

## BERNARD SHAW REWRITES SHAKESPEARE'S MACBETH.

England's Brilliant Social Philosopher and Playwright Explains in the April Cosmopolitan Magazine How Much Easier It Is to Write a Novel Than a Play



"He turned and saw Macduff there, glaring at him."

By George Bernard Shaw  
In The APRIL COSMOPOLITAN MAGAZINE.

In a pleasant little book Arnold Bennett talks shop and debits harmless tosh about technique for the entertainment of literary amateurs in a very agreeable and suggestive manner, as he has every right to do, being so distinguished a master of the craft.

But when I found the words, "One reason why a play is easier to write than a novel"—I need have read no further. I did not want to know "one reason" for so outrageous a piece of novelist's bluff. But the impetus of my reading carried me on, in spite of the shock, and so I learned that this one reason is "that a play is shorter than a novel." It is, and so is the Bible shorter than the London Directory. "Excuse the length of my letter," said Pascal, "I had no time to write a short one."

Now, I am not going to argue. I never do. I will just take one of the shortest, most intense and most famous scenes in English dramatic literature and rewrite it as a chapter of a novel in the style of my friends Bennett and Wells and Galsworthy when they are too lazy to write plays. It is the scene from Shakespeare's "Macbeth" in the fifth act beginning with the lines "Why should I play the Roman fool," and ending with "first cries hold enough!"

### MACBETH.

A Novel, by Anybody. The Last Chapter.

He was to fail, after all, then. The day was going against him. His men were not really fighting. They had conveyed to old Sward that they were open to an offer of quarter; and the hint had not been lost on that ancient campaigner, whose son he had just slain.

What was the use of killing? Duncan, Banquo, the Macduff people! He had waded through their blood; and how much better would it not be if it were all a dream and they were alive and kind to him?

How the martens were singing! Banquo, always a bit of a fool, had been sentimental about the martens. Gruach, the dear, dead wife whom the Southrons persisted in calling Lady Macbeth, had argued with Banquo about them, telling him that their habits were insidious, and that they were infested with small bugs which got into the castle, already too rich in insect life. But Duncan had agreed with Banquo; and when Gruach became queen, she would not let the martens' nests be broken down, being anxious to copy Duncan's tastes in every way, lest any one should say that she did not know how kings lived. And so the martens were singing, singing, always singing when they were not fly-catching.

It came to him, with a twist at the heart, that he had never told Gruach the truth about Banquo. He had left her to believe that he had killed him because the witches had foretold that his posterity should be kings. But the real reason was that Banquo had given himself moral airs. That is hard to bear at any time; but when you are within ten minutes of committing a murder, it is insufferable. Morality was easy for a man who did not intend to do anything; but a man of action could not stand on scruples. These idle thames who eat down on their little patrimonies and had no ambition—they had invented this moral twaddle to excuse their laziness.

What an exquisite morning it was! Was there anything so blue as a blue sky, anything so white as a white cloud, anything so golden as the gold of the sun? From the summit of Dunsinane he could see almost to the Roman wall on the south, and to the North Bridge on the north. The wind had backed a little to the north; perhaps it would rain later. But no such foreboding troubled the wood-pigeon that now called to him. "Tak two coos, Taffy; tak two coos, Taffy." He smiled grimly. He had taken, from first to last, not less than two thousand coos; and this funny bird kept on exhorting him to take two. And yet he did not throw a stone at it, as he once would

have done. It seemed all so useless. You strove and strove, and killed and killed, and made journeys to consult witches; and at the end of it all the wood-pigeon had no more to say to you than before; and the sky was no bluer, the cloud no whiter, the whins no yellower.

Curse the sky! Curse the whins! Doubly damn the wood-pigeon! Why not make an end of it, like the Roman fool at Philippi? He stood his claymore on its hilt on the flag and bent over the point. Just to lean on it, and let it go through him; then the wood-pigeon might soo itself black in the face: Macbeth would be at rest with Duncan. Where had he heard about Philippi? It seemed unlikely that he could have learned Roman history; and yet he found that he did know. Do men know everything before death? He shuddered.

Strange that he, who rather enjoyed killing other people, should feel an intense repugnance to kill himself! Besides, there was an advantage in suicide that no thrifty Scot would waste. You could kill as many people as you liked first, without considering the consequences. He would, please God, spit a few more of his enemies on that sword before his own turn came. He tossed it into the air by the point and caught the hilt as it came down. He no longer heard the wood-pigeon.

And yet, what was that? Had the wood-pigeon called him a hell-bound? He turned and saw Macduff there, between him and the sun, glaring at him. If the sun had been in his eyes, he could not have glared. It was clever of him to come that way and get the advantage of the sun.

Macduff! Yes, Macduff—the man of whom the spirit called up by the witches had bade him beware the man whose wife and child he had slaughtered. Could he blame him for glaring? Would not any man glare after such an experience?

Macduff had stopped to sharpen his claymore on the flags. He was squatting down in an attitude which brought his hony knees into prominence just below his hilt, and drawing his blade to and fro with a harsh, rhythmical grating on the granite. By the mere instinct of imitation, Macbeth did the same. His knees were fleshier, and it was harder for him to stoop; but he did it. It was never easy for a king to stoop; but fate will have it so sometimes. Now there were two blades scraping. The birds stopped

ONE of the most brilliantly amusing articles ever written by George Bernard Shaw appears in the Cosmopolitan Magazine for April. Mr. Shaw by rewriting a scene of Shakespeare's Macbeth sets himself the task of proving how much easier it is to write a novel than it is to write a play.

Mr. Shaw's delightful essay is reprinted here by courtesy of the Cosmopolitan Magazine.

singing, and listened in astonished, suspicious silence. Only a jay laughed.

Macbeth heard it. Something stirred in him, and distorted his lips into a grin. It seemed to him that he suddenly opened a book that had always been sealed to him. When Gruach was dying, he had asked the doctor for some physic for the mind; and the doctor had failed him. Then he had asked the porter, because he had noticed that the porter, alone among all the men of his acquaintance, was light-hearted, and would laugh, even when nobody was being hurt or ridiculed, and seemed to despise ambition. And the porter had told him that life is not so bad if you see the fun of it.

Old Sward had nailed the porter to the door that morning, because he refused to open it to the enemy. Did he see the fun of that, Macbeth wondered?

Yet here, as he squatted before Macduff, and they both sharpened their blades on the flags, a deep sense of something laughable in the situation touched him, though, God knows, there was nothing to laugh at if the warning witches were trustworthy. The spirit had said that no man born of woman should harm Macbeth. That seemed pretty conclusive.

But they had also said that he would not be vanquished until Birnam Wood came to Dunsinane. That also seemed conclusive; yet the thing had happened; he had seen the wood walking.

He decided to give Macduff a chance. He was tired of killing people named Macduff. He said so. He advised Macduff to go away.

Macduff tried to speak, gulped, and came on. His voice was in his sword.

Macbeth was not afraid, though he knew he was not the man he had been. He had drunk heavily since he had seized the throne; the Scots expected that from a king. But he could fight as well as ever for forty-five seconds; and try to get in his dirk somewhere.

After all, Macduff was no teetotaler; if one might judge by his nose, which was red and swollen. Only, the doubt came; was the redness and the swelling from drink or from weeping over his slaughtered family? With that thought came Macduff's first blow—a feint, followed by a vicious thrust at the groin.

Macbeth was quick enough to drop his targe and stop the thrust, even while he guarded the blow did not come.

"The innocent blunder gave him an impulse to untimely laughter."



"Macduff had stooped to sharpen his claymore on the flags."

That reassured him and took some of the bounce out of Macduff. He was equally successful the next time, and the next. He became elated. At last his pride in his charmed life got the better of his prudence. He told Macduff that he was losing his labor, and told him why. The effect was exactly the contrary of what he had anticipated. A gleam of savage delight came into Macduff's eyes. What did it mean?

Macbeth was not left long in doubt. He stood petrified while a tale poured from Macduff's lips such as had never before blasted the ears of mortal man. It cannot be repeated here—there is such a thing as the literary censorship. Let it suffice that it was a tale of the rude but efficient obstetric surgery of those ancient times, and that it established, beyond all question, the fact that Macduff had never been born.

After that, Macbeth felt that he simply could not fight with him. It was not that he was afraid, even now. Nor was it that he was utterly disgusted at the way the witches had let him down again. He just could not bring himself to hack at a man who was not natural. It was like trying to eat a cat. He flatly refused further combat.

Of course, Macduff called him coward. He did not mind that so much; for he had given his proofs, and nobody would believe Macduff; nor, indeed, would any reasonable man expect him to fight an unborn adversary. But Macduff hinted at unbearable things. At defeat, disgrace, the pillory, even.

A surge of wrath went through Macbeth. He was, above all things, a country gentleman; and that another country gentleman should move his timber without acquiring any rights infuriated him. He became reckless. Birnam Wood—his wood—had been taken to Dunsinane! Was that a thing he could be expected to stand?

What thought Macduff had not been properly born? Was it not all the more likely that he had a weak constitution and could not attack it out if he would pressed hard in the fight? Anyhow, Macbeth would try. He braced himself, grasped his claymore powerfully, thrust his shield under the chin of his adversary, and cried, "Lay on, Macduff!"

He could not have chosen a more unfortunate form of defiance. When the news had come to Macduff of the slaughter of his wife and boy, he had astonished the messenger by exclaiming: "What! All my pretty chickens and their dam at one fell swoop!" Accustomed from his earliest youth to deal with horses, he knew hardly anything of poultry, which was a woman's business. When he used the word "dam," properly applicable only to a mare, in referring to a hen, Malcolm, though deeply moved by his distress, had a narrow escape from a fit of hysterics; for the innocent blunder gave him an impulse to untimely laughter.

The story had been repeated; and something of it had come to Macduff's ears. He was a highly strung man, exquisitely sensitive to ridicule. Since that time, the slightest allusion to chickens had driven him to transports of fury. At the words, "Lay on!" he saw red. Macbeth, from the instant those fatal words passed his lips, had not a dog's chance.

In any case, he would not have been ready to meet a sudden attack. All his life he had been subject to a strange disorientation which sent his mind wandering to the landscape, and to the fauna and flora of the district, at the most exciting crises of his fate.

When he meant to tell Gruach that he had arranged to have Banquo killed, he had said to her, instead, "Light thickens; and the crow makes wing to the rooky wood." And his attention had strayed to the wood-pigeon when Macduff's yell of fury split his ears, and, at the same moment, he felt his foe's teeth close through his nose and his foe's dirk drive through his ribs.

When Malcolm arrived, there was little left of Macbeth but a pile of mince. Macduff was pointing.

"That will teach him," he said, and stopped, ex-sufficite.

They laid Macbeth beside Gruach in God's quiet acre in the little churchyard of Dunsinane. Malcolm erected a handsome tomb there, for the credit of the institution of kingship; and the epitaph, all things considered, was not unhandsome. There was no reproach in it, no vain bitterness. It said that he had "succeeded Duncan."

The birds are still singing on Dunsinane. The wood-pigeon still coos about the coos, and Malcolm takes them frankly and generously. It is not for us to judge him, or to judge Macbeth. Macbeth was born before his time. Men call him a villain; but had the press existed in his time, a very telling pecuniary sacrifice on his part would have made a hero of him. And, to do him justice, he was never stingy.

Well! Well!

THE END.

There! That is what is called novel-writing! I raise an idle question as to whether it is easy or not. But that sort of thing I can write by the hundred thousand words on my head. I believe that, if I turned my attention to mechanics for a month or two, I could make a typewriter attachment that would do it, like the calculating attachment that late lately came into use. The odd thing is that people seem to like it. They swallow it in doses of three hundred pages at a time; and they are not at all keen on Shakespeare. Incidentally, when my faculties decay a little further, I shall go back to novel-writing. And Arnold Bennett can go back to writing plays.

"He could fight as well as ever for forty-five seconds, and then he could clinch and try to get in his dirk somewhere."