'Misanthrope' and as the worthless wife in 'Georges Dandin'; but it is also true that he confided to her sympathetic and estimable characters to portray in 'Tartuffe' and the 'Femmes Savantes,' in the 'Bourgeois Gentilhomme' and in the 'Malade Imaginaire.' There is no justice in seeking to discover the real woman behind the character entrusted to the actress in the one set of comedies any more than in the other. It is safer to believe that Molière, in writing parts for his wife, sought to provide her with characters which would enable her to display her varied charm, her contrasting qualities, her versatility. Like every other dramatist, he made his profit out of the manifold capacities of the actors and actresses for whom he was composing his plays; he gave them the parts he believed they could act most effectively, wasting no thought on the actual personality of any one of them, but keeping in mind only his or her histrionic equipment.

The marriage of a man of Molière's years and of Molière's temperament with a girl like Armande Béjart contained small chance of happiness for either of them. Yet there is little reason to suppose that it was more unhappy than might have been predicted. It was probably not any more unfortunate in its consequences than the marriages of Shakspere, of Milton and of Goethe. There is no valid evidence in support of the graver accusations brought against his wife. She was probably avid of admiration, and he was certainly of a jealous disposition; and this unworthy passion appears as the mainspring of the action in play after play of his. Naturally enough, his enemies, perceiving this weak point in his character, tried to hurt him by assailing his wife. Very likely he was acutely conscious of the differences in their ages. The time came when their incompatibility was manifest to both of them; and for a season they separated, only to come together again a little while before his fatal seizure. She bore him three children, of whom only a daughter survived him. At the time of his death she behaved with courage and with dignity. A few years later she married again; and she seems to have been a good wife to this second husband. She came out triumphant from a scandal which involved her reputation and which was a curious anticipation of the affair of the diamond necklace that came near compromising Marie Antoinette. She had one son by her second marriage; and he testified that she brought him up to revere the name of Molière.

The marriage-contract was signed on January twenty-third, 1662, with Molière's father as one of the witnesses; and the wedding took place on February twentieth. Molière with his customary liberality shared his goods with his bride and allotted to her a dowry of four thousand livres. The young wife took her place at once in the company which her husband was managing. She was called Mademoiselle Molière—"Madame" being then reserved for persons of quality. She was a novice, with no theatrical experience; at least, there is no record of her ever having appeared on the stage. And there was no part for her in the new play which her husband was soon to produce, the 'Ecole des Femmes,' although it is not difficult to detect in that comedy the result of Molière's preoccupations at the moment of its composition.

CHAPTER VII

THE 'ECOLE DES FEMMES' AND ITS SEQUELS

I

It was in the final week of 1662 that Molière brought out the 'Ecole des Femmes,' a comedy in five acts in verse. Although he was later to produce as many as three plays in a single year, he had allowed an interval of fifteen months to elapse since his preceding piece. But these were the months of his courtship and of his honeymoon; and he may well have found more satisfaction in the society of Armande than in sitting solitary at his desk. And when the new play did come into being at last, it brought with it something of the springtime aroma of that happy season. It is full of zest and verve, full of sympathy for young love, and full of gaiety—a contagious gaiety which won for it at once a popularity unequalled by any of the earlier pieces, successful as they had been each in its own way.

With our completer knowledge of Molière's later work we may persuade ourselves, if we please, that we can perceive in these earlier pieces the promise that he actually fulfilled; but we have no right to be surprised that his contemporaries could not perceive this and that they still thought of him as a writer of amusing farces. He had displayed adroitness and resourcefulness as a playmaker; he had revealed himself as a humorist with unfailing facility in touching the springs of mirth; and once, at least, in the 'Précieuses Ridicules,' he had shown his ability to depict contemporary society. Yet not even the keenest and friendliest of his contemporaries could find warrant in what he had already done for foreseeing what he was soon to do. If Molière had died on the day of his wedding, the historians of literature would not really be justified in suspecting that he had been cut off just as his genius as a comic dramatist was about to expand. So, if Shakspere had died before 'Romeo and Juliet,' he would have left little to give any one the right to predict the nobler and deeper plays whereon his supremacy is based.

In the 'Ecole des Femmes' Molière took a long stride toward his future goal; and it is in this play that we first glimpse qualities he was later to reveal more abundantly. Yet to a contemporary it might very well seem to be only a Second Part to the 'Ecole des Maris.' The later play is indeed very much the same thing as the earlier; but it is also a good deal more, since the 'Ecole des Maris' was hardly more than a clever and amusing anecdote in action.

The 'Ecole des Femmes' gives us the same pleasure by its artfully constructed story, with its expectancy, its suspense and its surprises. It holds our interest by its episodes, ingenious and humorous and graceful. But it also contains far more clearly than its predecessor that picture of life which provokes reflection. We laugh at least as frequently over the 'Ecole des Femmes' as over the 'Ecole des Maris'; and after the laughter has died down we find ourselves thinking. There is a larger lesson in this mirthful laughter than Molière had ever earlier cared to suggest.

Even though Molière put more meaning into his work, he kept fast to the approved formula of the comedy-of-masks, profiting by its freedom, but dropping now what he no longer needed. The scene is again the public square, in two houses of which two chief characters reside. All the talk, however intimate it may be, is exchanged out in the open quite in the Italian manner. And the several characters, while they have acquired a certain individuality of their own, are still more or less types. The young lover, Horace, is only a young lover; and Molière borrowed from his own 'Etourdi' the effective device of letting this ingenuous youth babble the secrets of his wooing to the one person from whom they ought to be kept—the same device we find in the 'Merry Wives' when Falstaff confides to Ford the particulars of his intrigue with Mrs. Ford. Arnolphe, the part that Molière wrote for his own acting, is closely akin to the Sganarelle of the 'Ecole des Maris'; it might even now have borne the same name if Molière had not been growing away from the more obvious characteristics of Italian comedy. The older method survives also in the full dozen of Arnolphe's soliloquies, so varied and so adroitly placed, however, that we listen to them all with interest, amused by the self-revelation.

It must be confessed also that the new play by its structure discloses itself as a transition between the comedy-of-masks and the comedy-of-character. Its framework is still Italian and its content is already French. The naked plot, detached and considered by itself, is as artificial in its conduct and as arbitrary in its conclusion as any Italianate piece, the final discomfiture of Arnolphe being brought about by a "recognition" in accord with the tradition of Greek comedy and perhaps justified by the vicissitudes of Greek society, although not at all warranted by the facts of life in the France of Louis XIV. Molière was slowly learning how to put veracity into comedy, which had been frankly fantastic; and at first he did not hug reality too closely, finding his profit in the conventions which the playgoing public had been trained to accept. His plot sets before us the wooing of a willing maid by a young lover almost under the eyes of a jealous elderly man who was reserving her for himself—a plot often used before and since, notably by Scarron and by Beaumarchais. For mere invention Molière cared as little as Shakspere, taking his material wherever he might find it and borrowing from others as unhesitatingly as he borrowed from himself.

Arnolphe, a man of forty, once bought a little girl of four, whom he has brought up to be his wife, keeping her in the densest ignorance and holding that a wife knows too much when she knows anything. Agnès is the embodiment of innocence, as frank as she is simple. Her ignorance has left her without protection; and when Horace makes up to her, during an absence of Arnolphe, she knows no reason why she should not accept these gratifying advances. Horace, as it happens, is the son of an old friend of Arnolphe's, and as he has just arrived in town he does not know that Arnolphe has taken another name, "M. de la Souche." So he unhesitatingly tells Arnolphe all about his meetings with the girl that "M. de la Souche" is hoping to marry. And when Arnolphe, thus informed, interrogates Agnès, the innocent girl is equally frank. Neither of the young people conceals anything from him; and yet he is powerless to prevent their lovemaking. Indeed, these successive confessions of Horace and of Agnès to Arnolphe, who cannot help discovering the very things he does not want to know, are increasingly amusing. They unite the humor of character to the humor of situation; and even if they are brought about artificially, they are essentially natural. They explain Voltaire's criticism that the play seems to be all in action although it is in reality all in narrative. And Sainte-Beuve pointed out that we are kept interested through the five acts of a love-story in which the lovers do not meet before the eyes of the audience until the middle of the final act—than which there could be no better proof of Molière's dramaturgic dexterity.

II

But there is much more in the play than mere ingenuity of craftsmanship. Technical skill serves here a larger purpose than in the 'Ecole des Maris' or the 'Etourdi.' There is a perfect clarity of exposition; and there is a perfect unity of plot, since the story is single, moving forward steadily, the division into acts being almost accidental. Willing enough to borrow the externalities of his play and to let his plot-making be more or less arbitrary, Molière insisted on presenting life as he saw it and in creating characters in accord with human nature. The scene is laid in the Paris of his own time; and the personages are chosen from the burgher class he knew best. Scarron and the younger Corneille, who were the leading comic dramatists of France before Molière came forward, not only took over Spanish stories, but they were content also to leave the scene in Spain, with no ambition to depict the manners of their own country; and Molière himself had laid the action of the 'Etourdi' in Messina. But in the 'Ecole des Femmes,' even if the intrigue is more or less mechanical, there is a sense of reality. Here at last is the truth about life, even if the story itself is not a fact.

The plot may be manufactured at will; the people, at least, are observed.

Horace is drawn in outline only, a silhouette of the essential lover, existing only to adore and to be adored; yet he is a charming young fellow and we rejoice when his wooing prospers. Agnès has a little of the unthinking selfishness of youth, eager to have its own way and unsuspicious of the cost to others. She has the transparent simplicity of Miranda, although his more poetic theme imposed on Shakspere a more imaginative treatment of maidenly ignorance. She is honest and open-hearted, with a candid delight in being wooed and a girlish inability to understand Arnolphe's suffering. Arnolphe himself is also selfish, in fact grossly egoistic, and finally foolish. He is fiercely jealous, not unnaturally; and in his opinionated blindness he cannot see why he should not be preferred to the young lover the girl scarcely knows. Molière was always searching and acute in his analysis of jealousy, the one passion from which he himself suffered. Arnolphe is grotesquely absurd in his inability to see himself; but he is intensely true and vibratingly human. He is akin to us all; and although we are glad that he fails to get his heart's desire, although we laugh at him incessantly, as the author invites us to do, yet we are sorry for him also, and he has a share of our sympathy, simply because of our human brotherhood. He is no puppet to make empty laughter merely, he is one of us; and even while we smile, we recognize the solidarity of human nature.

But even if Molière managed to win casual sympathy for the sufferings of Arnolphe, whom he impersonated himself, he has left us in no doubt that he meant us rather to be interested in the wooing of the young folks; he is on their side, plainly enough. Arnolphe was seeking what he ought not to have, since it is everlastingly ordained that the young should mate with the young. We are what we are; and nature is irresistible. The course of true love may not always run smooth, but the current is charming. The attraction of a man for a maid and of a maid for a man, if it is sincere, even if it is also very sudden, had better be obeyed, whatever older heads and colder hearts may object. That way, at least, happiness may lie, who knows? And all other ways lead to disappointment.

If the 'Ecole des Femmes' has a sustaining thesis, if it presents a problem for consideration, there is no doubt as to Molière's own solution. There may be a problem, but there is no enigma. Probably Molière was not consciously and deliberately putting a moral into his play, even if the moral is there none the less for those who care to see it. Possibly, when he held up to scorn Arnolphe's attempt to secure the fidelity of his future wife by keeping her ignorant, Molière was not aware that he was proffering evidence in behalf of the belief that knowledge must precede morality, and that knowledge is in fact the only firm foundation for morality. If Molière was a philosopher, he was a laughing philosopher, as a comic dramatist must ever be; and if the 'Ecole des Femmes' is a problem-play, it is also a comedy in which the author never preaches, however much he may teach. We may dispute about the meaning of the piece; but there is no question as to its merriment. It is not only charming and cheerful, it is gay with felicitous mirth. It is one of Molière's most amusing comic dramas, delightful in the library and even more delightful in the theater, as a true comedy ought to be. The laughter evoked by its comic characters in comic situations is effervescent and abundant, even if it arouses serious thought when the fun has faded a little from the memory.

III

While the popularity of the 'Ecole des Femmes' was indisputable, the new comedy aroused more abundant and more acrid criticism than any of its predecessors. The hostility which had shown itself when the 'Précieuses Ridicules' was produced, now displayed itself with redoubled vigor. The 'Ecole des Femmes' was denounced as indecent, as immoral, and even as impious. And for every one of these accusations there was just sufficient color to make a complete answer a little difficult. There was one brief equivoke, which derived part of its point from the threat of a latent indelicacy. Then there was the obvious support the author gave to young love, in revolt against its lawful guardian. Finally, there was the scene wherein Arnolphe laid down the sequence of commandments which a wife ought to obey; and some spectators chose to regard this as a parody of a sermon. But these three alleged lapses from propriety were trifles, every one of them, however malignity might seek to magnify them. They were not likely really to shock any open-minded spectator.

Probably a certain part of the enmity aroused against Molière by this play may be attributed to a vague perception that here was a comedy larger in its scope and deeper in its meaning than any that had preceded it. Many playgoers then went to the theater for empty laughter, as do many playgoers now, having left their minds at home, and resenting every effort to make them think. The older writers of comedy had been satisfied to deal with the externals of life; and some spectators might hold it to be sheer impudence in Molière not to be content with what had been good enough for Scarron and the two Corneilles. Perhaps these spectators did not object so much to the special lesson of the 'Ecole des Femmes' as they did to the attempt to slip any lesson at all into a comedy. They believed that comedy was for laughter and for laughter only; and that the writer of comedy had no business to smuggle a moral into his mirth. For anything of this sort there was no precedent; and the comic dramatist who attempted it ought to be suppressed at once as a dangerous innovator. We can better understand this conservative attitude if we recall the violent protests raised at the end of the nineteenth century when a few modern dramatists began to deal conscientiously with the insistent problems of human conduct. These efforts to make the drama more literary by relating it more closely to life itself, were greeted by the strange proclamation that the sole function of the theater is to facilitate the digestion of "the tired business man." There must always yawn a wide gap between those who deem the theater to be only a place of idle amusement and those who rank the drama as the loftiest of the arts.

But the opponents of Molière included not only lazy souls who did not desire to be startled out of their lethargy, and not only prudish persons who affected to be disgusted by this episode or by that speech, they included also some men and more women who had no real liking for the broad common sense, for the hearty fun, and for the streak of earthiness which is as discoverable in the creator of Arnolphe as it is in the creator of Falstaff. Molière and Shakspere have an animal side as well as a spiritual; they are healthily full-bodied and full-blooded. If the

'Ecole des Femmes' was the first play in which Molière made manifest his bolder characteristics, it was a comedy not likely to please those who never would relish his outspoken frankness. These possessors of superfine delicacy were not prurient prudes, at least not all of them; they were sensitive creatures who looked to literature for subtleties of sentiment and etherealities of treatment of a kind wholly foreign to Molière's masculine temperament. In the nineteenth century Poe emerged as a specimen of this class, declaring that La Motte Fouqué was worth fifty Molières. Men and women of an ultra immateriality like Poe's want to see life sublimated; and they are not attracted to a writer who deals with it in outspoken fashion. They do not care for Molière, as they do not care for Montaigne or for Rabelais, with whom Molière had so much in common. Their supersensitive shrinking from the actual leads them to avert their gaze from much that is healthily natural; and they remind us of Watteau, who said that nature put him out.

Fortunately, those who did not enjoy the bluntness of tone, the frankness of humor, the fulness of flavor in Molière's work were in a small minority, even though they included a few men and women of prominence. Those who were most capable of appreciating the full value of Molière's new play were prompt in its praise. Boileau published a set of stanzas in which he encouraged Molière to go on with the good work. To us to-day Boileau's critical code may seem unduly restricted; but the man himself was sincere and he had keen perceptions. It must be counted to his credit that he did much to make the public understand Molière's merits. The satirical critic and the comic dramatist were not only stanch friends, they were allies in a common cause; they worshiped nature as they severally understood the word, seeking veracity, shunning the fantastic, rejoicing in the real; and this attitude of theirs was a novelty then when tales and plays were laid in a world of unreality and when the hollow absurdities of the 'Grand Cyrus' were still acclaimed. The simplicity, the sincerity which Boileau preached Molière practised; and thus each of them buttressed the other.

But it was not only by Boileau that Molière was then heartened; Louis XIV also took sides with him and accorded him a signal mark of the royal favor. Late in the spring of 1663, while the controversy over the 'Ecole des Femmes' was still raging, the king gratified a large number of men of letters by granting annual pensions for their encouragement. Corneille received two thousand livres as "the foremost dramatic poet of the world." Racine, then an almost unknown beginner, received eight hundred, as a "French poet." And Molière received one thousand as an "excellent comic poet." He was the only actor included in this royal benefaction; and the pension thus served to mark him as a man of letters, having an established position in literature. Probably this royal recognition at this time, when he was attacked on all sides, was as welcome as the money itself.

In accordance with the custom of the time, Molière rimed a copy of verses to Louis XIV, thanking the monarch for the royal gift. In his happily turned lines, bright and brisk, unpretending and easy, Molière bade his muse disguise herself and make her way to court, to present his gratitude to the king. In these occasional verses there is nothing obsequious, nothing more or less than the circumstances demanded. They are prettily clever, and their rimes are prettily polished; but they do not display any new aspect of Molière's genius.

About the same time he published also the 'Ecole des Femmes' with a dedicatory epistle to Madame, wife of Monsieur. He had been allowed to inscribe the 'Ecole des Maris' to her husband, the patron of the company; and the king himself had accepted the dedication of the 'Fâcheux,' augmented by the character he had suggested. Molière's next comedy, it may be noted here, was to be inscribed to the queen-mother, Anne of Austria. That these four plays could be presented in rapid succession to the four foremost figures of the kingdom is evidence that Molière's position was then solidly established. That he should have selected his dedicatees so carefully may have been due to his desire to make friends at court, against the time when he might need them, after he had composed the stronger plays which were perhaps already beginning to take shape in his mind.

IV

To the attacks on the 'Précieuses Ridicules' Molière had paid no attention; to those on the 'Ecole des Femmes' he finally resolved to retort. He never lacked courage to hit hard when he thought it worth while; and he was now emboldened by the public praise of Boileau and by the receipt of the royal pension. But how was he to reply to his adversaries? He might have accepted the custom of the time and prepared a pamphlet, which was the seventeenth century equivalent of the nineteenth century magazine article and of the twentieth century authorized interview. Molière, however, was an actor before he was a man of letters; and the printed page probably seemed to him to lack the sharpness of the spoken word. He was a playwright, after all; and he felt that his own stage was the proper platform for his parry and counter-thrust. Although the habit of the rimed prologue and epilogue did not obtain in France, Molière was the orator of the company and he was free to say whatever he pleased. A speech, however, could be spoken but once; it could survive only in the memories of those who might chance to hear it; it could not have either the permanence or the reverberation that Molière was seeking. Yet he was not at a loss for long; with his habitual ingenuity he found a new way of accomplishing his purpose.

On the first of June, 1663, he brought out a one act comedy in prose, the 'Critique de l'Ecole des Femmes,' presenting it immediately after the performance of the 'Ecole des Femmes,' still at the height of its popularity. In general, Molière did not care to go far afield in search for novelty of form, content to use the framework which had already won the favor of the playgoers; but in this new venture he displayed the same originality which had enabled him to find the novel formula of the comedy-ballet, employed in the 'Fâcheux.' He devised a play of a new kind, a play which was only a series of conversations, a play without a plot and yet possessing that needed backbone of the comic drama, the contrast of character with character. Slight as it is, without any external action, with no love-story at all, with only a succession of dialogues setting forth the antithesis of critical theories, the 'Critique de l'Ecole des Femmes' is a little masterpiece of playmaking skill; and it is one of the most adroit and characteristic of Molière's comedies.

He managed to give this string of conversations a movement of its own and even to work up to a climax, by the device of peopling it with a gallery of portraits taken from contemporary life, each of the characters coming on in turn just when its arrival would refresh the discussion. In this comedy, as in the 'Précieuses Ridicules' in which he was also making fun of the foibles of contemporary society, he laid the story in a drawing-room, relinquishing the street scene of the comedy-of-masks, most convenient for his plays of intrigue. In defending himself, Molière is again assailing a sham, for he is holding up to scorn the pedants who abused his play and the supersensitives who pretended to be shocked by his plainness of speech.

Two cousins are receiving—one of them Uranie, a little the elder, and endowed with the mature common sense of a healthy-minded woman; the other Elise, keen-witted, quick-tongued, possessing a sharp sense of humor and a pretty turn for irony. Their first visitor is Climène, a prudish *précieuse*, who pours out the vials of her wrath upon Molière's comedy. Next an absurd Marquis arrives, stuffed with prejudice, and incapable of thinking for himself. Climène had, if not arguments against the play, at least opinions; but the Marquis, although consumed with conceit, can only echo the opinions he has chanced to hear. Then in comes Dorante, an accomplished man of the world, clear-headed and open-minded; and he takes up the defense of Molière, coming to the rescue of Uranie, as Elise has pretended to be converted to the hostile cause. Finally, there appears one Lysidas, a rival poet, who begins by empty compliments for the play, and who ends by declaring it beneath contempt as entirely contrary to the rules of dramatic art. Dorante has no difficulty in demolishing this biased critic, exposing his petty pedantry and going to the root of the matter by declaring that the one unbreakable rule is to please. And at last when every point of view has been presented a servant declares that supper is ready; and this brings the little piece to an end.

Marvelous is the variety and the vivacity which Molière managed to impart to what is, after all, only a conversation, only a dialogued essay in criticism, only a debate over the principles of the dramatic art. It is a conversation, always keeping the tone of real talk, easy and unacademic, flowing and graceful. It is as abundant in humor as it is in good humor; and it is as fair as any one had a right to demand. Both sides are allowed to have the floor and at length; and while Molière entrusted his defense to the more sensible and sympathetic characters, he let the foolish figures say their say in their own fashion.

It is not only by its briskness of dialogue and of dialectic that the little play is sustained, but also by the skill with which several characters are contrasted. Specially ingenious is the later attitude of Elise, pretending to go over to the enemy, and thus intensifying the feebleness of the accusations brought against the play. That Molière himself impersonated the egregious Marquis is highly probable, although not absolutely certain. It is certain, however, that he entrusted the clever Elise to his young bride, who apparently made her first appearance on the stage in this character, in which it was her chief duty to defend her husband against malicious attack. Molière exercised his usual excellent judgment in thus bringing his inexperienced wife before the public in a part which was not too heavy for her young shoulders and which was likely to be sympathetic to the spectators.

That a play without story or action or love-interest, with nothing but character-drawing and brilliant conversation, dealing with a purely literary theme and discussing the technicalities of dramaturgy—that such a play could hold the interest of Parisian audiences again and again, is high testimony to the alert intelligence and the diffused culture of the burgher class which supplied the main body of spectators. "Nor can he whose business it is to address the mind be understood where there is not a moderate degree of intellectual activity," so George Meredith declared. The more sympathetic response of his audience is one obvious reason for the superiority of Molière over Plautus and Terence, who had to please the riffraff of the Mediterranean and the rude mob of Roman freedmen.

V

If Molière had vainly supposed that his clever retort would silence his assailants and leave them speechless, he soon found out his mistake. The assault was shriller and more envenomed than ever before; and now that he had shown his adversaries how to put dramatic criticism into a play, half a dozen little pieces, patterned on the 'Critique de l'Ecole des Femmes,' were performed or published. In the forefront of the attack were certain actor-authors of the rival company at the Hôtel de Bourgogne. They were annoyed by the sharp competition of Molière's company, not only in the capital but at court also. The Hôtel de Bourgogne was the long-established theater, and its actors had the right to style themselves "the only royal company." Its members liked to think of Molière's company as a band of new-comers fit only for farce-acting and entirely without repute in the nobler art of tragedy. Moreover, these comic performers were not under the immediate patronage of the king; they were only the "company of Monsieur." And yet Louis XIV had taken a fancy to Molière's troupe and had ordered it to act before the court far more often than the company of the Hôtel de Bourgogne, which was directly under his royal patronage.

Their bitter attacks on Molière did not win back the favor of the king to the rival company; indeed, they may have aroused in him a curiosity to see how Molière would meet them. Louis XIV again ordered the company of comedians to perform before him at Versailles; and a week before they appeared he told Molière to take this opportunity to retort on his adversaries. This is the explanation of the title and of the content of the 'Impromptu de Versailles,' a comedy in one act in prose, produced on October fourteenth, 1663. It was the earliest of Molière's plays to be originally acted at Versailles, and composed especially for Louis XIV—the 'Fâcheux' having been performed first at Vaux by request of Fouquet. That it was written in haste by the king's command Molière is very careful to make plain in the play itself, wherein we find three times repeated a formal assertion of the royal responsibility for the little play.

The 'Impromptu de Versailles' is almost the slightest of Molière's pieces; but it is not the least significant or the least interesting. It is only an unpretending trifle, and the haste in which it was put together would prevent its being anything more. But it is adroit and ingenious; it is, indeed, exactly what it ought to be for its special occasion. It has a certain likeness to the 'Frogs' of Aristophanes, to the 'Rehearsal' of Buckingham and to the 'Critic' of Sheridan; and it shows Molière discussing the art of acting, just as Shakspere made Hamlet discuss it with the Players. Its scene is laid on the stage of the theater at Versailles. The characters of the play are Molière himself and all the other members of his company. The king will be there in a few minutes to witness the performance of the new play Molière has written to order in a hurry; but the actors have not had time to learn their parts properly and they plead for postponement—unavailingly, since the king has commanded, and the king must be obeyed. Molière encourages them all, describes to each the character he or she is supposed to be representing, explains how he wants this or that speech spoken, and lets the rehearsal lapse every now and then while they talk over the predicament they are in and the imperativeness of the royal desire.

We see Molière the actor imitating the chief performers of the Hôtel de Bourgogne; we see Molière the stage-manager conducting a rehearsal; we see Molière the author discussing the reason why he has chosen to do one thing and not another; we see Molière the man defending himself and his family in manly fashion against unworthy attacks. We see the various members of the company, devoted to their chief, and yet chafing against the necessity of acting before they are ready. We see the important position held by Madeleine Béjart, who does not hesitate to give advice and who is always listened to courteously. We see the impeccable La Grange, with whom the author is always so well pleased that he never needs to give him any direct instruction. We see Molière's own wife, young and gay and happy, teasing her husband with the suggestion that he ought to write a play in which he could act all the parts; and when he tells her to hold her tongue, she retorts that he would not have spoken that way a year or two earlier, and that marriage changes a man for the worse. This amusing little passage at arms is evidence of the good feeling which still governed the relations of the bride and groom.

It remains to be said that there are a few lines in the ‘Impromptu de Versailles’ which we cannot help regretting for Molière’s sake. He chooses to mention by name one of those who had attacked him, a little-known playwright, Boursault. However irresistible his temptation, this holding up to public obloquy of a fellow-writer seems unworthy of Molière. He is wiser when he puts into the mouth of one of his company the assertion that the best retort to his assailants was to write a new play which should succeed like its predecessors. This advice which Molière thus gave himself he acted on for the rest of his career. He had paid no attention to any attack before he wrote the ‘Critique de l’Ecole des Femmes’; and he did not return to the charge again after he had brought out the ‘Impromptu de Versailles.’ Never again did he trouble or turn aside to pick up any of the quarrels that were thrust upon him. He went on his own way and he did the work he found ready to his hand.

VI

Unimportant as these two little plays may be, we should greatly regret not to have them. They may add little to his enduring fame; but they add materially to our acquaintance with Molière himself. We might deduce from them Molière’s theory of dramatic art. It is here that he put himself on record as holding—what Corneille and Racine also held, what every practical playwright must hold—that the chiefest rule of all is to please the public. Here he was in agreement with the Aristotle whom his opponents threw up against him; Aristotle distrusted the verdict of specialists and preferred the judgment of the cultivated public. Molière showed that he could talk about the rules as well as any one else; and he asserted that he kept the spirit of the law even if he might seem sometimes to break the letter. Thus he is in accord with Ben Jonson, when he asked, "Let Aristotle and others have their dues; but if we can make further discoveries of truth and fitness than they why are we envied?"

Molière had also the courage to declare his conviction that comedy is more difficult than tragedy, both to act and to write, since comedy deals with everyday life with which we are all familiar, whereas heroic pieces surpass our ordinary understanding and we have no standard to gage them wisely. He proclaimed that it is the business of comedy to represent all mankind, especially in the comic author's own century. Furthermore he denied that he had ever put into a play any individual baldly reproduced from actual life—a denial that some of his commentators seem still unwilling to accept.

CHAPTER VIII

MOLIERE AND LOUIS XIV

I

THE 'Impromptu de Versailles,' the first play of Molière's written to the king's order, was speedily followed by others, commanded by Louis XIV and composed especially for performance at court. It would be idle to maintain that these plays, prepared for particular occasions and cramped by the rigorous limitations of the court-ballet, have greatly contributed to raise Molière's reputation with posterity. But the cleverness and the ease with which he carried out the king's wishes did raise him higher in the favor of the monarch, who had taken all power into his own hands. Perhaps we must consider these lighter trifles, put together hurriedly to meet the caprice of the king, as the price that Molière paid for the privilege of writing his later and nobler plays to please himself, the ampler and deeper comedies in which he was able to express himself more completely.

Yet there is no reason to think that Molière was working against the grain in trying to gratify the monarch, or that he did not find amusement in the exercise of his inventive ingenuity. Probably the association with the sovereign and with the court was as pleasant to him as it was profitable. Louis XIV was then young; he had only recently come into power; he was ardent in the pursuit of pleasure. He enjoyed every kind of theatrical entertainment, delighting more particularly in musical spectacle. He was good-looking and graceful; and he liked to figure in the court-ballets. Popular at court for several reigns, these ballets had been mostly mythological in theme, as unreal as they were elaborate, setting in action Minerva and Venus, the muses and the graces, satyrs and nymphs. Their plots were almost always forced and fantastic; and the interest of the spectators was centered on the groups of dancers, who came on at intervals to sing and to caper in character.

In the 'Fâcheux' Molière had shown how it was possible to get away from the frippery of mythology and to devise a genuine play, which would justify a succession of songs and dances quite as well as the earlier and emptier schemes introducing gods and goddesses. In that comedy-ballet, simple as it was, he had proved that a web of true comedy might be embroidered at will with the interludes of singing and dancing which characterized the ballet. The comedy-ballet, as Molière thus presented it, was less pretentious and less fatiguing than the earlier type with its exaggerated grandiloquence; and it was more amusing, because it contained within the spectacle what was after all a real play, however slight this might be.

Stripped of these needless accessories the 'Fâcheux' is but a single act. So is the first comedy-ballet, which Molière devised for the king himself, the 'Mariage Forcé.' It is in one act, in prose; but it was first performed in January, 1664, at the Louvre, with a variety of songs and dances, which expanded it to three acts. It was written for the king; it was produced before him; and it was also performed by him—for he himself appeared as a gipsy in one of the interludes. The plot has the needful simplicity; it turns on a single suggestion, presented from a variety of aspects. Sganarelle, the same fixed type that Molière had impersonated more than once before, is a man of fifty, and he is thinking of getting married. But he does not know his own mind two minutes together. He consults a friend; he consults two philosophers, one after the other; he even consults a pair of gipsy girls; he has a disquieting interview with his chosen bride; and he overhears a still more disquieting interview between her and one of her admirers. Finally he resolves to break off the match; and the chosen bride's father sends in her gentle-spoken brother, who insists either on a duel to the death or a marriage on the spot. And Sganarelle accepts immediate matrimony in preference to immediate mortality.

This is the story of the play in one act; yet it lends itself to a host of other consultations and of other misadventures of Sganarelle, episodes of singing and dancing, which Molière ingeniously scatters through the action, and which could be omitted without loss when the play had to stand on its own merits. There is genuine comedy in the perplexities of Sganarelle; and there is rich humor in the two philosophers whom he seeks to consult. The pedant with his mouth crammed with scholastic phrases was one of the accepted types of the comedy-of-masks; but in the hands of the Italians it presented only a caricature of external characteristics. Molière had had a solid training in philosophy himself; the vocabulary of the schools was perfectly familiar to him; and here he turns it to humorous uses, caricaturing the essential qualities of the philosophy then going out of fashion. Having utilized what are really three of the fixed types of the comedy-of-masks, Molière employs again its customary and convenient scene, the open square, with the houses of four of the characters all on the stage together—those of the two philosophers, that of the bride, and that of Sganarelle himself. As usual, the acting took place in the neutral ground between the houses, very much as it had taken place in the 'Ecole des Femmes.'

II

Molière's young wife, who had made her first appearance in the 'Critique de l'Ecole des Femmes,' and who had appeared again in the 'Impromptu de Versailles,' had no part in the 'Mariage Forcé.' Two years after the wedding she had borne him his first son, only ten days before the 'Mariage Forcé' was performed at the Louvre. A month later this child was baptised, the king and his sister-in-law, Madame (the wife of Monsieur) being godfather and godmother, both of them by proxy. It was not uncommon for the sovereign to stand godfather to the children of his servants; and this is not the exceptional honor that it might seem. Yet, in this instance, it had special significance in that it testified to the king's disbelief in certain vile calumnies which had been heaped on Molière and which need not be recalled.

If Mademoiselle Molière had to forego the pleasure of appearing before the court in the 'Mariage Forcé,' her husband more than made this up to her in the part he prepared for her in the following play, the 'Princesse d'Elide,' the first good part she had been entrusted with, a precursor of the important characters which her husband was soon to devise for her. The new play was written to take its place in the most sumptuous entertainment yet given at Versailles, the week-long spectacle, called the

'Pleasures of the Enchanted Island.' Day after day, there were processions, maskings, concerts, tiltings and bravery of all sorts, in which Molière and his company bore their share, appearing by the side of the most brilliant nobles of the court. Ostensibly the entertainment was for the queen and the queen-mother; actually it seems to have been a delicate attention of the young king for his mistress, Mademoiselle de la Vallière.

It was on the second day of the festival, on May eighth, 1664, that Molière's new play was performed. The 'Princesse d'Elide' was called "a gallant comedy"; it was in five acts; and it was to have been in verse, but Molière had time to rime only the first act and one scene of the second, leaving the rest in prose and not working out the later scenes as elaborately as he had intended. Possibly there is little loss in this haste, since the 'Princesse d'Elide' never could have been worthy of its author. Perhaps because both the queen and the queen-mother were Spaniards, Molière chose to take over a Spanish plot, that of Moreto's 'Desden con el Desden.' While he borrowed the story he dealt with it very freely, simplifying the structure and harmonizing it with French taste. But the result is not satisfactory; for the admirers of French comedy there remains too much Moreto, and there is not enough Molière. The lyrical luxuriance of the Spanish play is attenuated; and we do not get in return the flavor of Molière's own humor. His handling of the rather highflown theme cannot be called perfunctory, but it is not sympathetic. There was no kinship between Molière's genius and that of the peninsular playwrights; and he lost far more than he gained when he tried to follow in their footsteps. After 'Don Garcie,' the 'Princesse d'Elide' is the least interesting of all Molière's plays; it is rarely read, and it is never acted. No doubt it filled its place on the program acceptably enough; and probably few of the spectators were bored by its rather strained sentiment and by its rather mechanical fun.

Warned by his failure in 'Don Garcie' Molière himself did not attempt the heroic part, even though the heroine was to be impersonated by his wife. He gave the lover to La Grange and he made over for himself the low comedy part; but the *gracioso* of Moreto did not lend itself to Molière's histrionic veracity. Molière is at his best as a humorist only when he is dealing with human nature as it is; he may exaggerate almost to caricature—indeed, he often does this deliberately; but he needs always a basis of reality. Quite possibly this part of the court-fool, Moron, that Molière himself performed, was amusing in the acting; but on the printed page its fun is pale.

In the summer the play was repeated several times before the court at Saint-Germain; and in the fall Molière brought it out at the Palais-Royal, allowing the playgoers of Paris to behold the spectacle which had pleased the king and the courtiers. In spite of the fact that it was set off with all its interludes of singing and dancing, it could not long retain the favor of spectators who had paid their way into the theater, and after twenty-five performances it was withdrawn, not to be acted again during Molière's lifetime. When the novelty of its spectacular accessories had worn off, the thinness of the piece itself was revealed; and the playgoers of Paris were probably disappointed at not finding in a play of Molière's the qualities he had accustomed them to expect in his comedies.

III

Four days after the performance of the 'Princesse d'Elide' and also included in the 'Pleasures of the Enchanted Island' there was the first performance of three acts of 'Tartuffe.' The 'Princesse d'Elide' was only task work, undertaken to meet the wishes of the monarch; but 'Tartuffe' was of all Molière's plays the one nearest to his own heart, the one in which he put the most of himself and the best he could do. It was also the one play of his the performance of which was allowed at last only by the direct intervention of Louis XIV himself. Yet the king began by prohibiting it. In the official account of the 'Pleasures of the Enchanted Island,' there is a very carefully composed paragraph setting forth that "although the play had been found very diverting, the king knew that there was so great a likeness between those whom a veritable devotion has put on the road to heaven and those whom a vain ostentation of good works does not prevent from the guilt of evil deeds, therefore his extreme delicacy in matters of religion would not suffer this likening of vice to virtue, one of which might be taken for the other; and although there was no doubt of the good intention of the author, the king forbade its public performance and deprived himself of a pleasure, that others, less capable of a just discernment, might not be led astray." The monarch did not absolutely deprive himself of the pleasure, since there was a second performance of these three acts before him in September of that same year, 1664.

Yet this official explanation testifies to a desire to treat Molière with the utmost courtesy. But none the less was 'Tartuffe' forbidden by royal authority; and nearly five years were to elapse before the king was finally to permit its performance, overruling the prohibitions of the archbishop of Paris and the president of parliament. It was not without good reason that Molière showed himself always ready to put aside his own work and to undertake the odd jobs of playmaking which the pleasure-loving young monarch imposed on him from time to time.

IV

"The best title of Louis XIV to the recollection of posterity is the protection he extended to Molière," so Lord Morley has declared; "and one reason why this was so meritorious is that Molière's work had a markedly critical character, in reference both to the devout and to the courtier. But Molière is only critical by accident. There is nothing organically negative about him; and his plays are the pure dramatic presentation of a peculiar civilization." The civilization that Molière portrayed was peculiar, partly because of the conditions which had prevailed in France during the infancy and youth of Louis XIV, and partly because of the personal character of the ruler himself.

Francis I had already established the royal authority, breaking down the influence of the feudal nobles in the provinces, and seeking to center all power in Paris in the hands of the sovereign. Richelieu took up the work of Francis I and made ready to substitute autocracy for mere monarchy. He overrode violently all laws and all customs which might in any way limit the might of the sovereign. So completely did he consolidate the kingly power that it survived the weak rule of Mazarin, marred by the petty bickerings and murderous intriguing of the Fronde.

Louis XIV lived through the Fronde and suffered from it and was humiliated by it. What he was then forced to see intensified his resolve that he himself, when he took the government into his hands, should be supreme, with no one to gainsay his royal will. He meant to be the focus of everything; to hold all command in his own control; to let no one shine except by reflected light from the throne; to be the center of the solar system. It was as though he had taken to heart the saying set him as a copy for his boyish writing-lessons: "Homage is due to kings; and they may do whatever they choose."

The reign of Louis XIV, like the reign of Solomon, began magnificently; and both kings, the Frenchman and the Hebrew, survived to see the failure of their rule, the misery of their people, and the pitiful diminishing of their glory. There were not a few great men in France, while Louis XIV sat on the throne; but the king himself was not one of them. He was not a man of much more than ordinary ability; and yet he was not without a certain sly cleverness. He had a shrewdness of his own; he had abundant taste; he had the knack of saying the right word at the right time; he was wise enough never to uncover his immense ignorance, the result of his neglected education. He was as lacking in depth of understanding and in breadth of outlook as he was in solidity of knowledge. His dominant characteristics were pride and selfishness; and they united to give him a monstrous egotism, even surpassing that of Napoleon, without being sustained by the soaring imagination and the superb energy of the Corsican adventurer.

He was supremely proud and also superlatively vain, although in most men who are proud the larger vice inhibits the pettier. He set up statues to himself in his own lifetime; and during his reign he did not allow a single statue to be put up to any of his predecessors. He erected Versailles, where he was free from all comparison with the past splendor of France, and where he caused to be strewn broadcast throughout the decorations his own boastful emblem, the sun, and his vainglorious motto, declaring that he had "no equal among many." At Versailles, which he had created, he saw only his own creatures, the courtiers who hung on his nod and who prostrated themselves at his beck. He was jealous of the ablest of his ministers, Colbert and Louvois, at times treating them harshly, while he was more affable toward their feebler successors who had no will of their own and whom he preferred because he believed that he had trained them himself. He was ever greedy of flattery, although not so insatiable in his youth as he became in his old age, when the only way to the royal favor was by groveling servility. Yet even when he had just ascended the throne he was always expecting a compliment, almost demanding fulsome eulogy, and never declining it, however gross or abject it might be. He took himself so seriously that this incense seemed only what was due to him. He was so well pleased with it that he seems never to have despised those who proffered it.

His selfishness was appalling. In all France he cared for no one and for nothing but himself and his own glory. In public affairs he held himself above all law, overruling every other authority in the state without scruple or hesitation. In his private life he disdained to be bound by any code of morality or even of decency. In his youth he was an ardent sensualist; and in his old age he naturally became a narrow-minded bigot. He flaunted his amorous intrigues, sometimes two or three at once, in the face of the queen, in the eyes of the whole court and even before the people of France. He punished severely the lady in charge who sought to prevent his having access by night to the apartments of the queen's maids of honor. He legitimated his bastards, even those he had by Madame de Montespan, the fruits of a double adultery, which he thus forced on the gaze of the world. He had no consideration for the fatigue or the health even of those whom he cherished, his intimates, his own family. He had no regret, no kindly feeling, no gentle word for the vanquished or for those who no longer pleased him. His own personal caprice was his sole law.

What his sluggish mind and his arid soul most delighted in was the empty ceremonial of Versailles. He found unfailing pleasure in the pettiness of it all. He enjoyed the routine of royalty; and in the incessant direction of all its details he was as hard-working as he was hard-hearted. He was glad to submit himself to the rigorous slavery of elaborate etiquet and he subjected all the nobility to it, enforcing their attendance upon his person, to the neglect of their estates and the ruin of their fortunes. He did everything in public, the cynosure of an adoring group of courtiers. He got out of bed and washed his hands and put on his shirt, while a throng of nobles filled his bedroom. Every day had its regulated duties and every hour had its prescribed occupations. Life at Versailles was monotonous and servile; and the sole relief for the emptiness of this parade was the spectacle of envious rivalry for the favor of the sovereign. The king himself did not care that everybody was uncomfortably lodged in the ill-planned and unhealthy palace; he was himself in reality little better off than they were. The outward show with its gaudiness gratified him daily and hourly, so that he gave no thought to the discomfort, the dirt, and the ever-present possibility of disease. He had no more regard for the convenience or the health of the courtiers whose presence there was due to his direct command, than he had for the well-being of the populace of the kingdom, crushed beneath the taxes constantly increasing to pay for the palace, for the support of the courtiers, for the lavish wastefulness of the royal existence and for the indefensible wars to which he was urged by his lamentable avidity for glory.

In the beginning of his reign he gave France what it most needed, order and stability and unity, that it had never had before. Toward the end he laid waste the Palatinate, he ordered the ruthless religious persecutions executed by brutal dragoons; and he revoked the Edict of Nantes, which broke up countless homes, sowed discord in countless families, drove out of the kingdom hundreds of thousands of most useful and orderly citizens; and by so doing he deprived France of a most precious element in its population, an element that might have wisely guided the revolution which his despotism made inevitable. Louis XIV was the perfect embodiment of the king by divine right. In him we see this autocratic principle reduced to the absurd. He acted selfishly always, seeking glory in ostentatious living and in useless war; and he never felt any obligation to consider the cost of this glory, such as it was. He has been acclaimed as a great king; but assuredly it is only as a king that he is great. He was despicable in the meanness of his ambition and he was contemptible in the intensity of his selfishness. Behind all his grandeur his essential pettiness stands forth.

V

If Louis XIV was the king whose character has been summarily indicated in the previous paragraphs and if Molière was the man whose character has been portrayed at length in the preceding pages, how was it possible that they should ever have worked together, that the playwright should have pleased the sovereign and that the monarch should have sustained the dramatist? The question must needs be put; and it is not easy to answer.

First of all, it must be noted that Molière saw the king only in the earlier years of his reign before the worst characteristics of the monarch had had time to be made plain or even to be developed. When Molière died the king was only thirty-five; and it was after Molière's death that the royal selfishness stiffened into inexorable habit. The defects of the king's character and the appalling results of these defects were scarcely visible during the lifetime of Molière, who shared with his contemporaries an inherited regard and admiration for the sovereigns of France. Molière had seen the meanness and the misery of the Fronde; and he was glad to behold the reins of government firmly held by a strong hand. In the beginning of the young king's rule there was peace and prosperity in the land; and the monarch got the credit even if Colbert had done the work. There was a general gladness in the air, and the buoyancy of hope. Molière, like the rest of his countrymen, was captivated by the glamour of Louis XIV's youthful grace.

Then Molière was a burgher of Paris, with no love for the arrogant nobles; and he was gratified to see the king take power from them and keep it for himself. This action of the sovereign, while it might raise him to a still loftier position, tended toward a juster equality among his subjects. Molière was no republican; he was no precursor of the revolution; he was no advanced thinker; he had no aptitude for political speculation; he accepted the framework of government as he found it, glad that the king gave to the country the internal peace it sorely needed. He was no sycophant; he had manly self-respect; but he was his own contemporary, after all; and like his contemporaries in France he unhesitatingly accepted the inequalities of society, whatever they might happen to be. There is no reason to suppose that he perceived the emptiness of rank and the danger that comes from the existence of privileged classes. He had no respect for place in itself, for the foolish courtier, for the dissolute noble; and he took every occasion to laugh at the one and to hold the other up to scorn, pleased that the king permitted this. For the rest, for the system of caste, for the autocracy of the monarch, he cared little, accepting a state of things which must have seemed to him natural.

Furthermore, Molière had a hereditary appointment in the monarch's household. Chaucer was a "valet of the king's chamber" to Edward III; and Molière had the humbler post of the *valet de chambre tapissier* to Louis XIV. This royal appointment gave him a personal relation to the sovereign; it imposed on him the occasional task of making the king's bed; it may even account in some measure for the protection now and again extended to him by the monarch, whose pride led him to look with favor on all those attached to his own person. For this protection, however, it is easy to find other reasons. The king in his youth was very fond of the theater; and Molière brought back to Paris a type of broadly humorous play, which the monarch greatly relished. This accounts for the bestowal first of the Petit-Bourbon and secondly of the Palais-Royal. Then, as Molière grew in stature as a comic dramatist and began to put more of the realities of life into his comedies, the monarch found himself provided with a new form of pleasure. The records show that Louis XIV, as might have been expected, greatly preferred comedy to tragedy; and in the acting of comedy Molière's company was far superior to the rival organizations. This in itself was a reason why the ruler should later take the company under his own royal patronage. This would explain the king's suggestion of a new character to be added to the 'Fâcheux'; and also his commanding Molière to retort on his enemies with the 'Impromptu de Versailles.'

Probably Louis XIV, entrenched in his own pride, found pleasure in Molière's exposure of the *précieuse* and of the marquis and of the hypocrite. Probably again the sovereign was so secure in his supremacy that he felt no fear of any social disintegration, such as would have influenced a usurper like Napoleon, who declared at St. Helena that he would never have permitted the first performance of 'Tartuffe.' Under Napoleon 'Tartuffe' would have been suppressed and its author exiled; and under Louis XIV it was performed and its author rewarded. This much must be set down to the credit of Louis XIV. That the king really saw and felt the full purport of that play is very unlikely; and it is still more unlikely that he ever suspected its author to be more than a clever contriver of comic plays. Molière was manly always, and never servile; but when he was in the presence of his sovereign he knew his place and kept it. Not for nothing had he cultivated his insight into human nature; and we may be sure that he had formed a pretty shrewd guess as to the best way to win the regard of the monarch and to gain the royal support for the more daring comedies he had resolved to write.

The most open road to the young king's good will was to minister to his pleasures; and it was along this road that Molière advanced. He was prompt to obey the royal wishes and even to anticipate the royal desires. However important the work on which he might be engaged, he was ever ready to lay it aside to devise the kind of play that the sovereign wanted, comedy-ballet or spectacle, as the case might be. Whatever the inconvenience to himself, the insufficiency of time, the haste with which he had to fulfil his task, he never hesitated and he never complained. Whatever the monarch had commanded was executed at once by Molière as best he could. Swift obedience was a quality Louis XIV could well appreciate—as he could also the inventive fertility that Molière revealed in the succession of plays written to order. It is no wonder that the sovereign was willing to do what he could for a servant of his pleasures who met his wishes at once. To say this, is not to say Louis XIV overlooked the difference of rank any more than Molière forgot it.

There is a pretty anecdote setting forth the king's discovery that Molière was once breakfastless because his fellow *valets de chambre* refused to eat with an actor, and narrating the monarch's magnanimity in thereupon inviting the dramatist to join him in his own royal meal. It is a picturesque legend which has been illustrated in paintings by Ingres and by Gérôme. But it is quite impossible to believe, without surrendering all we know about the inevitable etiquet and the invincible ceremonial of the court, and without denying the haughty arrogance of the sovereign, who was served alone, and who did not allow even the princes of the blood to sit at meat with him. It could not have happened; but if it had happened, the report of an event so monstrous would have reverberated through all the abundant letters and journals of the time. As the case stands, the simple story first emerged just a century and a half after Molière's death; and it appeared then only in a memoir of slight historic validity, wherein it is credited to the doubtful recollection of an unnamed physician.

There are two other anecdotes, of which one at least is more solidly authenticated, and which reveal more clearly the sovereign's opinion of the dramatist. Grimarest, Molière's second biographer—to whom we are more indebted than many later scholars have been willing to admit, and who displayed a desire to collect all the information accessible—Grimarest, writing in 1706, declared that "within the year the king had occasion to say that there were two men he could never replace, Molière and Lulli." Now Lulli was a wily Florentine, who composed the music for the court-ballets, and who also shone as a buffoon, evoking spontaneous laughter by his antics. Grimarest would not have dared to publish this in the lifetime of Louis XIV if he had not believed it to be true. And it sounds highly probable, for it confirms the belief that Louis XIV saw in Molière, not so much the supreme comic dramatist, as the deviser of court-ballets, the adroit minister to the royal pleasures.

The other anecdote is to be found in the life of Racine, written by his son. The assertion is there made that Louis XIV once asked Boileau who was the rarest of the great writers that had given glory to France during his reign, and that Boileau at once named Molière. To which the king replied, "I should not have thought it," adding with the gracious condescension he seems often to have shown to Boileau, "but you know more about these things than I do." Probably, it had never before struck him that Molière was either a great writer or a rare genius, since he had always regarded from a very different point of view the dramatist who was also an actor.

CHAPTER IX

‘TARTUFFE’

I

The first three acts of ‘Tartuffe,’ originally acted in 1664 as one of the ‘Pleasures of the Enchanted Island,’ fell under the royal interdict at once; and not until 1669 did the king finally authorize the continuous performance of the complete play. In these five years Molière was incessantly seeking permission for the production of his masterpiece before the public of Paris. He brought out half a score of other plays during this interval, including at least two of his most important comedies; but he never relaxed for a moment his effort to win the royal sanction for the acting of ‘Tartuffe.’

Although only three acts were included in the ‘Pleasures of the Enchanted Island,’ there is no reason to suppose that this performance was incomplete because Molière did not know how to end his play or even that he had not planned it to the fall of the final curtain. Quite possibly the later acts may not have been versified when the earlier acts were performed, or at least may not have received the author’s finishing touches. But it is inconceivable that he had not clear in his own mind every detail of the comedy complete from beginning to end. The construction of a play is like the construction of a building; and the foundations must always be what the upper stories will necessitate. A plot must needs be coherent and logical; and Molière never took greater pains with his planning than he did in 'Tartuffe.' All dramaturgic experts are agreed in praise of its straightforward movement and of its masterly unity. The three acts originally produced before the king imply the two later acts, since the end of the comedy is the necessary consequence of its beginning. And therefore 'Tartuffe,' although often considered as a later play than 'Don Juan' and the 'Misanthrope,' demands consideration before them. Indeed, it is only by dealing with it as representative of Molière's development in 1664 that it can be rightly appreciated.

When considered in its proper chronological order, 'Tartuffe' is seen to reveal an extraordinary advance in Molière's conception of comedy. It has a largeness of theme and a boldness of social satire which nothing in his preceding plays had led us to suspect from him. In the 'Ecole des Maris' and still more obviously in the 'Ecole des Femmes' he had posed a problem and he had sought to deal sincerely with life as he saw it. But in both plays he had depended for interest on intrigue as much as on character; and in neither of these pieces, ingenious as they were, was the intrigue without an element of mechanical artificiality. But in 'Tartuffe' the adroitly articulated story does not exist for its own sake, since the interest is centered in the characters, and in what they are rather than in what they do. The plot is what it is, solely because the characters are what they are.

In his earliest pieces Molière had revealed little more than his cleverness, his dramaturgic dexterity, his abundant sense of fun, his overflowing spirits. It is true that in the 'Précieuses Ridicules,' in the 'Ecole des Maris,' and in the 'Ecole des Femmes' he had also a thesis which served to stiffen and to enrich his plot. Yet none of these comedies contained anything which really prefigured the sudden development displayed in 'Tartuffe.' In this play, as in the later 'Misanthrope,' Molière enlarges the boundaries of comedy and raises it to a more exalted level. He gives us comic plays which are more than mere comic plays. They arouse laughter, no doubt, the thoughtful laughter that deep comedy ought to evoke; but they make us think even more than they make us laugh. They are not brisk and bustling like his first pieces; they are less gay, less joyous; they are serious and they are charged with meaning. It is on these grave and almost somber comedies, wherein Molière, by main strength, imposed a comic aspect upon themes in themselves far from comic, that his reputation is now solidly founded. It is in these plays that he most completely discloses the richne~~ss of~~ his endowment as a comic dramatist. It is by them that he stands forth a successor and a rival to Pascal, whose 'Provincial Letters,' published less than ten years earlier, are the model of epistolary comedy, and who may have pointed out to Molière the path that led upward to the full freedom of social satire.

II

Although 'Tartuffe' may seem serious to us nowadays, it was comic enough to Molière's contemporaries; and the clever playwright did not violently break with his past, however swift his advance. He gave the playgoers of Paris the abundant laughter he had led them to expect from him, even if he also gave them something more. Most of the characters in 'Tartuffe' are vigorously drawn in high colors, certain to meet the desire of the public for broad comedy. Molière's own part, Orgon, is one of the most amusing he ever put on the stage; and the characters of Madame Pernelle, his mother, and of Dorine, his wife's companion, are both of them exuberantly comic in conception and in execution. Even Tartuffe himself, although sinister at heart, is amusing on the surface; the spectators begin by laughing at him; and the character was entrusted to Du Croisy, an actor of sustained comic force. The play, so far as its earlier acts are concerned, is almost as full of fun as any of Molière's preceding pieces; but this fun is not now the result of reliance on the methods of the comedy-of-masks. 'Tartuffe' does not contain any of the fixed types of the Italians, nor is its scene laid in the convenient public square.

The atmosphere of this larger comedy is French; the scene is the interior of a French household; and nearly all the characters belong to a single French family. It is true that the members of this family—excepting only Madame Pernelle—bear the conventional stage-names customary in comedy in those days; yet impersonal as their names may be, they have each of them an indisputable personality. This and their family relationship gives to the comedy an intimacy, a suggested reality, a solidity of texture not discoverable in any earlier play. Pleasant folks are those who make up the household of Orgon; and they were a happy family before the arrival of Tartuffe.

Orgon is a worthy burgher, who had behaved well during the Fronde; he is well-to-do and he lives with comfort, if not with luxury. He has a rather hot-headed son, Damis, and a more docile daughter, Mariane, whom he has affianced to Valère (played by La Grange). Although well on in years, Orgon has taken a second wife, Elmire (a charming character written by Molière for his own wife). Elmire is young and pretty; she is fond of dress and fond of society; she is placid in temperament and kindly in disposition, being on the best of terms with her two step-children, and bearing with tolerant equanimity the taunts and reflections of Orgon's old mother, Madame Pernelle, who must have been a little hard to get on with. Elmire's brother, Cléante, is like her; he has the same placidity and the same common sense.

The household is completed by the outspoken and plain-spoken Dorine (played by Madeleine Béjart), a companion, not a menial, who has evidently served the family for years, and whose position is so secure that she never hesitates to give her opinion on all subjects even before it is asked. The type was one that Molière was to employ more than once in later plays; it was based on observation of the conditions of life in the burgher class in Paris. Dorine lightens up all the scenes in which she takes part, just as Mascarille had enlivened all the episodes in which he appeared. Dorine, however, is veracious, while Mascarille, brilliant as he was, can be praised only as a later variation of a traditional stage-type, going back through Italian to Latin comedy and even to Greek. In general, the valets of Molière are figures of fantasy, inherited from his predecessors in playmaking, whereas his soubrettes are nearly always truthfully and even realistically copied from life.

Into this burgher family, which must have resembled a hundred others in Paris under Louis XIV, an evil spirit has entered in the person of Tartuffe, the self-seeking adventurer, hiding his greed behind the mask of piety. Orgon, hitherto a sensible man, has experienced a change of heart; and religious fervor has made him selfish and foolish. Having met the seemingly devout Tartuffe in church, he has taken the hypocrite into his home as his spiritual director. When the play opens, Orgon is seen to have fallen absolutely under the sway of Tartuffe, and so has his opinionated old mother, Madame Pernelle. In vain do the rest of the family protest against the presence and the power of this outsider. So infatuated is Orgon that he makes a deed of gift to Tartuffe; and he even plans to bestow his daughter in marriage to the adventurer, cruelly breaking off Mariane's engagement to Valère. Tartuffe had given no thought to Orgon's insignificant daughter; it was on Orgon's charming young wife that he had cast longing eyes. And to save her step-children, the calm and kindly Elmire consents to lure Tartuffe into an avowal which her husband in hiding may overhear. When this scheme is successful, when Tartuffe has betrayed his evil designs and when Orgon has ordered him out of the house, the impostor throws off the mask and with brazen impudence claims the house under the deed of gift. Tartuffe, to whom Orgon had also confided a compromising secret, is even foolhardy enough to denounce his benefactor to the king; and Orgon would be ruined, if Louis XIV himself did not intervene (almost like the god from the machine in a Greek drama). The messenger of the monarch declares the royal will, restores the house to Orgon and hales the villain to prison.

III

This unexpected intervention of the sovereign has been severely criticised; and the charge has been made that Molière is often careless in the winding up of his plays. Taine declared that "the art of playmaking is as capable of development as the art of clockmaking," and that the hack-playwright of to-day sees that "the catastrophe of half of Molière's plays is ridiculous." It may be admitted at once that Molière is often satisfied to end a play in the easiest fashion. Here his practice is in accord with Shakspere's; and there is a certain likeness between the end of 'Tartuffe' and the end of 'Measure for Measure,' another somber comedy in which lust assumes the mask of piety.

Molière was no Ibsen and no Dumas *fils* with a thesis, which he was trying to prove in a play, and which imposed a logical and inevitable conclusion. He was a writer of liberal comedy, picturing the world as it was mirrored in his imagination, with no desire to drive home a narrow moral. He called characters into being; he set them in contact with one another; he let them reveal themselves completely; and then when the five acts had run their course, he sometimes stopped the action short, making use of the device nearest at hand. Often he did not trouble to untie the knot, he cut it abruptly.

Yet it may be recorded that the past-master of modern dramaturgy, Scribe, was loud in his approval of the ending of 'Tartuffe.' "First of all, it has one great merit: without it we should not have had the piece, for Molière would probably never have been allowed to produce it, had he not made the king an actor in it. Then, what a startling picture of the period this ending gives us! Here is an honest man who has bravely served his country, and who, when deceived by the most open and odious of machinations, does not find anywhere, in society or in law, a single weapon with which to defend himself. To save him the sovereign himself must needs intervene. Where can a more terrible condemnation of the reign be found than in this immense eulogy of the king?" This is shrewdly suggested, and yet we may rest assured that Molière meant no reflection on Louis XIV, on whose vanity he was playing to win permission for the play. Probably, if it had not been for the proud monarch's desire to listen to public laudation of his wisdom and his justice, the acting of Molière's masterpiece might never have been authorized. A message from Louis XIV was also the means used to bring to a finish the 'Impromptu de Versailles'; and thus we find Molière invoking the direct intervention of the monarch to wind up two very dissimilar plays, one of his slightest pieces and one of his solidest comedies.

Whatever view may be taken of the propriety of this untying of the knot, the conduct of the plot is masterly. In no other comedy does Molière more abundantly display his technical skill, his sheer craftsmanship. The action is powerful in its conception, unswerving in its steady movement, and simple without bareness. The story unrolls itself without any wilful tricks, with no reliance on the convenient conventions of the Italians; and yet with a clarity which even the Italians never surpassed. Goethe was lavish in his praise of Molière's constructive skill, and he dwelt especially on the adroitness of the exposition: "Only think what an introduction is the first scene! From the very beginning everything is highly significant and leads us to expect something still more important which is to come. It is the greatest and best thing of the kind which exists." And from the exposition on there is increasing tensity of cumulative interest up to the sudden turning and self-assertion of Tartuffe at the end of the fourth act—one of the most effective scenes ever shown in a theater, startling when it comes, and yet perfectly prepared for and immediately plausible.

'Tartuffe' adequately fulfils Voltaire's requirement that "every action, every scene ought to serve to tie or untie the plot, every speech ought to be a preparation or an obstacle." It fulfils also Gautier's stricter requirement that the skeleton of a good play should be a pantomime. When the Comédie-Française ~~made its memorable~~ visit to London in 1879, Sarcey noted how easily and how eagerly the English audiences followed the performance of this play, with its single plot, all in action and with no digressions which needed long-winded explanations. And the acute critic then suggested that 'Tartuffe' was perhaps the only one of the French classics which spectators, ignorant of the language, could watch with unfailing interest. Here 'Tartuffe' is like 'Hamlet'—in that its story ~~is so clear~~ that if the play ~~were acted in a~~ deaf and ~~dumb~~ asylum the inmates would be able to follow it with appreciation. Like 'Hamlet,' again, it is, in the stage phrase, "actor-proof,"—that is to say, it retains its power of holding the attention of the spectators even when the performance is barely adequate; and yet it will always repay the finest acting. Molière's masterpiece, like Shakspere's, again, is a model of playmaking skill, and therefore it moves every audience before which it is presented, whatever the merit of the actual performance.

The foreigner can follow the acting of 'Tartuffe' without difficulty, partly because of the sharp contrasts of the boldly projected characters, and partly because of the swift simplicity of the story in which these characters are involved. The plot is not far-fetched or extraneous; it is the direct result of the visible contact of character with character. Orgon and the several members of his family being what they are, then the obtrusion into the circle of Tartuffe, he being what he is, is certain to bring about the several situations that Molière has set on the stage. Yet clear as the story is, it is strong and tense; indeed, it is so moving that at the end the comedy almost stiffens into tragedy. And the source of this strength is in the subject of the play, in the central figure of the religious hypocrite, in our common knowledge that nothing is more disintegrating to the family, nothing is more dangerous to society, than the impostor who hides evil designs beneath the outer garb of piety and devotion.

Molière spent his utmost skill in so presenting Tartuffe that there could be no doubt about the impostor's true character, even though the evil schemer never for a minute lays aside the mask or speaks in other than the language of saintliness. It is by delaying the first appearance of the adventurer until the third act, and by making him the topic of every earlier conversation that the dramatist artfully arouses in the mind of the spectators the unerring suspicion that the still unseen Tartuffe must be a hypocrite. Having created this conviction, Molière leads the audience to see through the impostor, although he does not permit Tartuffe to have a single aside, such as Shakspere allotted abundantly to Iago, whereby that villain might unveil his black soul. Tartuffe has never a monologue to make clear his secret thoughts; but his tortuous nature is as visible to the spectators in the theater as Iago's, which Shakspere has disclosed with a less delicate art. Even when Tartuffe is baffled at the end and borne away to prison, he has no exit-speech, in which to unpack his heart. Indeed, he never speaks out; he is ever assiduously playing his part; and yet we have no difficulty in discerning the evil hidden beneath the veneer of piety. With such certain strokes has Molière prepared for his first appearance that the spectators cannot help seeing his foul self behind his fair words.

IV

Many of Molière's commentators have fatigued themselves and their readers in an idle effort to designate some one of his contemporaries as the possible original of Tartuffe, just as they have sought vainly to discover the original of Alceste in the 'Misanthrope.' To assume that a really vital character in a play or in a novel can have been slavishly copied from any existing human being, is to misunderstand the method of the creators. Molière was not a photographer taking likenesses; and no one man sat to him for the portrait of the hypocrite or of the misanthrope. In Tartuffe the dramatist is not drawing an indictment against any individual; he is bringing in a true bill against the body to which the impostor belonged. Into the mold he had conceived in his imagination, Molière cast various metals, derived from all sorts of sources. He had a dozen or a score of models for Tartuffe; and he may have availed himself of stray hints from many a living man, as he did also from many of his literary predecessors, more particularly from Regnier and Scarron.

If Tartuffe is to be taken merely as the reproduction of some real person, readily recognizable by his contemporaries, then the play must lose much of its largeness; and it could scarcely escape the pettiness of mere personality. Moreover, it would be far less satisfactory as a work of art. In this comedy Molière first discloses himself as really an artist in the full meaning of the word. In all the preceding plays it is easy enough to pick flaws; but 'Tartuffe' at last withstands criticism. When all is said, it is a model of high comedy, of the humorous play of contemporary manners, the action of which is caused by the conflict of character with character. This model Molière had to find for himself, since he would have sought it in vain in any earlier dramatist, whether French or Spanish, Latin or Greek. Of course, it is dimly possible that Menander may have anticipated Molière in the composition of true and lofty comedy, dealing veraciously with actual life and charged with social satire; but even if this had chanced to be, it could not profit the French comic dramatist, since no single complete work of the Greek comic playwright had yet been replevined from oblivion.

Even the supersubtle theorists of dramatic art in the Italian Renascence set up no very exalted standard for the comic drama. Scaliger, for example, distinguished only three elements in comedy—a story with complications, a happy ending, and a familiar style. These simple requirements are met in many a farce; and no insistence on them would have aided Molière to attain that fine fusion of the comedy-of-character and the comedy-of-manners which we discover for the first time in 'Tartuffe,' and which Molière was to achieve again in the 'Misanthrope' and in the 'Femmes Savantes.' He had to devise this model himself, with but little aid from his predecessors in playmaking; and he transmitted it to all his successors. That high comedy of this elevated type is exceedingly difficult to attain is proved by its extreme rarity in the history of the theater; and there is significance in the fact that whenever later dramatists have most amply succeeded in achieving this high comedy, it is when they have most closely clung to the model Molière set in 'Tartuffe' and in the later 'Femmes Savantes.' The examples easiest to cite are perhaps the most conclusive—the 'School for Scandal' and the 'Mariage de Figaro,' the 'Gendre de M. Poirier' and the 'Monde où l'on s'ennuie.'

The third of Scaliger's requirements for comedy is "a familiar style"; and here again Molière is a master. Purists and pedants have found fault with Molière's use of language as they have with Shakspere's. To the eye of the modern reader there may be trailing phrases here and there in Molière's lines, as well as constructions unauthorized by strict usage. But his dialogue was not written for the eye of the modern reader; it was composed for the ear of the contemporary audience. It has the rhythm of the spoken word, and not the balance of the sentence intended to be read. His is an oral style, as the style of every dramatist must be; and no oral style was ever better fitted for its purpose. It lends itself to delivery by the voice; it falls trippingly from the tongue; it is varied in its cadences and in its color. Boileau wondered at the ease of Molière's riming; and a later French poet-critic has praised the art with which Molière adjusted his manner to his matter, pointing out that the rimes are brilliant and amusing in themselves in the early artificial pieces, in the 'Etourdi,' for example—which may account for Victor Hugo's preference for this play—whereas in the later and more serious comedies, 'Tartuffe' and the 'Misanthrope,' the rimes are unobtrusive, modestly refraining from attracting attention to themselves.

Full and rich and flexible as Molière's verse is, his prose is even better suited to its purpose—or at least so it seems to those of us whose ears are accustomed to the strong beats of Teutonic poetry, and who fail to find in the rimed alexandrine a wholly satisfactory meter for dramatic dialogue. Balzac and d'Andilly, in the generation before Molière, had laid the foundation of modern French prose; they had done a great deal to give the language its clarity and its precision. The *précieuses* also had aided in the effort to make French sharper and more direct. Much had been accomplished in season for Molière to profit by it; but he preserved his liberty and refused to be bound by the fleeting fashions of the hour. He had been nourished on Rabelais and on Montaigne and he relished their vivacity and their vigor. Darmesteter noted that the language of Molière—and also that of La Fontaine, whose genius was closely akin to his—is far less Latin than that of most of the great writers of the seventeenth century; it has a more vernacular freedom and ease; it is nearer to the speech of the people; and thereby it is more truly French.

One admission must needs be made. However truly French his vocabulary may be, Molière could not get away from the conventional language of love-making, which was the only acceptable vehicle of courtship in the Paris theater under Louis XIV. In his love-scenes, whether in verse or in prose, he has perforce to use the jargon of gallantry and to let his lovers talk of their flames, their chains, their fires and their torments, the same frippery of outworn phrases which annoys us also in the impassioned speeches of Corneille's heroes and of Racine's heroines. But there is in the love-making of the young wooers in Molière's comedies a sincerity of emotion which we can feel even through the unreality of the traditional figures of speech. The feeling is genuine, even if the phrase does not ring true. Behind and beneath the shabby and threadbare expressions, we can detect the throbbing of the human heart, restrained by decorum, but pulsing with ardor. Even if the riming couplets of the lovers' quarrel of Mariane and Valère may sound a little sophisticated, the sentiments of the young couple are transparently simple and truthful; and even if the seductive appeal of Tartuffe to Elmire may seem a little stilted in its sublimated phraseology, there echoes all through it the strong note of overmastering desire.

V

The 'Tartuffe' which was finally permitted to be performed in 1669 is apparently more or less different from the original 'Tartuffe,' of which three acts were presented in 1664 as part of the 'Pleasures of the Enchanted Island.' When the play was prohibited, Molière did not hesitate to make concessions which might render it easier for the king to permit its performance. He modified his comedy so that it might give less offense to those who objected to it in good faith. As the result of these successive alterations, there seem to have been three acting versions of the play. Of these only the last survives, and yet we can guess at the other two from Molière's own statements and from a contemporary report describing the single performance of the second version.

In the original play Tartuffe was apparently an ecclesiastic; at least he wore a costume which suggested a connection with the church. And as a priest could not marry, we may assume that Orgon's project of giving his daughter to Tartuffe had no place in the first version. Probably one of the things which seemed most shocking when the three acts were originally represented before the court was this use of ecclesiastical costume on the stage, an abhorrent novelty in France, although common enough in Italy, where the church was taken as a matter of course. Indeed, more than one of the Italian comedies had a violence of satire and a coarseness of attack, going far beyond anything in Molière's play; and these pieces had been often acted without protest in Italy and even in France. This is what gives point to the anecdote with which Molière concludes his preface. A few days after the interdiction of 'Tartuffe' the Italian comedians performed before the court a piece called 'Scaramouche Ermite'; and the king said to Condé, "I should like to know why those who are so scandalized by Molière's play do not object to this 'Scaramouche'?" To which Condé replied, "The reason is that this 'Scaramouche' shows up religion and heaven, as to which these gentlemen care nothing; whereas Molière's comedy shows them up—and this they will not permit."

Both the queen and the queen-mother were devout Spaniards; and they may have taken offense at the broader strokes of the first version of the play, of which they had seen only three acts. Perhaps the royal interdiction was due to the monarch's desire to please his mother and his wife, whenever he could do so without sacrificing his own private pleasures. But he himself found no fault with the play; and after a Parisian priest had put forth a violent diatribe against the author, the king listened to Molière's protest and censured the libel. When a papal legate, a nephew of Alexander VII, came to Fontainebleau, Molière seized the occasion and read

'Tartuffe' to the visiting cardinal and to the dignitaries of the church who accompanied the envoy of the pope; and these high authorities on all religious matters did not disapprove the forbidden drama.

During the five years of the interdiction, the author read the play repeatedly, seeking to win friends for it and to discount the hostility of those who thought it more dangerous than it was. In giving these readings Molière was employing the same tactics as Rabelais before him, and as Beaumarchais after him. Against these readings no protest was raised for a long while; and the sovereign even tolerated three several performances of the entire play given for Condé at one or another of the family residences. That Louis XIV, while maintaining his interdiction of the play from motives of policy, did not wish to discourage or disavow Molière, is made evident by his taking the Palais-Royal company under his own patronage in 1665. He asked his brother, Monsieur, to let him have the company; he allotted it an annual pension of six thousand livres; and he authorized it to entitle itself "the company of the king." This was a gratifying testimony of the monarch's favor, even though the actors of the Hôtel de Bourgogne continued to be the "royal company" and to draw a pension twice as large as that granted to Molière and his companions. Perhaps it may be well to note here that on the accession of James I, the company of actors, in which Shakspere was a sharer, were authorized to entitle themselves "the king's servants."

Three years after the first performance of the earlier acts at Versailles, Molière seems to have believed that the royal interdiction was lifted; and in August, 1667, he brought out at the Palais-Royal the second version of the play, calling it the 'Imposteur' and changing the name of Tartuffe to Panulphe. The next morning the play was forbidden by the first president of parliament, who was in authority in Paris while the sovereign was absent with the army in Flanders. Within a week the archbishop of Paris also forbade the performing, the reading, or the reciting of the comedy, publicly or privately, under penalty of excommunication. Molière had already closed his theater and had sent La Grange and another actor to bear a petition to Louis XIV. The messengers were kindly received by the king, who promised to take the matter up again when he returned from the war.

And yet Molière had to wait more than a year longer before the sovereign accorded him permission for the uninterrupted performance of 'Tartuffe' in the theater. It was in February, 1669, that the third version of the comedy, the only one known to us now, was acted at the Palais-Royal under the original title; and at last Molière had the reward of his labor and of his long years of struggle to achieve the right to be heard.

VI

In the ashes of a dead controversy there may still be a little heat but there is rarely any light. Yet a proper consideration of Molière's comedy requires a discussion of the motives for the violent hostility it aroused. Nowadays, we are all agreed that hypocrisy, contemptible in itself, may be a menace to the community; and we are grateful to the man of genius who sets its characteristics before us and who puts us on our guard. Of all hypocrisies, religious hypocrisy is the most despicable and the most dangerous. It is religious hypocrisy that Molière assaulted, and he asked the honestly pious to recognize the importance of the warning he had raised against those who used religion only as a cloak. His own good faith is beyond question; and yet his appeal for support met with no response. Sincerely devout men of high character, the first president of parliament and the archbishop of Paris, were among his most aggressive opponents. Molière's portrayal of the religious hypocrite is appallingly veracious. No one ought to have been able to perceive this better than the truly devout; and yet they did not come to his aid, standing aloof if not hostile during the five years of his long struggle.

Sainte-Beuve pointed out that Molière in 'Tartuffe' attacked religious hypocrisy before its full outflowering in the later years of Louis XIV, when the royal sensualist had become a narrow bigot, just as Le Sage in 'Turcaret' assailed the predatory financiers before they had risen into the power they enjoyed during the Regency. Brunetière insisted that there were few religious hypocrites when Molière wrote, and that therefore his play was directed against the genuinely pious. But since Sainte-Beuve and Brunetière expressed these opinions we have been put in possession of further facts; we have been made acquainted with the so-called "cabal of the devout," which had been gaining power in the forty years preceding the composition of 'Tartuffe.' This was a secret organization started by men who wished to further the cause of religion, as they understood religion, and who sought to support and to control the leaders of the church. At first the movement may have been more or less tinctured with Jansenism; but its chiefs had in time prudently turned against this sect and had aided the ultimate triumphs of the Jesuits. These chiefs were so well assured of the honesty of their intentions and of the worthiness of their ends, that they saw no reason to be scrupulous as to the means they employed to attain their objects.

Vague and disquieting rumors in regard to this mysterious conspiracy were in circulation about the time when Molière was writing the 'Ecole des Femmes.' The leaders of this shadowy league made no public defense; they continued their labors in silence; and very naturally they came to be suspected of, and to be held responsible for, whatever ecclesiastical intriguing and for whatever puritan intolerance might become manifest. Very likely Molière had good warrant for believing that something of the bitterness and violence of the outcry against the 'Ecole des Femmes' was due to the cabal of the devout. Men who were bent on strengthening the authority of the church, who were themselves increasingly austere, and who looked with reprobation upon the fleshly spectacles of the stage—men holding these views were not likely to approve of the 'Ecole des Femmes' or of its author. And Molière, in his turn, was not likely to have high regard for puritanism in any of its manifestations.

Even in the severity of morals of the sincerely religious Molière would be inclined to see exaggeration if not affectation; and to him all affectation was offensive. Even if he had believed in the honesty of purpose of those who advocated a more rigid code of manners and of morals, he would have had scant sympathy for them. The puritan is ever the foe of the playwright; and the playwright is never the friend of the puritan. In 'Twelfth Night,' and in 'Measure for Measure,' Shakspere did not conceal his dislike for the conversation and for the character of the Puritans; and here is another point of contact between the English dramatic poet and the French. Shrewd observers of humanity, both of them, spectators of its manifold weaknesses and pettinesses, recorders of its invincible selfishness, Shakspere and Molière could not help distrusting all those who denounce worldliness and who parade otherworldliness. Their healthy suspicion is shared by many a plain man, and it leads him to look with doubt on the Pharisees who pray at street-corners and who make broad their phylacteries. Shakspere, not less than Molière, would have smiled with silent approval at La Bruyère's biting assertion that "a man who parades his piety is a man who, under an atheist king, would be an atheist."

In matters of religion Molière was not militant; rather was he tolerant. He conformed to the custom and accomplished the minimum of the duties prescribed by the church. But religion did not interest him greatly; he took it as a matter of course, asking no questions and letting sleeping doctrines lie. Indeed, he cared too little for these things to feel any hostility toward them. He had few beliefs and fewer illusions. His temperament was not exalted or mystic; and his philosophy was easy-going, commonplace and rooted in common sense. His religion, what there was of it, was of this world, and not of the next. It did not expect too much of man, a poor creature at best; and it believed in making the most of life, and in enjoying its good things in moderation as occasion served. It rejected and resented any doctrine of the total depravity of man, for it held that humanity generally meant well, however completely it might fail of its purpose. It believed in being natural, as Molière himself understood nature; and it was afraid to lift man aloft into ethereal heights where the moral atmosphere might be too rarefied for him to draw a long breath.

In this philosophy of Molière's, unformulated as it may be, and yet unmistakable in its larger outlines, there was little detachment, and little that was unsubstantially spiritual. It loved good, no doubt, and it hated evil; but it hated especially the evil which sought to disguise itself by vaunting its own goodness. It had as its basis a morality which was only humdrum at best; and it would have confessed to a fair share of epicureanism. It may have been derived in some measure from Rabelais and from Montaigne also, skeptics both of them, who also conformed to the usages of the church. To say this is to say that Molière was not profoundly religious, like his ardent contemporary, Pascal, and also that he was not profoundly irreligious like his early admiration, Lucretius. Rather was he like the gentle and kindly and honest Horace; he had the religion of a man of the world, a religion good enough to guide him through many complexities of conduct, but incapable of sustaining him or strengthening him or even solacing him, in the darker moments of discouragement and conflict, those solemn hours of which Molière experienced his full share. At the foundation of Molière's humor there was melancholy. Despite his exuberance of sheer fun he was at bottom less frolicsome of spirit than Montaigne. He took life as seriously as Pascal; and it may be that he was even sadder at heart.

VII

When a comic dramatist has as a dominant characteristic an abomination of all pretenders, when he has experienced the opposition of the puritans, and when he is restrained only by the religion of a man of the world, he may easily be tempted to voice anew what Emerson called "the oldest gibe of literature, the ridicule of false religion." And he is likely to overlook or to disregard the warning which Milton phrased solemnly:

> For neither man nor angel can discern
> Hypocrisy—the only evil that walks
> Invisible, except to God alone,
> By His permissive will, through Heaven and Earth.

Here indeed is the insuperable difficulty. It is impossible to set on the stage a religious hypocrite and not lend him the language of piety—absolutely the words which he would use if he were sincerely devout. The outward and visible signs must be the same, whether or not the avowedly religious character is speaking in good faith. This cannot fail to strike the truly pious, none too friendly to the theater at best, as a scandalous desecration of godly phrases. Furthermore, it suggests to the worldly, willing enough to clutch at the suggestion, that any one who employs this sanctified vocabulary may be a hypocrite. The truly pious suspect this and resent it; and with not a little show of justice they protest that an attempt to tear the mask off religious hypocrisy must necessarily take on the occasional aspect of an assault on religion itself. The truly pious may themselves abhor hypocrisy, but they are likely also to object to any attempt to expose it in a play; and for this objection there is abundant justification. Furthermore, they cannot help feeling that a comedy like 'Tartuffe' must have been written by an uncongenial spirit, by a man wholly out of sympathy with spiritual sentiment. Sometimes their humility before God is accompanied by a jealous pride before men, which inclines them to see an enemy where they do not find an ally.

That the truly pious are not altogether at fault in this attitude is shown by the fact that the opponents of the church hold the same view of the full meaning of 'Tartuffe' as is held by the adherents of the church. Those who are aggressively hostile to ecclesiasticism in any form have always shown themselves ready to use Molière's attack on the pretender to religion as though it were an assault on religion itself. Whenever there has been a tension in the relation of church and state, in Canada under Frontenac, or in England in the days of the nonjurors, then and there has 'Tartuffe' been made to play his part. ~~That this partisan use of the comedy goes far beyond Molière's intention is obvious, since he put Cléante into the play especially to voice his own respect for those whose piety is as sincere as it is unpretending.~~ Still there is little doubt also that Molière would not have been greatly annoyed if he could have foreseen what happened. He had combined in 'Tartuffe' the austerity of the Jansenist and the casuistry of the Jesuit; and he must have smiled when he discovered that each sect saw in his play the picture of the other and refused to perceive its own portrait. But he could not have been surprised that neither party really relished his play.

CHAPTER X

'DON JUAN'

I

DURING the months that followed the production of the first three acts of 'Tartuffe,' in May, 1664, Molière struggled with public disappointment and with private sorrow. One of his intimate friends was the skeptical physician, La Mothe le Vayer; and when that octogenarian lost his only son, in the early fall, Molière sent to the grieving father a sonnet of lofty consolation, one of the very few of his minor poems which has come down to us. He accompanied it with a letter, which is almost the sole surviving specimen of his prose not directly connected with his work as a dramatist.

For his friend's loss he could find words of cheer, little foreseeing that the same bereavement was soon to be his own. His first child, Louis, born in January, 1664, two years after Molière had wedded Armande Béjart, died in November, on the tenth, the day after the first performance of the 'Princesse d'Elide' at the Palais-Royal. The funeral took place the next day; and on the morrow the stricken parents had again to play their parts in the new piece. Molière's health was not strong; and he seems to have felt at last the burden of his many duties in the theater. To the trustworthy La Grange he now relinquished the post of orator of the company, which he had held since the distant days when the company had been strollers in the south of France.

It may be noted that Molière's sister died in the following April; and also that his second child, Madeleine, the only one who was to survive him, was born in the following August. It is pleasant to record further that in this winter of public contention and of private grief, Molière may have found relief in the agreeable gatherings at Boileau's which gave him the consoling companionship of Boileau himself, of La Fontaine and of the young Racine. It was in June, 1664, that he brought out Racine's first play, the 'Thebaïde,' to be followed in December, 1665, by a second, the 'Alexandre,' which its ambitious and ungrateful author was surreptitiously to take over to a rival company. Tradition tells us that Shakspere opened the stage-door to Ben Jonson, as Molière opened it to Racine; but Ben Jonson, self-willed as he was, did not turn against the elder author who lent him a helping hand in his eager youth.

II

The company had brought back to Paris a few of the comic and tragic plays by the older dramatists in which it had won success in the provinces, and it gladly welcomed new pieces by younger writers; yet its main dependence was ever on Molière's own comedies. This is made plain by La Grange's register in which the program of every performance is set down. When the company went to one or another of the royal palaces to give a series of performances for the king and the court, plays by any other dramatist than Molière were very rarely included in the list. He was the stock-playwright of the Palais-Royal, as Shakspere had been the stock-playwright of the Globe. As author no less than as actor, Molière was the mainstay of the enterprise; and his comrades kept looking to him to keep them supplied with new plays to attract the Parisian playgoers.

It was a severe disappointment to him that 'Tartuffe,' the most original and the most effective comedy he had yet written, could not be performed in Paris; but to his associates, as well as to him, this deprivation was also a pecuniary damage. It left the theater without any novelty to proffer; and the company had to do the best it could with plays of which the public might be beginning to weary. For a while, Molière seems to have hoped that the royal interdict on 'Tartuffe' would be raised; and it was not until early in the next year that he made ready a new play to take the place of the forbidden comedy. His choice of a subject for this new piece reveals his desire to meet the wishes of his comrades and to supply the theater with an alluring spectacle.

The legend of Don Juan had been set on the stage in Spain; and the Italian comedians had promptly borrowed the Spanish play. It had achieved immediate popularity wherever it was performed, partly in consequence of its picturesque and powerful story, and partly in consequence of its spectacular effects, the coming to life of a marble statue, and the descent of the blasphemous hero into the flames of hell. The original Spanish drama may have been presented in Paris by one or another of the Spanish companies which had come to France from time to time. An Italian alteration had been produced by the company which shared the Palais-Royal with Molière and his comrades. Two different French adaptations had been performed in Paris, one of them at the Hôtel de Bourgogne. Molière was justified in believing that if he should prepare a version in his turn, it would be assured in advance of a hearty welcome from the spectacle-loving playgoers.

He no more shrank from the task of making over a popular play than Shakspere had hesitated to handle anew the worn material of 'Henry IV' and 'Henry V.' We may doubt whether a lyrical legend, evolved by Spanish mysticism and tricked out with sensational trappings, would ever have tempted Molière for its own sake; it was too foreign to his temperament to have allured him, if there had not been pressing need of a new play to serve as a stop-gap until 'Tartuffe' might be performed again. Chappuzeau, the contemporary historian of the French theater, cited Molière as a rapid writer, who "could prepare in a few days a play that was greatly followed"; and Molière may have rapidly made ready the easy prose of his new version of the old story. Even if the impulse to write 'Don Juan' was external, he did not shirk the labor needed to make the play as interesting as might be; and he seized the occasion to carry on the attack on hypocrisy which he had begun in 'Tartuffe.'

'Don Juan' was first acted at the Palais-Royal in February, 1665; and it was performed fifteen times in the following five weeks before the theater closed. These performances were highly profitable; and there is no reason to doubt that the popularity of the piece would have kept it in the repertory for several seasons. But its career was cut short after this fifteenth performance. It had aroused a bitterness of animosity almost equal to that evoked by 'Tartuffe.' The malignant assault of a bigoted lawyer on 'Don Juan' was quite as offensive as that made on 'Tartuffe' by a bigoted priest. To this attack friends of Molière retorted; but the play was held to be dangerous by those who had been shocked at the boldness of 'Tartuffe.' All this leads to the conviction that the author must have received a royal hint not to bring the play forward when the theater reopened; and it is possible that this withdrawal of 'Don Juan' was made a condition for the ultimate approval of 'Tartuffe.'

It is noteworthy that Molière, who was unceasing in his demands on the monarch for permission to perform the comedy which lay close to his heart, made no public protest against the suppression of his later adaptation from the Italian-Spanish, although this could not but cut into the profits of the theater. Probably he was satisfied that the king had made amends pecuniarily, when the company was taken directly under the royal patronage with a comfortable annual subsidy. And possibly he was not greatly interested in 'Don Juan,' looking down on it as merely a job of hack-work, done under pressure of necessity to please his fellow-actors. He may have felt that this version of a Spanish story, not really congenial in its theme, was not representative of the kind of work he was anxious to produce. Very likely he would not have been indignant if he could have foreseen that only four years after his death, the younger Corneille would be employed to turn his alert and vivid prose into tame alexandrines and at the same time to make the play harmless by smoothing away the traces of Molière's indignation with hypocrisy.

III

Although Molière chose to call 'Don Juan' a comedy, it is not comic in its theme, and the laughter it may arouse is evoked only by episodic incidents here and there. The original Spanish play was a high-flown, lyrical melodrama, full of religious fervor. The Italian adaptations had retained the central situations, while warping the story to fit the traditions of the comedy-of-masks; they had attenuated the perfervid romanticism of the original, and they had elaborated the low-comedy part and all those passages where they felt at liberty to be funny. Molière followed one or another of these Italian versions or of the earlier French adaptations of these Italian pieces; and he may not have been familiar with the Spanish original. He simplified the tangled sequence of events; yet he could not but be subject to his source; and he was unable to give to the story the logical unity of 'Tartuffe' and of the 'Misanthrope.' The piece remains almost as loose-jointed as an English chronicle-play, 'Richard III,' for example—to which, indeed, it has more than a superficial likeness. It is a string of detached episodes, exhibiting successive facets of Don Juan's character and leading up to the banquet with the statue and to the fiery ingulfing of the wicked hero.

The construction being rather fragmentary, the sole unity is in the development of the character of the hero; but Molière was able to bring the Spanish-Italian story into a certain conformity with the contemporary customs of the French theater. He made no reference to the passage of time; and therefore the several intrigues of Don Juan may be supposed to have taken place all within the limits of twenty-four hours or a little longer. He changes the scenery only between the acts and he leaves these backgrounds rather indeterminate. He entrusted the impersonation of Don Juan to La Grange; and himself took the part of the hero's servant, whom he called Sganarelle.

The opening of the play is a skilful specimen of exposition, an adroit preparation for all that was to come after. To one of the minor characters Sganarelle sets forth what manner of man his master really is, declaring that "a great lord who is a wicked man, is a terrible thing." And immediately thereafter Don Juan, with characteristic cynicism, sets forth his own theory of life, appalling in its selfishness. This immoral code is then shown in action, when Don Juan repulses one of his victims, Elvire, whom he has seduced from a convent, and whom he now casts from him without disguising his impertinent disregard for her feelings. In the second act we see him at work, cajoling two peasant girls and in making each of them believe that she is his choice, even when they both claim him at once. In the third act he rescues one of Elvire's brothers from an attack by robbers; and then finding himself in front of the tomb of the Commander whom he had killed a few months earlier, he orders Sganarelle to invite the statue of the dead man to supper. The statue bows his head in acceptance of the invitation.

In the fourth act Don Juan humorously pacifies an insistent creditor, and listens impatiently to his father, who predicts divine vengeance on his incessant wickedness. Elvire, who has now made her peace with heaven, appeals to him to repent while there is yet time. Finally, the statue of the Commander comes to supper, and then invites his host to sup with him the next night. And in the fifth and last act, Don Juan gives another proof of his impenitence by turning hypocrite and by pretending to have seen the error of his ways. He even pleads his conversion when a brother of Elvire insists on his marrying his victim or giving to her champion the satisfaction of a gentleman. Then a ghost appears and changes into Time with its scythe. At last the statue of the Commander enters. Then lightning flashes and a flaming chasm opens and Don Juan is precipitated to hell. Sganarelle briefly points the moral and the play is over.

IV

From this outline of the story it is clear that 'Don Juan' cannot be considered a well-knit play, when it is tried by any severe standard of dramaturgy. Its action is casual and inconsequent, with more than one incident which is quite unnecessary. Having undertaken to make over a play of proved popularity, Molière contented himself with adapting or transposing the Spanish-Italian story; he did not assimilate it and make it his own absolutely. Possibly he did not feel free to modify the plot too much, and possibly again his heart was not in his work, since its subject matter was not really to his own liking. It was a theme romantic and fantastic; and with these characteristics Molière had little sympathy. His own relish was ever for the concrete realities of life. He liked to deal with the men and women he saw around him in his own country and in his own time. His own taste would never have led him to make a play having for its hero a remote and legendary character.

This must be admitted frankly, and 'Don Juan' must be considered primarily as a piece of hack-work accom-

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plished to meet special conditions in the theater; none the less the play demands discussion, if not as one of Molière's masterpieces, at least as a striking product of his genius. Just as Shakspere took over the earlier 'Hamlet,' preserving its plot intact, and then elevated it by purging away its baser horrors and by filling it with his own ampler poetry and philosophy and psychology, so Molière took over 'Don Juan'—a far less congenial subject for him than 'Hamlet' had been for Shakspere, who had a leaning toward the supernatural—and elevated it by a transformation of Don Juan himself. The shallow character of the universal lover, mocking heaven and going to hell, disappears, to be replaced by the terrifying portrait of a great lord who is a wicked man. It is in the projection of this sinister personality that Molière put forth his full strength; and it is because of his portrayal of the steely iniquity of Don Juan, because Don Juan himself is a figure of incarnate evil, to be set by the side of Iago, that this play ranks itself by the side of 'Tartuffe.' And we can now see that the subject which Molière chose because of its spectacular element, he so handled that these spectacular elements ceased to be significant or even important.

In several of the plays written between the first appearance of 'Tartuffe' before the king and its final production five years later in the Palais-Royal, one can perceive the same impulse which had driven Molière to compose 'Tartuffe' itself; and in some of them we can discover traces of his disgust at the interdiction of his great comedy. Perhaps he might never have written 'Don Juan' if 'Tartuffe' had not been prohibited; and probably this prohibition is partly responsible for the deeper traits of Don Juan himself.

Don Juan is the embodiment of primitive sexual instinct, selfish, lawless, and corrupting. Advancing civilization has found it needful to control this instinct; and the insatiable seducer has come under the ban of morals and of religion which certifies morality. And therefore Don Juan is moved in his turn to scout religion and to see only hypocrisy in any manifestation of morality. He has shifting caprices and perverted desires; but his ingrained selfishness keeps him cold to the sufferings of his victims—perhaps it even leads him to find a voluptuous satisfaction in their writhings. His amorous egotism, joying in the dexterity of his devices, makes him proud of his inconstancy, as an evidence of his superiority over the rest of mankind.

It is this type of essential energy, however misguided and misplaced, that Molière sets on the stage with deep understanding of its possibilities. The dramatist lends to his frightful yet fascinating hero the finer qualities which belong to the type; and his Don Juan is no mere butterfly wooer of maid, wife and widow; he is gay and clever, quick-witted and sharp-tongued. Above all he is brave; this much at least must be counted to his credit—that he is devoid of fear. A type of essential energy could not be a coward; and Don Juan has a bravura bravery. He displays an unconquerable courage in the face of death and in the presence of damnation. He has a final impenitence in full view of eternity which may lend to him for the moment a likeness to Milton's Satan.

We are made to see Don Juan not only as he appears before us, but also as he reveals himself to the servant who has witnessed his misdeeds and who knows his secrets. Molière found this humble companion of the hero in his Spanish-Italian original, wherein he was no more than a low-comedy part, a mere fun-maker, like a hundred other clowns, expected to get his laughs at all hazards in order to relieve the somber complexion of the main story. This low-comedy part Molière transposed for his own acting; and he called it Sganarelle, although the character differs widely from any Sganarelle presented in the earlier plays in which he appears. He is no longer the obstinate creature whom we have already laughed at again and again. He is now a cowardly servant endowed with penetrating shrewdness. He has the hard-headed simplicity of Sancho Panza; and it is he who acts as chorus, and who here serves as the mouthpiece of the author. His duty it is, not only to enliven the action by his blunders and by his jests but also to comment on what takes place, and to suggest to the spectators the repugnance which they ought to feel for the eternally charming hero, so handsome and so brave, so cruel and so callous. It is Sganarelle who brings out the moral again and again in the course of the play.

V

Rarely has the morality of a play been confided to a character to whom we more willingly listen, for all that he is timorous, mendacious and servile. He is the embodiment of French common sense, as Don Juan is the incarnation of French wickedness. And all the other characters in the play are equally swift to reveal their birth in France, even though they take part in a Spanish story with its scene laid in Italy.

Molière took a Spanish legend, filled with characters fundamentally Spanish, and he made it French. He allowed the action of his play to take place in an alleged Sicily, but the persons of his piece are French, all of them, inherently French. Shakspere had also laid the scene of a story in an alleged Sicily, but his Beatrice and his Benedick are quite as English as his Dogberry and Verges. Shakspere and Molière, both of them, reproduced characters they knew at first hand, and made no vain effort after local color; neither of them fatigued himself in an idle endeavor to step off his own shadow. Alien as the theme of 'Don Juan' might be to his sympathy, Molière modified it to suit his own intention; and then peopled the borrowed legend with characters like those he had observed himself in the capital and in the provinces.

He puts into the mouths of the peasant girls and of the country bumpkin who is in love with one of them, a provincial dialect such as he had picked up in the days of his strolling. And his knowledge of the peasant, male and female, goes far deeper than mere dialect, for he was familiar also with their modes of thought, with their narrow-mindedness and their obstinacy. The creditor whom Don Juan wheedles is a worthy burgher of Paris, a contemporary of Molière's father. The outraged Elvire might have stalked straight out of one of Corneille's lofty tragedies, and so might her fiery and eloquent brothers. Don Juan's father is a gentleman of the old school, austere and unbending, a survival from the rule of Louis XIII, such as Molière may often have met in his father's shop.

And Don Juan has suffered a change in crossing the Pyrenees and the Alps. He is a very different figure in Molière's play from the rather vulgar hero-villain of the turbid and violent Spanish piece. Less affected and less artificially lyric, he has become more truly poetic.

Above all, he has gained in distinction; he is now a gentleman, in externals at least, in breeding, in courage, and in overbearing self-confidence. Molière had not to go far afield in search of a model. There were a host of young gallants at the court of Louis XIV, who might have sat for the portrait—well-born, graceful and unscrupulous. The comic dramatist was no respecter of persons, no flatterer of rank. He might be the servant of the king, but he was not a blind admirer of the king's courtiers. In play after play he had made fun of these danglers after the person of the monarch; in the 'Fâcheux' he had etched a gallery of grotesques, and now he held up to scorn where all the world might see, burgher as well as courtier, a figure more despicable and more dangerous, the great lord who is a wicked man. Here is an appalling portrayal of impious selfishness and of mocking cynicism, never more splendidly set forth than in the episodic scene in which Don Juan seeks to tempt a hapless beggar into blasphemy, only to be rebuked by the simple piety of the poor man, to whom, at last, he flings his proffered coin "for the love of humanity." He was here aiming at a loftier mark than the *précieuses* and the pedants, the bigots and the hypocrites. It had taken courage to do what he had done before; and no other dramatist of that day had dared to follow in his footsteps. To do what he did in 'Don Juan' revealed a deeper audacity; and there is no need to wonder why the career of the play was cut short.

VI

The fundamental inspiration of the Spanish original was religious; its author was sincerely devout; he intended his drama to be edifying; and his ingenious piece had a close kinship with 'Life is a Dream,' with the 'Devotion to the Cross' and with other examples of Calderon's power of combining mystic emotionalism with spectacular theatricality. This religious impulse was no longer potent in the adaptations of the Italians, whose devotion had little spirituality and who preferred to develop all the comic possibilities of the plot. In the two French versions which preceded Molière's, and which he laid under contribution as was his custom, the spectacular element was emphasized and the characters remained unreal and exaggerated. It was left for Molière to sharpen the outlines of these characters, to make them obey the logic of their own natures, to give them the reality which they lacked.

Keeping as much as he must of the framework of the legend, Molière profoundly modifies the figures involved in it, by making them veracious, by bringing them back to our common humanity. In endowing them with vitality, he enlarges their significance and he makes possible the later cosmopolitan travels of Don Juan. The Spanish quality of the play disappears or is at least greatly reduced; and the subject is made French, with the gravity which the French derived from the Latins and with the gaiety which descends to them from the Gauls. Thus enlarged, thus lifted up, the theme became capable of universality, and it was ready to wander from land to land and from art to art. A story essentially medieval thus became modern and cosmopolitan.

It is the Don Juan of Molière who is the immediate ancestor of the conscienceless fascinator of Byron and Mérimée, of Mozart and Musset. It is to Molière that the perversely attractive figure of Don Juan owes its elevation, its largeness, its major meaning. It is in

Molière's play that the real Don Juan, as we know him now in story, in song and in picture, first emerges—a freethinker and a libertine, an atheist who is also a hypocrite, a lordly seducer whose desire after woman is physical, of course, but psychological also, and to almost an equal extent. It is in Molière's play that we first find the virtuoso in seduction, whose insatiable curiosity causes him to take keener pleasure in the delayed pursuit than in the ultimate possession, and who is therefore condemned to lose all interest in his conquest as soon as the final resistance is overcome. It is in Molière's play that we can first perceive the Don Juan who devotes his life to loving, who (because he loves every woman equally) loves no one of them with all the unforgetable appeal of an overmastering passion, and who therefore has to die without ever suspecting what love may be.

It is only after Molière rehandled the legend that the supernatural element—out of which the story had arisen originally—lost its importance and became indeed almost negligible. Thereafter what holds our attention and focuses our interest is not what happens to Don Juan, but what he is. He ceases to be a mere wooer at large, commonplace and unconvincing. He fixes himself in our memories as a human being, immeshed in the realities of life, subtler than his Spanish-Italian forerunner, more significant and far more sinister. Molière may have composed 'Don Juan' in haste to serve a temporary purpose, accepting a theme which he might never have chosen of his own free will, and his conduct of his plot may be as careless as his construction is straggling, but he here revealed a power of dealing with the deeper aspects of human nature, a power not displayed as profoundly in any other of his plays.

CHAPTER XI

MOLIERE AND THE DOCTORS

I

EARLY in the fall of this same year Louis XIV again called upon Molière to minister swiftly to his pleasure, and the dramatist responded with a celerity which was extraordinary even for him. In five days he devised, wrote, rehearsed and produced a comedy-ballet, the 'Amour Médecin,' which was acted before the king at Versailles in the middle of September, 1665, and brought out at the Palais-Royal a few days later. It was in prose and in three acts, but by omitting the interludes of dancing it could be presented easily as a single act. In this merry trifle, improvised hastily at the monarch's desire, Molière returned to the familiar and convenient framework of the comedy-of-masks. The action takes place in the open air in front of the house of Sganarelle.

The plot of the little play is as simple as may be; but however slight in texture it is sufficient for its immediate purpose. Molière himself appeared as Sganarelle, not here the shrewd servant of 'Don Juan,' but the more narrow-minded and obstinate type seen earlier in the 'Ecole des Maris.' He is now a widower with one daughter, Lucinde (probably impersonated by Mademoiselle Molière). The father wishes to keep his daughter for himself, but the daughter prefers to be married to a young man who has sought her hand, Clitandre (acted by La Grange). She pretends to be ill and Sganarelle seeks advice, first from various friends, and then finally from four physicians called in consultation upon her case. The doctors disagree, and two of them, after proposing radically different treatments, quarrel violently. A little later Lisette, the maid, brings in Clitandre disguised as a physician. The young lover deceives the father into consenting to his daughter's marriage, Sganarelle supposing that this is only a pretense, likely to arouse Lucinde out of her melancholy. When he discovers that she is really wedded to Clitandre the play is over.

This unpretending little farce, significant only as an example of Molière's fertility and facility, is brisk and lively in its movement. It was probably effective enough on the stage when performed by Molière and his comrades; and it is in the theater that its merits would be most evident. In the preface, wherein the author explains that the piece was written to order at topmost speed, Molière modestly asserts that it contained much which was dependent chiefly on the skill of the performers. And he adds a remark characteristic of the professional playwright who has planned his work for the actual theater: "Every one knows that comedies are written only to be acted."

But the interest of this amusing little piece when it was first performed did not lie in the adroitness of the acting or in the humorous ingenuity of its situations; it resided rather in the four physicians who meet in consultation. To us in the twentieth century they seem to be artfully contrasted types of the practitioners of medicine of those remote days; but to the Parisian playgoers in the later seventeenth century they were recognizable caricatures of living men, somewhat exaggerated portrayals of four of the leading doctors of the court, each of them endowed with the individual peculiarities of the original. This was an Aristophanic license of personal caricature, which is here without offense or ill-will, for Molière was not here attacking the persons or the characters of these physicians. He was using them only as the means of showing up the hollowness of the pretensions of the whole medical profession of his own day.

II

It was in 'Don Juan' that Molière had first girded at the practitioners of the healing art. When Don Juan and Sganarelle have to disguise themselves, the latter appears in the flowing robe of a physician, giving his master an occasion for a few bitter gibes against the doctors; and this shocks Sganarelle, horrified to find that Don Juan, a skeptic in religion, is also a skeptic in medicine. It was in the 'Amour Médecin' that Molière first declared open war against the faculty, that guerrilla warfare which he was to keep up for the rest of his life, returning to the attack in play after play, as though he were as bitter against the doctors as he was against the pedants and the hypocrites. The explanation of this hostility is to be found in the fact that Molière held the physicians of his time to be both pedants and hypocrites. For affectation in all its phases, for pretenders of every kind, for humbugs of all sorts, Molière had a keen eye and a hearty detestation. On them and on them only he was always swift to pour the vials of his wrath; and he was never moved to assault unless his hostile contempt was awakened by his acute instinct for a sham.

In every period there are certain callings or professions, as the case may be, which the average man of that epoch delights in abusing; and we are not to-day prompter to make fun of the plumber than the people of the Middle Ages were to crack jokes at the expense of the miller. The source of the irritation which thus seeks vent in humorous girding is the same: it is the result of our knowledge that we cannot control the accounts rendered by the miller and by the plumber. We must accept them as they are rendered; and the only revenge open to us is to take away the character of the craftsman who has us at his mercy and whom we cannot help suspecting. In all ages, at least ever since law and medicine were first recognized as professions, the average man has been prone to resent the air of mystery assumed by the lawyers and the physicians, and to be annoyed by their professional self-assertion. Hosts of merry jests, directed at the conceit of the members of these two professions, have been handed down from century to century or are born again by spontaneous generation.

Molière's immediate predecessors in the comic drama, the French farce-writers and the devisers of the Italian comedy-of-masks, had drawn unhesitatingly from the inexhaustible arsenal of missiles directed against the two professions; and in attacking the practitioners of medicine Molière was only doing again what had been done before him. And here the question imposes itself, Why did he neglect the lawyers to concentrate his fire on the doctors? The answer is not far to seek; the lawyers, whatever faults they might have, were not impostors, and Molière's resentment is fierce only against a humbug. The law might lend itself to chicanery, and to annoying delay and ultimate injustice, its procedure might be complicated and vexatious; but the lawyers did not pretend to be in possession of mysterious secrets, and they did their work in the open for all men to see. The physicians made the most exalted claims for their art and they demanded to be taken on faith, however helplessly their practice might fall below their preaching. Ordinarily the lawyer deals only with losses of money; and he does not lay hands upon the body nor require us to submit our minds to his that he may control our bodies. And this is what the physician does now, always has done, and must always do. This is therefore why the practice of the law, sharply as we may dwell on its defects, does not come home to us as closely as the practice of medicine, which must ever be a matter of life and death.

But there were also special reasons peculiar to his own period why Molière was moved to pour out his contempt on the physicians. The reign of Louis XIV marks what is perhaps the lowest point in the history of medicine in France, far lower than it had been a century earlier when Rabelais had studied the art of healing. The men who represented medicine were narrow and bigoted conservatives, accepting blindly all that they had inherited from the ancients and refusing resolutely to depart from the practices of their forefathers. They rejected every new discovery without investigation, scouting it scornfully. They were determined to maintain their ancient landmarks. They believed that medicine was an exact science, that they were the custodians of all its mysteries, and that what they did not know was not knowledge. They held fast to a body of doctrine, a purely theoretic conception of their art, which was almost as closely reasoned and as compactly coordinated as was the contemporary doctrine of Calvin in matters of religion. Behind this they intrenched themselves, and in defense of this they were prepared to die in the last ditch—and to let their patients die also.

In Paris the faculty of medicine was a close corporation, bound together by the loyal traditions of a trade-gild and possessing a solidarity more substantial than that of any modern trade-union. There were only about a hundred physicians in the capital and not more than four were admitted in any one year. The cost of a medical education was onerous, and therefore the faculty was recruited only from the middle class. At the examinations special privileges were granted to the sons of physicians; and the profession thus tended to be hereditary, with all the obvious disadvantages of persistent inbreeding. The training of the youthful aspirant to the doctorate was philosophic, not to say scholastic; and the questions propounded to the candidate were often foolish. Medicine was not considered as an art, necessarily more or less empirical, but rather as an exact science, lending itself abundantly to scholarly disputation. The doctors were generally more interested in medicine as a code of tradition, and in their own strict obedience to its precepts and precedents, than they were in the art of healing and in the condition of the individual patient. They were indeed far more conservative than the ancients whom they bound themselves to follow; and the oath of Hippocrates had a large liberality which was lacking in the pledge subscribed by the young doctor in Paris, which was little more than a promise ever to defend sturdily the rights of the faculty itself.

The Parisian faculty of medicine rejected the circulation of the blood, as we are told by one historian of medicine in France, because this came from England, and also the use of antimony and of quinine, because one came from Montpellier and the other from America. It refused to have anything whatever to do with surgery, which it despised; and students of medicine were not allowed to dissect. The physicians held surgery to be a mere manual art, unworthy of a learned profession. Any physician who had ever practised surgery was required to promise that he would never again descend to this craft fit only for an artisan. There were numberless other absurdities accepted by nearly all the physicians of the time. Bleeding and purging were, of course, the foremost of remedies, since they were necessary to rid the body of its "humors." Patients took medicine or were purged not only for any ailment they had but also for the ailments they might have in the future, merely as a precautionary measure. And to these ridiculous practices every one who consulted a physician had to submit, including the king himself.

III

Since these absurdities and artificialities were patent to all, Molière could not help seeing them. He was moved to mirthful indignation by the empty pretensions of the physicians. He might not know better than any other layman what ought to be done; but he was too sharp-sighted and keen-witted not to see that these things ought not to be done. He had also here as elsewhere an abiding faith in the power of nature to take care of itself and to work out its own salvation. This led him to abhor the endless drugging which every physician then resorted to. It led him also to anticipate the modern practice of letting a disease run its course. In the 'Amour

Médecin' the nimble-tongued Lisette tells how the household cat had recovered from a fall into the street, after lying three days without eating and without moving a paw; and then she adds that there are no cat-physicians, luckily for the cat, or it would have died from their purgings and bleedings. A similar attitude is taken by other characters in the later plays, in which Molière returned again to the attack.

Molière had had thorough instruction in the official philosophy, as the Jesuits imparted it to their students; and he had been made familiar with a more modern school of thought by Gassendi. He was by training fitted to understand the philosophic foundation on which were raised all the theories promulgated by the faculty of medicine; and his objection to the practices of the French physicians of his time seems to be due not more to the absurdity of these practices than to the absurdity of the philosophy which justified them.

He did his own thinking in his own fashion; and he was not a blind worshiper of authority. He was not overawed by the revered name of Hippocrates, outside of which there was no health. Even the citing of Aristotle was not to him conclusive, if his own observation revealed to him an experience not obviously in accord with the saying of the great Greek. It is not without significance that he makes one of his characters declare that "the ancients are the ancients, and we are the men of to-day." Molière was no iconoclast, no violent revolutionary, no rejecter of tradition solely because it was an inheritance. On the other hand, he was ready to prove all things so that he might hold fast that which was good. So it was that he detested vain theorizing, and the building up of formulas and of classifications into rigid systems, false to the facts of life as he saw them with his own eyes. The medicine of his day was a rigid system of this sort; and the moment he perceived this clearly he could not help exposing it.

But his detestation of the contemporary perversions of the doctrines of Hippocrates and of Galen did not lead him to misrepresent them. On the contrary, he strove to reproduce them with the most conscientious exactness. If the discussions of his doctors, their dissertations, their disputations, seem to us almost inconceivably ridiculous, this is because Molière had assimilated the theory that sustained them and had absorbed the vocabulary in which they were habitually set forth. To bring forth abundant laughter all that Molière had to do was to show the doctors in action, to isolate this principle and that, and to set this forth in their own jargon, with only the slight heightening necessary to make it clear. The result is inevitably laughable, because of the fundamental absurdity of the originals thus faithfully portrayed.

The scholars who have investigated the history of medicine in France are united in their admiration for the accuracy with which Molière has dealt with the doctrines he was denouncing. They have constant praise for the certainty with which he seized the spirit that animated the French physicians of the seventeenth century, and for the skill with which he caught the very accent of their speech. His was no haphazard criticism; it was rooted in knowledge. The consultation in 'Monsieur de Pourceaugnac' is declared to be almost phonographic in its verisimilitude. Even when the comic dramatist was moved to frank caricature and overt burlesque as in the ceremony of the 'Malade Imaginaire,' he was only exaggerating what actually took place on similar occasions.

His satire, however grotesque it may seem, however broadly humorous, has philosophic truth to sustain it.

IV

Molière put into the 'Amour Médecin' four figures of fun which his contemporaries recognized as copied from certain of the more prominent physicians of Paris; but there was no bitterness of personality in this. It was the whole faculty he was attacking and the spirit that governed this trade-gild of those who trafficked in medicine. He had no quarrel with any individual doctor; indeed, he was on the best of terms with several practitioners of the healing art—with La Mothe Le Vayer, for one, with Bernier, for another, and with his own doctor, Mauvillain.

The only favor that Molière ever craved from the sovereign was that a vacant canonry might be bestowed on Mauvillain's son. This request he addressed to the king on the joyful day when Louis XIV at last permitted the public performances of 'Tartuffe.' In his appeal he told the monarch that the physician had promised and was ready to bind himself under oath to keep his patient alive for thirty years if this boon could be obtained from the monarch. The petitioner explained that he had not demanded so much and that he would be satisfied if the doctor merely promised not to kill him. Grimarest recorded that the king once asked Molière how he got along with his physician, and that the dramatist answered, "Sire, we talk together; he prescribes remedies for me; I do not take them; and I get well."

These talks together were probably the source of Molière's accurate and intimate acquaintance with the principles, the procedure, and the vocabulary of contemporary medicine. Mauvillain was a man of marked individuality, who had had his own troubles in his youth, but who rose in time to be dean of the faculty. Ardent defender of the rights of his gild, he seems to have had a sense of humor; and it may be that he took a malicious pleasure in supplying Molière with material for caricaturing other members of the faculty and even the faculty itself.

Molière's uncertain health must often have given occasion for these talks with Mauvillain; and although he may have told the king that he did not take the remedies his physician prescribed, it is a fact that when he died he owed a heavy bill to his apothecary. That his health was uncertain is beyond all question. His lungs were weak, and he had a chronic cough, which he even gave as a peculiarity to one of the later characters he wrote for his own acting. He came of a feeble stock; his mother died young and few of her children attained long life. Molière's younger brother died before he did, and he himself was to survive only until he was fifty-one. Two of his three children died before him; and his only surviving child, a daughter, died at last without leaving issue.

It is only after he became conscious that his health was failing and after he had to call on physicians for relief, it is only then that he began to make fun of them, when he had had personal experience of the futility of their efforts. Perhaps we may find the exciting cause of his hostility to the contemporary practice of medicine in the inability of the contemporary practitioners to alleviate his own ailments and to restore him to strength. He continued his attacks on them to the end of his life; and the last play he lived to produce, the 'Malade Imaginaire,' contained the most vigorous of all his assaults, far more searching than the comparatively mild satire of the 'Amour Médecin.'

Early in the very winter when this little play was in the flush of its success the theater had to be closed for nearly two months, partly because of the death of the queen-mother and partly because of Molière's own ill-health. That he was not in the full possession of his powers at this period of his career seems to be proved by the unusually long interval which elapsed between the production of 'Don Juan' and the first performance of his next important play, the 'Misanthrope,' a period of sixteen months, broken only by the improvisation of the 'Amour Médecin' in five days. It is true that he was still constantly hoping for the removal of the interdict on 'Tartuffe,' and that this hope may have delayed his undertaking a new play. But the delay is significant, none the less, since Molière was always a swift worker, and since he had the abundant productivity of affluent genius. Once, at least, he brought out three of his larger plays within the space of a single calendar year. The total number of his pieces and also the average of his annual production, may be compared with Shakspere's. The English dramatist, as it happens, gave up playwriting when he was about the age at which the French dramatist had his career cut short by death. But Shakspere's work was spread over a longer period of time than that of Molière, whose achievement was concentrated within the final fifteen years of his life, from thirty-six to fifty-one.

CHAPTER XII

THE 'MISANTHROPE'

I

The play which Molière produced after this protracted interval was worth waiting for; and it may well have demanded an unusual time for its conception, its construction and its verbal perfecting. It was the 'Misanthrope,' a comedy in five acts, in verse, brought out at the Palais-Royal in June, 1666, when Molière was forty-four years old, and in the ripe plenitude of his powers.

This new play, long in its incubation, was composed while its author was undergoing unusual strain. He was not in good health and he was worn by the deferred hope ~~that 'Tartuffe' might still be permitted;~~ and it is easy to ~~perceive~~ the effects of this struggle against repellent forces in the 'Misanthrope.' He was also ~~suffering from~~ discord in his own household. The incompatibility of temper between himself and his young wife had at last declared itself violently. He loved Armande Béjart passionately and jealously. She appears to have been incapable of appreciating this ardent devotion; and perhaps it is not too much to say that she was unworthy of it. She was light-hearted and headstrong; and she seems to have been rather chilly in temperament. Moreover, Molière was probably not easy to live with, often silent, sometimes moody, and always busy. The breach between them had now brought about a temporary separation, although husband and wife had to meet in the theater. Perhaps these daily meetings at rehearsal and during the performances intensified the husband's sufferings; and traces of his exasperation from this cause also can be discovered in the 'Misanthrope.'

By most French critics this play of Molière's is held to be the loftiest achievement of French comedy, the inapproachable masterpiece of the foremost of comic dramatists. This high opinion is shared by many critics of other nationalities. George Eliot described it as "the foremost and most complete production of its kind in the world"; and Lord Morley called it "that inscrutable piece where, without plot, fable or intrigue, we see a section of the polished life of the time, men and women paying visits, making and receiving compliments, discoursing upon affairs with easy lightness, flitting backwards and forwards with a thousand petty worries, and among them one strange, rough, hoarse, half-somber figure, moving solitarily with a chilling reality in the midst of a world of shadows."

And yet this masterpiece, in which Molière has most completely expressed himself, did not win the immediate popularity in the theater which had been attained by several of his earlier plays of a far slighter importance. The best judges saw its merits at once and praised it unhesitatingly; but it had no proportionate attraction for the public as a whole. It was not performed before the king, because the court was in mourning for the queen-mother during the comparatively brief period when the play was kept on the boards. It had an honorable run when first produced, and it remained in the repertory for two or three seasons; but rarely was it really remunerative to the treasury of the theater. And in the two centuries and a half since it was first seen, it has never proved as interesting to the plain playgoers as have other of its author's comedies which are far less highly acclaimed. Every French comedian of distinction has aspired to play Alceste, as every English tragedian of distinction has aspired to play Hamlet; but whereas Shakspere's masterpiece sustains the actor, even if he is not really equal to its performance, Molière's masterpiece, even if it richly rewards the efforts of the actor, rarely arouses the enthusiasm of an average audience.

The reason for this relative failure of the public to respond to Molière's noblest achievement is not far to seek. The 'Misanthrope' lacks the powerful structure of 'Tartuffe,' and the variety of incident of 'Don Juan.' As Lord Morley put it, perhaps a little too strongly, the play is "without plot, fable or intrigue." Its qualities are literary rather than theatric, philosophic and psychologic rather than dramaturgic. On the stage literature must be sustained by drama. If the play itself, the plot, the fable, the intrigue, grips the attention of the spectator, then it can be surcharged with all the philosophy and with all the poetry that the author may please to put into it. But in the theater psychology is never acceptable as a substitute for dramaturgy. And in the composition of the 'Misanthrope,' Molière for once forgot the lesson which he had learned from the Italians and which he had kept in mind while he was building the solid foundation of 'Tartuffe.' He seems to have been so absorbed in the projection of the congenial figure of Alceste that he did not trouble to invent a story strong enough to serve as a supporting frame for it.

So it is that the play, superb as it is, wants progressive intensity of movement. Indeed, it is almost open to the charge of monotony, since its incidents are devised mainly to afford Alceste a succession of opportunities for the display of his hostile contempt for social hypocrisies. The action of 'Tartuffe' rolls forward steadily with increasing force and with cumulative interest, whereas the action of the 'Misanthrope' may be said to revolve around Alceste himself, leaving most of the characters at the end very much where they were at the beginning; in other words, the 'Misanthrope' is a picture of society, with more or less of the immobility of a painting. Molière is not only a playwright, he is a philosopher also, as a true dramatist must ever be; and in 'Tartuffe' and in the 'Femmes Savantes,' we can see the philosopher and the playwright working together on equal terms, each aiding the other, whereas in the 'Misanthrope' we suspect that the philosopher for once got the better of the playwright, tempting him to be satisfied with a story which is at once a little too empty and too episodic.

II

The history of dramatic literature reveals to us also the significant fact that most successful dramatists, the undisputed masters of this form of literature, have often begun by being little more than adroit playwrights, unambitiously providing the public with the kind of piece it had been accustomed to enjoy. Thus Shakspere first followed modestly in the footsteps of Marlowe and Kyd, of Lyly and Greene; and thus Molière himself accepted the model of the unpretending comedy-of-masks. Then, as these authors grow in authority, their ambition wakens and they cease to be imitators. They find themselves able to educate their audience to accept plays richer and deeper than it had desired. They still give the public what it wants, while also giving it what they themselves want. At last, there may come a period in their careers when the need of pleasing the audience is less imperative than their desire to express themselves abundantly and to body forth their own interpretation of life, as they feel it in the full maturity of their genius. And here is the moment of danger, since the more completely a dramatist puts himself into his plays the more likely he is to separate himself more or less from the main body of his contemporaries, because his own individuality is necessarily set apart from their collective personality.

At this stage of his development the dramatist is unexpectedly lucky if he happens on a plot like that of 'Hamlet,' which is broad in its appeal to the myriad-minded public, and yet fit to carry the poet's own message with all its profundities of meaning. And here Molière was not so fortunate as Shakspere, and the play into which he put the most of himself is far from possessing the many elements of theatrical popularity which we perceive in the play in which Shakspere expressed himself most satisfactorily. The French dramatist overestimated the ability of the spectators to be interested in what was most interesting to him. And it is proof of his ability to profit by experience that he never repeated the mistake he had made in the 'Misanthrope,' as he never repeated the mistake he had made in 'Don Garcie.' The unwillingness of his public to be entertained by his masterpiece of comedy because it was not supported by a story which gripped their sympathy, served as a warning to him; and in no one of his later plays did he fail to remember it. In these subsequent comedies he might do what he wished and say what he wished, but he took care also to provide the spectators with what he knew they expected.

III

In 'Tartuffe' Molière puts on the stage a family of the middle class. In the 'Misanthrope' he presents a picture of the "best society" of his time, and his characters are courtiers and women of fashion, frequenters of the Louvre and Versailles, claiming acquaintance with the sovereign himself. Appropriately the successive episodes of the play take place in the drawing-room of Célimène, a young widow who has a host of admirers and who seems to be on the point of accepting Alceste, in spite of the violence with which he expresses his abhorrence for the company in which she shines. In the very first scene we behold Alceste holding forth to his friend, Philinte, who does not disagree with his condemnatory opinion of the circle in which they move, but who disapproves of the exaggeration of Alceste's speech and action. Philinte is possessed by the social instinct which makes him almost as tolerant to the knave as to the fool. Alceste is plain-spoken to excess, and sincere almost to absurdity. When Oronte, another of Célimène's suitors, chances in, and after flattering him elaborately, asks his opinion of a newly written sonnet, Alceste is frank to the verge of brutality, insisting on the worthlessness of the little poem. Oronte is naturally outraged by this direct discourtesy. And this is the first act.

When the curtain rises again, Alceste is making love to Célimène by jealously protesting against her complacent acceptance of attentions from other of her admirers, Clitandre and Acaste. Just then these two are announced; and with them come Philinte also, and Eliante, a cousin of Célimène's, who lives with her, and whose hand Philinte is seeking. Célimène insists upon Alceste's remaining. It is with an indignation that boils over again and again that he listens to the ensuing conversation, in which Célimène takes the lead lightly, as if glad to display her cleverness, and in which she wittily sketches a series of satiric portraits of her acquaintance in the fashion of the time, every one of them brilliantly colored by her gay malice. (This effective scene obviously served as the model for the similar episode in Sheridan's 'School for Scandal.') Then Alceste is unexpectedly called away to a court of honor, convoked by the insulted Oronte. And this is the second act.

When the play begins again we are introduced to a new character, Arsinoé, a mature prude, who also is in love with Alceste, and who is therefore jealous of the woman to whom he is devoted. She has come to have it out with her rival; and there and then the two ladies have a bout with the buttons off, each of them getting home more than once under her adversary's guard. When Alceste returns, Célimène leaves him with Arsinoé, who promptly informs him that she can prove that her rival is engaged in a flirtation with one of his rivals, and she carries him off to get the letter which will substantiate her accusation. But before going, she intimates, with unexpected directness, that if he should break off with Célimène, she might be willing to console him herself. And this is the third act.

When the interact is over we find Philinte and Eliante in conversation. They both express their high regard for Alceste, and she admits an even tenderer feeling for him. But this does not prevent Philinte from asking her to accept him in case Alceste should finally marry her cousin. Then Alceste comes back again, infuriated by the letter of Célimène's which Arsinoé has given to him. When he is left alone with the woman he loves, he confronts her with the evidence of her duplicity and overwhelms her with reproaches. She meets him calmly and disarms him by asking him what right he has to assume that her letter was written to a man, since it bears no address and it might have been sent to a woman. For this he has no response; and in the ardor of his passion he overrules his suspicion and his jealousy, and urges his suit once more. At this moment his servant comes in to inform him that a paper has been served on him, a paper which obviously refers to an important lawsuit and which the blundering lackey has left at home. Alceste goes perforce to learn what may be the contents of this document. And this is the fourth act.

At the opening of the final act Alceste tells Philinte that he has lost his lawsuit, merely because he had refused to comply with the corrupt custom of cajoling the judges. He is highly indignant at this miscarriage of justice, and he refuses to take an appeal, preferring to be a martyr to the iniquity of procedure. Then Oronte appears and asks Célimène to decide once for all between him and Alceste, who accepts the challenge. Célimène refuses to declare herself on a summons so peremptory. Finally Acaste and Clitandre return with Arsinoé. They have got possession of another letter of Célimène's, in which her satiric wit has led her to hold all her admirers up to ridicule, one after another, including even Alceste. Thus suddenly betrayed, Célimène expresses her contrition to Alceste, who forgives her on condition that she will give up society and come with him to live in a desert far from the pestilent insincerity of the fashionable world. In spite of her genuine love for Alceste this unattractive proposal does not tempt her; and he breaks away to rush forth alone into the solitude which will spare him the spectacle of human meanness. Philinte begs Eliante to accompany him in an effort to dissuade Alceste from this exile. And this is the end of the play.

IV

The first comment evoked by this meager outline of the 'Misanthrope' is that Molière's contemporaries acknowledged its accuracy as a picture of the "best society" of the time. They would have conceded that it conformed to the idea of comedy, accepted by Ben Jonson, as "the imitation of life, the mirror of manners and the image of truth." And Taine, in his estimate of the 'Ancien Régime,' continually called upon Molière as an unimpeachable witness. Now, if it is a fact that this play reproduces, as exactly as a play can reproduce it, the tone of the upper circles of France under Louis XIV, then the second comment inevitably follows, to the effect that the men and women who then moved on that elevated social plane fall far below the standard set for ladies and gentlemen in our own republican times. We can find in this veracious masterpiece ample evidence of the amelioration of manners, if not of morals, during the past two centuries.

For it is a sorry spectacle that Molière invites us to gaze at. Beneath the high polish of that courtly era we can see the underlying coarseness of fiber. Beneath the varnish of politeness there is fundamental vulgarity of feeling and thought and act. Superficially the characters of this comedy may be well-bred, and they display the airs and graces of people of quality; but at bottom they are almost devoid of common decency, as we understand this to-day. The quarrel of Célimène and Arsinoé is frankly brutal, for all its suavity of phrase; it is not unworthy of two fishwives disputing in the market. Equally gross is the scene in the last act when one marquis abetted by another insults Célimène, in whose house they all are, by reading aloud in her presence a letter written by her, which no gentleman had any right even to glance at without her permission, and this unpardonable rudeness calls forth no objection from any of the courtiers present. Apparently they saw no harm in this betrayal of ordinary propriety. And in the preceding act, Alceste, the honest Alceste, is guilty of the indefensible indelicacy of making use of another of Célimène's letters, given to him by a jealous woman, who had brazenly avowed her interest in him and who had no right whatever to be in possession of her rival's missive.

It is to be remembered that when Molière paints the social leaders of his time in these black colors and with these bold strokes, he is in agreement with the record of Saint-Simon. The frequenters of the court were not only inconceivably petty in their outlook and immeasurably frivolous in their interests, they were also often harsh and heartless; and here they had an example in Louis XIV, who was icily callous in his indifference to others. There was a cold-blooded disregard for all those who did not stand on a level with them socially. There was a hardness which was sometimes almost inhuman. Young nobles did not hesitate to mutilate a poor apprentice whom they might catch as they were returning from a debauch; and they knew well enough that their quality protected them and that their victim had no redress even when his injuries might be fatal. Women of high rank made a habit of ill-treating and even of beating their female servants. For all its charm and however glittering its veneer, the period of Louis XIV reveals itself as an age of grossness and brutality, not so far removed from the despicable cruelty of the Fronde. And what made it more hideous beneath its outward semblance of elegance, was the fact that it did not suspect its own vileness.

There were protests against the impiety of 'Don Juan'; but no one rose up to deny the veracity of Molière's portrayal of the great lord who is also a wicked man. Molière makes Alceste pour forth his indignation against the flagrant corruptibility of the judges; but no one of the spectators of the comedy saw any reason to declare that the dramatist had misrepresented the manners and customs of the "best society." Obviously enough, Molière himself did not perceive the vices of this society as clearly as we do nowadays on the testimony of his own plays. Obviously also he seems to us now far more aggressive in his attitude than he appeared to his contemporaries. Yet he had seen the evil of the Fronde with his own eyes and he had himself suffered insult and injury from those born to superior station. No wonder is it that his heart was hot within him, even if he was no revolutionary and no iconoclast.

V

That Molière was no revolutionary and not even a political reformer is evident from his attitude in this play. He was not assaulting the major abuses of the political organization of France; he was attacking only the minor blemishes of social intercourse, not even peculiar to his own time or nation. In no other play did he more clearly display the depth and the subtlety of his observation or more plainly prove that he was truly a poet. But he was a comic poet after all; and Alceste is neither a Hamlet nor a Faust. The 'Misanthrope' is a comedy and not a tragedy, even if its central character may seem to us too austere to be truly comic. So Shylock impresses us nowadays as almost tragic in his intensity, although he may have been primarily comic to his creator. Quite possibly Cervantes did not see in Don Quixote the high seriousness that we now perceive in that pathetically humorous figure. It is the good fortune of every masterpiece to enlarge its meaning century after century and to be enriched by all that later generations can read into it.

Those who persist in accepting Alceste as tragic in its author's intent, forgot that Molière was ever a humorist, even if he was likewise a poet. He was a philosopher also, but a laughing philosopher. And above all was he a comic actor, devising Alceste for his own acting. If the play was accepted by the Parisian public with Molière in the chief part it must have been comic then, however heroic it may seem to some of us now, since we know that Molière had not been able to win approval as an actor in any but comic characters. His audiences came to his theater expecting him to make them laugh; and it was only five years before the production of the 'Misanthrope' that 'Don Garcie' had failed chiefly because Molière had chosen to disconcert his habitual spectators by appearing before them in a heroic part. Beyond all question, Molière meant Alceste to evoke laughter, even if he intended him also to provoke thought.

Comedy deals with the foibles of humanity and not with the overwhelming passions to which tragedy alone may lay claim. And in this comedy Molière set before us the conflict between an uncompromising character and a society which cannot exist without incessant compromise. Here the essential struggle which the drama demands is the eternal antithesis between the several individuals who make up a community and the social bond which unites them. Obedience to this social bond brings amenity and urbanity; but subservience to it, an obsequious following of its behests, leads to insincerity and hypocrisy, which are in turn disintegrating to society. And here is the originality of this comedy and its superiority to all those that Molière had earlier written, that he was not content merely to create characters as in his preceding plays, but that he took society itself as his subject, handling boldly the relation of man to his fellows and bringing out the deceitfulness of the conventions on which human intercourse rests. Even if this struggle might have been treated tragically, it is the very stuff out of which comedy is made.

Alceste may be a misanthrope, although this is not what we should have called him if his creator had not bidden us to do so; but he is not a cynic, and he is not a pessimist. It is only superficially that he seems like a precursor of Rousseau, even if he does talk of hiding himself in a desert far from the haunts of men. He is more intelligent than Dr. Stockmann in Ibsen's 'Enemy of the People,' and perhaps a little less narrowly obstinate. He is a nobler type than the hero of 'Timon of Athens,' in that he is not moved by resentment for any mere personal injustice or injury. He is to be likened rather to Jaques in 'As You Like It,' who had a melancholy of his own, compounded of many simples and whose boasted bitterness, as in the speech on the seven ages of man, has more than a hint of humorous exaggeration. He has even—so Gaston Boissier once suggested—a certain resemblance to Cato the younger, a historic irreconcilable.

He has magnanimity of soul and he is free from all pettiness. He has been able to bind his friends to him, men and women also, even if he despises mankind at large, because he cannot help seeing its manifold meanness. Friendship is his and love also, since there are only three women in the comedy and all three of them express their willingness to marry him. He is a fine fellow at bottom, with undeniable charm, and with a certain suggestion of the heroic—which Eliante, for one, has found captivating. He has manliness and fervor and force—which are perhaps the reasons why Arsinoé makes advances to him and why even the flirtatious and light-hearted Célimène prefers him above all her other suitors. There is even eloquence in his more exalted outbreaks which nobody seems to take seriously; and there is fascination in his exuberant personality.

Perhaps Alceste dimly perceives the impression he makes and is encouraged to further extravagance of speech. He is proud of his virtue; he parades it and he pushes it to extremes. He abounds in his own sense; and he finds constant delight in unexpected violence of phrase, even when he seems most unconscious of his own exaggeration. He is sincere, of course, and he is ever preaching sincerity. But he is just as sincere and as emphatic in little things as in great; and an emphatic sincerity about trifles is an absurdity which we cannot help smiling at. But even when we go further and laugh in his face, we laugh at what he is saying, not at him personally. Alceste himself is not ridiculous, even if his extravagances of speech may be. As a man he always retains our respect and often a share of our sympathy, at the very moment when our laughter breaks out sharply at the exaggeration of his feeling and of his phrase. In the course of the play we laugh with him perhaps as often as we laugh at him. And after all this laughter, we like him the better; we hope that he will outgrow his growling; we may even wonder whether he will not make his peace with Célimène and withdraw his absurd demand that she should bury her youth in a desert with him. Ought not a comedy to end with a marriage? And perhaps there might turn out to be in this marriage no greater incompatibility of temper than in many another love-match.

For Célimène is not really the heartless coquette that she seems, even if there is a gulf fixed between her worldliness and his unworldliness. Alceste is reasonable to excess and logical beyond measure; and Célimène, being a woman, is not reasonable and, indeed, reveals herself as a past mistress of illogic. On the other hand, with all his ability to reason, he is radically impractical, while she is ready always to take the world as she finds it and to make herself at home in it. Yet the discord between them is not unbridgeable. She is a little frivolous and a little more than flirtatious. She thinks herself very clever with tongue and pen, a belief in which her admirers have encouraged her until she runs into wanton satire. She has an insatiable desire for admiration, and she is quite willing to pay the price which incessant attentions demand. But, when all is said, her faults are venial; they are excusable on the score of her youth.

Even if she is incapable of appreciating his nobler qualities, and even if she has let herself be tempted into making fun of him behind his back, she does prefer him to all the other courtiers who are dangling after her, and she expresses very prettily her contrition for her gravest fault. Apparently, in spite of his jealousy and of his absurd violence, she is really in love with him, as far as her rather shallow nature permits. What more could he ask? What more had he a right to expect? Certainly it is inexcusable for him to demand that she should renounce the society which makes up a large part of her life, to wander out into the wilderness with him alone.

What urges Alceste to propose that they should begin their married life in the desert is partly his immediate disgust at the loss of his lawsuit, but it is mainly his innate jealousy. He wants his wife all to himself with no other male of her own station within miles of them. And there is no denying that Molière can always express the piercing poignancy of jealousy. That Célimène should seem to give him cause for jealousy is easily explicable. She is very young, only twenty, so that she must be almost in the first flush of her freedom as a widow, joying in the new privilege of exercising her fascinations at large. Alceste has only to wait a little and she will come to him on his own terms; he has only to be patient with her.

VI

But to be patient with her or with any one else is just what Alceste cannot be. He is as exacting with her as he is with everybody. And here is where Alceste is to be sharply distinguished from Molière himself. If we can judge his character by his career Molière resembled Philinte far more than he did Alceste. He lent to his hero his own sturdy hatred of hypocrisy and his own gnawing jealousy; but he had himself none of the extravagance with which he has endowed the part he played. In real life the comic dramatist managed to get along in society without friction; the social bond did not irk him and he was ready enough to make the inevitable compromises it imposed. It is this more moderate view of life which he causes Philinte to express. Molière had no grudge against the world and no animosity toward it. He had no cause for exacerbated protest. He had been born in a well-to-do household; he had been brought up in comfortable circumstances; he had scarcely known the youthful bitterness of going hungry; he had got into debt, it is true, but he had got out again; and he was at last prosperous and able to live luxuriously. Besides, he was successful and his success was evident to all men.

Because he wrote Alceste for his own acting we have no right to declare that the character voices his own opinions and that there are personal reasons for the diatribes of the hero. That he put something of himself into the protesting Alceste is likely enough, just as he certainly put something of himself into Philinte, the Epicurean temporizer, content to move through life along the line of least resistance. Every artist must paint himself; and he knows others and is able to project them into independent life, only because he knows himself. But the dramatist is a true dramatist only when he is superior to mere lyric self-betrayal and when he can create figures foreign to his own personality. No doubt Molière looked into his own heart when he depicted Alceste, but so he did when he drew for us the earlier Arnolphe and the later Argan, in the 'Malade Imaginaire.'

We may be assured that he who had no quarrel with existence, who was no anarchist in theory, and who always accepted the social order as he found it, knew very well that Alceste took life too hard and was far too strenuous in his incessant declamation. We may be certain that he meant the independent hero of his comedy to be impossible in the extravagance of his demands upon others, and that he expected us to laugh at the character even if he hoped that we might also like Alceste in spite of his frequent eccentricity. We need not doubt that Molière designed Alceste rather as a warning than as an example, even if he also used the character as the mouthpiece for certain of his own convictions.

One reason why so many of his critics and commentators have insisted upon identifying him more often with Alceste than with any other of his creatures is their belief that the relations of Molière to his wife at the time when this comedy was composed are reflected in the play. Their contention is that they overhear an echo of Molière's appeal to Armande Béjart, in the reproaches Alceste (which he acted) addresses to Célimène (which she acted). But this is sheer assumption, unsupported by the facts; and it is significant that certain of the speeches in which Alceste voices his despairing jealousy and which sound as if they had been wrung from Molière's own heart at this moment of anguish when he and his wife were living apart, were not written originally for the 'Misanthrope' but for 'Don Garcie,' produced long before his marriage. This unsuccessful play had never been published, and its author held himself at liberty to use its fragments again not only in the 'Misanthrope' but in other of his later plays.

Some of Molière's biographers who admit that Alceste is not Molière are still inclined to persist that Célimène is Armande Béjart, because her husband wrote it for her acting, fitting it to her accomplishment. That he fitted it to her accomplishment is undoubtedly the fact; but there is no warrant for the belief that he was also reproducing her own character. He wrote Célimène for her to act, and Célimène is a young flirt quite unworthy of the nobler Alceste. But he had earlier written Elmire for her to act, and Elmire is a woman of irreproachable conduct. That the actress stood as a model for the character entrusted to her we have really no more right to assume in the one case than in the other. Nothing in Molière's career leads us to suppose that he would lay bare his own life on the stage and invite the sympathy of the public for his private misfortunes. Indeed, we have every reason to believe that this is what he would never dream of doing, since it would be an act absolutely abhorrent to a man of his temperament. Self-revelation of this kind belongs to the lyric, not to the drama; and Molière had little in common with Shelley. Rather is he like Lucretius, who kept out of his lofty and austere poem every fact of his own biography.

VII

Horace Walpole once declared that "the world is a comedy for those who think and a tragedy for those who feel." Molière was a thinker who felt acutely; and in the 'Misanthrope' his emotion is almost as keen as his intellectual endeavor, with the result that his comedy has sometimes seemed almost tragic to those whose own sensibility is unusually delicate; and this may be taken as evidence of the steady development of his genius. He was, and he remained, to the end of his life, a writer of comedy, but he was now putting into comedy more than French comedy had ever before been called upon to carry. He felt the attraction of subjects not comic in themselves, rather serious than otherwise; and to these he gave a more or less humorous twist, so that they might be acceptable to the playgoers of Paris, who expected him to make them laugh heartily.

'Tartuffe' is comic chiefly because of the unctuously humorous character of Orgon written by Molière for his own broad acting, as if he dreaded the darkness of the central figure of the play, which appears to us nowadays as grim almost as Shylock (also a personage in a comedy that is on the verge of tragedy). 'Don Juan' is not fairly to be described as a comedy within any reasonable limitation of the word; such humorous scenes as it may have are almost extraneous to its straggling story; and as for Don Juan himself, to laugh at him is the last thing any spectator would be tempted to do. And the third of the group, the 'Misanthrope,' even if comic in intention and in execution, is not comic enough, not clearly and frankly humorous enough, to provide the public with the direct pleasure proper to pure comedy; and an audience following its sequence of scenes could hardly help feeling that it was seeing a play transcending the strict bounds of the comic. Indeed, this comedy has almost the austere economy and the stark simplicity of a tragedy by Racine. These pieces are, all three of them, serious in theme, not to say somber, and less humorous in treatment than any of Molière's earlier efforts; and they also lack the customary conclusion. The 'Misanthrope' does not end in a wedding; 'Don Juan' ends with its hero's going down to the devil; and 'Tartuffe' terminates with the marriage of two young lovers in whose ultimate happiness the public takes no great interest.

In all three of these plays we can discover their author to be a little restless within the form that was imposed on him by the expectation of his audience who demanded that he should provide them with material for mirth. We can see him stretching the formula of comedy to force it to contain his deeper views of life. He was feeling his way doubtfully toward a framework more adequate for the full expression of his maturer thought. It was not that he was ready to forego comedy or that he was outgrowing it, but that he needed more room for his larger message.

This new formula, which without ceasing to be comedy should yet be more comprehensive than comedy had ever been before, he most nearly attained in 'Tartuffe.' Whether he might not have achieved it completely to his own satisfaction if his life had extended to the full threescore years and ten—this we cannot do more than guess. As it was, his career was cut short when he had only a little more than completed his half-century, and when he was still in the full ardor of production. Perhaps if he had survived another ten years he might have been able to carry with him the laughter-loving playgoers of Paris and to persuade them to let him interest them in plays that did not have to pretend to be comedies and that might even at times have taken on an aspect almost tragic.

It is, of course, idle to speculate what this new formula might have been. Perhaps Molière would have anticipated the grave comedy of Lessing and the social drama of Augier and Dumas. As it is, we can see that the formula of Lessing, which is the formula of Augier and Dumas also, is only an extension of the formula of Molière in 'Tartuffe' and in the 'Misanthrope,' more completely satisfactory in the former, but perhaps of a more assured promise in the latter.

CHAPTER XIII

FROM THE 'MEDECIN MALGRE LUI' TO 'GEORGE DANDIN'

I

AFTER the strenuous effort of composing 'Tartuffe,' 'Don Juan,' and the 'Misanthrope,' in which he had risen higher and revealed himself more amply than in any of his earlier plays, Molière relaxed his tension and brought out in swift succession a series of lighter and easier pieces, full of fun and lacking in the loftier purpose visible in the three masterpieces of which one was still under the royal interdiction, while the second had been cut short before its full career had been run, and the third, highly acclaimed as it had been, had proved less pleasing to the public than its author had expected.

The slighter plays which immediately followed the 'Misanthrope' were less elevated, but more likely to give pleasure to the ordinary playgoer; and for a little while Molière was content to curb his more exalted ambitions and to put together plots intended primarily to provoke hearty laughter. He was not only a dramatic poet, he was also both an ingenious playwright and an alert theatrical manager. He acknowledged the duty of keeping his fellow-actors constantly supplied with the kind of piece which had an approved popularity. After indulging his own aspirations in the 'Misanthrope' he returned once more to the simpler form of the comedy-of-masks, conveying no large message, but certain to attract the main body of playgoers who delighted in frankly farcical imbroglios.

There is no reason to suppose that it irked Molière to prepare these humbler pieces. He might be a keen observer of the society of his time and he might be moved to satirize its affectations and its extravagances; but he was also a humorist, with the gift of rich fun and with a relish for bold buffoonery. The farce which almost raised itself up to the level of comedy or the comedy which sometimes sank to the level of farce—this was a dramatic form in which Molière was absolutely at ease. In this he was an acknowledged master; and we have no reason to suppose that the plays of this unpretending class were written against the grain. Indeed, there is in all of them a hearty freedom, an ingenuity of invention, a felicity of episode, a varied coloring of character, a full flow of animal spirits, which must be accepted as evidence that Molière really enjoyed composing them, even if he knew them to be less important than the larger comedies of a loftier type.

And here—in the fact that Molière was the manager of a company of actors who depended upon him to keep them constantly supplied with plays likely to attract the public—can we find the explanation of the inequality of aim and of tone which cannot fail to impress any one who considers carefully the chronological sequence of his plays. Beginning with brilliant farces which displayed only his dramaturgic dexterity and his command of laughter, he rose slowly above these more or less primitive plays with more or less external humor until he was able to utilize his acquired skill to set on the stage comedies with an underlying thesis, the 'Ecole des Maris' and the

'Ecole des Femmes.' After he had attained to the high seriousness of 'Tartuffe' and of the 'Misanthrope,' he returned again and again in the later years of his life to the earlier and more farcical type, which he might be supposed to have outgrown, but which we recognize once more in the 'Médecin malgré lui' and in the 'Fourberies de Scapin.'

If we had no more definitely ascertained chronology for Molière than we have for Shakspere, if we were without the exact dates and were compelled to arrange his plays by the aid of internal evidence only, by the degree of maturity they severally reveal, we should unhesitatingly credit the 'Médecin malgré lui' and the 'Fourberies de Scapin' to an early period of his development as a dramatist, reserving the more austere 'Misanthrope' to the last years of his brief career. We could scarcely help assuming that all the farces must have preceded the riper and deeper comedies in five acts. We might be justified in projecting the line of his progress as a steadily ascending curve. But by good fortune we are in possession of the precise dates when almost every one of his plays was originally performed; and we can now perceive that the curve of his actual advance is very different from that we should have drawn hypothetically had these facts failed us. We can see that even if this line rises steadily, its ascent is interrupted again and again by a sudden descent to a level only a little above that attained very soon after his earlier successes in Paris. The dates as we have them contradict what would be perfectly justifiable inferences if we had to rely solely on conjecture.

And perhaps this possible blunder may serve as a caution to the students of English literature who have ventured to arrange Shakspere's plays in a chronological table supported mainly by internal evidence, the result of an attempt to trace the growing maturity of Shakspere's art as a playwright, as a poet and as a philosopher. Perhaps the precise dates, if we ever shall possess them, will upset this arbitrary Shaksperean chronology as completely as the facts would overturn any similar Molièrean chronology founded upon any similar hypothesis.

II

The earliest of these later unpretending pieces was the 'Médecin malgré lui,' a comedy in prose in three acts, brought out at the Palais-Royal on August sixth, 1666, only two months after the original performance of the 'Misanthrope.' It seems to be an elaborate reworking of an earlier farce, entitled the 'Fagotier,' which had probably been composed by Molière during his provincial strollings, about the time when he devised the two other farces that happen to have survived. It retains the simplicity of plot possible and proper in a farcical play which aims at nothing more than a rapid succession of laughter-provoking episodes. Its set is probably that of the comedy-of-masks, the open square with the dwelling of the heroine's father on one side or the other. Its characters are the profile figures of the Italian improvised play; and the chief of these characters, written by the author for his own acting, is Sganarelle once more, a Sganarelle who is cunning and improvident, and who differs not a little from the other Sganarelles that Molière had impersonated in one or another of his preceding pieces.

This time Sganarelle is a woodcutter, who has had the rudiments of an education, who was once the servant of a physician and who is now so dissipated that his wife is constantly reproaching him. Her taunts are so acute that he is provoked into giving her a thrashing, for which she resolves on vengeance. It happens that one Géronte has a daughter Lucinde (played by Molière's wife) who is in love with Léandre (played by La Grange). To avoid marrying a husband chosen by her father she pretends to be dumb, and, naturally enough, no one of the doctors has been able to cure her pretended affliction. Géronte sends two servants to seek out some other physician; and Sganarelle's wife seizes the opportunity to get even with her husband. She tells Géronte's servants that Sganarelle is really a marvelous physician, having wrought incredible cures; but that he is very eccentric and will not admit that he is a learned doctor until he has been soundly beaten. So the servants beat Sganarelle until he acknowledges himself a physician. He is taken to Géronte and he examines Lucinde, parodying the manners and usages of the contemporary practitioners of medicine. Léandre at last bribes him and he introduces the suitor to Géronte as his own apothecary assistant. He distracts the father's attention while his companion gets into conversation with the daughter. He restores Lucinde to speech; and she immediately displays an extraordinary volubility. Finally, Léandre and Lucinde start to elope, but they return at once with the news that Léandre is now the heir of his rich uncle, who has kindly died in the nick of time. So all ends happily; Sganarelle forgives his wife and determines to remain a physician, since the profession is easy and profitable and safe.

Upon this slight framework Molière has embroidered the most spontaneous and exuberant fun. The laughter that greets the successive incidents is irresistible and incessant. The play achieved its immediate purpose of attracting paying audiences to the Palais-Royal; and its popularity has survived to the present day. There is no denying that it is not a comedy in the higher sense of the word, it is essentially a farce; but scarcely any other of its author's broader pieces is more boldly mirth-provoking. It has a Rabelaisian sweep of humor and a Rabelaisian freedom of phrase. The spectators are caught by the contagion of its wholesome fun, which exists for its own sake only and not for any ulterior purpose—except in so far as occasion serves to satirize the pompous pretenses of the practitioners of medicine. The 'Médecin malgré lui' is almost a comedy, because its simple story sustains a series of simple episodes, each of them funnier than its predecessors and each of them disclosing another aspect of Molière's comic force. It is almost a comedy, because its characters, fantastic as they are and extreme in their exaggeration, have an unexpected and indescribable veracity; their extravagance has its roots in truth. It is almost a comedy, again, because of the literary quality of its dialogue, fresh, vigorous, and unfailingly felicitous. Farce as it is, no comedy of Molière's has put into circulation more quotable phrases.

The 'Médecin malgré lui' was devised to please the burghers of Paris, who cherished the tradition of the earlier French farce and who relished the flavor of Gallic salt. They had a hearty liking for broad fun and they were not unduly squeamish over its breadth. They did not object to this little play because it had an occasional streak of earthiness, such as we discover often in Rabelais, sometimes in Montaigne, and now and again in Shakspere also. To say this is to suggest that it was not a play likely to find favor with the *précieuses* or with the puritans.

III

Molière's next pieces were composed for a more delicate audience, for those whom the king invited to another of his splendid spectacles, and we can note in them a falling off in spontaneous humor. Indeed, two of them may be dismissed summarily, as productions written to order, and devoid of the qualities which have given Molière his lasting fame. La Grange records in his register that, by the command of the king, the whole company left Paris on the first of December, 1666, for Saint-Germain, remaining there until the twentieth of February, 1667, more than two months and a half. They were summoned to take part in an interminable entertainment which was entitled the 'Ballet of the Muses' and into which various plays were to be intercalated. Three of these pieces were from the pen of Molière.

Two of these three were prepared merely to oblige the sovereign, and are of very little importance. The first of them was a "heroic pastoral comedy" called 'Mélicerte,' acted in December, 1666. The invention of Molière was equal to any task Louis XIV might impose upon it; but a heroic pastoral comedy was not the kind of play in which his genius was likely to display itself advantageously. The pastoral at its best is a wholly artificial form, with which the author of the 'Précieuses Ridicules' could have little sympathy. And there is no reason for surprise or for regret when we find that he wrote only two acts of this chilly comedy with its conventional atmosphere, with its impossible shepherds and shepherdesses, and with its remoteness from all the realities of life. It was never completed; nor was it ever acted in Paris. It was not published by Molière himself; and it did not appear in print until nine years after his death, in the complete edition of his works issued by the loyal La Grange. In that edition the two acts actually written are followed by a note declaring that the comedy had never been finished, and that as the king had been satisfied with the performance of the two acts at the festivity for which it had been commanded, its author had not cared to carry it further. Long after Molière's death and long after his widow had remarried, her son by her second husband was moved to complete the play as best he could.

Little as the author seems to have cared for 'Mélicerte,' he cared even less for the second piece prepared for the same royal festivity. This was the 'Pastorale Comique,' performed before the king on January fifth, 1667. This was never published, and Molière apparently did not even preserve the manuscript. We can recover an outline of the plot, and a few fragments of the dialogue from contemporary records of the royal entertainment. Probably the little trifle was ingeniously adjusted to the circumstances of its performance, and probably also there were not a few strokes of humor in the part which Molière wrote for himself, even if the scheme afforded him little opportunity to put forth his full strength.

IV

But a third play, the 'Sicilien,' was also performed before the king, as a part of the 'Ballet of the Muses,' in February, 1667, and this was a more spontaneous effort of Molière's genius. It is a comedy-ballet in one act and in prose. It is a charming little piece, light and lively, an anticipation of modern opéra-comique (perhaps the most characteristically French of all the various forms of the drama). The theme lends itself to a lyric treatment; and in the past century it tempted more than one composer. The prose of the dialogue contains not a few blank verse lines, as though the poet were already experimenting for the free rhythms of the later 'Amphitryon.' We can perceive in the 'Sicilien' an anticipation of Marivaux and of Beaumarchais; it has the ingenuous grace of the one and the ingenious briskness of the other. It has a spring-like sympathy with the young lovers and a faint flavor of eternal romance, wholly uncontaminated with more exalted romanticism.

The scene is laid in Sicily. The action is simplicity itself, and yet it affords opportunity for comic acting. There are two characters that Molière might have played himself: one is Hali, a resourceful intriguing valet, having many traits in common with Mascarille; the other is Don Pedro, an elderly man of a jealous temperament, not unlike the Sganarelle of the 'Ecole des Maris,' but more dignified in his deportment. It was this latter character that the author chose for his own acting, perhaps because he liked to impersonate a jealous man and perhaps because he knew that the victim always affords an ampler histrionic opportunity than the intriguer.

Isidore is a beautiful Greek slave who is beloved by Don Pedro and by him guarded with jealous care. Adraste is an ardent young Frenchman who has caught sight of Isidore and who wants to marry her. He is aided and abetted by his servant Hali. The lover serenades the heroine; he sends Hali and several musicians to sing and dance before her—and incidentally to declare his passion to her. Then he substitutes himself for the artist who was engaged to paint her portrait; and while he is employed in this agreeable duty, Hali, well disguised, succeeds in distracting the attention of Don Pedro long enough to allow the hero and the heroine to come to an understanding. Finally Climène, the sister of Adraste, is enlisted in his aid. Heavily veiled, she rushes to Don Pedro and claims his protection from her husband, who is ill-treating her. Don Pedro promises her shelter; and when Adraste comes on as the abusive husband, Don Pedro seeks to reconcile them. Adraste allows himself to be converted; and Don Pedro informs Climène that she can now return to her husband, who has promised to treat her kindly in the future. She retires into the house to get her veil; and it is the muffled Isidore whom Adraste bears away under the eyes of her jealous guardian. A little later, when Climène herself comes forth Don Pedro awakes to the fact that he has been befooled and appeals for justice to a Senator, who will not listen to him, as he has just devised a Moorish dance for a troop of masqueraders. And this little dance brings the little piece to its appropriate end, the deceived Don Pedro finding no redress.

The 'Sicilien' was acted before the king and the court in midwinter; but it was not brought out before the burghers of Paris until early in the summer. The reason for this delay was undoubtedly Molière's precarious health. The company reopened the Palais-Royal toward the end of February; and early in March, the first performance of Corneille's 'Attila' took place, a tragedy in which Molière did not appear. At the end of March the Palais-Royal closed for the usual Easter recess; but it remained shut for an unusual time, because Molière was not then well enough to act. In April there was even a rumor that he was dying; his chest was weak and his digestion was out of order. He found relief by putting himself on a milk diet. In June he had recovered sufficiently to reappear; and the 'Sicilien' was at last presented to the Parisians with its entertaining interludes of song and dance.

It was two months later, while the king was away in the Low Countries with his invading army, that Molière believed himself authorized at last to bring out 'Tartuffe'; it was promptly interdicted after a single performance. Molière immediately sent two actors to bear his protest to Louis XIV, a journey which cost the company a thousand livres and which necessitated the closing of the theater for seven weeks. What with the failure of 'Attila,' the expenses of La Grange's trip, the suspension of the performances caused by this and by Molière's frequent illnesses, the company had a lean year. Luckily for its members, the king had been so well satisfied with their share in the 'Ballet of the Muses' at Saint-Germain that he had given them twice the annual pension, a sum of twelve thousand livres, which served to carry them safely over this time of dearth.

V

It was perhaps because of his broken health and perhaps because of the discouragement due to the new interdiction of 'Tartuffe' that Molière allowed nearly a year to elapse before he brought out his next play. And it was perhaps because the financial result of his labors during the preceding months had not been altogether satisfactory that he selected a plot of an assured popularity, calling for spectacular accompaniment—the intrigue of Jupiter with Alcmena, the chaste wife of Amphitryon, a subject already successfully treated in French by Rotrou, in his comedy called the 'Deux Sosies.'

Rotrou's rather original adaptation from Plautus had owed much of its attractiveness to various mechanical devices such as the playgoing public heartily appreciated. The drama, while it may aspire to the highest peaks of poetry, is always and of necessity closely connected with the "show-business"; and every true dramatic poet has kept in mind the need for pleasing the eyes of the spectators as well as the ears of the audience. Shakspere, for example, with his frequent ghosts, his combats, his battles and his processions, is as frankly spectacular as the meager resources of the Tudor theater would permit.

In taking over the plot of Rotrou's adaptation Molière profited also by his own study of the original play by Plautus—if that can fairly be called original which was in its turn an imitation of the Greek. In view of Molière's habit of levying contributions on the Spanish playwrights, on the Italian devisers of the comedy-of-masks, and on the forgotten authors of the old French farces, it may be matter for wonder that he had not earlier had recourse to the Latin dramatists, whose plays he had studied at the Collège de Clermont. For his 'Ecole des Maris' he had borrowed a hint or two from Terence; and a line of La Grange's brief biographical sketch seems to imply that in his boyhood, when he was studying under the Jesuits, Molière had preferred Terence to Plautus. This preference may have been due to the influence of his instructors, over-enamored of external elegancies of style, or it may have been the result of Molière's own schoolboy ignorance of the stage, which would then veil from him the fact that Terence is essentially a stylist, a polished man of letters rather than a practical man of the theater. Molière's later experience must have disclosed to him that Plautus is a born playwright, a realistic humorist, able to present comic characters entangled in comic situations.

Whatever Molière's opinions might be as to the relative merits of the two Roman dramatists, it was to Plautus, in the original and as adapted by Rotrou, that he turned for the material of his next play, the 'Amphitryon,' a comedy in three acts, produced at the Palais-Royal in January, 1668, and repeated before the king within a few days.

With the myth of Jupiter's love for the beautiful wife of a Greek general and with the unworthy trick through which the lustful god deceived her by assuming the likeness of her husband—with this legendary matter the earlier Attic dramatists had dealt tragically. Later Greek playwrights had preferred to consider rather its more humorous aspects, and in this they had been followed by Plautus, who pretended to wonder just what kind of play it was he had written. As it contained a god and a prince it could not be a comedy (according to the critical code which the Latins had taken over from the Greeks); and as it contained a slave it could not be a tragedy. Plautus therefore suggested that his medley might be a tragicomedy, a term before unknown. The Latin dramatist was restrained by traditional regard for the god, even while representing one of this deity's least reputable amorous adventures. In dealing with a theme of this doubtful propriety Molière undertook a task of obvious difficulty. To make such a subject acceptable or even tolerable to an audience, who did not believe in the myth and who could have no sympathy with Jupiter's misdeed, demanded a very light hand and the utmost certainty of touch. It called not only for skill, but even more for tact and taste.

How dangerous the story is and how disgusting it might be, we discover when we consider the result when Dryden undertook it. With all his wit and with all his imagination, Dryden was not a comic playwright by native gift; and most of his attempts at comedy seem to have been done against his genius. In none of them, full-flavored as most of them are, does he surrender more subserviently to the depravity of Restoration audiences than he did when he wrote his 'Amphitryon.' He drew on Molière as well as on Plautus; but he did not imitate the dexterity of his Parisian contemporary (from whom he had already borrowed his 'Sir Martin Marall,' a free rendering of the 'Etourdi'). It is sad to see how Dryden sinks in the mire where Molière steps lightly and easily. As Scott said—and he was an ardent admirer of both poets—Dryden is coarse and vulgar where Molière is witty, and "where the Frenchman ventures upon a double meaning the Englishman always contrives to make it a single one."

Indeed, nothing reveals more clearly the cleanmindedness of Molière, in spite of his breadth of humor, than the delicacy with which he here deals with a situation undisguisedly indelicate in itself, and the adroitness with which he robs a gross situation of most of its offensiveness. His treatment of the theme is not austere, of course; it is unfailingly playful; it gets all possible fun out of the situation; but it is never libidinous; and it is never colored with any extenuation of the mean trick which Jupiter is playing on an honest woman. And occasion serves to note that Molière, often as he put a jealous man on the stage, has never presented even one woman who has broken her marriage vows; the wife of Amphitryon is innocent in intent, and the wife of George Dandin is still innocent in fact.

Where Dryden used a sturdy blank verse and a blunt prose for his setting forth on the stage of this story which ought to be treated poetically and romantically, Molière, with a finer instinct for a remote and airy legend, far removed from the realities of life, told it lyrically in irregular verses that often link themselves in stanzas. He was not naturally lyric, which is a mood the dramatist may rarely need. But he was a consummate artist, with an intuitive feeling for the fit form. Moreover, he had long been a close friend of La Fontaine, whose 'Contes' had been published in 1666, to be followed by his 'Fables' in 1668, only a month after 'Amphitryon' was acted. Intimate as he was with the fabulist it is probable that they had often discussed the metrical novelties of La Fontaine's verse as disclosed in the 'Contes' and the 'Fables,' its artful variety and its unfailingly graceful ease; and it is evidence of Molière's exceeding cleverness and of his mastery of verse that although he had never before adventured himself on the lyric elevation where his friend was wont to wander at will, now that he heard the imperative call he proved himself capable of the ascent. Only in 'Amphitryon,' and again a little later in 'Psyché,' did he care to lift himself to this lyric plane. But in these two pieces he displayed his possession of a lyric faculty not visible in any other of his works—a faculty scarcely inferior to La Fontaine's. The sensual ardor of Jupiter is expressed to Alcmena in lines that glow with passion even though the words belong to the outworn vocabulary of Louis XIV gallantry, which we now find rather unconvincing even in the more ardent passages of Corneille and Racine.

However inferior in the expansion of his lyricism Molière may be to La Fontaine and to Aristophanes, the chief other lyrists who are humorists also, he is superior to them in his humor, which is richer than that of La Fontaine and finer than that of Aristophanes. And in few of his comedies is his humor both richer and finer than in the 'Amphitryon.' He gets more fun out of the assumption by Mercury (who is Jupiter's servant) of the personality of Sosia (who is Amphitryon's servant) than Shakspere extracts from the likeness of the two Dromios. There is no scene in the 'Comedy of Errors,' the farce in which Shakspere first displayed his deliberate playmaking skill, as subtle or as laughter-provoking as that in which Mercury, insisting that he is Sosia, shatters the real Sosia's belief in his own identity—a scene made possible only by its author's thorough training in philosophy. Indeed, in the whole range of the comic drama there are very few scenes of a more consummate craftsmanship and of a more overpowering humor than this, in which Mercury maliciously enjoys the bewilderment of Sosia when forced to deny himself and then to wonder who he is if he is not Sosia. And originally Molière himself impersonated Sosia.

A part of the contemporary popularity of the 'Amphitryon' was due to its mechanical devices. In the prologue Mercury descended from a cloud and held colloquy with Night, who had halted her chariot in mid air; and at the end of the play Jupiter was wafted up to the sky in another cloud.

VI

Molière's next play was a comedy, 'George Dandin,' produced at the Palais-Royal in November, 1668, but earlier presented before the king in the gardens of Versailles in July in a theater of foliage adorned with fountains and artfully arranged for the sudden transformations called for by the story of the ballet which surrounded the performance of the comic play.

As if in contrast with the magnificence of its original representation, 'George Dandin' itself is a piece with a very simple story, elaborated from one of its author's earlier farces. Moved by a misplaced ambition which we should now call snobbishness, a wealthy peasant, George Dandin (played by Molière himself) has married Angélique (played by Molière's wife) because she was of noble blood. He has dealt directly with her parents, Monsieur and Madame de Sottenville, whose debts he has to pay and who treat him with condescending contempt. He never consulted Angélique herself, and therefore she feels free to seek her own pleasure now without consulting him. She welcomes the attentions of a more youthful and more gentlemanly admirer, Clitandre (played by La Grange). In the course of the three acts she discloses herself to be a conscienceless creature; and her husband has good reason to keep strict guard over her. But she is quick-witted, and when he sends for her parents to expose her perfidy, she manages again and again to put him in the wrong, so that Monsieur and Madame de Sottenville seem to be justified in insisting that George Dandin shall apologize for his vain suspicions. And at the end the deceived and defeated husband declares that there is nothing left for him to do but to throw himself headfirst into the river.

No one of Molière's plays is more disconcerting to a modern audience than 'George Dandin.' It is a farce in its form and content; it is almost a comedy here and there by the felicity of its touches of humor; and it impresses us sometimes as almost tragic in the inexorability of the domestic calamity which has befallen its central figure. With his detestation of all affectation, Molière is here scourging a peasant for seeking to be socially superior to his real rank; and at the same time the dramatist is not taking sides with the upper class to which the peasant has aspired. George Dandin is very foolish, but even if the consequences of his folly are severer, he is not more foolish than the Sottenvilles. And their daughter is even less estimable; she is worse than foolish; she is evil. In fact, there is no single sympathetic character in the whole play; all are more or less repellent; and of no other piece of Molière's could this be said. The chief episode of the story is taken over from a practical joke told in the Middle Ages; and it is difficult not to discover a medieval hardness in the conduct of the plot, a medieval lack of pity, a medieval callousness which is not far removed from cruelty. George Dandin is not wicked; he is only selfish and foolish; but he is punished for his selfish folly as if he had been wicked.

This is what the spectator feels if he takes the play seriously, or if the piece is acted seriously, so as to give the spectator time to think. We may be sure, however, that Molière did not mean the play to be acted seriously. He composed it to be a component part of a comedy-ballet on a joyous occasion when the king had returned triumphant from war and wanted his courtiers to rejoice with him. All the contemporary reports unite in recording the incessant laughter which the comedy evoked from its royal audience. No one of those who beheld it, when Molière was himself impersonating George Dandin, seems to have had a suspicion that the play was other than a farce; and this is evidence that the author-actor must have conducted the performance in a mood of tumultuous fun, sweeping everything along in a whirlwind of gaiety, pushing character to the edge of caricature and carrying comedy beyond the border of farce.

Perhaps this was easier then than now, easier before that hard-hearted king and his hard-hearted court, than it is to-day before us with our overstrained sensibilities. We may doubt whether any one of all the hundreds of those who laughed at the antics of George Dandin and at the grotesqueness of the Sottenvilles, two centuries and a half ago when the little play was performed on its sylvan stage in the gardens of the palace under the many candles that dispelled the darkness of the midsummer night—we may doubt whether any one then perceived that there might be anything painful in the misadventure of the peasant-husband.

And yet, even if we doubt this, we may wonder whether Molière himself was glad of heart when he composed this play. Coleridge asserted that "farce may often border on tragedy; indeed, farce is nearer tragedy in its essence than comedy is." Did Molière know that at the core of his farce there was tragedy? Did he mean to put it there? Was he taking a sadder view of life, just then when his health was weakening, when he was wearying of the struggle, and when he was sorrowfully disappointed in his own marriage? The 'Misanthrope' had been very serious for a comedy, and 'George Dandin' is very pitiful for a farce. Shakspere also had his period of depression when he composed 'Measure for Measure' and 'All's Well that Ends Well,' comedies that are not at all comic. But Shakspere, not being himself a comic actor, was allowed to write tragedy, and thus to pour out amply what was in him. Molière had not this privilege; he had taken warning by 'Don Garcie' first and then by the 'Misanthrope.' As actor and as author he was held bound to make his audiences laugh, and from this there seemed to be for him no escape.

CHAPTER XIV

THE 'AVARE'

I

This year 1668 was one of those in which Molière most amply proved his superb productivity. It was in February that he had brought out the easy and polished 'Amphitryon'; in July he had followed it with 'George Dandin'; in September, only two months later, he produced at the Palais-Royal the 'Avare,' a comedy in five acts; and these three plays were a splendid harvest for the short space of nine months.

The 'Avare' is in prose, which was contrary to the custom of the theater then, when a five act play, whether comic or tragic, was expected to be clothed in verse, the less ornate prose being good enough only for less important pieces in one act or in three. That the author did not present this play dressed out in riming alexandrines is to be ascribed to the haste with which he had to work to meet the necessities of his company—the same reason which accounted for the use of prose in the earlier 'Don Juan,' also prepared in a hurry. 'Tartuffe' was still under the interdict, and Molière's comrades relied on him to keep them supplied with new plays. It is known that Molière, like Ben Jonson, was in the habit of writing his first draft of a play in prose, which he finally turned into verse; and in preparing the 'Princesse d'Elide' for its speedy performance before the king, he had time to versify only the first two acts, leaving the later scenes in prose. In the 'Avare' we can detect many metrical lines, awaiting in vain their later incorporation into the sequence of rimed couplets.

Perhaps it was due also to the need for working against time that he turned once more to Plautus for the suggestion of this new play, which is however not fairly to be described as an adaptation of the 'Aulularia' any more than is the 'Comedy of Errors' to be dismissed as an imitation of the 'Menæchmi.' Molière was willing enough to borrow freely from any predecessor, but he was never content to follow servilely in the footsteps of any one of those he was imitating; and he rehandled with the utmost freedom the humorous material he found in the Roman piece. There is little more in the comic drama of Plautus than an ingenious intrigue, whereas the play which Molière made out of the Latin piece is on a higher plane. It is a comedy-of-character in which the external story is subordinated to the exhibition of the characteristics of the miser himself.

The plot does not exist for its own sake, as in Plautus, but solely to set forth the various aspects of personified avarice. When Molière interested himself in the scrutiny and in the delineation of a specific character, the misanthrope or the miser, he was inclined to be a little careless about the conduct of his plot and the logical winding up of his story. Sometimes he is a little too careless; and in the concentration of his attention on the dominating figure of his play he does not take trouble enough to sustain the presentation of character by an adequate framework of story. This is what happened when he wrote the 'Misanthrope'; and the unsatisfactory reception of that elevated comedy may have served as a warning to him and led him to support his portrait of the miser with a pair of love-stories and to relieve its sadness by frequent episodes of sheer fun, almost farcical in their exuberant humor.

II

The miser is Harpagon, of course acted by Molière himself. He is a burgher of means, having to keep up his position in society. He has a pair of horses, which he starves; and his coachman is also his cook, whereby he is enabled to save the wages of one servant. He has a son Cléante and a daughter Elise. A young man, Valère, who has fallen in love with Elise, has managed to persuade Harpagon to take him as a steward. Once in the house he has succeeded in winning the affection of Elise. Cléante, in his turn, has fallen in love with Mariane, the very girl whom Harpagon has resolved to take for his second wife. To further his wooing Cléante needs money; and he seeks to borrow it on his expectations. He consents to exorbitant terms of interest; and when he is brought face to face with the lender, he finds out that the unscrupulous usurer is his own father, and Harpagon discovers that the spendthrift he was ready to pluck is his own son.

Harpagon has resolved also to marry off his daughter to an elderly friend, Anselme, who will take her without a dowry, for which reason the miser refuses absolutely to listen to the protests of Valère and of Elise herself. Thus we see ~~a violent breach between~~ father and daughter, following the violent breach between father and son. Elise is determined to marry Valère, and Cléante is determined to marry Mariane, in absolute disregard of their father's commands. At this juncture Harpagon discovers the disappearance of a casket which contains ten thousand livres and which he has carefully hidden. He is stricken to the soul by this loss and his despair is as overwhelming and as outspoken as that of Shylock. The casket had been found by one of the servants and given to Cléante. But Harpagon, suspecting Valère, sends for the police. And now Molière feels that his work is done and he hastens to bring the play to an abrupt conclusion. He has so contrived his succession of episodes that Harpagon has been presented to the spectators from every possible angle. The miser has been turned inside out for the audience to laugh at him and to take warning by him. And this was what the author had at heart; and when his object was once attained, the comedy was complete.

At this moment, therefore, Anselme is brought on, for the first time, when all the other characters are assembled; and the play is wound up arbitrarily by a sequence of unexpected recognitions, such as were common enough in Greek comedy and such as Aristotle would not have disapproved, however artificial this ending may seem to us moderns. In self-defense Valère has to declare who he really is; and it turns out that he is the brother of Mariane, separated from her in infancy by a shipwreck. It appears further that Valère and Mariane are the long-lost children of Anselme who is delighted to recover them. To his new-found son the new-found father willingly yields Elise whom he had come to marry. And when Cléante promises to restore to his father the stolen casket with the contents intact, Harpagon instantly gives his consent to his son's marriage with Mariane. Characteristically, he refuses to make any provision for either of his children about to enter on the responsibilities of marriage; but as it happens, this does not matter, since the convenient Anselme is a man of large means, quite willing to support both his son and his daughter.

III

From this bald summary it will be seen that the unity of the play lies in the single character of Harpagon, and that the other personages of the piece are set in motion mainly to exhibit one or another of Harpagon's idiosyncrasies. He dominates the play; one might almost say that he is the play, since it exists only that he may stand before us alive in every lineament. He is a bold projection of a figure made vital by a single passion. He is so possessed by this lust for gain, he is so completely in ~~its grasp, that~~ he ~~loses~~ self-control and talks aloud to himself of his own secrets, only to arouse himself when he discovers his children near him and to tremble for fear they may have overheard him. He is so overmastered by greed and by the desire to continue to enjoy the results of his rapacity that when he is told by a self-seeking flatterer how he is likely to survive his children and his grandchildren, he has an exclamation of delight, inhuman in its unconscious selfishness.

There are scenes in which Harpagon may seem for a moment to be almost a caricature of himself, so violent is he in his intensity. With far more of the variety and of the color of our common humanity he has the large certainty of outline and the immense simplicity of the most successful characters in the English comedy-of-humors, Sir Epicure Mammon, for example, and Volpone. And it may be noted that Ben Jonson's 'Case is Altered' was derived in part also from the same play of Plautus that

Molière utilized in the 'Avare,' and that Captain Bobadil is only a splendid resuscitation of that stock-figure of Græco-Roman comedy, the braggart. But Molière's humor is rarely so extravagant as Ben Jonson's, so hard or so metallic; it is more human, and more often relieved by contrast. In this very play there is genuine sentiment in the wooing of Cléante and Valère, more attractive than the rather perfunctory love-making in several of his earlier pieces.

And yet it must be said that although Molière has a genial sympathy with the wooing of young men and maidens and takes care that they mate happily at the fall of the curtain, he does not put them in the forefront of the action; he reserves himself rather for the portrayal of the more vigorously comic characters. Here he stands in sharp contrast with Shakspere, who was also accustomed to commingle the grave and the gay in his romantic-comedies. The English dramatist often employs a semi-tragic sub-plot to sustain the story of successful courtship in which he is mainly interested, whereas the French dramatist centers attention on a semi-tragic main plot, relieving it by a few scenes of love-making. In the 'Avare,' for example, the two pairs of lovers help to dispel the gloom inevitably evolved by the profound portrayal of the sordid avarice of Harpagon. In the 'Merchant of Venice,' the comedy opens and ends with the courtship and married life of the brilliant and fascinating heroine; and the dark profile of Shylock, after having lowered through the middle of the play, serving to stiffen the comedy almost into tragedy, is not allowed to cast a shadow over the joyous last act. In Shakspere's comedy the utmost effort of the dramatist is not focused on Shylock. In Molière's play it is focused on Harpagon.

There might be profit in pushing further the comparison of the English comedy with the French. Although the foundation of the 'Merchant of Venice' is medieval in its fantasy, since it is only our willingness to make-believe which permits us to accept the arrant absurdity of the three caskets and of the pound of flesh, the characters who people this impossible plot demand no apology; they are as easily understood as any other human beings. In the 'Avare,' on the other hand, the main story makes no demand on our credulity; it is possible and plausible—except perhaps in the perfunctory winding up and marrying off. Where we are left a little in obscurity is in our perfect understanding of the central figure, of Harpagon himself.

In classic French comedy there is often extreme simplification of character presentation, and we are frequently told less about the character than we should like to learn. In the 'Misanthrope,' for example, Célimène is introduced to us as a young widow only twenty; and we have no further information about her. We know nothing about her first husband, or her own family; she stands forth alone for what she is, and we must get acquainted with her as we observe her in the play itself. The same extreme simplification is carried even further in the presenting of Harpagon; and here it is more disconcerting, because we see him in circumstances which seem to call for explanation, which are not essential to his ruling characteristics, and which are, some of them, apparently incongruous.

How has Harpagon acquired his fortune? Has he inherited it or did he make it himself? What is his position in society which compels him to keep a carriage in spite of himself, to give entertainments, to have a staff of servants? How is it that he, a man of means, with experience in guarding money, can find no better place of security for a large sum than to hide it in a casket? Why does he, an elderly man, not of an amorous temperament, desire to take a young wife? These are the queries we find ourselves asking as we see Harpagon moving before our eyes. No doubt it would have been possible for Molière to answer these questions; but he has not cared to do so. He needed all these irrelevancies to set forth the several peculiarities of Harpagon, and he assumed them without troubling to explain.

As a result of this the miser, powerfully as he is drawn, remains somewhat enigmatic and sometimes even a little inconsistent with himself. The motives of Harpagon are not always as clear as those of Shylock. The reason for this is probably to be found in the fact that Shakspere is not presenting us with an embodiment of Revenge, but with a specific character who happens to be seeking vengeance, whereas Molière is giving us not so much a typical miser as the embodiment of Avarice itself. In so far as this is the case, he has reverted to the method of the old Morality with its personifications of abstract qualities. And here in his turn Molière is medieval.

IV

This much may be admitted without detracting from the ultimate value of Molière's searching comedy. The 'Avare' is not equal to 'Tartuffe' in solidity of structure and in the intimate relation of character to environment; but it is none the less one of its author's most veracious portrayals of humanity. It is like 'Tartuffe,' in that its action passes inside a single household and in that it displays before us the possible disintegration of a family in consequence of a single corroding vice. To Molière, inheritor of the social tradition of the French, the family is the foundation of society; it is sacred. Whatever endangers the security of the family is to be denounced and exposed as a warning and as a lesson.

He may not be a deliberate moralist and he may not ~~have intended to~~ point a moral. But in almost every one of his larger comedies we have a play which is a picture of life, which provides the abundant laughter we expect in the comic drama, and which furthermore warns us against yielding to the solicitations of evil. He makes us see the dire effects of Tartuffe's hypocrisy and of Orgon's credulity, of Célimène's insincerity and of George Dandin's snobbishness. And in the 'Avare' he puts before us the picture of a family rent asunder by the fault of the father, who has neglected to do his duty by his only son and his only daughter.

The children of such a father are not likely to be altogether estimable; and Molière was too truthful to offset the vice of Harpagon with the superior virtues of the miser's son and daughter. But the author is careful to make us see that the fault is rather Harpagon's than Cléante's or Elise's. It is because Harpagon is what he is that Cléante is driven to seek money on usury and to look forward willingly to his father's death, whereby he will come into his inheritance. It is because Harpagon is what he is that Elise has allowed herself to be drawn into a love-affair without her father's knowledge and against her father's wishes. It is because Harpagon is what he is that Valère has been enabled to work his way into the house to carry on his secret intrigue with Elise. It is because Harpagon is what he is that all these perils threaten the solidarity of the home. The final result of Harpagon's indulgence in his single vice of avarice, with all its attendant evils and its inexorable consequences, is frightful. By this picture of the contamination and the corrosion of those who are closely related to the miser, and by the severe delineation of the dissolution his avarice must bring about—it is by this that Molière's play stands out as one of its author's most valuable social dramas.

The 'Avare' may be open to minor criticisms; and as a specimen of stage-craft it is distinctly inferior to 'Tartuffe.' It may not always be as clear as it might be or as consistent; its exposition may be slovenly and its ending may be huddled; it may have moments of an exaggeration which is almost caricature; it may have more blemishes than any true lover of Molière will readily admit; but in spite of all that may be said against it, there is no denying its high value and its worthiness to occupy a position only just below that accorded to his acknowledged masterpieces. This is what the piercing mind of Goethe perceived clearly when he declared that the 'Avare,' "in which a vice destroys the piety uniting father and son, has extraordinary grandeur and is, in a high degree, tragic."

Tragic may seem a strange term to apply to a comedy; but it has been applied also to the comedy in which Shylock appears. The 'Avare' is a comedy, no doubt, a comedy-of-character, a comedy of austere kind; but it is perhaps better to be described as a social drama. Harpagon is comic in intent, but he is often almost tragic in intensity; and the theme of the play is somber. In itself avarice is not an amusing spectacle. In spite of all Molière's efforts to lighten the piece with its two love-stories and to brighten it with extraneous episodes of almost extravagant humor, its performance does not arouse the hearty laughter which is evoked by the earlier acts of ‘Tartuffe,’ which had also a somber theme, but which Molière was able to make less gloomy because he wrote the immensely humorous part of Orgon for his own acting.

Perhaps it was due to this lack of frank gaiety that the ‘Avare’ did not at first prove very attractive to the Parisian playgoers. In time, however, its serious merits were recognized and it became one of the more popular of his plays. It is still frequently acted at the Théâtre Français; and every ambitious French comedian is anxious to prove himself in the part of Harpagon and to measure himself with his distinguished predecessors.

V

In considering the more important plays written by Molière after he had been grievously disappointed by the prohibition of ‘Tartuffe’ we are struck by a deeper note and by a harder tone than we have perceived in any of the gayer pieces composed before ‘Tartuffe.’ There is a gravity, a suggestion of the sadder aspects of life in ‘Don Juan’ and in the ‘Misanthrope,’ in ‘George Dandin’ and in the ‘Avare,’ which their author’s earlier comedies had not prepared us for. In no one of these four plays is the subject really comic in itself, even if the actor-author felt himself forced to make the piece as laughter-provoking as he could. Their humorous characters and their more mirthful episodes are not always integral to the theme of the play; they are not always logical outgrowths of the story; and they seem sometimes to be almost excrescences devised especially to distract the attention of the audience from the fundamental seriousness of the central idea.

To point this out is easy enough, but not to explain the reason for it. Perhaps the state of Molière's health led him to take a darker view of life than he had taken earlier in the first flush of his youthful success. Perhaps the continued strain of his incessant activity as actor, as author and as manager, was wearing on him and wearying him. Perhaps the patent incompatibility of temper between himself and his charming young wife, ardent in the pursuit of pleasure and eager for admiration, may have driven him in upon himself, destroying his earlier cheerfulness and embittering his earlier hopefulness. These are all personal reasons why Molière was no longer lightheartedly composing comedies as frankly comic as the 'Précieuses Ridicules' and the 'Ecole des Maris.'

It may be, however, that a simpler explanation is to be sought outside the circumstances of Molière's own life, in the natural development of his artistic ambitions. He has said himself that it was a strange task to undertake to make people laugh; and it may very well be that he had tired of this task of laugh-making, and that he now found himself inclined to set forth the more serious incidents of the human comedy. This may be the real reason why the four more important plays composed while 'Tartuffe' was still under interdict are to be described as social dramas rather than as comedies pure and simple. Taken together this group confirms the impression that Molière was groping tentatively and doubtfully toward a new type of play, in which he could feel at liberty to express more liberally his later and deeper views of society than he had been able to express earlier in pieces whose chief purpose was to arouse laughter. In 'Tartuffe' itself, which preceded these four plays, the author had been able to achieve the object of this riper ambition; and he had produced a play which had become a social drama without ceasing to be a comedy. Perhaps, in composing 'Tartuffe,' he had builded better than he knew, as is the case so often with artists of genuine inspiration, whereas in the four plays which followed it, and which were due in some measure to the same impulse, his uncertainty of aim prevented his skill from being so completely successful.

Whatever the explanation may be, and whether the reasons are personal or artistic, the fact remains that the larger plays composed by Molière at this period of his career have a certain likeness to each other and a certain unlikeness to the more comic comedies written earlier. They seem to indicate that, for the moment, at least, he was more or less unsettled in his attitude. This epoch in Molière's development as a dramatist has its parallel in the career of Shakspere. In Molière's case the period of uncertainty came to an end with the removal of the prohibition of the public performance of his masterpiece; and this took place less than six months after the first performance of the 'Avare.'

VI

The permission to act 'Tartuffe' followed hard upon the proclamation of the so-called "Peace of the Church"; and it was possibly a consequence of that lull in theological strife. Louis XIV was sternly resolved to put down factions of every kind, in church as well as in state. As he insisted upon slavish obedience to himself as king, so he demanded an uncompromising unity in the ecclesiastical realm. He believed in absolute authority; and he refused to allow any of his subjects to think for themselves. Probably it was in part the mental independence of the Jansenists that set him so sternly against them and led him in time to crush them out almost as harshly as he was afterward to crush out the Huguenots. In the earlier years of his reign Louis XIV was annoyed by the turmoil which raged in the church, with the constant struggle of Gallicans and Ultramontanes and with the incessant intriguing of the Jesuits against the Jansenists; and at last the king used the full weight of his authority to bring these unseemly bickerings to an end. Impossible as was a durable reconciliation between parties holding diametrically opposite views upon questions of eternal importance, the monarch was able for a little while to flatter himself that he had accomplished his purpose.

And one immediate result of this truce in ecclesiastical warfare was the granting to Molière of permission to perform 'Tartuffe.' In its third form but under its original title the play was brought out at the Palais-Royal in February, 1669. Its instant success must have greatly gratified its author, so long heart-sick with deferred hope. After the performance of 'Tartuffe' Molière's serenity seems to have returned; and the plays which immediately followed are in marked contrast with the plays which immediately preceded.

Molière was now forty-seven and he had attained to the summit of his achievement. He was to live only four years longer and he was still to bring forth one of his most perfect comedies, the 'Femmes Savantes'; in these last years there was to be no falling off in his work; but already had he displayed adequately every aspect of his genius. He had begun by imitating the comedy-of-masks and by composing pieces of external activity. He had risen slowly from the comedy-of-intrigue to the comedy-of-manners and to the comedy-of-character. He had achieved what Lord Morley terms "the fine gravity of 'Tartuffe,'" the masterpiece of comedy sustained and stiffened by drama. He had essayed a series of social dramas, comedies not fundamentally comic. He had invented the comedy-ballet. He had been gracefully lyric in the humorous fantasy of 'Amphitryon.' He had ranged the gamut of the theater of his time; and he had exhausted the possibilities of the dramatic formulas then admissible on the stage. And thereafter he could go no further forward; he could only undertake again one or another of the forms which he had already employed triumphantly. There were no more worlds for him to conquer; and if he had died after the first performance of the 'Avare' his fame would be as secure as it is to-day and as solidly established.

This is evident enough to us now, and it was evident also to those who lived a generation after him. From his own generation it seems to have been hidden. His contemporaries did not see that he had already proved himself to be the foremost of comic dramatists. Boileau may have suspected this and La Fontaine also; but the rest of the men of his time did not perceive it. Perhaps this was natural enough; we need to bear in mind always that while we think of Molière only as an author, they who had seen him on the stage thought of him mainly as an actor. To them the player loomed larger than the playwright; and there were even those who held that it was only the surpassing skill of the player which gave vitality to the works of the playwright. And the actor was thought of as a performer of broadly comic parts, as Mascarille and as the often revived Sganarelle, rather than as Alceste. He was considered as an actor of farces. Indeed, it was about this time that there was painted a picture, now in the possession of the Comédie-Française, depicting the chief drolls of the day; and there amid Gros-Guillaume and Scaramouche and their fellows, we find Molière also. In the eyes of his contemporaries this was his proper place, and no voice was raised in protest when the author of 'Tartuffe' was set by the side of these clowns whose sole pleasure it was to make the people of Paris laugh loudly.

Shakspere suffered from no indignity of this sort, partly because he was not prominent as a performer. But it may be doubted also whether many of Shakspere's contemporaries suspected his indisputable primacy. Those who had met him were abundant in praise of the man himself, of his gentleness and of his copious industry; but no one of them, while he was yet alive, voiced the opinion of posterity that he was the supreme poet, not only of his age but of all time.

CHAPTER XV

'MONSIEUR DE POURCEAUGNAC' AND THE 'BOURGEOIS GENTILHOMME'

I

Sometimes to delight the king and sometimes to attract the populace of Paris, Molière relinquished the comedy which moves us to thoughtful laughter and returned to the frank farce which awakens only unthinking mirth. He had proved the truth of De Quincey's assertion that "inevitably as human intercourse in cities grows more refined, comedy will grow more subtle; it will build itself on distinctions of character less grossly defined, and on features of manners more delicate and impalpable." He had attained to the most delicate distinction of manners in the 'Misanthrope'; but he never shrank from employing the swifter effects of the farce with which he had first won success as a playwright. Yet some of these later farcical comedies are in advance upon the earlier in that they are raised almost to the plane of comedy by the richer humanity of the central characters.

'Monsieur de Pourceaugnac' is a farce and so is the 'Etourdi.' In both plays the humor arises in large part from the ingenuity of the mechanism of the situation; but Pourceaugnac himself is a more recognizable human being than Mascarille; and the piece in which he appears has not only more absolute fun but also a larger and more liberal humor. Molière was still steadily growing, not only as a psychologist but also as a humorist. There is in 'Monsieur de Pourceaugnac' and in the 'Bourgeois Gentilhomme' a breadth and a solidity of comic resource which recalls Rabelais, and an imaginative fantasy which reminds us of Aristophanes in his wildest flights of fun-making.

It was at Chambord in October, 1669, that Molière brought out before the king and the court 'Monsieur de Pourceaugnac,' a three act comedy-ballet in prose, for which Lulli composed the music and in which there were the customary interludes of song and dance. In November the comic play was produced at the Palais-Royal, where it proved as attractive to the Parisians as it had been entertaining to the courtiers. And its superb gaiety has assured its popularity to the present day, although it is now not so often performed as a dozen of its author's other plays.

The plot is very simple and the framework is again that of the comedy-of-masks, which Molière always found convenient for his purpose when he aimed merely at laughter. The set is the traditional public place where all the characters can meet at will. On one side is the house of a certain physician, and on the other is the house of Oronte, the father of Julie, with whom Eraste is in love. Oronte is what Gorgibus was in the earlier farces; and Julie and Eraste are the pair of young lovers common in Italian comedy. Eraste's ally in his wooing, Sbrigani, is another Mascarille. And the one character who is not drawn from the stock-figures of the comedy-of-masks is Monsieur de Pourceaugnac himself, the part that Molière composed for his own acting. He is no mere profile, strongly outlined and touched with high color; he is truly a character, drawn from Molière's intimate observation of life. And in the portrayal of this character he was profiting by the knowledge of provincial types accumulated while he was still a stroller, for Pourceaugnac is a provincial, an inhabitant of Limoges. The scene of the play is laid in Paris; and much of the fun is derived from the contrast of this rustic, rather simple by nature, with the livelier Parisians who make up the other personages of the piece.

Oronte has never met Pourceaugnac, yet he has arranged a marriage between his young daughter and this mature gentleman from the country. Julie herself is resolved to wed Eraste, who has determined to discourage the elderly wooer by every possible trick. In this plot against Pourceaugnac's peace of mind he has enlisted the services of Sbrigani. When the provincial from Limoges arrives in Paris, Eraste presents himself at once and actually persuades his victim that they are old friends, quite in the manner of the modern "confidence-operator." He invites Pourceaugnac to be his guest, and then leaves him in the hands of a physician, whom the country gentleman supposes to be Eraste's steward. The physician has been told that the new arrival is a patient touched with lunacy; he has summoned a colleague; and the two doctors hold a consultation on Pourceaugnac's malady, to the rising astonishment of that gentleman. After which an apothecary presents himself armed with the instrument of his calling; and when the perplexed gentleman from Limoges seeks to escape from the impending operation, other apothecaries appear and pursue him relentlessly. And this serves as an excuse for a comic chorus and a pleasant dance.

In the second and third acts misadventure after misadventure befalls the unfortunate wooer. Sbrigani in disguise informs Oronte that his accepted son-in-law is laden with debt and that the creditors are waiting impatiently for Monsieur de Pourceaugnac's marriage to the only daughter of a wealthy man. Then Sbrigani manages to insinuate to Pourceaugnac that Julie is not a young lady of irreproachable character. Thus, when the father and the rustic suitor meet for the first time they are prepared to be suspicious of each other; and Pourceaugnac's doubts are confirmed when Julie affects a wanton eagerness to welcome him as her husband. Then Sbrigani springs a new trick: while Oronte and the provincial are still disputing, a woman, speaking the Provençal dialect, suddenly appears with several children and claims Pourceaugnac as her lawful husband; and after a little interval another woman, speaking the dialect of Picardy, rushes in with her children, asserting her right to Pourceaugnac's name. And the little children drive the victim to the verge of despair by hanging to his garments and calling him "papa." After explaining that this is a very serious matter since bigamy is punishable by hanging, Sbrigani brings about a consultation with two lawyers, who also have their song and dance. Finally Sbrigani aids the thoroughly frightened Pourceaugnac to disguise himself as a woman (the device adopted by Falstaff after the merry wives have befooled him into a belief in impending danger). And when the rustic has rushed away to get back to Limoges as speedily as he can, Oronte hands Julie over to Eraste; and the comedy ends with a wedding, as a comedy should.

This is the most broadly amusing of all the comedy-ballets prepared by Molière for the delight of the monarch. It is a farce, of course, and little more than a farce, except in so far as the character of Monsieur de Pourceaugnac himself may give it a deeper significance. Lacking the variety of character-portrayal in certain of the earlier comedy-ballets—the 'Fâcheux,' for one—it is only a farce wherein the humor may be perhaps a little primitive, since the fun is the result of a succession of practical jokes; but these practical jokes are every one of them closely related to the main purpose of the play. But when all is said, it is a farce such as no one but Molière could have written, and such as Molière himself could not have written in his earlier days.

He kept on developing, not only in insight into humanity and in veracity of character-drawing, but also in essential humor, in the sense of sheer fun, in the luxuriance of animal spirits needed to carry off a comic fantasy as robustly extravagant as 'Monsieur de Pourceaugnac.' There is in this piece an inexhaustible fertility of device, every trick being more irresistibly amusing than the one that went before, until the spectators feel themselves swept off their feet by a tornado of gaiety. Moreover, the humor is always good humor; and there is no aftertaste of bitterness in the bubbling laughter. The fun is free and spontaneous and almost unctuous in its richness. Indeed, it is not without a streak of coarseness, or rather of earthiness, of healthy realism. Once again, Molière is like Shakspere in that his idealism is not squeamish and does not lead him to shrink from frank acceptance of the baser facts of life. Their spirituality is indisputable; but it is rooted in a wholesome animality.

II

To those who draw back from life as it really is and who insist on taking an unduly etherealized view of human nature, the boisterous breadth of 'Monsieur de Pourceaugnac' will ever be unwelcome. These over-refined souls would probably prefer the more sentimentalized psychology of the next piece which Molière prepared for the king's pleasure. This was the 'Amants Magnifiques,' a prose play in five acts performed before the monarch at Saint-Germain in February, 1670. The plot was of the sovereign's own selection; at least he asked Molière to arrange a play in which two rival princes should woo a princess by vying with one another in the sumptuous entertainment to which each of them in turn invited her. In the eyes of the king and of the courtiers these sumptuous entertainments were all-important, and the action of the play itself was of value only as it justified the spectacular effects which had called it into being. The acts of the comedy were regarded only as the interacts of the more interesting spectacle.

It was idle to expect that Molière could take any deep interest in task-work of this sort. Yet he never shirked it and he did what he was expected to do in workmanlike fashion. He so constructed his story as to introduce the songs and dances and processions the king delighted in. He sketched out a little group of characters sufficiently indicated to carry on the necessary plot. He took some pains with the heroine, analyzing her shifting sentiments with a subtlety that prefigured the psychological delicacy of the later Marivaux. He outlined the part of a pleasantly witty humorist for his own acting. He introduced an astrologer so that he could deride a pseudo-science still in favor in court-circles. He found occasion to set into the dialogue of one act a clever imitation of one of Horace's odes. He scattered through the play touches of grace and strokes of light humor. In short, he did all that he was called upon to do.

But he cannot be said to have done any more. He must have been aware that the merits of his play, whatever they were, would be obscured by the glitter of the resplendent interludes in which the chief courtiers were to appear and even the king himself. There was really no need for Molière to attempt more than the skeleton of a plot; and it would have been absurd for him to put forth his full strength under these circumstances. He had no exaggerated opinion of the value of the comedy he had promptly prepared on the plot provided by the monarch. His haste is shown by the fact that he left the dialogue in prose, not riming even the earlier acts as he had done with the 'Princesse d'Elide.' His low estimate of the acting value of this play written to order is proved by his never having brought out the 'Amants Magnifiques' at his own theater, in spite of the curiosity which must have been aroused in the Parisian playgoing public by the glowing reports of the performance before their ruler. Not only did Molière never produce the comedy at the Palais-Royal, he never even published it; and it did not appear in print until La Grange made ready the complete edition of Molière's works nine years after the dramatist's death.

III

When Molière turned aside from his own projects to improvise the 'Amants Magnifiques' for the gratification of the king, he had his reasons, which are obvious enough and with which we have now no right to quarrel. But when we recall that he had then only three scant years of life before him, we cannot help holding that this was a waste of precious time. We do not feel this in regard to 'Monsieur de Pourceaugnac' because that superb farce exists independent of all its musical and terpsichorean accompaniments, and because it gave Molière a chance to revel in humor and to reveal his comic force perhaps more liberally than in any earlier play. Nor have we any sentiment of regret when we come to the next play he wrote for the king, a play which unites the unflagging fun of 'Monsieur de Pourceaugnac' with the social satire of the 'Précieuses Ridicules.'

This was the 'Bourgeois Gentilhomme,' a prose comedy-ballet in five acts, produced before Louis XIV at Chambord in October, 1670, and performed before the Parisians at the Palais-Royal only a month later. The 'Bourgeois Gentilhomme' is like 'Monsieur de Pourceaugnac' in that it is a string of episodes rather than a closely knit play. Here the two later plays recall the earlier 'Etourdi,' but with this significant difference, that the central personage in the later comedies is not an arbitrary figure, a mere mask, but a living human being, disclosing new aspects of his character as he is involved in the succession of incidents, all chosen carefully to set off his personal peculiarities. The 'Bourgeois Gentilhomme' belongs in the same group with 'Monsieur de Pourceaugnac,' that of comedy-farces filled with contagious carnival gaiety. Its humor is more delicate in spite of the fact that there is a more daring buffoonery in its most fantastic episode. And it is superior not only because the central figure is of a more general interest, but also because this figure is surrounded not by the outline personages we found in

'Monsieur de Pourceaugnac,' but by recognizable human beings.

As in 'Tartuffe' and the 'Avare' earlier, and as in the 'Femmes Savantes' later, Molière introduces us into the life of a single family and exhibits before us once more the disintegrating effects of folly. The burgher who wishes to turn gentleman is the worthy Monsieur Jourdain, a typical tradesman, such a man as Molière must have met often enough in his father's shop. So solidly has Molière drawn the portrait of Jourdain and so completely has he realized the burgher of Paris in his home life, that some commentators have seen fit to regret that Molière to please the king hurriedly debased into farce a subject he must have intended to treat in a comedy of a more exalted kind. The history of the piece proves that this suggestion has no foundation in fact, since the play was called into being specially to lead up to its most extravagant episode, that caricaturing the manners and customs of the Turks. There had been an unworthy envoy from Turkey a few months earlier; a returned traveller had also amused Louis XIV with a playful account of oriental life; and these things moved the monarch to ask Molière for a piece which should introduce the parody of a Turkish ceremony. It seems likely therefore that the author planned at first to prepare a farce akin to 'Monsieur de Pourceaugnac,' an easy comic imbroglio leading up to the required burlesque of oriental procedure, and that as he worked on the play he became more and more interested in his subject until he insensibly gave to what was originally a farce the larger outlook of loftier comedy.

Monsieur Jourdain (who was of course impersonated by Molière himself) has a wife, Madame Jourdain, and a daughter Lucile (acted by Molière's wife). The household is completed by Nicole, a quick-witted and ~~plain-spoken~~ serving maid, own cousin to the Dorine of 'Tar~~tuffe.~~' Lucile is beloved by Cléonte, who has a valet Covielle. ~~The~~ wealthy burgher is ambitious to rise above his station in life; he would like to be a gentleman and he is striving to fit himself for association with gentlemen. He has a music-master, a dancing-master and a fencing-master. He is taking lessons also from a master of philosophy, who is imparting to him ~~the elements of~~ grammar and rhetoric. The dancing-master gets into a dispute with the music-master as to which of them follows the nobler calling; and the fencing-master holds them both in contempt, only to be put down ~~crushed~~ in turn by the superior ~~contempt of the~~ master of philosophy.

We are shown Jourdain at his daily tasks, learning to dance and to fence. We are present when the master of philosophy explains scientifically how to pronounce the letters of the alphabet that Jourdain has been able to utter accurately since his childhood. We listen while Jourdain consults his teacher as to the proper phrasing for a little compliment he wishes to pay a certain marquise. Dorimène is the name of this lady; and Jourdain has been introduced to her by a certain Dorante, an impoverished nobleman, who is flattering the tradesman's social ambition and taking care to get well paid for his advice and assistance. Dorante is in love with Dorimène, and, being too poor himself to entertain her, he persuades Jourdain to provide a banquet for her. But this feast, which gives Jourdain the pleasure of seeing at his table two persons of quality, is ~~rudely~~ interrupted by ~~the protests~~ of Madame Jourdain, who puts to flight the insulted Dorimène.

And when Molière had thoroughly exposed the foolishness of the ambitious burgher, his ignorance and his credulity, he goes on swiftly to the scene for the sake of which the play was composed. Covielle, the valet of Cléonte, enters in disguise to inform Jourdain that the son of the Grand Turk is in Paris and that he has fallen in love with Lucile. As it would ~~be~~ improper for the son of the Grand Turk to marry the daughter of a man of inferior station, the oriental suitor proposes ~~to raise~~ Jourdain ~~to~~ the rank of "Mamamouchi." Cléonte disguises himself as the son of the Grand Turk; and then follows a scene of indescribable fun—the ceremony of conferring an oriental title upon the aspiring tradesman, a ceremony ~~commingled~~ of music and dancing. Cléonte, as the son of the Grand Turk, comes to claim his bride, and Lucile, as soon as she recognizes her lover, accepts him. Dorimène and Dorante promptly agree to get married also. And the piece ends pleasantly, ~~with~~ Jourdain still ~~absurdly~~ happy in his new honor.

As a play the 'Bourgeois Gentilhomme' is a curious nondescript; it has three acts of character-comedy worthy of comparison with the best that Molière had given us in other pieces; and then it has two acts of extravagance, of buffoonery, of grotesque exaggeration, filled with unhesitating humor, but scarcely in keeping with the more logical and artistic scenes with which the comedy commenced. Shakspere, in the 'Merry Wives,' had also to finish out a farcical comedy with humorously fantastic spectacle; and he too was then obeying a royal command. And Menander had not hesitated to bring into one of his plays a band of comic dancers, more or less unrelated to the action, but useful in filling the inter-acts in the frolic. In intent and in temper the 'Bourgeois Gentilhomme' resembled 'Monsieur de Pourceaugnac,' but not in method. The earlier comedy-ballet has a straightforward story which never swerves aside. The later has a first and a second act, in which we are shown only Jourdain in the hands of his various instructors and in which we get well acquainted with him; and it is not until the third act that we first catch sight of the Cléonte-Lucile love-story and of the Dorante-Dorimène intrigue. And this recalls the fragmentary method rather of the 'Avare' than the logical construction of 'Monsieur de Pourceaugnac.'

The explanation of this sudden descent of a philosophic comedy into what is almost pantomimic farce must be sought in its origin, in the circumstances of its first performance, when it served as the excuse for the interludes of song and dance. Where we now think of Molière's play as distended and possibly as debased by its spectacular accessories, his contemporaries thought of the dances chiefly. They even recorded the production of the ballet episodes "accompanied by a comedy." Molière knew what was expected of him; and however humble the task, he accomplished it completely to the king's satisfaction. We have cause for congratulation that he gave good measure and that he did more than was then demanded of him.

Disconcerting as this hybrid of comedy and farce and burlesque may be to the critical analyst, the 'Bourgeois Gentilhomme' is one of Molière's most characteristic plays. It contains not a few of his most ingenious scenes, at once humorous and veracious. Monsieur Jourdain himself is a never-failing joy in his innocent fatuity. He is a constant source of unquenchable laughter as we behold him delighted to discover that he has spoken prose all his life without knowing it, and as we see him, pricked by the foil in the hands of Nicole, protesting that she is not fencing according to the rules. We may laugh at him incessantly, but at the same time we like him. There is no harshness in Molière's painting, none of the ferocity which marks the portrayal of the miser, for example. In Monsieur Jourdain, Molière is showing up the folly of a member of the middle class, just as he had shown up the wickedness of a representative of the nobility in Don Juan. He surveyed the society around him with an unprejudiced eye, and he held no brief even for the class to which he himself belonged. Yet he took care to set over against his foolish burgher a self-seeking man of quality, Dorante, who was little better than an adventurer, not to call him a swindler. And this unflattering portrait was not calculated to win favor from the courtiers, before whom it was first presented.

The story of the practical joke played on the unfortunate Jourdain is sustained by the love affair of Jourdain's daughter. In setting forth this ~~true~~ love story ~~which did not run smooth,~~ the author introduces into this comedy a quarrel ~~love-tiff~~ very like the lover's quarrel~~s~~ ending with a happy reconciliation, with which he had already enriched the ~~earlier 'Dépit Amoureux'~~ and 'Tartuffe'. It may be noted that Molière took occasion to put into the mouth of Cléonte a physical description of his own wife, who played Lucile, and to give the lover an explanation of her charm and fascination. This Molière did, although husband and wife were then living apart; and perhaps this may have helped to bring about the reconciliation which took place in the final years of Molière's life.

IV

It has seemed best to link together here the 'Bourgeois Gentilhomme' and 'Monsieur de Pourceaugnac,' since these two comedy-ballets have many characteristics in common. But this has necessitated the temporary neglect of another of Molière's works, in which he adventured himself in a new field. He was a dramatist, writing prose or verse as he saw fit and as the occasion demanded, and yet once and once only he came forward as a poet, pure and simple, dealing with a theme which had no connection with the drama. It is true that he had strayed into the lyric in the sonnet to La Mothe Le Vayer, and in the stanzas thanking the king for his pension. But now at the call of friendship he risked a longer poem, didactic and descriptive, in accordance with the tradition established by Horace's epistle on the 'Art of Poetry.' This poem was entitled 'La Gloire du Val-de-Grace.' He had long been intimate with Pierre Mignard, perhaps the foremost painter in France. They had met in the south while Molière was still a stroller; and their friendship had become closer when the painter returned to Paris from Rome.

The church of Val-de-Grâce in Paris was due to the piety of the queen-mother. Begun in 1645, it was not completed until 1665; and it had a dome, the decoration of which had been confided to Mignard, who adorned it with an elaborate fresco. This painting seems to have been finished somewhere between 1663 and 1666. At this time there was a rivalry between Mignard and Le Brun, who was sustained by the powerful Colbert. One of Colbert's secretaries was Charles Perrault; and in 1668 he put forth a poem on painting which was one long pæan of praise for Le Brun, who is called the only perfect artist of the time. Perrault was not important as a poet, and his verses are now faded and forgotten. But when they were fresh, they were a challenge to the friends of Mignard; and Molière promptly stepped into the lists. Early in 1669 he came to the defense of his friend with his 'Gloire du Val-de-Grâce,' which was printed and published in exactly the same form as that chosen by Perrault for his rimed eulogy of Le Brun.

As it happened, Du Fresnoy, an associate of Mignard's in the decoration of the dome of the queen-mother's church, had written a Latin poem on the graphic art, which appeared about this time both in the original and in a French translation. These Latin verses Molière utilized now and again in the preparation of his own poem, although he intended not so much a discussion of the whole art of painting as a panegyric of Mignard's fresco. He set forth the principles of the painter's craft as these were practised by Mignard, who had absorbed much from his prolonged study of the Italian masters, and who was therefore not wholly in accord with the French tradition of that time. And incidentally, Molière took occasion to dwell on the fundamental differences between the art of painting in oil and the art of painting in fresco.

Although Molière's poem is not that one of his works which posterity has most cherished and although it is now little read even by its author's most ardent admirers, it has won praise from critics as competent as Boileau and Sainte-Beuve. Both of them pointed out that in his distinction between the methods of the two classes of painters Molière was perhaps unconsciously indicating the essential quality of his own genius as a dramatist, whose art demands a daring swiftness, like that of the painter in fresco.

CHAPTER XVI

FROM 'PSYCHE' TO THE 'COMTESSE D'ESCARBAGNAS'

I

In the 'Gloire du Val-de-Grâce' Molière had unexpectedly proved his possession of the power of writing verse of the didactic and descriptive type, as he had a little earlier and with equal unexpectedness revealed in the 'Amphitryon' his ability to attain a lyric elevation unattempted earlier. And now to please the king once more he disclosed another unexpected gift, an ingenious facility in dealing with a theme as lyric as that of the 'Amphitryon,' but without any of the elements of humor —a theme indeed almost as tragic as that was comic. There was a gorgeous piece of scenery representing the fiery realm of Pluto, long reserved in the royal storehouse; and Louis XIV asked Molière to prepare a spectacular play in which this might be utilized and into which various mechanical effects might be appropriately introduced.

The result of this request from the king was 'Psyché,' a tragedy-ballet in five acts, performed frequently at the palace of the Tuileries in the winter of 1671 and brought out at the Palais-Royal late in the summer of the same year. Tragedy-ballet is what the author called his piece; but we should describe it to-day as a grand opera. In planning this medley of scenery and of music, of heroic acting and of dancing, Molière was a precursor of Scribe, who devised the librettos for Meyerbeer, and of Wagner, who wrote both the book and the score of his musical dramas. In Molière's piece we can perceive the same massive simplicity which we observe in these modern operas, the same starkness of outline and the same desire to profit by every possibility of pleasing the eye as well as the ear. The story, which lent itself abundantly to its musical and mechanical accompaniments, was of Molière's own choosing; and it may have been suggested to him by the success of La Fontaine's little tale which had appeared only two years earlier.

The graceful legend which he had selected enabled him to construct a play of a kind never before essayed by him. He accomplished his task so as to prove his perfect understanding of its requirements. The drama itself, with all its struggle of contending desires, its artfully contrasted characters, its progressive action, is developed less for its own sake than for the sake of its spectacular possibilities. The Italian artist-engineers of the Renascence had carried the use of mechanical devices to an elaborate perfection scarcely surpassed in the theaters of our own time, which are superior chiefly in the possession of facilities for ampler illumination. In planning 'Psyché' and in setting its successive episodes on the stage, Molière availed himself of the utmost that these artist-engineers could do, both as scene-painters and as inventors of ingenious tricks. He adorned his play with all conceivable pomp, scattering through it transformations and conflagrations, introducing a sea of fire with flaming waves in incessant agitation, and exhibiting before the marvelling spectators Venus descending from the upper ether, Jupiter appearing in mid air mounted on his eagle, and at the end Cupid and Psyche wafted up into the skies by invisible power.

The music was composed by the wily Florentine, Lulli, who is really the founder of grand opera in France; and the words of the songs and concerted pieces were written by Quinault. Molière himself invented and constructed the plot, and he is responsible for the complete scenario. But the king was in a hurry, as usual; and to get the play ready for the carnival season the author had to call in the aid of collaborators, not only Quinault but also Corneille. Molière was able himself to write only the first act and the opening scenes of the second and third acts; and Corneille undertook the versification of the rest of the five acts. This division of the work may have been fortuitous, but it was fortunate also, since Molière passed the pen to Corneille at the moment when the tone of the play had to rise and when there was need of a fuller lyric note.

Thus it is that we have in 'Psyché' one of the rare instances in France under Louis XIV of that dramatic collaboration which was common in England under Elizabeth and James. In the plays of the English dramatic poets who labored in combination we are often left in doubt as to the respective shares of the several partners in the enterprise. In this French example of conjoint playmaking we are not reduced to guess at the contribution of each with only the hazardous support of internal evidence. Fundamentally, the whole play is Molière's; the conduct of the story is entirely his; and Corneille's sole duty was to clothe with words the action of the later acts. Most of the actual writing must be credited to the elder poet; but he was only expressing in words the plot planned by the younger poet. Corneille was then well past sixty years of age, yet he showed himself capable here of recapturing the lyric fervor of his youth, commingled with the sonorous eloquence of his maturity.

In the first few years after Molière's return to Paris he seems not to have been on the best of terms with Corneille, although it was in a tragedy of the elder dramatist that the younger had made his first appearance before the king. Quite possibly the author of the 'Menteur' did not altogether relish the more realistic comedy toward which the author of the 'Ecole des Femmes' was constantly tending. Quite possibly again Molière had Corneille in mind when he had declared in the 'Critique de l'Ecole des Femmes' that comedy was really more difficult than tragedy. But Molière was appreciative and generous; and in 1667 he had produced 'Attila,' paying two thousand livres for it, a very liberal sum for the time. And in 1670 he had brought out the 'Tite et Bérénice,' which Corneille had written in rivalry with the 'Bérénice' of Racine, acted simultaneously at the Hôtel de Bourgogne.

Perhaps there is more than a hint of irony in the fact that this interesting collaboration of the founder of French tragedy with the founder of French comedy was simply the result of the king's unwillingness to let a spectacular scene lie too long unemployed. Whatever their differences may have been in the remoter past, the elder poet did not scamp the work he contributed to the opera which the younger poet had devised. He found no difficulty in writing verses as free and as lightly lyric as those which Molière had used in the 'Amphitryon' and in the first act of 'Psyché' itself. And there is a glow of genuine sentiment in the declaration of ardent devotion which Cupid makes to Psyché. Beneath the frigid phrases of the vocabulary of contemporary gallantry which both Corneille and Molière were forced to employ, since they were their own contemporaries and since they had to hit the taste of their audiences, it is easy to feel the warmth of sincere emotion. And it is not harder for us to recover the real sentiment which animates this outworn diction than it is for us to substitute real persons and real places for the vague "swains" and the intangible "bowers" that arrest our attention in the English poetry of the eighteenth century.

'Psyché' was performed repeatedly before Louis XIV during the carnival, but it was not represented at the Palais-Royal until late in the summer. The stage of that playhouse was not capable of the spectacular effects easily attainable in the more sumptuous theater of the Tuileries. The Italian comedians still shared the Palais-Royal with Molière's company; as it happened they were equally anxious to be able to gratify the public liking for transformations and mechanical effects. Therefore in the spring, at the joint expense of the two companies, the stage of the Palais-Royal was rebuilt so as to permit a more elaborate scenic splendor. Even then it was not possible to present 'Psyché' with the amplitude of spectacle which had characterized its performance in the royal palace. Still the Parisian playgoers were satisfied, and more than satisfied, with the entertainment which was set before them. During the remaining two years of Molière's life, 'Psyché' was acted more than eighty times to nightly receipts that did not vary greatly from a thousand livres, more than twice the average of those taken at the performances of the 'Misanthrope.' It would be pleasant to believe that this unprecedented success was due to the interesting collaboration of two of the three foremost living dramatists of France; but the facts forbid, and the credit must be given rather to the machinery, the music and the costumes, than to the captivating charm and the airy grace of the lyrics of Molière and Corneille.

Perhaps, however, it is wholesome for us to be forcibly reminded once more that the drama does not live by literature alone, and that it can never be considered entirely apart from the demands of the actual theater.

II

Between the performances of 'Psyché' before the king and its appearance before the citizens of Paris, Molière brought out at the Palais-Royal the 'Fourberies de Scapin,' a three act comedy in prose, first acted toward the end of May. In this swift sequence of joyous episodes Molière returned for the last time to the formula of the comedy-of-masks, although it was from Terence that he took over the outline of his story.

Scapin, the part which Molière impersonated, is simply Mascarille under another name; he is the same rascal of infinite resource who is called Hali in the 'Sicilien,' Sbrigani in 'Monsieur de Pourceaugnac' and Covielle in the 'Bourgeois Gentilhomme.' The successive situations in which he exhibits his incomparable roguery and his unparalleled audacity might any one of them have been included in the 'Etourdi.' In the earliest of Molière's comic pieces on the plan of the Italian comedies, Mascarille plays a series of tricks on the father of his young master, so that the youthful lover can marry the maiden of his choice; and in the latest of the dramatic pieces on this ever useful model Scapin plays a series of tricks on two fathers, so that two enamored young fellows may be able to wed the two girls they have fallen in love with. The method is identical, however dissimilar the separate deceits may be in themselves.

But the 'Fourberies de Scapin' is not only more ingenious in its trickery than the 'Etourdi,' it is also less obviously mechanical and therefore less fatiguing on the stage to-day. Its humor is richer and its gaiety is more spontaneous. Of course the fun is the result mainly of the situations, as must ever be the case in farce, but it is sustained by a more obvious vivacity and veracity of character-drawing than can be found in Molière's earlier handling of a kindred theme. The two fathers whom Scapin befools, one after the other, are not mere profile figures; they are genuine human beings, solidly set on their feet, even if they are not as searchingly delineated as the chief characters in Molière's higher comedies. Perhaps even the two young couples, the necessary supporters of the story, are sketched in with a firmer touch and a more sympathetic sentiment than their predecessors in Molière's first pieces on the pattern of the comedy-of-masks.

The plot is brought to a happy conclusion with contemptuous suddenness when the fun has been carried far enough. The two girls turn out to be the very brides whom the two fathers had picked out for their two sons. This arbitrary cutting of the dramatic knot is quite in keeping with the frank artificiality of the whole play, which is as remote as possible from reality. As we laugh at the humorous imbroglio we know that we are beholding a fantasy only; we know that these things never happened in this workaday world, and that they could not happen. We are aware also that they should not happen, since it is only the flagrant unreality of the action which prevents us from applying the standards of ordinary morality. If we take this play seriously, then the conduct of the sons is inexcusable, and the tricks they allow Scapin to play on their fathers are indefensible.

We might go further and say that it is only the lack of any relation to actual life which prevents us from protesting against the physical and moral indignities which the unscrupulous valet puts upon the two old men, each in his turn. Considered as a picture of existence as it is, as a portrayal of any possible society, the 'Fourberies de Scapin' is as detestable in its cruelty as that other mirth-provoking drama, the tragedy of Punch-and-Judy. Perhaps this final farce of Molière's can be described not unfairly as a Punch-and-Judy piece for grown-ups; its characters move in a kindred world of make-believe and they are as irresponsible to the moral law. To apply the code of common sense or of common humanity would be as absurd in the one case as in the other. And perhaps it is partly to create this atmosphere of frankly fantastic unreality that Molière is willingly careless in the logical conduct of his plot, that he lays his scene in an impossible Naples, and that he brings his story to its conclusion by a couple of impossible coincidences.

He carries the play off with a high hand, with abundant animal spirits, with no suggestion of effort and with no sign of fatigue. The little drama may be mature in the amplitude of its humor, but it is splendidly youthful in its gaiety, its celerity, its brio. In robustness of comic effect there are few of his plays superior to the 'Fourberies de Scapin.' And perhaps no single scene in all Molière is more amusing than that in which Scapin persuades one of the fathers that his son is held as a captive on a Turkish galley, the owner of which insists on a large ransom. There is an almost pathetic humor in the accent of plaintive protest in the old man's reiteration of his question as to why his son ever went on board that galley. The familiar device of the catchword, recurring in the dialogue at artfully chosen intervals, is very old, so old indeed that it is perhaps remotely related to the device of the refrain in the popular ballads. Molière did not often avail himself of this facile device for awakening laughter; but when he did condescend to employ it (in this play and earlier in the 'Avare,' where Harpagon insists on the willingness of an elderly suitor to marry his daughter without a dowry) he gets out of it the last drop of fun that can be squeezed from it, and he also succeeds in making it a revelation of essential character.

It is in the 'Fourberies de Scapin' and in 'Monsieur de Pourceaugnac' that Molière most clearly exhibits his familiarity with the technicalities of the law, with the manifold delays of its procedure and with the manifest chicanery of its practice. He does not recur to the attack again and again as he does in his assault on the practitioners of the healing art; but he is outspoken in his exposure of the corruption which characterized the courts of his day. In its way the contemptuous slap which Scapin bestows upon the legal profession is quite as significant as the fiery outburst of Alceste when he hears that he has lost his lawsuit. And in his very last play, the 'Malade Imaginaire,' Molière introduces a wily pettifogger who is willing enough to turn the law dishonestly to the advantage of his unscrupulous client.

III

The 'Fourberies de Scapin' had been written for the people of Paris. Molière's next piece was written for the king once more. This was the 'Comtesse d'Escarbagnas,' a one act comedy in prose, presented before Louis XIV in December, 1671, and acted at the Palais-

Royal in July, 1672. It is only a slight sketch, written to order, to justify the revival of the more effective dances from the earlier 'Ballet des Ballets.' It is the least important of all Molière's pieces, excepting only that 'Pastorale Comique' which he did not care to preserve. It is the only play of his which did not contain a part for his own acting. It may be dismissed as a hasty sketch, dashed off hurriedly to meet the king's demand. Its author thought so little of it that he never published it.

Yet nothing of Molière's is negligible. In this perfunctory piece of work he gives us an amusing vignette of provincial manners. The Comtesse d'Escarbagnas is an ignorant and pretentious widow who has paid a flying visit to the capital, and who has returned to the little town where she lives even more affected and absurd than before. She has the complacent ignorance of Mrs. Malaprop, and like Mrs. Malaprop she is easily led to believe that the attentions of the wooer of a younger woman are meant for herself.

The unpretending little piece contains two other figures from the gallery of provincial types that Molière had collected during his youthful wanderings. One of these is a stupid and mercenary judge; and in presenting this character Molière avails himself of the opportunity to express again his low opinion of the law as it was practised in his day. Another of these subsidiary characters, etched quickly by a few summary strokes, is a rude receiver of taxes, ill-mannered and overbearing—a first outline of the predatory financier, whose full-length portrait one of Molière's followers, Le Sage, was later to paint in his 'Turcaret.'

IV

Perhaps it would be possible to find evidences of fatigue in the 'Comtesse d'Escarbagnas,' at least in the author's unwillingness to take trouble to make the most of his material and to set the carefully observed characters in a story that might be better worth while. That Molière should now begin to be a little weary is not to be wondered at. When he brought out this little play it was only thirteen years since he had returned to Paris; but in that brief space he had produced twenty-six other plays, of which half-a-dozen were in five acts. He had acted incessantly; and he had been responsible always for the prosperity of the company of actors of which he was the chief. He had had to turn aside from his own work repeatedly to improvise comedy-ballets at the behest of the king. His health was always insecure; and he was not happy in his home life. However fiercely his ambition might still burn, he had reason enough to be tired of the perpetual struggle.

Just what his relations with his father had been we do not know with certainty. But the son may well have been saddened by the father's death early in 1669, at the ripe age of seventy-six—not so much perhaps by the death itself as by the circumstances that accompanied it. The elder Poquelin had long survived his two wives and he had seen all his children go before him, except Molière. He was prosperous when Molière's mother died—and perhaps his prosperity was in part due to her character and to her influence. In the years that followed, after his son left him to become a strolling actor, his affairs went from bad to worse. When he died he was poor; he left few belongings and he owed money; in fact, after his death one of his debts was paid by his son. It may not be safe to draw inferences as to the character of the elder Poquelin from the various fathers introduced by Molière into his many plays; and yet it is to be noted that nearly all of these fathers are opinionated, domineering and selfish. Of course, this was the type Molière had found in the Italian comedy he imitated and in the Latin comedy which was his other model; still there may be some slight significance in the fact that only in the 'Femmes Savantes' did he take occasion to vary this character and to represent a father more amiable and more estimable. It is pleasant, however, to recall here the evidence that Molière seems to have been on good terms with his father and that he willingly came to his assistance when the elder Poquelin was in need.

It was two years before the performance of the 'Comtesse d'Escarbagnas' that Molière had lost his father. And it was shortly after the production of that play before the king that the death occurred of Madeleine Béjart, with whom he had been intimately associated ever since he had left his father's roof, nearly thirty years earlier. She had been ailing for some time; and she had created no new part in the plays that Molière had recently written. In February, 1672, she died, at the comparatively early age of fifty-four. She had been the original performer of many of Molière's most vigorously drawn characters, of which Madelon, in the 'Précieuses Ridicules,' was one of the earliest and Dorine, in 'Tartuffe,' one of the most effective. A versatile actress, she was also a woman of much sagacity in business; and she seems to have managed the financial affairs of the company and of Molière himself, until long after they had all returned to Paris. She had wisely invested her own share of the profits of their theatrical enterprise; and she was able to leave behind her a little fortune. By her will, drawn up only a few days before her death, she provided for a charitable bequest and for masses for herself. She also gave four hundred francs a year for life to her brother Louis and to each of her two sisters, Genevieve and Armande. And she designated the younger sister, Armande, the wife of Molière, as her residuary legatee.

A few months before the death of Madeleine Béjart a final reconciliation had taken place between Molière and his wife. We do not know the exact date of their agreeing to live apart, nor do we know the exact date when they made up their differences at last. Probably this reunion preceded or accompanied a severe illness of the wife in the fall of 1671, a few weeks before the first performance of the 'Comtesse d'Escarbagnas.' Whatever the former disagreements between husband and wife may have been, they managed to get along together during the few remaining months of Molière's life. He took a house, which he furnished and supplied sumptuously, perhaps to gratify her desires and perhaps to please his own liking for luxurious surroundings.

CHAPTER XVII

THE 'FEMMES SAVANTES'

I

To meet the sudden desires of the king and to keep the Palais-Royal constantly supplied with new plays Molière often found himself forced to work in a hurry. This lack of leisure for the slow maturing of masterpieces wherein he could put forth his whole strength explains why it is that he has left us so few large comedies and so many comedy-ballets and so many Italianate farces. His comic dramas are not only surprisingly varied in form, they are also surprisingly unequal in scope and in finish. It is at most in a scant half-dozen of his comedies that he is able to display his rich resources as a dramaturgic craftsman and his full powers as a humorous psychologist. Perhaps almost half of his thirty plays disclose plainly either the special circumstances of their origin or else the haste with which they had to be put together. It might even be maintained that there are only two of his loftier comedies in which he was able to show himself at the highest and to do justice to his skill as a playmaker, to his gift of humor and to his insight into character. One of these two is, of course, 'Tartuffe'; and the other is the 'Femmes Savantes.'

In the 'Femmes Savantes' we have the ultimate model of high comedy—a type of play which must be excessively difficult of attainment if we may judge by its extraordinary rarity in the dramatic literature of every language, ancient and modern. By high comedy we mean a humorous play which is sustained by a worthy theme and in which the action is caused by the clash of character on character. The 'Femmes Savantes' is even more absolutely a comedy than 'Tartuffe,' since that superb play threatens at one moment to stiffen into drama and almost into tragedy. It is ampler in its theme than the 'Avare' and the 'Bourgeois Gentilhomme,' where the interest is centered on the presentation of every aspect of a single character. If not so significant in its thesis as the 'Misanthrope,' it is better built and more adroitly adjusted to the demands of the theater, where the desires of the crowd must always be considered.

The 'Femmes Savantes' is also one of the most original of all its author's plays. The loftier and the larger Molière's comedy the less he borrows. When he was composing a farce, he was content to go to others, sometimes for his plot and sometimes for his episodes; he was willing enough to take the 'Fourberies de Scapin' from the Latin and the 'Etourdi' from the Italian. But the indefatigable industry of his countless commentators has not enabled them to indicate the actual sources of the 'Femmes Savantes' or of 'Tartuffe,' even though it has permitted them to point out a few suggestions here and there in the works of his predecessors and his contemporaries by which he may have profited. It is when Molière is at his best that he owes least to others. He was then looking, not at what had already been set on the stage, but at what was going on in the society by which he was surrounded. He was drawing directly from nature, and he was not disposed to take his material ready-made from the hand of another. He had no need to copy anything but humanity itself.

Molière seems to have given a longer time to the composition of the 'Femmes Savantes' than he was able to bestow on any other of his later plays. Apparently he had begun to compose this comedy several years before it finally appeared in the theater. It was prepared at leisure, even if its preparation was more than once interrupted by a call to produce other plays for which there was an immediate demand either from the king or from the company. And perhaps this preoccupation with a more ambitious work may account for the perfunctory carelessness with which the 'Comtesse d'Escarbagnas' was dashed off and for the reckless swiftness of the 'Fourberies de Scapin.' The 'Femmes Savantes' is spaciously conceived, solidly constructed, and highly finished. Evidently the author had allowed it to ripen slowly; and when at last he chose to bring it before the public it was free from all evidences of haste.

It is a five act comedy in verse; and it was first acted at the Palais-Royal in March, 1672, less than a year before Molière's death. It is the last of Molière's nobler comedies; and in it he handled again, on an ampler scale, the subject he had lightly treated in the earliest play written after his return to Paris. In the 'Précieuses Ridicules' he had killed the vogue of the romance-of-gallantry, as one of his masters in comedy, Cervantes, had killed the vogue of the romance-of-chivalry. Yet the spirit which animated the *précieuses* was not dead, and it had manifested itself anew in fresh forms in the thirteen years since Molière had first attacked it. In these new manifestations he detected a menace to society far more dangerous than he had discovered in the older affectations. It was with delight that he returned to the assault, not with another little play, like the 'Précieuses Ridicules,' amusingly sustained by the artifices of farce, but with a compactly planned comedy of fuller import, devoid of fantastic exaggeration and direct in its portrayal of character.

II

In the 'Femmes Savantes,' as earlier in 'Tartuffe,' in the 'Avare' and in the 'Bourgeois Gentilhomme,' Molière lays his story in a single family. An easy-going citizen, Chrysale (played by Molière himself) has a wife, Philaminte, who is educated beyond her intelligence. There are two daughters, Armande, the elder, who takes after her mother, and Henriette, the younger (played by Molière's wife), who has simpler tastes and more commonplace desires. Chrysale has a brother Ariste, who is the embodiment of common sense, and also a sister Bélise, an absurd old maid, who holds with Philaminte and who believes herself to be sought by several suitors. A most presentable young man, Clitandre (acted by La Grange), had paid his attentions to Armande, only to be rebuffed by her scorn for anything so mundane as matrimony, whereupon he transferred his affections to Henriette. In the midst of this family group there is another outsider, Trissotin, whom the learned ladies have made a pet of, because he appears in their eyes as the embodiment of the wit they admire and of the learning they adore.

The art of comedy is largely the art of contrasting characters so that each shall make the other more salient and more significant; and in none of his plays has Molière shown himself a more skilful artist than in this. The weak-willed Chrysale is set over against the firm and resourceful Ariste. The pedantic and platonic Armande is set by the side of the charmingly natural Henriette. The over-educated Philaminte is shown engaged in controversy with her ignorant servant, Martine. And Clitandre, who has the easy courtesy of a man of the world, stands in juxtaposition with the pretentiously arrogant Trissotin.

The art of comedy also calls for dexterity in the conduct of the plot, for certainty of exposition and for cumulative interest in the episodes as they succeed one another. Here also Molière is seen at his best; and the opening passages of the play take us as swiftly into the full current of the story as the opening episodes of 'Tartuffe,' than which there could be no higher praise. The action is engaged in the very first scene by a colloquy between the two sisters, in which Armande reproaches Henriette with the younger's willingness to marry a discarded admirer of the elder. She ends by asking whether Henriette is absolutely convinced that her lover has conquered his earlier affection. Henriette thereupon summons Clitandre to declare himself and to decide between them; and the young fellow, to the warm dissatisfaction of the elder sister, makes it plain that his heart is now given irrevocably to the younger. And the spectators cannot help feeling that Armande will thereafter do all in her power to prevent the course of true love from running smoothly.

In the second act we make the acquaintance of Chrysale, to whom Ariste declares the desire of Clitandre to wed Henriette. But when the more or less hen-pecked husband discloses this matrimonial project to his strong-willed wife, he is told that she has made another arrangement. She is determined that Henriette shall marry

Trissotin. This prodigy of wit and wisdom has not pretended to be in love with the girl; but he is willing enough to wed her because both of her parents are wealthy. When Ariste hears of the match proposed by Henriette's mother, he upbraids her father with his weakness in yielding; and at last he arouses in Chrysale a spirit of manly resistance. The worthy burgher resolves to assert himself for once. He sends for a Notary to draw up the marriage-contract of Henriette and Clitandre; and he is fearless in proclaiming that the young couple shall be made happy that very day.

When Aristotle laid down the principle that every play ought to have a single story of a certain importance in itself, and that it ought also to set forth the beginning and the middle and the end of this single story, he was unwittingly testifying to the convenience of a three-act form, one act containing each of these necessary parts of the plot. And even when the dramatic poets have felt compelled to fill out the larger framework of five acts, they have been able to do this only by subdividing one of these necessary parts between two acts. This is what Molière has done in the 'Femmes Savantes.' In his first two acts we see only the beginning of the story, in which the characters are set before us sharply and in which our interest is keenly aroused in what is to follow. Molière had also to divide the ending of his story between the fourth and fifth acts. It is in the third act that he gives us the swift succession of effects for which we have been prepared by the earlier acts and which make us eager for the later acts.

In this middle act we behold the learned ladies assembled. We see them purring with extravagant delight as the complacent Trissotin reads aloud two of his empty and labored little poems. We look on while Trissotin introduces his friend, Vadius, who knows as much Greek as any man in France. We gaze with joy at the quarrel that soon arises between the two parlor-poets, who get hotter and hotter in the violence of their objurgations until they almost come to blows. We are shown the angry withdrawal of the unvanquished Vadius, leaving Trissotin to the consolation of his trio of female admirers. And we look on while Philaminte tells Henriette that she is to accept Trissotin as her husband. The girl protests in vain; but when her mother has left the stage to be succeeded by her father, she finds sudden encouragement. Despite the warnings of Armande, Chrysale announces to Henriette that she shall be married at once to Clitandre.

After all the bustling comedy-scenes of this third act, the fourth may seem a little thinner in substance, partly because it is mainly a preparation for the end of the play. Armande embittered by jealousy seeks to set her mother even more strongly against Clitandre, who comes in just in time to overhear her insidious attack. He defends himself; and at that Armande declares that she will now accept the suit she formerly rejected. Since he is not satisfied with a purely platonic relation, she will take him for her husband. But Clitandre has to decline, as he is now sincerely in love with Henriette. And after an amusing and rather personal passage of arms between Clitandre and Trissotin, we see Chrysale still resolved that his younger daughter shall wed the man of her choice.

In the fifth act Henriette pleads with Trissotin to renounce his suit, telling him plainly that her heart is given to Clitandre; but the self-seeking pretender refuses to withdraw. When the Notary arrives to draw the marriage contract, Chrysale designates Clitandre as the future husband, and Philaminte sets forward Trissotin. Finally, the mother suggests that if Clitandre must marry one of her daughters, he can have Armande, at the same time that Trissotin marries Henriette. Chrysale is weakening a little when Ariste arrives with two letters, one to Philaminte announcing the loss of a lawsuit, which will greatly diminish her fortune, and the other to Chrysale, declaring that his bankers have defaulted, which will sadly reduce his wealth. And thereupon Trissotin promptly withdraws, unwilling to marry a poor girl. Clitandre persists in his suit; and then Ariste confesses that the bad news is only a device of his own to expose the mercenariness of Trissotin. And now that all opposition is withdrawn, Chrysale valiantly orders the Notary to proceed with the marriage contract.

III

Slight as may be the story of the 'Femmes Savantes' it is sufficient to sustain satisfactorily the interest of the spectators; and it is developed in a sequence of situations unsurpassed in effectiveness of humor and in exquisite truthfulness of character-delineation. No single episode in all Molière is at once more vigorously amusing and more truthful than the quarrel between Trissotin and Vadius. Nothing is more characteristically comic than Philaminte's protest to the Notary, against the barbarity of the legal terms in which the marriage contract is drawn. No character has a more opulent humor and a more vital humanity than Chrysale, the weak-willed but well-meaning husband. And the comedy as a whole has a unity of intent and a harmony of tone which Molière was rarely able to attain, forced as he often was to relieve a somber theme with episodes of an almost farcical vivacity. From the rise of the curtain in the first act to its final fall on the fifth, the play is kept consistently on the highest plane of comedy.

In no other play has Molière gathered together a more entertaining collection of characters, sharply individualized and eternally true to life. The success of the play was immediate; and it has been enduring, for its thesis is as pertinent to-day as it was two centuries and a half ago, and its characters have a permanent appeal. Philaminte and Armande are prototypes of the perennial blue-stocking; and we can find them in our own time perorating in culture-clubs and attending conventions to the neglect of their household duties. Their vocabulary may be different nowadays; but their attitude is the same. They may not be devoted to Greek, they may not be enchanted by petty little poems, they may not be striving to reform the language; but they have changed only their outer garments, and this disguise does not prevent our recognizing them at once as old acquaintances. It would be easy to pick out in the twentieth century not a few women who are thrusting themselves forward in drawing-rooms and on the platform, and who are as affected as the Bélise and as pretentious as the Philaminte that Molière presented in the seventeenth century. And it might not be difficult to find a few who are as ignorant and as foolish.

And Trissotin flourishes to-day in America and reveals himself as complacently self-satisfied as he did in France under Louis XIV. He may wear a coat of another color, but he has not transformed his character. He may have transferred his interests to more modern topics; but his method is unmodified and his manners also. He is as vain and as superficial as ever; and he is still surrounded by a little group of admiring women, open-mouthed and empty-headed. Sometimes he appears as a lecturer on ethics or on esthetics; sometimes he prefers to be a parlor-socialist; and on occasion he may even venture to set forth sympathetically the most advanced theories of the intellectual anarchists. But more often he contents himself with disquisitions upon the more unsubstantial poets, Shelley, for one, and Maeterlinck, for another, expounding their inner meanings and delightedly setting forth their airy withdrawal above the vulgarities of everyday life.

Keenly as Molière has perceived and presented the folly of Bélise and the absurdity of Philaminte, he is subtler in his portrayal of the more perverted Armande, the prurient prude, who pretends to put the pleasures of the mind above those of the senses, while allowing us to suspect that her own thoughts dwell unduly and unpleasantly on more material things. Molière had a plentiful lack of liking for a young woman who paraded her false delicacy and her platonic shrinking from the realities of matrimony and of motherhood. He sees in this type a dangerous detachment from duty, and he does not disguise his indignation. Possessed as he is by the social instinct and believing as he does in the necessity of being natural, he could not but detest the theories which Armande proclaims. He perceives clearly enough that if these theories should prevail, the family would disintegrate. Therefore he holds them to be threatening to society.

He makes his own attitude plain by contrasting the etherealized views of Armande with the practical common sense of Henriette. No dialogue in all his comedies is more carefully written or more thoroughly thought out than the opening scene of the 'Femmes Savantes,' in which Armande and Henriette reveal themselves unconsciously. The elder sister is characterized with a full understanding of her individuality; but it is the younger sister who has the author's sympathy and whom he portrays with a caressing touch. Henriette is nature itself and straightforward simplicity; she is essentially womanly; she has a wholesome charm and a feminine grace. Perhaps it is not too much to say that Henriette embodies Molière's ideal of the French girl, just as Rosalind may represent Shakspere's ideal of the English girl. And the contrast of the two characters is as instructive as it is interesting; it affords us an insight into the divergent attitude of the two races toward woman as a wife and as a mother. The Frenchman does not idealize woman as the Englishman is wont to do, for Shakspere is ever and always poetic, whereas Molière deals with the prose of life, even if he has to express himself in rimed alexandrines. As the type of maidenly ignorance Molière gives us Agnès, where Shakspere presents us with Miranda; and as the representative of all that is most attractively feminine he depicts Henriette, where Shakspere has imagined Rosalind. The love-affair of Clitandre and Henriette is not romantic and it has no hectic flush of romanticism; it is a solid affection, founded on sympathy of taste and of character; but it is quite as likely to result in durable happiness as the more poetic wooing of Orlando and Rosalind.

IV

If it is appropriate to apply a modern term to this masterpiece of comedy, it might be described as a problem-play. It is a picture of manners and a gallery of portraits; but it has also its thesis, as the 'Ecole des Maris' had and the 'Misanthrope' also. As we sit in the theater while its successive scenes are acted before us, we are forced to reflect upon the higher education of woman, or at least upon the effect produced on the social organization when women undertake a rivalry with men in the attaining of learning. It is true enough that Molière does not here introduce us to women who have really made themselves equal to men in solidity of attainment, since Bélise and Philaminte and Armande are all of them pretenders to knowledge; their paraded learning has little foundation, and they have vainly sought to acquire culture without the labor of getting an adequate education as a foundation for it.

Although this may be admitted, the question is raised nevertheless; and it is obvious also that Molière does not attempt to reply to it. As a dramatist, whose duty it is to set on the stage life as he sees it, he is not called upon to answer the query he suggests. It is sufficient if the playwright poses his problem, and there is never any obligation on him to solve it himself. It is enough if he calls it to our attention and if he asks us to find each our own solution. Should he go further and strive to impose on us his own answer to the interrogation, he would be beyond his province of depicting life. His play is then no longer a true problem-play; it becomes immediately a sort of dramatized novel-with-a-purpose, in which the convincing portrayal of society has been sacrificed to an attempt to prove a theory. Now, in all the arts the effort to prove anything is always sterile, since it is the province of art to reproduce nature and not to find answers for insistent questions.

Molière is too completely a dramatist to set on the stage any single character as the mouthpiece for his own opinions. It is his duty as a dramatist to let the persons in his play express the sentiments by which they are severally animated. In fairness to the characters he has created he must permit them to speak for themselves and to proclaim their beliefs each in his own fashion. Even Chrysale, the character that Molière himself impersonated, cannot be held necessarily to voice his own opinions on the question at issue. And yet in the course of the comedy Molière manages to have one or another of the speakers say the things which he wants the audience to hear and which he holds it necessary to have said by some one, if the whole subject is to be presented at full length. Sometimes one of these needful remarks is made by Chrysale and sometimes by Ariste. Both Clitandre and Henriette take part in this expression of the opinions that have to be put forth. And now and again it is the rustic Martine who takes her part in the discussion and who drops words of unexpected wisdom.

As a result, it is not difficult to arrive at Molière's own views on the thesis he has propounded, even though he has put into his play no single character charged with the utterance of his personal opinions. If we want to discover what Molière himself thinks we need not scrutinize what any one of his characters happens to say; we have only to consider the comedy as a whole and to weigh the total impression it leaves upon us. What Chrysale may declare at one moment or what Martine may put forth at another, what Philaminte or Bélise may assert—these things are useful enough in their place; but the truth is not in any one of them. It is what all the characters say, it is what they do, it is what they are—these are the things which tell us what Molière's own attitude is. This attitude is clearly shown by the single fact that the learned ladies are all of them more or less foolish, and that Trissotin, the man whom these foolish women foolishly admire, is also foolish. It is even more evidently disclosed by the added fact that the most sympathetic character, Henriette, is in revolt against the pretentiousness of her mother and her aunt and her sister.

Although Molière himself broke away early from his father's house, and although his own home was not happy, he is ever the defender of the family from foes within and without; and he thinks that everything is dangerous which may tempt a woman to disregard her household duties. His belief is that woman is completely filling her place in the world when she is simply a wife and a mother. He thinks that women fail to do the best they can for themselves when they turn aside from this noble function, and when they despise and neglect the privileges of wifehood and of motherhood to assert arrogantly an equality with men, instead of being satisfied with the superiority which men have generally conceded to them. He is of opinion that a woman will have a full life and will best accomplish that for which nature intended her, only when she is satisfied with her place in the household and when she joys in being the mother of children whom she has the pleasure of bringing up. If her life is thus filled to overflowing, she will have little leisure for rivalry with man in the acquisition of knowledge and in the advancement of learning. Therefore Molière cannot help perceiving that the pretension of women to intellectual equality is too often but a barren affectation. And for pretentious affectations of every kind Molière had only contempt and scorn.

In the 'Femmes Savantes,' as perhaps in no other of his comedies, can we discover the abiding influence of Montaigne, which is as direct and at times as powerful as that of Rabelais. It is in 'Monsieur de Pourceaugnac' that the indebtedness to Rabelais is most clearly revealed, in its hearty humor and in its exuberant fun-making. Both Rabelais and Montaigne were governed by the social instinct and they saw man as a member of society. Moreover they both believed in nature, as they each understood it, and they were prompt to plead in its behalf. In spirit Molière was akin to both of them; and he had nourished himself on their works. His indebtedness to them is deeper than any chance reproduction of casual passages, here and there, in one play or another; it extends to his philosophy, to his attitude toward life as a whole, to his feeling for the larger problems of existence.

V

In the 'Femmes Savantes' we can discover as well that Molière had found his profit also in the study of another of his predecessors. Nisard declared that he could detect the influence of Descartes in some of the comic dramatist's most beautiful passages, "in that logic of dialogue so free in its turns and yet so serried." And it is perhaps in this play that these passages are most abundant, in the opening scene between the two sisters, for example, and in the later scene when Clitandre explains to Armande why he has transferred his affection to Henriette. Molière's style was suppler than ever in this comedy, more substantial, more warmly colored. Perhaps 'Tartuffe' and the 'Misanthrope' are the only other plays of his which really rival the 'Femmes Savantes' in literary merit. His style is never academic; it has ever the savory directness of popular speech; it always unites clearness of thought to intensity of expression.

Purists and pedants have found fault with his manner of writing as they have with Shakspere's, and to as little purpose. Neither the English dramatist nor the French aim at empty propriety of phrase; their sentences are always animated and tingling with the emotion of the moment. In their hands the language is molten and malleable and they bend words to their bidding, often forcing a phrase to carry more meaning than it had ever borne before. Especially is Molière's a style intended for oral delivery. It is meant not for the eye of the single reader in the library, but for the ears of the audience assembled in the theater. More than one speech which may seem trailing and tortuous to the linguistic critic, falls trippingly from the tongue of the actor. And it was the actor whom Molière had ever in mind. His lines were written primarily for delivery on the stage and only secondarily for perusal in the study. They have the free and flexible rhythm of the spoken word, so different from the more balanced construction which befits a style intended only for the reader. Molière was an actor himself and he knew the needs of the actor. If we may accept the testimony of Coquelin, who reincarnated most of the parts Molière prepared for his own acting, even the longest of these parts is not physically fatiguing to the actor, however difficult any one of them may be to impersonate adequately.

The unfailing brilliance of the dialogue of the 'Femmes Savantes' is never external; it is achieved by no explosive epigram; it is not the result of merely picking clever sayings from a notebook and pinning them into the conversation at a venture. But if there is no trace of artificial crackle and rattle like that which at once pleases and provokes us in the comedies of Congreve and of Sheridan, and which we cannot help suspecting to have been elaborated at leisure, there is in this comedy of Molière's a constant play of wit of a more truly intellectual kind. The French dramatist's humor is more solidly rooted in truth and more luxuriant in its flower; and his wit is less specious and more pervasive. The whole play is bathed in wit and swims in wit; and this wit is rather in the thought than in the phrasing. It is the wit of the intelligence, and not of the vocabulary only.

French critics have distinguished three forms of witticism, of the humorous stroke proper to comedy. One is the witticism itself, pure and simple, existing for its own sake, as serviceable in one scene as another; and for this inexpensive effect Molière has no liking. Another is the speech that evokes laughter because it expresses essential character; and a third is the phrase which comes spontaneously as the culmination of a situation, and which is funny only because it is spoken by that particular character at that particular moment. The dialogue of Molière's comedies is studded with humorous strokes of these two latter classes. Indeed, he had the gift of hitting on the sentence which combines the two, expressing character at the instant that the situation culminates. Such is the parting shot of Vadius as he challenges Trissotin to meet him face to face—"at the bookseller's." Such is Chrysale's sudden "my sister," by which he seeks to suggest that he has been addressing to Bélise the daring speech that he suspects Philaminte is ready to resent.

Molière does not condescend to the empty glitter of the clever sentence, which is extraneous to the immediate purpose of the scene; and he also eschews that bandying of sharp personalities which often degenerated into sheer vulgarity of retort in the Restoration dramatists, and which is not as infrequent as might be wished in Shakspere. There is delicate fencing in the interview of the two sisters; there is sharp rapier-play in the duel between Clitandre and Trissotin; and there is rougher saber work when Vadius and Trissotin turn on each other. But even in the encounter between these two thin-skinned and quick-tempered men there is no hint of the seeming brutality which we discover in the cut-and-thrust repartee of Beatrice and Benedick, and which suggests rather the boxing-glove than the fencing-foil. In Molière's comedy the characters, however irritable or exacerbated, abide by the rules of the sport and they do not hit below the belt. They preserve the courtesy of the school of arms, with the self-respect which implies respect for others.

VI

There are some of Molière's admirers who feel that in this comedy Molière fell below his customary standard of urbanity and amenity in his delineation of Trissotin. And for this regret there is a certain justification. To us to-day Trissotin is a type of the immensely conceited man of letters; and as he plays off his little parlor-tricks before us we recall the cynical saying that an amateur is a man who loves nothing and a connoisseur is a man who knows nothing. But to Molière's contemporaries Trissotin was primarily the portrait of a living man, of the Abbé Cotin. The two little epigrams that Trissotin reads with smug complacency are taken from the published works of Cotin; and the imagined quarrel of Trissotin and Vadius had been preceded by a real altercation between Cotin and Ménage. It has ever been asserted, but apparently without warrant, that Molière had originally called the character Tricotin.

More than once Molière vigorously defended himself against the charge of putting real persons into his plays; and it is in vain that efforts have been made to identify Tartuffe and Alceste with any of those who have been suggested as the living originals of these characters. Yet in this single instance he seems to have departed from his practice and to have violated his own rule. In general, Molière was gentle and kindly; and he did not retort when he was cruelly assailed even in his own family life. Once, and once only, in the 'Impromptu de Versailles,' he had turned aside to transfix one of his wanton assailants with a scornful shaft. And yet in the 'Femmes Savantes' we find what seems to be a second example of this Aristophanic license of personal attack. But when the two cases are considered carefully they are seen not to be parallel. In holding Cotin up to ridicule before those who knew him, Molière was apparently less moved by resentment against the individual than by detestation of the class to which the abbé belonged.

It is true that Cotin had attempted a translation of Lucretius and had thus posed as a rival of Molière's. It is a fact also that he had defended himself as best he could against the satires of Boileau and that in so doing he had gone out of his way to insult Molière. These things may have called him to the attention of the comic dramatist; and Boileau may have besought his friend and literary ally to second his own assault. But these things alone would not have sufficed to tempt Molière into personality if he had not seen in Cotin the embodiment of literary pretentiousness supported by a limited foundation of intelligence. Molière detested heartily all that Cotin stood for; and he had only contempt for all that Cotin admired. It was not the personal slurs on himself, but the feeble pettiness of Cotin's verses which allured Molière irresistibly to put their author into his comedy. Humor always loves a dull mark; and Molière's laughter could not but be spontaneous and copious at the sight of the empty prettiness and the punning conceits which constitute Cotin's attempts at poetry.

Trissotin, moreover, is larger than any Cotin. Molière is not a mere photographer; and he gives us a durable painting, even if it happens also to be a portrait; he gives us a typical character, even if it chances also to be the reproduction of an individual. His contemporaries may have seen in Trissotin only the peculiarities of Cotin; but for posterity Trissotin exists for his own sake, with an eternal truthfulness and with a largeness which far transcends the accidental original. In fact, Trissotin is to us nowadays the unforgettable portrait of the essential pedant; and we are no more called upon to remember the forgotten individual who was its exciting cause, than we are summoned to keep in mind the unknown Greek girl who may have had the good fortune to serve as the living model for a Venus of Praxiteles.

Candor compels the admission, however, that even if this solitary straying of Molière's into the lower region of personality may be comprehensible and even excusable, it is none the less regrettable—especially since Trissotin's withdrawal of his suit when Henriette is supposed to be less fully dowered than he had believed, reveals him as meanly self-seeking, a contemptible characteristic due to the exigencies of the plot and not inherently related to the type represented. Here Molière seems to have laid himself open to the accusation of deficiency of tact which was brought against Dickens when he bestowed certain of the external peculiarities of the living Leigh Hunt on that genial swindler, Harold Skimpole. In justice, it must be noted that Molière was here dealing with an enemy, who had assailed himself without provocation, whereas Dickens was misusing a friend who had done him no injury.

Although it was well known that Ménage had been the other participant in the squabble which suggested the quarrel scene of Trissotin and Vadius, Ménage did not sit for the portrait of Vadius. Very wisely he refused to put on the cap, holding that it would not fit him; and he never displayed any resentment toward Molière. Indeed, Vadius, the priggish pretender, is diametrically unlike Ménage, who was really a scholar, manly and unpretending. He was an intimate friend of Madame de Sévigné and of Madame de Lafayette, to whom he had given instruction in Italian and in Greek. He was a kindly man, serviceable to his friends and stanchly loyal to Fouquet after the disgrace of that supporter of arts and letters. And as an etymologist he was far in advance of his time. Molière could have had no grudge against Ménage since he had no hostility toward real scholarship. It was only the pretenders to learning that he delighted in unmasking. We may be sure that Vadius was no more intended for Ménage than Philaminte and Bélise were aimed at Madame de Sévigné and Madame de Lafayette, women who were essentially womanly although they had added culture to education.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE 'MALADE IMAGINAIRE' AND THE DEATH OF MOLIÈRE

I

THE final months of Molière's life were full of struggle, of sadness and of disappointment. His sister-in-law Madeleine Béjart, the comrade of his strolling, had died in February, 1672, exactly one year before the day on which he was to die himself. In September his second son had been born, to survive less than a fortnight, carried off in infancy, just as his elder son had been taken. His own health was giving him concern and his strength was failing slowly. He was beginning to weary of the incessant effort imposed on him. And there were signs that he did not stand so high in the favor of the king as he had supposed; at least it became evident that Louis XIV was not unwilling to sacrifice Molière to Lulli. The monarch seems always to have esteemed the playwright chiefly because of the prompt certainty with which Molière ministered to the royal pleasure by improvising the comedy-ballets for which Lulli composed the music; and when Louis XIV was called upon to choose between the intriguing composer and the sincere dramatist, he did not hesitate to prefer the Florentine to the Frenchman.

Lulli knew his own value and he was well aware that the king believed him indispensable for the court festivities of all sorts. Trading upon this and threatening to withdraw from France in case Louis XIV refused to grant him what he asked, he induced the monarch to confer upon him a privilege for opera which gave him almost a musical monopoly. Lulli was to have sole control over every musical performance which should be given before the king, whether in the royal chapel, at the Opéra or during the court festivities. The edict he extorted from the monarch also forbade any one else to perform anywhere any play set to music without his permission. Lulli began at once to profit by this royal privilege; the actors of the Palais-Royal and of the Hôtel de Bourgogne were notified that they could not thereafter employ more than six singers and twelve instrumentalists or engage any of the king's dancers, whose services were absolutely reserved to the manager of the Opéra.

When 'Psyché' was revived at the Palais-Royal, in the fall of 1672, Molière had to find substitutes for the original musicians and dancers; and he seems to have been so much annoyed by the restrictions which his former collaborator sought to impose on him, that when he brought out the 'Comtesse d'Escarbagnas' at his own theater, he discarded the music which Lulli had composed for the original performance and had a full score prepared by another composer, Charpentier. It was Charpentier, and not Lulli, to whom he confided the musical accompaniment of his last play, the 'Malade Imaginaire,' which had a burlesque ceremony as elaborate as that of the 'Bourgeois Gentilhomme,' and in which therefore the musical element was equally important.

The prologue of this piece proves that Molière intended it specially for performance at court before the king; and the comedy itself is evidence that it was planned to parallel the 'Bourgeois Gentilhomme,' with the expectation of repeating the success achieved by that medley of high comedy, farce and musical buffoonery. In this expectation the author-actor was disappointed. In all probability Lulli refused to permit the performance before the sovereign of a piece enlivened by the music of a rival composer. Louis XIV, forced to choose between Lulli and Molière, stood by the Italian. As a result Molière had to bring out his last play at the Palais-Royal; and the sovereign deprived himself of the pleasure of beholding it with the best actor of his reign in the chief part. This may have been a disappointment to the monarch himself; and it was certainly a loss to the author, whose comedy was represented before the playgoers of Paris without the prestige which it would have had from its original performance before the assembled courtiers.

II

Even though the 'Malade Imaginaire' was put together obviously to repeat the popularity of the 'Bourgeois Gentilhomme,' with its comedy of character tailing off into opéra-bouffe, its subject was not so gay. Indeed, the theme of Molière's last piece, taken in itself and detached from its laughable accompaniments, is sober, not to call it somber. Of course, its darkness is carefully disguised by its author, who lightened it deliberately because he knew that he was expected to make people laugh. Not only is the thesis of this piece more or less lugubrious, when we separate it from its humorous trimmings, but Molière's treatment is also frankly realistic, in the narrower and lower meaning of this adjective.

The central figure is Argan, the imaginary invalid, the character which Molière performed, and which he may even have modelled to some slight extent upon himself. Argan is a hypochondriac, a hysteric, a neurasthenic, who has deceived himself into the belief that he is a sick man and who has centered all his attention on his health. The medical science of the twentieth century would seek to cure Argan's mind rather than his body, assured that the latter would be able to take care of itself as soon as the former was set at ease. What Argan really needs is mental healing and not the drugs and purgations lavished upon him recklessly by the practitioners of his own time. There is really nothing the matter with Argan except his own belief that he has one foot in the grave. He rejects roughly every suggestion that he is not on the verge of death. He insists violently on being treated as desperately ill; he is irritable and irascible. And he is absolutely self-centered and therefore intensely selfish. He is as selfish as Orgon in 'Tartuffe,' and in the same fashion, since he wants to marry his daughter to a physician, so that he may have a medical attendant always at hand, just as Orgon desires his daughter to wed Tartuffe, so that the director of his soul might be bound to him by family ties.

Willing as he was to borrow from himself and from others, Molière had a fertile originality, and he was constantly displaying his ability to deal freshly and forcibly with matter that he had already handled. Three times before had he girded at the doctors, in the 'Amour Médecin,' in 'Monsieur de Pourceaugnac,' and in the 'Médecin malgré lui'; and now he returned to the charge for the last time, attacking the medical profession once more and from another point of view. He varied his method and approached his target from a different angle, but with an even acuter sense of the absurdity of contemporary medical pretensions. Apparently his own failing health, and the inability of the physicians to afford him relief, had made him more bitter than ever before and more biting in his satire.

It is indeed a startling exhibition of crass ineptitude that he has put before us in this last assault upon the dull but erudite doctors of his day, who had learned nothing except from the books of the ancients, and who had forgotten nothing therein contained. It is a strange collection of characters that Molière invites us to consider, representatives of every department of the healing art. There is Argan's own medical attendant, the learned Monsieur Purgon, with his immitigable sequence of laxative prescriptions. There is his special apothecary, the grasping Monsieur Fleurant, equipped with the instrument of his subordinate art and eager always for its employment. There is Monsieur Purgon's brother-in-law, the pompous Monsieur Diafoirius; and there is Monsieur Purgon's nephew, the younger Diafoirius. The force of satire cannot surpass this creation of Thomas Diafoirius, a stupendous caricature of the possible result of the medical education of the seventeenth century.

In all Molière's comedies there are no two figures of a more amusing veracity and of a more irresistible humor than the Diafoirius pair, the father inflated with sonorous solemnity, and the son stuffed with barren learning. It is by the speaking portraits of the three physicians and of the single apothecary who is their fit ally, and by the equally comic portrayal of the imaginary invalid, who is their proper prey, that Molière manages to raise this play up to the higher rank of true comedy, in spite of the fact that not a few of the episodes are undeniably farcical and that the termination is pure buffoonery, unmitigated fun which is its own excuse for being.

III

The other characters are less significant and less original. There is Béline, the second wife of Argan, believing in his illness and awaiting his death that she may despoil his children. Twice only has Molière chosen to introduce a step-mother, the gracious and charming Elmire, who is Orgon's second wife, and the treacherous and self-seeking Béline, who is Argan's second wife. There is Argan's elder daughter Angélique (impersonated by Mademoiselle de Molière), whom he wishes to marry off to Thomas Diafoirius, and who has chosen a husband for herself, Cléante (acted by La Grange). The lover gains access to the house in the guise of a music-teacher—just as another lover had already done in an earlier play of Molière's (and also in the 'Taming of the Shrew'). There is Argan's younger daughter, Louison, a mere child, who figures only in a single scene, which won the high approval of Goethe as masterly in its handling. There is the unscrupulous notary, Monsieur de Bonnefoi, whom Béline has called in to enable her to grasp more of Argan's fortune than the law permitted. There is Argan's brother Béralde, closely akin to the Cléante of 'Tartuffe' and the Ariste of the 'Bourgeois Gentilhomme,' and resembling his predecessors in the earlier plays in that he stands for common sense and in that he acts as the friend of the young lovers.

Finally there is Toinette, another of Molière's boldly drawn serving-maids, the embodiment of mirth, bringing a breath of fresh air with her whenever she comes into the sick-room and lightening it with a gleam of sunshine. Toinette recalls the Dorine of 'Tartuffe' and the Nicole of the 'Bourgeois Gentilhomme,' but with a more exuberant gaiety which is all her own. When Béralde persuades Argan to reject one of his doctor's prescriptions and when the insulted physician renounces and denounces his patient, predicting speedy demise in consequence of the withdrawal of medical advice, it is Toinette who comes to the rescue promptly, by disguising herself as a physician (just as Portia had disguised herself as a lawyer). Possibly it was the joyous humor of Toinette and the high spirits of the successive scenes in which she takes part which led Daudet to declare that there was in the 'Malade Imaginaire' an unmistakable flavor of the south of France, a memory of Molière's youthful stay in Pézénas and of his wanderings to and fro in Provence. Daudet went so far as to suggest that the play would gain in comicality if it should be acted with the accent of the south.

There is also a southern exuberance and even a southern exaggeration in the concluding episode of the farcical comedy, in the buffoonery of the burlesque ceremony, which was evidently devised to repeat the success achieved by the reception of the Mamamouchi in the 'Bourgeois Gentilhomme.' When Molière has shown us the hidden depths of Argan's selfishness and exhibited every aspect of the imaginary invalid's self-delusion, and when Toinette has played her merry trick of appearing as a physician, then Béralde gravely suggests that the best thing for Argan to do is to turn physician himself. He insists that Argan is not more ignorant than the doctors themselves, and that he will find himself endowed with all their learning as soon as he has donned the cap and gown of the profession. Argan is no more difficult to persuade than was Monsieur Jourdain; and then the fun becomes fast and fantastic. The spoken dialogue gives place to song and dance. In cadence and to music upholsterers dance in and decorate the room for the reception of the new doctor in medicine. Then two by two the academic procession sweeps in grandly; first of all, eight apprentice-apothecaries armed with the instrument of their craft, followed by six apothecaries, twenty-two physicians, and ten surgeons.

Singing and dancing they take their several places, and the presiding physician greets them in macaronic Latin, easily understood by a French audience. He praises their sacred art, their learning, their prudence and their common sense. He then invites them to admit a new member, Argan, who stands forward to pass his examination. As he answers the successive questions, the chorus acclaims in rime the felicity of his responses and declares his worthiness to be admitted to their learned body. The president administers the oath and the candidate swears to defend the rights of the faculty, and always to abide by what the ancients have asserted. He binds himself also to make use of no new remedy, even though the patient should die. The presiding physician thereupon confers upon their new colleague all the privileges of the profession to purge and to bleed and to kill throughout the whole world. The surgeons and the apothecaries dance forward to pay reverence to the new doctor, who sings his response to the accompaniment of rattling pestles and mortars. Finally the entire body circles around the recipient, wishing him a thousand years of life in which to eat and to drink, to bleed and to kill.

Grotesque as this termination of the play may seem to us now, it had a recognizable relation to the actual customs of Molière's own time. It is a parody, of course, with all the license of parody. But beneath its singing and its dancing and its amusing macaronics, we can perceive not so much an arbitrary invention of absurdities as a turning into ridicule of actual practices. Investigators into the history of medicine in the reign of Louis XIV find in this burlesque ceremony an adroit condensation of the long series of examinations and dissertations and admissions which a candidate for the doctorate in medicine had to undergo. One of these scholars has even asserted that he catches in Molière's parody an echo rather of the customs of the school of medicine at Montpellier than of those which obtained in Paris itself; and this may be taken, perhaps, as some slight confirmation of Daudet's discovery of a decidedly southern aroma in the comedy as a whole. It is proof, at any rate, that Molière was as conscientious in achieving substantial accuracy in his use of the technicalities of medicine as he was in his account of legal procedure and in his employment of law-terms. He may have seen the ceremony of a doctor's reception at Montpellier; and he must have drawn also upon the fuller knowledge of his own physician, Mauvillain.

IV

If it were not well known that the wildest humor often has its roots in the deepest melancholy, we might marvel at the bustling gaiety with which this play is wound up and at the bubbling merriment of the earlier scenes; and we might wonder at the variety of gay devices by the aid of which Molière was able to disguise the essential gloom of its central theme. On the surface at least there is little to show that it was written by a worn and weary man, disenchanted and almost disheartened, afflicted with a disease as incurable to-day as it was then. How fatigued he was in body and how broken in spirit we may gather from a confession he made after the third performance of the 'Malade Imaginaire.' Talking to his wife and to Baron, a young actor whom he cherished and who transmitted his remarks to Grimarest thirty years later, he declared that he had no longer any spirit for the struggle and that he was ready to give up. He could not bear up under constant pain and increasing disappointment. He felt that he was nearing the end; and yet, he added, "how much a man must suffer before he can die."

His wife and Baron besought him to take a rest and not to risk his strength on the stage again until he felt better. His answer to their appeals testifies to the kindly thoughtfulness of the man and to his essential unselfishness. "What would you have me do?" he asked. "There are fifty poor workmen who have only their day's wages to support them; what would they do, if I did not act?" And he persisted in appearing in the play for the fourth time; this was on February seventeenth, 1673. It was only with difficulty that he was able to get through the performance; and he was seized with a convulsion while he was taking the burlesque oath in the final ceremony. After the play he had a chill, and Baron sent for a sedan-chair and took him home, from the theater which Richelieu had built, to his house near by in the street which bore Richelieu's name. After he was put to bed he was seized again with a severe cough, which brought up blood. There were two sisters of charity visiting in the house, and they took care of him. He sent Baron to call his wife, but before they could reach him he was choked by the blood from a vein he had broken in his incessant coughing. When his wife came up with Baron, they found him dead. The priest, who had also been sent for, arrived too late to render him the last offices of the church. He had received the communion the preceding Easter.

Actors were still under the ban of the church, and they were not entitled to extreme unction unless they formally renounced the theater. Two priests of his own parish, who had been summoned first, had refused to come to the bedside of the dying comedian. The curate of the same parish also declined to permit the body to be buried in the parish cemetery—wherein he was only acting in accord with the ecclesiastical regulations then in force. The widow appealed to the archbishop of Paris to accord a special grace which would authorize this interment. When the archbishop—Harlay, a man of notoriously evil life—refused this request, the widow threw herself at the feet of the king; and permission was finally granted for the burial, on condition that the ceremony should take place without pomp, with two priests only, and with no solemn service. Thus it was that Molière's funeral was deferred until four days after his death and that it took place at night—as had always been the custom in ancient Rome. The coffin was covered with the pall of the upholsterers to whose guild Molière belonged. It was borne by four priests and three other ecclesiastics accompanied it—so that the strict letter of the permission was exceeded. Six choir-boys carried lighted candles in silver candlesticks; and several lackeys bore wax torches. There seems to be some doubt as to whether or not the body was actually interred in consecrated ground, and also as to whether or not the remains transported to the Panthéon during the Revolution were really Molière's.

V

In the later years of his life Molière had been prosperous. His income has been estimated as equivalent to about twenty thousand dollars of our money to-day. He was able to indulge his luxurious tastes; and although he himself lived simply, he had lavishly fitted up his house for his wife about a year before his death.

The inventory taken after his demise gives the list of his stage-costumes and of the books that composed his library. Among these were a Bible, a Plutarch, a Montaigne (but no Rabelais, oddly enough), a Terence (but no Plautus), a Lucian, a Horace, a Juvenal, and two hundred and forty volumes of unnamed French, Italian, and Spanish plays. He did not leave a large fortune, some forty thousand livres, but his widow and his sole surviving child, Madeleine, inherited his copyrights. A sum of fifteen hundred livres was paid for the privilege of publishing the plays the author had not cared to print. A further payment was made to the widow four years later when the younger Corneille turned 'Don Juan' into verse, softening down or smoothing out the passages which had given offense when the play was first acted.

In the dark weeks that immediately followed the death of Molière, it looked for a while as though the company he had directed might be compelled to disband. Several actors left it at Easter, when the theatrical year ended. And Lulli, now that his old collaborator was no more, persuaded the king to give him the Palais-Royal as the fittest theater for the Opéra. Ousted from their playhouse thus unexpectedly, the company headed by Molière's widow was fortunate in having among its members a man of the high character of La Grange. Under his guidance the actors expelled from the Palais-Royal set themselves up in another playhouse in the rue Guénégaud, where they were soon joined by the leading members of the company from the Marais theater, which the king then suppressed. The chief reliance of the combined comedians was upon the plays of Molière; and the new theater opened with a performance of 'Tartuffe.' Seven years after Molière's death, in 1680, Louis XIV ordered the actors of the Hôtel de Bourgogne to fuse with those of the Hôtel de Guénégaud, and thus established the still flourishing Comédie-Française, which is proud to style itself the "House of Molière" and to cherish loyally the traditions it has inherited directly from the original manager of the Palais-Royal.

Nothing could have been more becoming than the conduct of Molière's widow immediately after his death. She displayed abundant feeling and she behaved with the utmost propriety. She did willingly and promptly all that she was called upon to do. How deep her grief may have been we have no means of knowing, or how profound her affection for the husband to whom she had borne three children. She may very well have had a sincere regard for him without any romantic love and without in any way recognizing his greatness. Not always is a man of genius a hero in the eyes of his wife; and there is no reason to credit her with an ability to appreciate him at his full worth. Four years after his death she married again. Her second husband, Guérin, was also an actor, who had joined the company when the Marais theater was closed. By Guérin she had a son, who has testified that his mother brought him up to venerate Molière. She withdrew from the stage in 1694; and she died in 1700, nearly forty years after her marriage to Molière. To the end of her career in the theater she continued to impersonate the characters which Molière had written for her, and in the performance of which he had trained her.

Molière's sole surviving child was his only daughter, Madeleine, who was seven and a half years of age when she lost her father. She was nearly twelve when her mother remarried. In 1691, when she attained her majority, she had a slight dispute with her mother over her share of her father's estate, a matter which was settled two years later. Grimarest, writing in 1705, declared that the daughter had inherited her father's good qualities. In this same year she married a Monsieur de Montalant. She was then forty and the bridegroom was a widower of sixty. She survived until 1723—a hundred and one years after the date of her father's birth; then she died childless, and the lineage of Molière became extinct. Shakspere and Molière—to point a parallel in their lives for the last time—had both had sons born to them, who died before they did. Where Molière left only one daughter, Shakspere left two; and yet when his daughter's daughter died childless, his line came to an end almost as swiftly as Molière's.

CHAPTER XIX

MOLIERE THE MAN

I

In an early page of his biography of Schiller Carlyle asserted that "it would be interesting to discover by what gifts and by what employment of them he reached the eminence on which we now see him; to follow the steps of his intellectual and moral culture; to gather from his life and works some picture of himself." The Scotch critic affirmed that "it would at once instruct and gratify us if we could understand him thoroughly, could transport ourselves into his circumstances, outward and inward, could see as he saw and feel as he felt." And the biographer pointed out the difficulties of his task: "such men as he are misunderstood by their daily companions, much more by the distant observer, who gleans his information from scant records." And finally Carlyle called attention to the added difficulty due to the haze of a foreign language, of foreign manners, and modes of thinking strange to us—a haze, which "confuses and obscures the light, often magnifying what is trivial, softening what is rude, and sometimes hiding or distorting what is beautiful."

If Carlyle was conscious of these disadvantages, when he wrote only a scant half-century after Schiller's death, how much larger must they loom before any one who undertakes to deal with Molière almost three centuries after his birth. And yet there is fascination in the resolute grapple with difficulty, in the effort to see the man as he really was, to seize his character as it reveals itself to us, and to estimate his art. The task is irresistibly alluring, even if the result cannot be completely satisfactory. Moreover, any attempt to paint the portrait of the artist who has left us a gallery of pictures of the society in which he moved calls for the exercise of the most delicate criticism, of that discrimination, indeed, which "dwells less on the final balance of good and evil than on the first innate conditions of temperament," as Lord Morley has defined it, and which considers carefully "the fixed limitations of opportunity and the complex interplay of the two."

In psychologic analysis of this exquisite precision no one has ever surpassed Sainte-Beuve; and he took occasion more than once to declare his method. When he sat himself down before an author to discover the secret of character and to penetrate to the soul of his subject, he was in the habit of drawing up an interrogatory. He asked himself a series of questions as to the writer's race, his time, his family, his father and mother, his first group of friends and his later associates—since a man is ever known by the company he keeps. Then the critic pushed the inquiry further and sought to discover what were the circumstances of the author's career. How about his health? Was he rich or poor? What was his attitude toward money? How did he live? What were his relations with women? What was his dominating passion? What were his religious views and what was his philosophy? And it was only when he had held this inquest that Sainte-Beuve felt himself fully prepared to begin his criticism.

Even if the scrutiny may not have been pushed to its uttermost limits, the answers to most of the questions which Sainte-Beuve would have asked about Molière will be found in the earlier pages of this biography. Molière was born in Paris; his family was well-to-do; he saw the opening glories of the reign of Louis XIV; his health was never good; he made money and he spent it freely, living largely and having an open hand; he had a gift for friendship and he was fortunate in his friends; he was unhappily married; he died when he was only fifty-one and when he may not have revealed his full power. These are the fundamental facts which must serve to elucidate his character; and about them there can be no dispute. But there are not a few other aspects of the man, other characteristic facts which call for further consideration: his attitude toward religion, for one, and for another, his position as a representative of his race and of his time.

II

Molière's philosophy is closely akin to that of Rabelais and Montaigne; and although not so relaxed it is not really remote from that of La Fontaine. It is easy-going and tolerant; it does not expect too much from mankind; yet it makes the best of humanity as this happens to be. Here it parts company with the philosophy of Pascal and of Bossuet, and even of Racine, which is severe and austere, perhaps almost as rigorous for themselves as for others. Molière has not a little of the richness of Rabelais' humor, though he lacks the earlier writer's overflowing vitality; and beneath the humor of both there is deep observation and ripe reflection. They did their own think-

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From a photograph by A. Giraudon of the bust by Houdon, in the Théâtre Français

ing in their own fashion; and they were bold enough in reasoning, even if they felt it needful to be cautious in expression. Molière has also his full share of the skeptical optimism which characterizes Montaigne, who also loved sincerity and abominated falsity and pretension.

Considered by itself the philosophy of Molière is like his morality and his religion; it is that of a man of the world. It is not vague or dreamy or mystic; it is practical, even if it has a flavor of epicureanism rather than of stoicism. It is not nourished on abstractions; it clings to the concrete facts, interpreting them, no doubt, but also controlled by them. It is not unlike the eminently uninspired philosophy of Franklin, serviceable enough for everyday use, but not sustaining in the darker crises of existence. It leads Molière to take human nature as he finds it, not expecting too much and not unduly disappointed when men and women do not come up even to his modest expectations. It does not prevent his warning his fellows of the danger of selfishness and of hypocrisy; neither does it stimulate him with high hope that his caution will be heeded by many of those who hear him. It never awakens him to wrath against mankind at large and to scornful contempt for the human race as a whole. It helps him to laugh out loud rather than to weep or to scold. It is kindly and not uncharitable. It prevents him from idealizing humanity and it helps him to keep his grip on reality, on things as they are.

Molière has little aptitude for metaphysical speculation. His philosophy is not spiritualized; rather is it like his religion, distinctly terrestrial. Things celestial did not easily attract him; and the circle of his interests was contained in this world. To say this is to say that he was not religious by temperament and that his morality was but little touched with emotion. Here again he recalls Montaigne, whose influence on him is visible at every stage of his intellectual development. Both of them accept the church as they chance to find it, taking it as a matter of government and little concerned with its mysteries. There is no hypocrisy in their conforming to its minimum requirements; nor is there in this any sacrifice of conviction, since a deeply rooted religious conviction was as conspicuously lacking in the one as in the other. Neither of them cared to take thought about the matter, not holding any doctrine or any dogma important enough to quarrel about or to reward argument.

When religious disputes ran high Montaigne and Molière passed by on the other side, not tempted even to look on at the faction fight. They were well pleased that so long as a man kept peace with the church and did what it demanded, he was free to have his own opinions, even if he had better keep these to himself. Perhaps Molière did not even take the trouble to have opinions of his own about religion—although we may doubt whether he would have actually approved the dogma of the fall of man any more than Montaigne really believed in any doctrine of total depravity. He took his religion not exactly on faith, but by tradition, receiving it as a convention of society. Passionate as he might be, he was not sentimental and not emotional; and he could work his own code of morality and expound his vision of life without bothering his head any more about its spirituality than about its materiality. In other words his religion was not so much personal as it was social; and very likely he would have been willing enough to accept La Rochefoucauld's assertion that "most of the devout give us a distaste for devotion itself."

There is a far closer resemblance between Molière and those conforming skeptics Rabelais and Montaigne, than there is between him and the sincerely religious Pascal, whose 'Provincial Letters' undoubtedly broadened the scope of Molière's larger comedies. But Molière has his point of contact with Pascal in that they both submit themselves to the government of pure reason, whereas religion demands an element of poetry, if that word may serve to designate something which is not easy to define. This poetic element of religion is lacking in Pascal, humble as was his piety. Perhaps we can see more clearly into Molière when we recall what Sainte-Beuve has written about Pascal, who has "a mind logical, geometric, anxious as to causes, fine, clear, eloquent," and who therefore "represents the perfection of human understanding in what this understanding has that is most definite, most distinct, most detached in its relation to the universe." Molière is not Pascal, of course; in many ways he is the diametric opposite of Pascal; but not a little of this characterization of Pascal is applicable also to Molière, whose mind was also logical, lucid and eloquent, and whose understanding was definite and distinct.

III

Danger besets every attempt to compact a composite race into a single formula; and yet manifest and manifold exceptions may not invalidate a general definition if only that has been guardedly drawn up. The inhabitants of different countries differ; and it is not impossible, even if it is not easy, to indicate the deeper lines of cleavage between two nationalities. The French are like the Greeks of old in their regard for reason and in their reliance on intelligence as though it were sufficient for all things. They are like the Latins, whose traditions they have inherited, in their respect for order and for proportion, even at the expense of an artificial sharpness of outline and even at the cost of a certain hardness, which is evident enough in spite of their attitude of sympathetic comprehension. They are like the Celts, who contributed so large an element to their population, in their social attributes, in their irresistible desire to stand well with their fellows, in their facility of speech, in their ease and their gaiety, in their keen sense of the ridiculous and their light-hearted mockery.

They are unlike the Germans in that they lack the aptitude for philosophical speculation, preferring what is clear and precise to what is vaguely suggestive; they have also less lyric gift than the Germans, less dreamy sentiment. And they are also free from the excessive individualism of the English-speaking race, with its impatience of authority and its insistent demand for freedom. Perhaps this is because they have less of the essential energy which characterizes the Anglo-Saxon stock and which often expresses itself in imagination. And as they do not possess this, they do not greatly value it, preferring the qualities they have in its stead. As Nisard put it admirably, in France "reason, which is the common bond of all men, is more highly esteemed than imagination, which disperses them and isolates them." This is why the French are superior to all other modern races in their mastery of prose, which is the instrument of reason and of social intercourse. This is why they are less likely to excel in the loftier regions of poetry which demands rather the isolating imagination.

Here also we can find the explanation why the French have surpassed all other peoples in comedy, which is the picture of society and which must be a product of the intelligence, while their tragedy, perhaps the most characteristic department of all their literature, is not universally acceptable, and is indeed completely satisfactory only to the French themselves. "Such is this race," said one of the acutest of French critics, Taine, who had also a wide outlook over the other nations, "such is this race, the most Attic of the moderns, less poetic than the ancient, but as keen, with a mind exquisite rather than great, endowed rather with taste than with genius, sensual but without grossness or excessive ardor, not moral but sociable and gentle, not reflective but capable of grasping ideas, and all ideas, even the highest, in spite of their mockery and their gaiety."

When Taine wrote this he had in mind La Fontaine, whom he put forward as the embodiment of racial characteristics. But La Fontaine seems a little too narrow in his vision and a little too restricted in his productivity to be received as an acceptable representative in literature of the national type. Molière is a larger figure and fitter for this preëminence. We find in him the characteristics of the race more boldly displayed. He stands forward as the chief figure in all French literature, not only because of his ample genius, which causes his work to transcend the boundaries of a single language and to attain the universal, but because in him better than in any other French author we find the permanent and essential qualities of the French summed up and condensed once for all.

As La Fontaine is too limited in his scope to withstand comparison with Molière, so Rabelais is too exaggerated and Montaigne too skeptical in his curiosity. Pascal is too religious; and Voltaire is too cynical and disintegrating. Victor Hugo is too Teutonic and too individual; and Balzac is too tense and too confused. Better than any of them does Molière express the complexity of the national type. In his works we cannot help discovering all the best qualities of the French, the play of wit, the sense of humor, the keen intelligence, the reasoning faculty, the social instinct and the subtle insight into character. And whatever we may fail to find in his writings, we are not likely to be able to perceive often in the other authors of his language. Molière is the foremost figure of all French literature, as Dante and Cervantes and Shakspere are the leaders in their several tongues.

IV

"Order and clearness, logic and precision, severity of composition and finish of style," these, so Brunetière declared, have ever been the ideals of French writers; and never were these ideals more deliberately sought and more often attained than during the classical period, which almost coincided with the life of Louis XIV. We are wont to look upon Boileau as the exponent of the classical theories; but when he codified the rules of literary art he was only setting in array the scattered precepts already accepted in the practice of his elder contemporaries. He did not descend from the mountain with a new revelation, carrying the tables of the law in his hand.

The classical theory as Boileau maintained it was partly the result of the French acceptance of the principles worked out by the Italian critics of the Renascence, who deduced from Aristotle the doctrine of the three unities and the separation of the comic and the tragic. But it was modified by the social instinct of the French themselves and by their desire for simplicity of construction and for clarity of treatment. It imposed on all writers the duty of thinking about their readers as well as about themselves, and of so presenting what they had to say that it might be most readily received. They were expected to shun eccentricity, exaggeration, and awkwardness, and to avoid overt individuality. They were to keep to the middle of the road, not straying from the beaten path. They were expected to appeal, if not to the average man, at least to the general reader, who might be supposed to have derived from his general reading a common fund of knowledge and a common stock of ideas. This led them to generalize, to seek the typical, and to deal with every theme broadly and boldly in its larger aspects, not delaying long over individual peculiarities.

Molière is the chief figure of all French literature and especially of this classical period; he holds this position not only because he happened to live under Louis XIV and because he painted the society of that period, not only because he was the most indubitable genius of the era, but also because he accepted the classical theory and conformed his practice to it and found himself at ease within it. Corneille yielded to it a little unwillingly and kept chafing against its bonds; Racine, whose range was far narrower, was really a disciple of Molière, artfully applying to tragedy the method which Molière had exemplified in comedy. Racine was the result of the rigid application of the French classical dogmas, and he was therefore most fully appreciated by his own countrymen. He lacked breadth of interest; he has never won wide acceptance outside of France. Corneille has found more admirers in other countries, partly because he was not really in sympathy with the fundamental principles of the classicists. He was a Norman, with an almost Teutonic individualism; and he delighted in the stark assertion of the human will, which strengthens his drama, no doubt, but which appears sometimes to be almost anarchistic when contrasted with the uniform acceptance of the social bond, as we see this in Racine and in Molière.

It is the better side of the classical period that Molière represents, not its excesses or its weaknesses. He avoids the stately artificiality, which is the besetting sin of the period, and which disappoints us in the architecture of Versailles, for example; and he never relaxes into the empty grandiloquence discoverable occasionally even in Corneille. He is natural always; he neither soars too high nor sinks too low; he keeps in mind his spectators and he manages to express himself fully while he is delighting them. The drama must be the most social of the arts, not to say the most democratic. It has been called "a function of the crowd"; and it is necessarily the art which must make the broadest appeal to the people as a whole. Perhaps this is the reason that the doctrine of the theorists of classicism was most directly applied to the drama. The Abbé d'Aubignac had published his treatise on dramatic art a year before Molière's return to Paris; and while Molière's practical sense as a playwright prevented his blind adhesion to the rules as the theorists proclaimed them, and while he asserted again and again that the chief rule of all was to give pleasure—an assertion made also more than once by both Corneille and Racine—he never set himself in opposition to the theorists, and indeed defended himself against the charge that he had violated their "rules." Even if he did not care about them very much, he conformed to them—

except in 'Don Juan,' where his Spanish story required a departure from the unity of place.

At bottom, Molière, like Shakspere, cared little for any dramaturgic theories. Those which he took occasion to express are the result of his own methods. His theories did not control his methods; rather do his methods control his theories. As a result his theories and his methods were in accord; and he is never caught in contradiction with himself—as Zola is, for example, declaiming in favor of naturalism, while working if not romantically, at least epically. As it happened by good fortune, the principles of dramatic art proclaimed by the critics of his own time suited Molière's genius, and perhaps even aided its expansion. His composition is lucid and logical; and it may be that we do not at first perceive his richness in ideas, because they are presented so clearly and so unpretentiously. His plays are swift in movement and clear in outline, without hesitancy or confusion. He knows in advance what he is going to do and he does it with the unerring certainty of a mathematical demonstration.

He accepts the unity of action, the unity of place and the unity of time; he gives us a simple story, acted out in one place and within twenty-four hours; and he adds to these three the unity of character. Perhaps it ought to be said rather that the unity of character is the direct result of the unity of time, since a human being cannot greatly change within the space of a single day. He presents his chief characters with logical completeness, making them coherent and self-explanatory. They are never inconsistent or self-contradictory. We are never left in doubt as to the aim and as to the motives of Alceste as we may be as to those of Hamlet. Molière's psychology, deep and searching as it is, is also free from excessive complication. Although all his great characters are individual as well as typical, he tends toward the type—which was in accord with the theory of the classicists. Harpagon is a recognizable human being, of course, but he is also the embodiment of avarice itself; and herein is where Harpagon differs from Grandet, who is individual even more than he is typical.

The gap that yawns between classicism and realism is most evident when we compare Balzac's concrete presentation of his characters with the abstract methods of Molière. Balzac relates his figures to their backgrounds. Molière generalizes and avoids the specific; the persons in his plays are known to us only as they appear in these plays. There are few details of contemporary life to be gleaned in Molière, where there is a rich harvest in Balzac,—details about trade and money, about education and heredity. There are in Molière very scant indications even of the social condition of the characters. Who is Alceste, for example, and what is his position in society? These things we may infer, if we choose, but we are not specifically informed by the dramatist. Who is Tartuffe, and where did he come from? What have been his earlier adventures? Orgon has only a label for a name, although his mother is Madame Pernelle. In all Molière's comedies Monsieur Jourdain and Monsieur de Pourceaugnac are the only leading characters who have names of their own. And this is quite in accord with the classical theory, which approved of an abstract presentation, and which shunned the concrete as too personal and not sufficiently generalized. Yet his willing acceptance of this principle of the classicists does not loosen Molière's grip of reality. He may choose to present his characters in a different fashion, but they do not yield to Balzac's in their actuality, in their vitality.

V

There may be a hint of hardness now and then in Molière, for his intellect controlled his emotion; but there is no bitterness, no trace of the acerbity we cannot help finding in Beaumarchais. Molière saw only the glorious beginning of the reign of a beloved king, whereas Beaumarchais beheld the exposed shame of a degraded and degrading monarchy tottering to its fall. We do not catch in Molière's comedies that note of revolt which rings through the satiric plays of Beaumarchais; nor is there any exhibition by Molière of the sophistry of Rousseau or the cynicism of Diderot. He had no hatreds, except that he desperately despised pretenders of all sorts. He was too gentle and too kindly for any detestation of individuals. He was not vindictive, even toward Racine, who had acted meanly toward him. He was generous in temper as well as liberal with money. Grimarest derived from Baron more than one anecdote setting forth his open-handedness and the delicacy of his charity.

Even if a little disenchanted, Molière had no grudge against humanity. He was companionable; and he joyed in gathering his friends about him. Boileau and La Fontaine were habitual guests of the country house he had at Auteuil in the later years of his life. In their society he found relief from his abiding melancholy—that melancholy which often accompanies the broadest humor. Aristophanes may have been without it to his loss; but Cervantes had it for a certainty, despite his manly fortitude; and Swift was possessed by it. They had all of them command over the springs of laughter; they could all be gay with hearty expansion and with irresistible comic force; but none the less they had their days of depression. Life did not always wear its most amusing aspects in Molière's eyes; and the deeper he saw into the meanness of mankind, into its pettiness and its selfishness, the harder it must have been for him to keep always to the tone of comedy. But he never let any vision of the darker vices of humanity obscure his outlook on life. He retained his optimism to the end; he never lost his belief in nature.

It is in this trust in nature, when nature is controlled by reason, that we can find the clue to Molière's philosophy. It is this regard for what is natural which urges him on to expose pretension and affectation and hypocrisy. It explains his attacks on the *précieuses*, on the physicians and on the bigots. Above all else he cherishes sincerity and simplicity—especially sincerity in men and simplicity in women. It is his regard for nature again which leads him to be on the side of the young lovers in his plays when their natural mating is opposed by a parental selfishness unnatural in his eyes. He seems to hold that every one of us has a natural right to his or her share of happiness and even of pleasure, and that this natural right is limited only by the rights of others.

His morality is not religious but social. He was a self-controlled man, as his whole life proves; and he had neither time nor health for dissipation. But there was nothing ascetic in his sobriety. He had no longing for renunciation or for self-sacrifice for its own sake; these were Christian virtues that he did not appreciate or understand. Probably these appeared to him unnatural and therefore not to be cultivated. It is a very mundane morality, this of Molière's; and it has its obvious inadequacy. Yet it served his purpose. At bottom, he had himself a character of transparent simplicity and of unalterable sincerity. He was in no way self-conscious, self-centered or egotistic.

It may be because his morality is rather earthy than ethereal that he has found little favor with women. He is too direct, too keen-eyed and too plain-spoken to please them greatly. He appears to them lacking in passion and in poetry. Certainly he fails to idealize them, and they resent this, finding his comedies without that which delights them and flatters them in Shakspere's plays. Shakspere has heroines in plenty, even if he has few heroes; Molière has not even heroes. He writes for men who know life and who want to know it better, and not for women who prefer to ignore it. His plays are meant for men, who relish reality, and not for women, who are delighted rather with romance. He appeals to the manly love of veracity even if it is harsh or brutal, not to the womanly shrinking from certain revelations of the truth, even if it cannot be denied.

It is a fact, also, that women do not greatly care for any of the bolder humorists, not even for Shakspere when he is at his richest and broadest, as in Falstaff, for instance. They draw back from the hearty animality of it, the healthy grossness, which is a necessary element of large genius, and which we can discover in Luther and Franklin and Lincoln as well as in Shakspere and Molière. Women like to shut their eyes to this lower aspect of our common humanity; and they see no reason why attention should be called to it. They often prefer the feeble and unhealthy idealism of Shelley and of Poe, which seeks to soar above the soil and which only too often falls into the mire. Even when humor is not free and penetrating, women cannot help preferring a more pathetic treatment of life. They would rather weep than laugh. And there are no tears in Molière, but only the true comedy of mankind, with the mirth that clears the air and helps us to live our lives in this world. As Goethe said, "Molière is a genuine man; there is nothing distorted about him. He chastened men by drawing them just as they are."

CHAPTER XX

MOLIERE THE DRAMATIST

I

MOLIÈRE was only ~~fifty-one~~ when he died, and all except two of his thirty plays had been written in the final fourteen years ~~of his life~~. From 1659 to 1673 there was no single year in which he did not produce at least one play; and there were four years in which he brought out three pieces within the twelvemonth. In all but one of these plays he acted himself; and he also directed the affairs of the company. He had need to be both fertile and facile in these later years when the demands on him were incessant and imperative. Fortunately for him he had served a long apprenticeship in the provinces, solving the mysteries of the art of playmaking and amassing a store of observations of human nature. When at last he was able to return to the capital, his genius ripened swiftly. The dramatists have usually begun to produce plays when they were in the first flush of youth, in sharp contrast with the novelists, who have often flowered late in life. Molière, however, was forty-two when he wrote 'Tartuffe,' forty-three when he followed it with 'Don Juan,' forty-four when he brought forth the 'Misanthrope,' and fifty when he made fun of the 'Femmes Savantes.' Perhaps a part of the deeper insight and the wider vision of these masterpieces of comedy is due to the relative maturity of their author when he composed them.

As we consider the strict succession of his comedies we can trace the steady growth of his power as a dramatist. In the very earliest of his plays we meet with his characteristic gayety, animation and swiftness. He is already a master of the craft of playmaking; he has achieved constructive skill; and he has attained to asbolute certainty of execution. But his humor then is not so rich as it revealed itself in the later plays; it is more or less external in these earlier pieces, arising rather from deliberate ingenuity of artificial situation than from piercing observation of life and character. Indeed, in the 'Etourdi,' for example, our interest is aroused mainly by the situation and scarcely at all by the characters, who are little more than profile figures, created to carry out the plot.

Then as he slowly gains confidence in himself and as he steadily wins authority with the public, he puts more and more human nature into his comedies, and he relies less and less on the easier and more mechanical effects of equivoke and surprise. Yet he advances very cautiously indeed, desirous of carrying his audience along with him and unwilling ever to disconcert them by too rapid a stride forward. The 'Ecole des Femmes' is already a comedy-of-manners, but it is still a comedy-of-intrigue; it has a thesis and it contains a moral, but its form is that of the familiar comedy-of-masks. Not until he wrote 'Tartuffe' did he emancipate himself completely from this convenient Italian frame. When he composed 'Tartuffe' he perfected a new formula of his own, fit for all the higher efforts of his comic genius, used by him again in the 'Misanthrope' and in the 'Femmes Savantes,' and now accepted by every writer of comedy in every modern language.

Yet, even after he had gone forward to high comedy he never shrank from going back to low comedy, for he was master of both, and he needed both to express himself completely. Even in the last year or two of his life, in the 'Fourberies de Scapin,' he utilized again the framework of the comedy-of-masks, which he knew to be permanently popular with the Parisian playgoers. The later plays on this Italian model are only superficially like the earlier, as we can see plainly when we compare the 'Fourberies de Scapin' with the 'Etourdi,' a comparison which easily establishes Molière's constant progress as a comic playwright. In both pieces the situations are brisk, lively and ingenious; but the earlier play is dependent solely on these situations, while the later play is carried by its characters, who are far more solidly and amply conceived than those that appear in its more primitive predecessor. Here once more there is a Shaksperean parallel; the English dramatist willingly descended to farce again when he put together the 'Merry Wives of Windsor,' after he had risen to the more delicate comedy of the 'Merchant of Venice.' And the 'Merry Wives,' it may be noted also, farce as it must be called, is peopled with characters recognizably human, and far more real than those in 'Love's Labor's Lost,' wherein the resolution to be clever is quite as obvious as in the 'Etourdi' and wherein the humor is quite as external.

Although Molière, in more than half of his comic plays, chose to avail himself of the formula of the comedy-of-masks, assured of its attractiveness to the public and satisfied to use it as a means of calling forth hearty laughter, he was in fact remarkably prolific in the invention of new dramatic forms. In 'Tartuffe' and the 'Femmes Savantes' he has left us the model of high comedy. In the

'Fâcheux' he contrives the first protean play, in which a single actor can appear in several parts in swift succession. In the 'Critique de l'Ecole des Femmes' he puts on the stage a piece which is only a literary criticism in dialogue, a daring feat never before attempted. In the 'Impromptu de Versailles' he takes the audience behind the curtain and makes a play out of a rehearsal, anticipating Buckingham and Sheridan. In the 'Mariage Forcé' he hits on the fit method for making a comedy-ballet. In 'Psyché' he anticipates grand opera with all its sustaining spectacular effects, as in the 'Sicilien' he suggests the future opéra-comique. In the 'Misanthrope' and the 'Avare' he creates the comedy-of-character, which was to have a long life in the French theater. And in a host of other pieces he leaves us interesting variants of the comedy-of-intrigue and of the comedy-of-manners.

II

That he did these things was largely due to the fact that he was not only a dramatic author, but also a theatrical manager. The demands of the manager must always condition the work of the author. However Molière might aspire as a poet, he rarely allows his ambition as an author to interfere with his duty to the company he is directing. He keeps his finger on the pulse of the public, and when it fails to accept what he has given it, he never hesitates to retrace his steps and to provide it with what he knew by experience it is certain to approve. If the playgoers of Paris will not accept a heroic comedy like 'Don Garcie,' with him in the heroic part, he never again repeats the attempt. If the 'Misanthrope,' the play of his predilection, proves to be too bare of story to win wide popularity, he takes the warning to heart and sustains the 'Femmes Savantes' by a plot more likely to arrest attention and to win sympathy.

Like every other great dramatic poet he composed his plays, not for the readers of posterity, but for the spectators of his own time. He intended them, not for perusal, but for performance—by actors, in a theater and before an audience—and therefore he fitted his characters to the actors who were going to impersonate them, he adjusted his plots to the playhouse wherein they were to be exhibited, and he kept in mind always the likes and the dislikes of the spectators before whom his plays were to be acted, whether at court or in the capital.

Probably he did not do these things any more conscientiously than Shakspere, but unfortunately we know far less about the company of the Globe in London than we know about the company at the Palais Royal in Paris. If Hamlet, who is "the glass of fashion and the mold of form," is also "fat and scant of breath," we may surmise that this is only because Burbage was beginning to put on flesh. If Argan in the 'Malade Imaginaire' has a cough, we know that this was because Molière wrote the part for himself, after his own cough had become troublesome. If Tartuffe is plump and well-favored, this may be partly because the character was composed for Du Croisy. If La Flèche in the 'Avare' limps, we can discover the reason in the fact that his part was written for Molière's brother-in-law, Béjart, who was lame. If the Toinette of the 'Malade Imaginaire' and the Nicole of the 'Bourgeois Gentilhomme' have less authority than the Dorine of 'Tartuffe,' and a more infectious joyfulness, although the three characters are otherwise very much alike, we can explain this easily enough when we remember that Dorine was written for Madeleine Béjart, who had played many a leading part in tragedy, whereby she gained breadth and weight, and that her successor, Mademoiselle Beauval, for whom Nicole and Toinette were composed, was a younger woman of less experience, but with a spontaneous laugh and a gift of bubbling gayety.

We can gage the range of Molière's own art as an actor when we recall that he was unfailingly successful in the chief comic characters of a large majority of his own plays. He did not appear as Tartuffe or as Don Juan, but he did impersonate Alceste, Orgon and Argan, Mascarille, Sganarelle and Scapin. We can also form a clear idea of the very remarkable ability of his wife as an actress, when we call the roll of the important parts with which she was intrusted and in which she was completely successful, according to all contemporary criticism. She had youth and charm, even if not acknowledged beauty; but these qualities alone would not equip her for the performance of characters as various and as difficult in their several degrees as the Angéliques of 'George Dandin' and of the 'Malade Imaginaire,' as Elmire and Célimène and Henriette. We can be sure that her husband would never have written these parts for her, if he had not seen in her a capacity to play them brilliantly.

It is true, of course, that the author was his own stage-manager, and that he insisted on educating all the company to speak his lines and to personate his characters exactly as he intended. It is probable that he did not spare himself in the trouble he took in the training of his wife, in explaining his wishes to her and in suggesting readings and gestures and business. But she must have had the native gift or all this would have availed little. Mrs. Siddons is known to have profited by many an invaluable suggestion from her able and scholarly brother, John Philip Kemble; and Rachel did her best only after she had had the benefit of Samson's advice. But without these extraneous aids Mrs. Siddons and Rachel would have been eminent in their profession; and so would Armande Béjart, even if she had the path made smoother before her by the genius of her husband.

In certain of Molière's earliest pieces the performers are so closely identified with the parts they impersonated, that the characters are called by the actual names of the actors themselves,—Gros-René in the 'Dépit Amoureux,' and Jodelet, La Grange and Du Croisy in the 'Précieuses Ridicules.' And in this last play the two pretentious young women who have come up from the provinces are known only as Madelon and Cathos. Brunetière suggested that these names were significant in themselves, as Madame de Rambouillet was called Catherine and Mademoiselle de Scudéry, Madeleine. But this ingenious suggestion loses most of its point when we remind ourselves that the two parts were played by Madeleine Béjart and Catherine de Brie.

It has been pointed out by more than one commentator that, although Molière presents many fathers, he scarcely ever introduces a mother, and that he gives us no single portrayal of maternal love, in spite of the unusual strength in France of the bond between mother and child. We can account for this omission by recalling the fact that Molière's own mother had died when he was very young, and that he prefers to put into his plays no sentiment he had not witnessed at first hand. This explanation may be valid; but another will present itself to any one who considers closely the absolute exactness with which the dramatist always adjusts his comedies to the company for which they were composed. Molière's plays never contain any character for whom there was not a fit performer already attached to the Palais-Royal; and he never burdened the treasury of the theater with the cost of a special engagement. Now, there was no "old woman" in the company, and the occasional elderly female whom Molière brings on the stage is always so vigorously drawn that she can be played by a man. Madame Pernelle and Madame Jourdain, Philaminte and the Comtesse d'Escarbagnas were each of them originally impersonated by a male actor, capable enough of depicting the humorous peculiarities of these characters, but probably not competent to suggest the tenderer sentiment of motherhood.

III

Molière's comedies are not more consistently fitted to his own comedians than they are to the actual stage of the theater for which they were composed. Even the more or less spectacular comedy-ballets, prepared for the king and the court, were most of them so constructed that they could be brought out afterward at the Palais-Royal with little loss of effect. The French comedians shared this theater with the Italian comedians; and quite possibly the two companies had a common stock of scenery. Certainly Molière is constantly employing the traditional set of Italian comic drama, inherited, it may be, from the Latin, or else derived from the permanent scenery that Palladio built upon the stage in his theater at Vicenza. This had the obvious advantage that it enabled the playwright to conform to the unity of place by massing together in a single spot the residences of all the characters. We find this set in more than a third of Molière's pieces.

In another third of his plays, including all the larger and more elevated comedies, the scene is an interior which serves for all the acts. In but two or three plays does Molière allow himself to violate the unity of place; and there are changes of scene only in the more or less spectacular pieces, 'Don Juan' and 'Psyché.' We need to bear in mind always, that in Molière's theater, as in Shakspere's, spectators were permitted to have seats on the stage itself, well down in front. At the Globe in London these playgoers had to provide themselves with stools, which they procured behind the arras before they came forward; whereas at the Palais-Royal they seem to have been placed on benches that ran back at right angles to the line of the curtain. The presence of these spectators on the stage, hidden from the audience when the curtain fell, but able to see whatever went on behind it, deprived Molière of the modern playwriter's privilege of ending the act with a tableau. At the Palais-Royal, as at the Globe, all the characters had to make their exits before the end of the act. Indeed, this emptying of the stage was the conventional signal that the act was over.

With a part of the audience sitting in full view and with the important episodes always acted well forward and between these rows of spectators, the dramatist could not aim at the pictorial effects which the more modern playwright has at his command in our latter-day theaters. As the stage was only dimly lighted, the acting had to take place remote from the scenery, and the dramatist could not relate his characters to their background. He could make only occasional and limited use of properties or of furniture. His characters had to stand, or at least he provided seats for them only when this is absolutely demanded by the action—as in the interview between Elmire and Tartuffe, when she sits by the side of the table under which Orgon has concealed himself.

This extreme simplicity of presentation is not imposed on the modern stage, free of all spectators and seen through the picture-frame of the proscenium. But it had its advantages as well as its disadvantages. For one thing, it focused interest on the action itself and on the characters who were taking part in the action. And, for another, it has bestowed on the play itself a transportability which few modern pieces possess, since they require a more elaborate scenic adornment. A comedy of Molière's could be acted anywhere and anywhen, almost without preparation. This accounts for the ease with which he was able to present his plays in private houses. It explains, also, why his comedies are now performed at the Théâtre-Français without alteration, omission or transportation—without any of the hacking and mangling which is absolutely imperative when one of Shakspere's plays is presented in a modern playhouse.

It cannot be said too emphatically or too often that the theater for which Shakspere wrote was semi-medieval, whereas the theater for which Molière wrote was essentially modern, even if it did not contain all the latest improvements. Shakspere's theater was unroofed, it was illuminated only by daylight, and its stage had no scenery. Molière's theater was roofed, lighted and furnished with scenery. This is why Shakspere is a most unfortunate model for all modern poets, whose dramas are intended for performance in the playhouses of to-day. Coming after the theater had given up the semi-medieval methods which still obtained when Corneille wrote his earlier plays, and after it had taken on conditions not radically different from those which we find in the playhouse of the twentieth century, Molière was fortunately able to anticipate the dramatic form still acceptable after nearly three hundred years. Indeed, this dramatic form, devised by Molière and exemplified in 'Tartuffe,' is almost identical with that employed by Ibsen, a later master of dramaturgy, in the 'Pillars of Society,' and in the 'Doll's House.'

IV

Molière did not study his actors and his theater more persistently than he studied his audiences. He knew them intimately, and he was one of them, a Parisian by birth and breeding; their point of view was his also; and he had inherited the same preferences and prejudices. He knew that they came to the Palais-Royal for laughter, first of all; and he rarely disappointed them of this. He was ever ready to give them what they were seeking, although he often put before them stronger meat than they had asked for. Even when he turned, in time, to themes not comic in themselves, he was careful to present these from the most humorous standpoint and to lighten them and brighten them with episodic characters and situations often frankly farcical. He was glad to give the contemporary spectators again and again the kind of comic play that they had most enjoyed; he might enrich this comedy-of-intrigue with a deeper portrayal of character, but he did not depart from his principles. It was by slow steps that he ventured to advance from the more or less mechanical form of the 'Etourdi' to the more significant comedy of the 'Ecole des Femmes' and 'Tartuffe.' To the very end Molière sought for laughter even when he was also striving to stimulate thought.

"Lasting works usually have pleased all classes in their own time," said Stedman in discussing Whitman; and this shrewd saying is exemplified in the immediate and enduring popularity of Molière's plays. The Parisian playgoers supported his theater liberally and sturdily, even while his enemies were shrilly protesting. These playgoers knew what they wanted and they knew where to get it. That they valued what they were getting as we rate it to-day, it would be unreasonable to suppose. While posterity now esteems Molière chiefly as a creator of undying characters, his contemporaries held him in regard as a humorist, as the man who made them laugh as an author and at whom they laughed as an actor. However popular he may be, a humorist rarely receives recognition in his lifetime, still less appreciation. Rabelais, for one, was highly esteemed as a scholar and as a physician; but contemporary writers scarcely ever mention his books, which probably seemed to them too low and too vulgar to demand consideration as literature. Cervantes, for another, survived to see the public liking for his great work proved by the eagerness with which pirate publishers reprinted it; yet it was more than a century after his death before the discovery was made that 'Don Quixote' was more than a narrative of comic misadventure.

"Humanity moves onward like an army," so Renan wrote in his youth; "great men are the scouts in advance, and the main body of the army follows, more or less near; this is why great men are not usually known in their century—they are ahead." This may be true enough of the philosophers and of the original thinkers;

but it can never be true of the dramatists, since they cannot risk themselves too far ahead of the main body of their contemporaries. Probably no dramatist has ever been an original thinker, in the largest meaning of the term, just as no practical statesman has ever been. Certainly Shakspere and Molière were not original thinkers, pioneers in speculation, any more than Washington or Lincoln. It was not their function to carry the torch ahead and to lead the way into unexplored regions. Rather was it their duty to hold up a lantern so as to illuminate the way for the main body, and to keep the stragglers from stumbling into the wrong road. It is because Shakspere and Molière were not original thinkers, but interpreters of the eternal truths which cry aloud to be set forth anew for every generation, it is because they kept in close contact with humanity, with the men and women of their own time, that they were able both to please their contemporaries then and to delight us now. Human nature is not changed in the twinkling of an eye; it is only a little transformed with the revolving centuries. Men are men, after all, and once for all; and the portraits painted three hundred years ago are recognizable to-day. Macbeth and Tartuffe are with us still; their souls are the same, even if Macbeth has given up war for finance, and even if Tartuffe has turned from religion to politics.

V

Perhaps it is due, in a measure, to his enforced study of the public he had to please that Molière developed so cautiously and tentatively from a writer of brisk farces into the master of high comedy; and yet this retarded growth may be ascribed rather to the absence of any model for his guidance. When he began to write, the comic drama of the French was unreal; it was under the influence of Spanish extravagance; Scarron's free adaptations were almost unrelated to actual life; and if there was more observation and reflection in Corneille's comedies, there was still not a little superficiality. Molière strives for the real, but he is his own contemporary, after all, conscious that he has to please these contemporaries; and in the mere mechanism of his plots he never shrinks from utilizing traditional artificialities to bring characters together, or to marry off a young couple summarily when the play has to end somehow, so that the laughing spectators might leave the theater satisfied that all was as it should be.

In this less important matter he may be careless at times; but he is never careless in matters that count. There is a sharp contrast between his occasional romanticism in plot-making and the eternal reality of his character-drawing. We have no reason to doubt that he knew as well as we do, that 'George Dandin' ends where it begins, and the 'Misanthrope' also. When we have been made acquainted with the chief characters of these two comedies and with the contradiction in which they have entangled themselves, the play may come to an end, for the dramatist has accomplished his purpose completely. The first two acts of the 'Bourgeois Gentilhomme' are given up to the presentation to the public of Monsieur Jourdain, and the actual plot does not emerge into sight until the third act; but this is of small consequence, since the story imports little or nothing and the central character everything. Molière never scorns the niceties of preparation, when preparation is necessary to his major purpose. The opening dialogue of the two sisters in the 'Femmes Savantes' takes us into the center of the action and arouses in us the liveliest interest to see the solution of the dilemma. Tartuffe is prepared for and made transparent long before we are allowed to see him in the flesh. Agnès is permitted to reveal herself completely the moment she appears. In all this there is nothing haphazard, nothing left to chance; and Molière never neglects any detail of construction which seems to him of "the essence of the contract." It is in these touches that he displays his mastery of the craft of play making.

Sainte-Beuve insisted that Molière is not merely a portrait-painter, but a delineator of society as a whole. He is not a miniaturist but a fresco-painter, working boldly, with swift certainty of stroke. With unfailing fidelity he depicts the social organization of his own time—which is precisely the one thing that Shakspere never attempts, except casually in the 'Merry Wives.' His portrayal revives that brilliant society before our eyes and sets it again in front of us as it was when it unconsciously posed to the artist. Beneath the contemporary we cannot fail to find the permanent, for he gives us the lasting truth about human nature as well as the accidental facts about his own time. Grandet is more elaborately drawn than Harpagon, but he is not more veracious, more vital, more alive. The 'Femmes Savantes' is at bottom as modern as the 'Monde où l'on s'ennuie,' as well as solider and sincerer.

Any one of Molière's greater comedies is a picture of society united by the social bond, not rent asunder by overt individualism; and therefore it is characteristically French in its temper. There is sanity not less than thorough workmanship in all these larger comedies; and there is dignity of purpose also, not mere amusement only and unthinking laughter. In the 'Femmes Savantes,' for example, the foolishness of the learned ladies is shown to be not altogether innocent, since it leads Armande to shun the honorable office of wife, and since it dries up the natural affection of Philaminte for Henriette. Molière delights in dealing with the affectations and with the passions that destroy the family and with the vices which corrode and disintegrate society itself—selfishness and self-seeking and hypocrisy. In themselves these themes may not be laughable, but Molière manages to make us laugh, while he is also making us take thought of ourselves. Subjects which Balzac was to present tragically, Molière contrives to keep within the limits of comedy, thereby giving to comedy a wealth of meaning it had never before conveyed.

In setting before us the men and women of his own time, who are human beings for all time, Molière sometimes simplifies summarily the characters he is presenting, he sometimes exaggerates their essential characteristics, and he sometimes does both, not shrinking from caricature—as in the case of Bélise, in the 'Femmes Savantes.' He is willing enough to sharpen his outline and to heighten his color when this seems to him needful; but this necessity is not frequent; and in most of the larger comedies the characters are presented without any forcing of the note, with only the condensation and the swift intensity demanded in the theater where every minute is counted.

Molière's characters are not only veracious, they are also astonishingly varied; and his range of observation is most remarkable. In one play or another he puts on the stage all sorts and conditions of men. He is the only French author of his time who gives any thought to the peasants; he does not often introduce them, but when he does, as in

'Don Juan,' it is with sympathetic understanding. He is familiar, also, with the male and female riff-raff of the nether world of dark intrigue; and he draws out of this the sinister figure of Frosine in the 'Avare.' If the Dorante of the 'Bourgeois Gentilhomme' has not yet fallen to this lower level, he is plainly on the downward path, in spite of his birth and his breeding and his social pretensions.

Probably it never entered Molière's head to question the autocracy of the king, which was the only rule he knew; and probably, again, he would have agreed with Ben Jonson in regarding the court as the "special fountain of manners." Certainly he was well affected toward the court; he set the courtiers frequently on the stage; and almost the monarch himself in 'Tartuffe.' The chief figures in the 'Misanthrope' all belong to the group that immediately surrounded the throne. Molière takes occasion to praise the good judgment of the courtiers and the open-minded and unpedantic criticism of the men of the world who gathered about the person of the monarch. But he is not dazzled by the glamour ot the royal circle; and he is no flatterer. He holds the foolish marquis up to ridicule again and again; he exhibits Dorante as an unscrupulous adventurer, if not yet a frank swindler; and he paints Don Juan as the boldest of villians. Even the petty nobles of the provinces do not escape his keen observation; and the two Sottenvilles, fitly mated, are immortalized in all their superb self-satisfaction.

Of course, it is the burgher class that he draws most frequently, with the utmost intimacy of knowledge. He brings before us tradesmen and citizens of high and low degree, Orgon and Harpagon, Jourdain and Chrysale, with their wives, with their sons and their daughters, and especially with their servants, male and female. When he takes us into the interior of a French family of the middle class under Louis XIV, nothing is more characteristic and nothing displays better his unfailing felicity of observation than the place in these households which is taken by the maidservants. Sometimes the menservants are authentic peasants, as in the 'Ecole des Femmes' and 'George Dandin', but more often not; the valets are a little fantastic, at least there is no denying that Mascarille and Scapin are impossible domestics in any realistic representation of family life, and this is the reason we fail to find them in the more spacious comedies. They are survivals of the cunning slaves of Latin comedy, or taken over from the tradition of the contemporary comedy-of-masks.

The maidservants, however, are drawn from real life, caught in the act. They appear at first sight to be variants of a simple type, but they are often clearly individualized. Martine is a peasant girl, and Nicole probably comes from the country, whereas Toinette and Dorine seem to be city-bred. They all talk and they all feel as if they belonged to the family—indeed, almost as if the family belonged to them. They are the confidants and the abettors of the daughters' love affairs. On occasion they voice the sturdy common sense of the author himself. They have a hearty humor and a free tongue, quite impossible of toleration to-day, when servants come and go, and when they are trained to know their place and not to step outside of it. They recall the "mammy" of the old South, who mothered the whole brood of her mistress, who was well aware of her rights as a member of the family, and who did not hesitate to assert them. Dorine, for one, although she is ready to dodge Orgon's box on the ear, feels herself a privileged character, saying her say boldly, and contradicting her master, secure in the knowledge that she is a fixture in the family. Of a certainty she had rooted herself in the household when Orgon's first wife was yet alive, and after the mother's death she it was who brought up Valère and Mariane.

VI

A literary masterpiece often derives much of its greatness from the fact that we can find in it much more than the author deliberately put there. We read into it a profounder meaning than he intended; and this is no betrayal, since he is one of the supreme masters of his art, only because he was able to build "better than he knew." The little sapling that the author planted and tended during his own brief life strikes down deep roots after his death and grows into a branching tree, whose lofty stature he never foresaw. We now discover in Molière, as in Shakspere, much that would greatly surprise them. They wrote for the stage of their own day, for their immediate contemporaries, giving no thought to the generations that were to come after. Yet posterity is glad to analyze in the study to-day what they meant only for the stage of long ago. They pleased the crowd of their own times and they still delight the scholars, the men of affairs and the plain people also, both in the theater and in the library.

Molière is like Shakspere, once more, in that his plays have never lost their popularity in the playhouse except for a brief season now and again. Critical theories may come and go, but Molière's comedies keep their firm hold on the playgoing public. They have been continuously acted by the Comédie-Française, the company of comedians which can pride itself on its direct descent from the little group of actors whom Molière brought back to the capital two and a half centuries ago, and which still cherishes loyally the traditions inherited from its founder. Not only in this unparalleled national theater have Molière's plays continued to attract unfailing audiences, but also in playhouses of less pretensions. They have retained their power to please the unlettered public in Paris and in the provinces, even when inadequately performed by strolling actors of inferior training. They are still, as they have always been, the plays in which the ambitious young comedian strives to prove himself. Their appeal has been potent with the plain people who go to the theater unthinkingly for the special pleasure to be had there, and there only; and it has been as indisputable upon the keenest judges of literature and life.

One of the truests tests of a great writer is to call the roll of his admirers and of his disparagers, of his friends and of his foes. And this trial Molière withstands triumphantly now and always. In his own day he was best appreciated by Boileau and by La Fontaine; and in every generation since then he has been beloved by those whose affection was best worth having—by Goethe and by Fielding, by Scott and by Sainte-Beuve. Goethe, for example, declared, "I have known and loved Molière from my youth, and I have learned from him during my whole life." And Sainte-Beuve asserted that to love Molière, "to love him sincerely, is to have a guarantee against many a defect and many a fault; it is to be antipathetic to all pedantry, all artificiality of style, all affectation of language; it is to love common sense in others as well as in yourself; it is to be assured against the dangers either of overestimating our common humanity, or of underestimating it; it is to be cured forever of fanaticism and intolerance." Molière's enemies are as honorable to him as his admirers; they are the fanatics and the pedants—Rousseau, for one, and Schlegel for another. Goethe was characteristically shrewd when he asserted that Schlegel felt that if he had been a contemporary of Molière, he might have been pilloried by the side of Trissotin.

While the acutest and ripest critics of every tongue have been abundant in praise, the dramatists of all countries have paid the sincere flattery of imitation. In France, Regnard and Marivaux and Beaumarchais all derive from Molière; they all find inspiration in the study of his comedies; and in him they are all contained in germ. In the nineteenth century Augier and Labiche follow in his footsteps. In England he was imitated while he was yet alive by Dryden; and in its form, if not in its spirit, the comedy of Wycherley and of Congreve is taken from the comedy of Molière. Goldsmith and Sheridan are his pupils, perhaps more or less unconscious of the fact. He was the model for Holberg in the North and for Goldoni in the South; and Lessing, even if a little unsympathetic, profited by his example. And almost every modern dramatist, whether he knows it or not, has to express himself in the mold that was first used by Molière, who is really the earliest of dramatists to work in complete accord with the conditions of the modern theater.

Nor is his influence confined to the drama alone. The felicitous character-drawing of Steele and Addison in the social essay was due, in some measure, to their admiration for Molière. Brunetière pointed out the impress of Molière on Le Sage, and Le Breton has observed it on Balzac. Fielding began his literary career by adaptations from Molière, whose influence can be discovered easily in the novels of his maturity. It is thus that the great French comic dramatist's methods of conceiving and presenting character and of handling humorous situation have been transported from the play to prose-fiction. This stimulation is as obvious in the novel of the English language as in that of the French. From Le Sage it passes to Smollett and to Dickens; from Fielding and Balzac it is transmitted to Thackeray and Meredith; and from Scott, who received a double current, one direct and the other indirect from 'Gil Blas,' it has been spread abroad to all the writers of romanticist fiction who walk in the trail blazed by the author of the Waverley Novels.

It was only in the early nineteenth century that the novel really proved itself a formidable competitor of the play; and it was only in the mid-years of that century that prose-fiction seemed about to overwhelm the drama and to usurp its place. A part of the power of the novel is the direct result of its adoption of the methods of the dramatists, and more especially of Molière. Now, at the beginning of the twentieth century, while the novel is slackening a little, the play is awakening for a renewed rivalry with prose-fiction. The modern drama must also avail itself of Molière's methods, as it has, perforce, to accept the external form he established. To-day poetry is languishing, while the novel is flourishing and while the drama is taking on new life. In both of the most prosperous departments of modern literature we can see the mark of Molière.

CHAPTER XXI

MOLIERE AND SHAKSPERE

I

"Of Menander I know only the few fragments," so Goethe declared, "but these gave me so high an idea of him that I look upon this great Greek as the only man who could be compared with Molière." When he said this, the great poet, who was also a great critic, had only comedy in his mind, which led him to pass over Shakspere, who put forth his topmost power only in tragedy. The comparison of Shakspere and Molière, which the German did not care to draw, imposes itself upon us who speak English and who have been taught to hold Shakspere as the standard by which the foremost writers of every other language must be measured. The English dramatist wrote in an era of expansion and of imaginative energy, and the French dramatist worked in a period of keen intelligence and of social reserve. The Englishman is the master of tragedy, who has also left us a group of delightful comedies; and the Frenchman is the master of comedy, who might have attained to the tragic, if only his life had been a little longer.

It is interesting to remember that Sophocles, Shakspere and Molière, the supreme dramatists, held each of them a middle place in the successive stages of the most splendid expansion of the drama in their several tongues.

Each of these noble eras was compassed in a century, a little more or a little less. Æschylus was born 525 B.C. and Euripides died in 406; and Sophocles holds the position midway. Marlowe was born in 1565 and Shirley died in 1666; and Shakspere flourishes a little before the middle of these hundred years. Corneille was born in 1606 and Racine died in 1699; and Molière runs his briefer career between them. And it may be noted also in Spain there elapsed only a little more than a century from the birth of Lope de Vega, in 1562, to the death of Calderon in 1681—the Spanish period of dramatic activity beginning earlier than the English and lasting later than the French. Perhaps it was well for Sophocles, for Shakspere and for Molière that they came forward at the maturity of the movement in which they were chiefs, neither pioneers in its beginning nor laggards at the end, when at last the original impulse was slackening.

Molière was only fifty-one when he died, the same age attained by Lessing and by Balzac; Shakspere survived to be fifty-two and so did Menander; this comparatively premature death has an importance of its own, for even if they may have done their work thus early and have put forth all their powers before they died, they were deprived of that aftermath of fame which came to Voltaire and Goethe and Victor Hugo, by the mere fact of survival beyond the allotted threescore years and ten.

In the merely external circumstances of their careers, Shakspere and Molière are often curiously alike. They were both born in prosperous households of the middle class; and they were not stinted in their youth, although the affairs of both fathers may have become embarrassed later. Shakspere may have gone to the grammar school at Stratford; and Molière went to the best school in

Paris, getting a more thorough training. Neither of them ever achieved the wide erudition of Lessing, still less the minute scholarship of Racine. Both broke away from their homes to become actors; and both, after acting for a while, undertook to write plays. Both began modestly as dramatists, content at first to imitate and to patch up earlier work. Even when they had given over this 'prentice labor, their earlier pieces contained little promise of their later mastery. In 'Love's Labor's Lost' and in the 'Etourdi' we can see clever young writers striving to show off their cleverness, delighting in their own fantasies and not yet knowing enough about life itself to be willing to rely on it unaided. Molière was the manager of his company, while Shakspere was only one of several partners in his; and both of them had a shrewd sagacity in business affairs, governing their private fortunes with skill, putting money out at interest and amassing a comfortable reserve. Both of them liked the good things of life; and neither of them took an austere view of mankind. Shakspere was as little attracted toward the Puritan as Molière was toward the Jansenist.

Both of them are ready enough to repeat an effect which has been found attractive; so the lovers' quarrel of the 'Dépit Amoureux' is varied only a little in "Tartuffe' and in the 'Bourgeois Gentilhomme'; and the heroines of the 'Two Gentlemen of Verona,' 'As You Like It,' and 'Twelfth Night,' one after another don boy's apparel. Both of them make unhesitating use of the works of their predecessors and contemporaries, despoiling alike the alien and the native, taking their raw material wherever they found it, as if they disdained the trouble of mere invention, choosing to put forth their full imagination rather in the interpretation of the stories which others less gifted had failed to use to full advantage. Both of them, despite this casual borrowing of situation, were boldly original in their creation of character. Shakspere finds his supreme triumph in the display of character as it expands under opportunity or disintegrates under temptation, whereas Molière, presenting it as permanent, reveals it to us in all its aspects. Both of them were copious in their productivity and swift in execution. Ben Jonson records that Shakspere "never blotted a line"; and Boileau tried in vain to get Molière to correct. Both of them were helpful to younger authors, Shakspere to Jonson and Molière to Racine. Both of them in their later years on occasion collaborated with fellow dramatists, Shakspere with Fletcher and Molière with Corneille. Both of them cared little for the publication of their pieces; and it was only several years after the death of either that his complete plays were published by the pious care of surviving comrades in the theater. The manuscripts of both have vanished; and we have from their pens only a few signatures to legal documents. Both of them had the gift of friendship and were highly esteemed by their associates, even if neither of them was really appreciated by his contemporaries. Both of them took life soberly, never surprised that it was not better. Neither of them much exceeded a half-century of life. Shakspere, who lived a few months longer, had done his work and had withdrawn to rest, while Molière was still in harness, with his goal not yet attained. Neither of them seems to have sought glory for its own sake, satisfied with immediate success and caring little for mere fame.

Many of these resemblances in the career of the two great dramatists may be merely fortuitous; but some of them are strangely significant. And it would not be difficult to pick out other points of similarity or of contrast in their works. The 'Comedy of Errors' is not unlike the 'Amphitryon' in one of its devices (derived in both cases from Plautus); and 'Richard III' is not unlike 'Don Juan' in its dominating character. Ford is akin to Arnolphe in his jealousy, and Autolycus is akin to Mascarille in his resourceful knavery, both rascals employing on one occasion the very same trick of not letting a robbed man suspect his loss. Alceste can be compared better with Jaques than with Timon. Harpagon repays a comparative study with Shylock, and Tartuffe with Iago. Hamlet's advice to the Players can be set over against the personal discussion of actors and of the art of acting which Molière put in the 'Impromptu de Versailles.'

There can be no dispute as to the perfect understanding of the principles of the histrionic art possessed by both Shakspere and Molière; and there can also be little doubt that in the actual practice of the art Molière was superior to Shakspere. Molière was acknowledged to be the foremost comedian of his time, even by those who thought ill of his plays. Shakspere's position as an actor is more modest, so far as we can judge from the fact that he did not venture to appear in any of the more important parts in his own plays, whether tragic or comic. Hamlet was performed by Burbage, its creator apparently contenting himself with the humbler character of the Ghost, for which dignity and delivery were sufficient equipment; and he is believed also to have impersonated old Adam in 'As You Like It.' No doubt, Shakspere had a good presence, and probably his elocution deserved praise, since this is a quality within the control of intelligence.

But the great English dramatist must have been more or less deficient in the fundamental mimetic faculty, without which intelligence alone is ineffective. We know, also, that Shakspere was not in love with acting, as Molière was; and his distaste for the art may be either the cause or the consequence of his lack of prominence in his calling.

II

To push the comparison between these two great dramatic poets too far would be unfair to Molière, since Shakspere is the master mind of all literature. He soared to heights and he explored depths and he had a range to which Molière could not pretend. His is the spirit of soul-searching tragedy, of youthful and graceful romantic-comedy, of dramatic-romance, of dramatized history; and in no one of these is Molière his rival. But in the comedy of real life he is not Molière's rival. In every variety of the comic drama Molière is unequaled,—in farce, in the comedy-of-intrigue, in the comedy-of-character, and in the comedy which is almost stiffened into drama, yet without ceasing to be comedy. Shakspere's greatest strength is in tragedy, after all, even if he delights us also with comedy. Molière is at home in comedy only, even if he had a latent tragic possibility. "In depth, penetrativeness and powerful criticism of life" Molière, comic as he is and not tragic, belongs to the same family as Shakspere and Sophocles, so Matthew Arnold maintained, pointing out that he had also "one great advantage over Shakspere" in that "he wrote for a more developed theater, a more developed society."

Arnold also suggested that Molière was "probably by nature a better theater poet than Shakspere; he had a keener sense for theatrical situation." This is a hard saying, for it is difficult to admit that Shakspere was not a born playwright who acquired an early mastery of his craft. But the English dramatist was less ambitious than the French, less conscientious and less careful. Admirable as his workmanship is in his nobler tragedies, it can be very slovenly, especially in his dramatic-romances, 'Cymbeline' and the 'Winter's Tale.' In his romantic-comedies he sometimes tumbles together two or three independent stories, leaving us to discover as best we can which one of them it is he intends us to center our interest on. Molière has only a single plot, orderly and lucid; and this is partly because he sees life clearly and uncomplicated. Coquelin asserted that Molière has more art and more method than Shakspere; "he graduates his effects better."

The real distinction between Molière and Shakspere merely as playwrights is that Molière is an artist always, and that Shakspere is an artist only intermittently and when the spirit moves him. Molière always does his best; even a play of an inferior type he makes as good as he can, as good as a play of that type can be. Shakspere is an artist putting forth his full power only when he happens to be keenly interested in his subject, in 'Othello,' for example, and in 'Macbeth.' In plotting these plays he spares himself no pains. But if we examine his work as a whole we can see that he does not always exert his constructive skill. Sometimes he is careless of form, huddling his action together anyhow, satisfied with the easiest way of handling his story, and relying chiefly on his insight into character and on his unquenchable springs of poetry. Wisdom is his for the asking, and almost without taking thought; but solid construction taxes the mind, and Shakspere occasionally neglects the preliminary scaffolding which a vital action always demands and which Molière and Sophocles never fail to provide.

The explanation for this is not far to seek. The English dramatist was working for a less developed theater than the French and for a less developed society. There was no standard of artistic perfection imposed on Shakspere by the pressure of an educated public opinion. There was nothing to keep him up to the mark, except his own ambition; and this was uncertain and even flagging. He seems sometimes to have felt that what was good enough for his uncritical audience, for the unlettered groundlings, was good enough for him. This is why he rarely rises superior to the traditions of the rude and semi-medieval theater for which he worked, content to avail himself of its conventions and to take the short cuts it authorized. This is why Iago is less subtly presented than Tartuffe; Iago is frankly a villain, and he knows himself for what he is, unbosoming himself freely and frequently to the spectators, whereas Tartuffe never drops the mask until he stands at bay, and may very possibly have had no suspicion of his own vileness.

Not a few of those who have most highly appreciated Shakspere have felt this occasional carelessness, although most of them have failed to express it. Coleridge linked the two masters together, and told us that "in the comedy of Shakspere and Molière the more accurate my knowledge and the more profoundly I think, the greater is the satisfaction that mingles with my laughter." And George Meredith, in his discussion of the comic spirit and of the idea of comedy, recurred again and again to Molière, holding him up to our admiration as the unsurpassable model, and declaring that "if life is likened to the comedy of Molière, there is no scandal in the comparison." And this is what no one could rightly say of the comedy of Shakspere, who put his richest comic character into a straggling chronicle-play and whose romantic-comedies are compounded of arbitrary fantasy; delightful as they are, they bear little relation to real life as this ever existed anywhere but in a fancied Illyria or in the distant Bohemia which is a desert country by the sea.

III

Not only does Shakspere refrain from dealing with the men and women of his own time in his own country, not only are his most comic characters sporadic and incidental to a tale of pure romance, of young lovers meeting and mating in the springtime of their lives, he is also willing often to gratify the Elizabethan liking for an empty and glittering playing with words, for a wit which is merely external and almost detachable, and which, unrelated to character, tends in no wise to elucidate it. His humor is frequently verbal, which Molière's never is. "Molière was no mere wit," so Coquelin reminded us. "Puns, points, collocations of droll sounds,—these are all absent from his work. . . . He wished to bring a laugh only by touches of nature. It is not from him as an author that his witticisms come; it is from his characters, and they come naturally and by the force of things." Of course, this is true very frequently of Shakspere also, especially of his Falstaff; but often it is not true, and his characters descend to the bandying of repartee and to the making of quips which do not serve to reveal character or to advance the story. Molière indeed declares his own principle in the 'Critique de l'Ecole des Femmes,' when he asserts that a certain joke had not been put in by the author "as a clever saying of his own, but only as a thing that characterized the man."

Perhaps the explanation for this willingness of Shakspere to give his audience the verbal witticisms they relished may be sought in the fact that his romantic-comedies are more romantic than they are comic, whereas Molière's comedies are essentially realistic. Touchstone and even Jaques are only incidental and accessory; and the core of Shakspere's comedy is the coming together of Rosalind and Orlando. Generally Molière puts in a pair of young lovers merely to hold his plot together, to make a story around Orgon and Argan and Harpagon. But Shakspere sets his pair of young lovers in the forefront; they are his comedy and all else imports little. In other words, Shakspere's comic characters interest us by what they are, whereas Molière's often take our attention more by what they do. Comic action is the life of many a play of Molière's, although not of the greatest; and as a result character is more simply presented in Molière's pieces than in Shakspere's; it is less complex. So it is that Shakspere's clowns and other of his humorous figures wear their motley outside, while Molière's characters wear it within.

The secret of the acceptable mingling of romance and of comedy is Shakspere's only; and what he did in the vein of romantic-comedy he alone could do. The form itself may be anomalous and open to adverse analysis; but the result is charming—when it is Shakspere who stirs the mixture with the magic of his lyric gift. But of the few who have sought to follow in the path he trod through the fairy woodland, none have grasped the elusive prize. In other words, Shakspere's comedies are highly individual; they are his and his alone. They are not deliberate expositions of the manners and customs of his own time and of his own people. They are not racial, as Molière's comedies are. They are too idealistic, too remote from everyday life, from the rude experience of actuality, to be all that comedy can be. They belong to a very special type, too lyric, perhaps even too poetic, to be acceptable as a picture of the real world about us; and it is just such a picture that we have a right to expect in comedy. The romantic drama may voice our aspirations and show us what we dream that we would like to be, and tragedy may set before us the things we dread; but comedy has for its chief duty to depict us as we are actually. When it most completely fulfils its function comedy is not individual, like Shakspere's, but social, like Molière's.

Undeniable as is Shakspere's comic force, indisputable as is his power of creating humorous character and of handling amusing situation, it is not in comedy that he most satisfactorily exhibits his consummate genius as a dramatic poet. For the full display of his art he needs the towering framework of tragedy; and it is in comedy that he is less of a theater poet than Molière. It is by his tragedy far more than by his comedy that Shakspere has conquered the nations of the modern world. Hamlet and Othello and Macbeth are known to millions who have never heard of Viola and Beatrice and Anne Page. This is due partly to the exportability of tragedy, which works with the universal emotions. A great tragedy can go anywhere, whereas a great comedy has often to tarry at home because of its very greatness as a comedy, because of the adequacy of its reproduction of contemporary reality. 'Julius Cæsar' can be taken to the confines of the globe and its tragic action will arouse the interest of the spectators, whatever their race or their degree of culture; but the 'Femmes Savantes' can meet with fit and full appreciation only when it is performed before those who can understand its strokes and who can recognize the types it presents. The passions are much the same the wide world over; but wit and humor are often local, and character often depends on time and place.

The predominant influence which Shakspere has exerted upon modern tragedy Molière has exerted upon modern comedy. The only dramatist of the nineteenth century who sought to recall again in his own plays the evanescent grace and fleeting beauty of Shakspere's romantic-comedy is Alfred de Musset. All the other writers of comedy, not only in France but in England and in Germany, have found their model in Molière. This is due partly to the fact that the practical playwright of to-day, adjusting his plays to the theater of our own era, shrinks instinctively from the imitation of Shakspere, whose comedies are semi-medieval because they were necessarily adjusted to the ruder Elizabethan platform stage, and because they therefore need to be taken apart and put together again before they can be represented on the picture-frame stage of our latter-day playhouses. But it is due, also, to the fact that in Molière the modern dramatist finds, first of all, the outer form which concords with the conditions of the theater of the twentieth century, and then also the final model of the comedy which represents largely and liberally the realities of life.

IV

Less myriad-minded than Shakspere, less lyric and less poetic, lacking the depth and the width of the English dramatist, dying early before his tragic possibilities had a chance to unfold themselves, Molière is more completely the master of comedy. He is a more conscious and a more conscientious artist in his structure. He has more absolutely attained the ideal of that high comedy which is the picture of society and the revelation of humanity in its larger relations. Better than Shakspere does he succeed in achieving "the imitation of life, the mirror of manners, the image of truth"—to borrow that phrase of Cicero's, which echoes through Renascence criticism. That he, rather than Shakspere, should have most richly expressed himself in comedy, is a strange thing, since Matthew Arnold, taking the hint from Sainte-Beuve, was plainly right in saying that "Shakspere has more joy than Molière, more assurance and more peace." Perhaps Molière's humor flowers out of his melancholy, and his satire out of his sadness. Whatever their obscure roots, the humor is there in his plays, and the satire also, and, in addition, the sheer fun which brings irresistible laughter.

It is our good fortune that whatever our tastes we can find somewhere in literature the poet or the prose writer who can satisfy them; and if our likings are inconstant, we are still rewarded as we roam from one author to another. Certain poems there are, and novels also and dramas, that we outgrow as we wax in years and in wisdom. What pleased us once, may fail to delight forever. There are authors whom we used to enjoy and whom, in turn, we drop behind us, milestones marking the road we have travelled; and though we came up to them with pleasure once upon a time, the season arrives at last when we depart from them without regret, to leave them in the distance. We may not have tarried long with them; and unless we turn back we never pass them again.

Molière is not one of these whom we desert as we grow older and more exacting in our tastes. He is for all ages of man. In youth we may enjoy him, unthinkingly, amused by his comic abundance, his rollicking drollery, his frank fun. As we mature, his spell over us strengthens its hold; and we discover the finer qualities of his work —his insight into human motives, and his marvelous skill in revealing character. In old age we regale ourselves once again with his unfailing and unfading humor, and with the true wisdom which underlies it. At one time the 'Bourgeois Gentilhomme' may please us, and at another the 'Misanthrope'; but at all times a man who relishes the comedy of human endeavor will find in Molière what he needs.

LA BONNE COMÉDIE

Les 'Précieuses Ridicules' allèrent aux nues dès le premier jour. Un vieillard s'écria du milieu du parterre: "Courage, Molière! voilà de la bonne comédie!" (Notice sur Molière.)

True Comedy circum præcordia ludit,—
It cheers the heart's cockles. 'Twas thus that he viewed it,—
That simple old critic, who smote on his knee,
And named it no more than he knew it to be.

"True Comedy!"—ah! there is this thing about it,
If it makes the House merry, you never need doubt it:
It lashes the vicious, it laughs at the fool,
And it brings all the prigs and pretenders to school.

To the poor it is kind; to the plain it is gentle;
It is neither too tragic nor too sentimental;
Its thrust, like a rapier's, though cutting, is clean,
And it pricks Affectation all over the scene.

Its rules are the rules Aristotle has taught us;
Its ways have not altered since Terence and Plautus;
Its mission is neither to praise nor to blame;
Its weapon is Ridicule; Folly, its game.

"True Comedy!"—such as our Poquelin made it!
"True Comedy!"—such as our Coquelin played it!
It clears out the cobwebs, it freshens the air;
And it treads in the steps of its master, Molière!

AUSTIN DOBSON.

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