



## THE ART OF PANTOMIME • BY BRANDER MATTHEWS DRAWINGS BY HARRY STONER

**I**N HIS SUGGESTIVE study of ancient and modern drama, M. Emile Faguet, one of the acutest of contemporary French critics, dwells on the fact that the drama is the only one of the arts which can employ to advantage the aid of all the other arts. The muses of tragedy and comedy can borrow narrative from the muse of epic poetry and song from the muse of lyric poetry. They can avail themselves of oratory, music and dancing. They can profit by the assistance of the architect, the sculptor and the painter. They can draw on the co-operation of all the other arts without ceasing to be themselves and without losing any of their essential qualities.

This was seen clearly by Wagner who insisted that his music-dramas were really "the art of the future," in that they were the result of a combination of all the arts under the control of the drama. Quite possibly the Greeks had the same idea, since Athenian tragedy has many points of similarity to Wagner's music-drama; it had epic passages and a lyric chorus set to music; it called for stately dancing against an architectural background.

But although the muses of the drama may invoke the help of their seven sisters, they need not make this appeal unless they choose. They can give their performances on a bare platform or in the open air, and thus get along without painting and architecture. They can disclaim the support of song and dance and music. They can concentrate all their effort upon themselves and provide a play which is a play and nothing else. And this is what Ibsen has done in his somber social-dramas. *Ghosts*, for example, is independent of anything extraneous to the drama. It is a play, only a play and nothing more than a play.

Yet it is possible to reduce the drama to an even barer state than we find in Ibsen's gloomy tragedy in prose. Ibsen's characters speak. They reveal themselves in speech and it is by words that they carry on the story. A story can be presented on the stage, however, without the

use of words, without the aid of the human voice, by the employment of gesture only, by pure pantomime! No doubt, the drama makes a great sacrifice when it decides to do without that potent instrument of emotional appeal, the human voice; and yet it can find its profit, now and then, in this self-imposed deprivation. Certain stories there are, not many and all of them necessarily simplified and made very clear, which gain by being bereft of the spoken word and by being presented only in pantomime. And these stories, simple as they must be if they are to be apprehended by sight alone without the aid of sound, are nevertheless capable of supporting an actual play with all the absolutely necessary elements of a drama.

In foregoing the aid of words the drama is only reducing itself to its absolutely necessary elements—a story, and a story which can be shown in action. A clever French critic once declared that the skeleton of a good play is always pantomime. This is not quite true, since there are plays the plot of which can not be conveyed to the audience except by actual speech. Yet, some of the greatest plays have plots so transparent that the story is clear even if we fail to hear what the actors are saying. It has been asserted that if *Hamlet*, for example, were to be performed in a deaf and dumb asylum, the inmates would be able to understand it and to enjoy it. They would be de-

prived of the wonderful beauty of Shakspeare's lines, no doubt, and they would scarcely be able to guess at the deeper significance of the philosophy which enriches the tragedy; but the story would unroll itself clearly before their eyes, so that they could follow the succession of scenes with understanding.

The drama, in brief, can use two kinds of poetry, that which is internal and contained in the plot, and that which is external and confined to the language. It can use

*"Jewels five-words long,  
That on the stretched forefinger of Time  
Sparkle forever."*

**B**UT it can also attain poetry without the use of theme alone. This is what the poets have often felt; and as a result French poets, like Theophile Gautier and Francois Coppée, have not disclaimed to compose librettos for pantomimic ballets. One of the most successful of the recent Russian ballets was simply a representation of Gautier's poetic fantasy, *One of Cleopatra's Nights*.

Perhaps because the pantomime contains only the essential element of the drama—action—it has always been a popular form of play and it appears very early in the history of the theater. Indeed, it

seems to be the only form of drama known to primitive man, if we may judge from observations made among savages who are still in the earlier periods of social development. Gesture precedes speech, and a pantomime was possible even before a vocabulary was developed. In the Aleutian Islands, for example, the pantomime is the only form of play known. One of the little plays of the islanders has been described. It was acted by two performers only, one representing a hunter and the other a bird. The hunter hesitates, but finally kills the bird with an arrow. Then he is seized with regret that he has slain so noble a bird. Whereupon the bird revives and turns into a beautiful woman and falls into the hunter's arms. This is only



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