# Good Hunting!
# (*An Essay on the Nature of Comedy and Tragedy*)

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Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law.

"Bye, Baby Bunting!
Daddy's gone a-hunting . . ."

## I.

Such is the sole stuff of art, as it was the sole occupation of primitive man. Hunting is the one real passion of man. Love, the desire of wealth or power, are only branches of the sport. For it is directly related to the first of all passions, hunger; and it is an exciting sport; it is gambling for the highest of all stakes. Now, art is primarily the celebration of excitement, the record of some stimulus of the soul. Dramatic art, which represents drama, action, consequently concerns itself with hunting — and with nothing else.

When daddy came back with a deer, there was great rejoicing in the tribe. Every one filled himself with meat; the cockles of his heart grew warm; he began to laugh. You can do the same today with a very hungry man, without the aid of alcohol. This expansive state being clearly associated causally with the killing of the deer, and the sportsman excitedly recounting his exploit, the story itself was food for laughter. And the key of the jest soon discovered itself as contempt for the foolish victim. "What a fine stag he was, how proud and

swift! Nothing could catch him, and, if he wished, how sharp were those great, branching horns of his! And all the while there was I tracking him with my little flint axe — ha! ha! ha!"

All these points were seen and seized on by the old comedians. They would always accentuate the self-esteem of the victim. They would dress him up as a king or a God, and hunt him down. A still funnier elaboration of the joke was to persuade him that he was the hunter. "Come," say they to Pentheus in the Bacchae, "come, great king, adorn thyself according to thy dignity; come, arm thyself, slay these wild creatures!" and aside: "And when we've got him there his own mother shall kill him in her madness, and run about with his head under the impression that it is a lion's!" This further development of humor was doubtless due to Dionysus; even the hungriest man could hardly think that out on mere venison.

I read my Agamemnon through the spectacles of Dr. A. W. Verrall, and it seems to me that the play is a comedy. The incident of the carpet is very like adornment of the victim. Agamemnon, however, is not taken in the snare; he does not show "Hubris," but modesty; and this makes the play more serious. Still, no doubt, it ends on the comic note — Aegisthus chuckling over the success of his clever stratagem. This Hubris hated of the Gods is the root of many a proverb. "At the hour of triumph sacrifice the dearest thing thou hast to the Infernal Gods" — the case of the play "Jephthah." "Beware of the moment of success." Think of Ajax flattered into the madness wherein he kills the sheep — what a superlative jest for the onlooker! Alternative themes lead surely to anticlimax. Consider Abraham's sacrifice — what a typically inartistic ending! The whole passion and beauty of the drama is destroyed by the sneaking subterfuge of the substitution of the ram for the heir of promise.

Let us glance now at the Crucifixion. Here we have comedy in its fullest flower. "Hail, King of the Jews!" Triumphal entry into the capital; robing in purple, crowning in mockery, barbarous murder at the close. The ritual is that of all ancient comedies of initiation, with mere local variations. Now why do not we laugh? They did at the time. "Let us see whether Elias will come to take him down!" "He saved others, himself he could not save." The answer follows easily, and we shall see incidentally why we are a little doubtful as to whether Agamemnon is a comic figure.

When Daddy goes a-hunting he does not always bring home a deer. Sometimes he meets a diplodocus, and does not come home at all. Then, what do the tribe do? They squat and hug their empty bellies. There is no laughter. There is one long wail. There is no food, and the man that used to get it has been eaten alive. This is no joke, no joke at all. Presently the wail becomes articulate; some one recounts the heroic deeds of the dead hunter. How skilful he was! How cunning! How swift and strong! How accurately he swung the axe! And now "he is gone on the mountain, he is lost to the forest!" He died fighting heroically against enormous superiority of force . . . and so on. Anyhow, he's dead, and we're without food, and what can we do but weep? It is a tragedy!

Just so; that is the definition of tragedy. The primitives of the next tribe probably are laughing to split their sides. Their hunter has brought in a wild bull, and they are having a glorious time. "And that fool across the valley who fancied himself so at hunting went out after rabbits and got a diplodocus — ha! ha! ha!"

It is all a question of our sympathies. The event described is always the same. Whether it is a tragedy or a comedy depends on the point of view. The Agamemnon is a tragedy for the family man; for the young sport who wants to beat him out of his wife and his kingdom, it is a romantic comedy.

So when we come to consider plays about Hecuba and other people that in no wise concern us personally, we judge by our own sympathies, and laugh or cry accordingly. Thus the sympathy of mankind has been secured, in the case of the crucifixion, for the figure of Jesus, so we call the story a tragedy. We have been told to identify him with Everyman, who is doomed to suffer a barbarous death sooner or later. It is the same with the stories of the murders of Osiris and of Hiram. (Footnote: Observe, dear brother, the hunter's ritual in this last story; the stationing of the hunters, and the way they head off the game in turn.)

In other words, man began to think of himself no longer as a hunting animal, but as a victim. In the second stage of human thought, man is the sufferer. (Compare William James, and his remarks on the once-born and the twice-born.) Man has begun to fear Nature, to wail over his own fate symbolically in lamenting the deaths of the great heroes of the past. It no longer seems funny to us to adorn a man as a God, and eat him, for that is just what life is doing to all of us.

To recover the comic spirit, therefore, we must acquire a new view of death.

## II.

In certain previous essays of the writer it has been pointed out that desire or love must be held to include such phenomena as chemical change. All true acts of love produce or consume energy in some form, that we have explosive disintegrations and violently rapid oxidations which disengage heat, light, electricity, and other forms of matter and of motion — regard them as you please — which are (on the surface) of a different order of Nature to the ingredients of the operation. Similarly, by putting the right pair of featherless bipeds together, there are explosions and emotion, poetry, perhaps spiri-

tual growth, as well as the phenomenon which is obviously of the same order — a baby.

In all such acts, chemical or physiological, there is a true transmutation, therefore, and we may class these things as genuinely partakers of the Ineffable Mystery of Godliness. In mere admixture we do not get this transmutation. Mix hydrogen and oxygen; they remain the same; nothing at all happens. Combine them and you get not only a transformation of the very nature of the molecules, but numerous physical phenomena — flame, heat, moisture — which were not there before.

Now let us take another issue. All conscious, self-willed motion implies life, and, all such motion being accompanied with chemical change and (as Buddha insisted) with the partial disintegration of the individual, we must define life as something quite beyond the crude conception which is usually formed of it. Every true phenomenon, whether it be the haemoglobin-oxyhaemoglobin-carboxhaemoglobin cycle in the blood, or the changes in the brain which we call philosophy from a consideration of their effects, may be thought of as a form of copulation, atom seeking atom, and producing molecule, just as woman seeks man and produces offspring. Now every such act of copulation involves the death of the partakers. True, the hydrogen can be recovered from the water; ultimate simplicities are in some sort immortal, but (again we quote Buddha) all complexities perish and are not recoverable in their integrity. We cannot suppose that by recombining the recovered hydrogen and oxygen into water each atom in the original water will find the self-same mate. We cannot recover the father in the child, though we may perceive many traces of him; and the persistence of the father himself is due to the fact that only a minute percentage of his life is used in the production of the child. His quintessence vivifies any amount of other matter and transmutes it to his likeness; this is the Alchemical miracle, to produce some such process in the mineral kingdom. If one pos-

sessed the quintessence of gold, the unknown 'seed of gold,' that which makes gold gold and not silver, it might impregnate other elements and make them grow into its own nature. This at least was the theory evolved by the fathers of chemistry, and (I doubt not) will be the practice of their descendants in a year not distant.

Now, to return, since every copulation may be considered as involving death, we may say (at the risk of appearing to convert an A proposition) that every death may be considered as a form of copulation. The chemical changes of disintegration are in no way distinguishable from those of life. We cannot call one set synthesis and the other analysis, even. We merely make a false distinction on account of the fact that our personal prejudices are involved . . . just as we were in doubt whether to laugh or to cry at the Agamemnon. Now, it is to be noted that certain people take the sexual view of death. To this day the peasants in some parts of Greece regard the death of an individual as his marriage to that deity, Artemis or Aphrodite, to whom he was most devoted during life. Mohammed taught that death was the key to the enjoyment of the Hur al' Ayn. Even in Christian mysticism we find the death of the saint equivalent to his marriage with the Saviour. We are "waiting for the Bridegroom." In fact, this idea is almost universal in all true religion. (Buddhism, an exception, is more a philosophy than a religion.)

Now, we have no means of telling what occurs in the "soul" at the time of death. Whatever may be the approaches to the pylon, we have no evidence with regard to the Door itself. But we have certain analogies in the experience of mystics. We have the 'Dark Night of the Soul' breaking in the 'Dawn of the Celestial Bridal.' And we have in physical life an exact counterpart in the fear of Love which is characteristic of the Virgin. This is especially marked in the case of boys. There is an instinctive fear, repulsion and anxiety, which must be overcome before the soul swoons in bliss. Is it racial

experience that tells him that love is the twin brother of death? Love and Death are the levers of that universal life which we saw to be the Name of the Universe. Each is an annihilation of an individual in the interests of universal Energy. Thus, as we have seen in a slightly different shape, when referring to the quintessence of comedy, Love and Death are the sole preoccupation of the artist, whose subject is Life. There is no other real interest, for there is nothing else in which to delight.

If, then, we can take the view that Death is an intense form of Love, in which the individual is permanently destroyed, as he is temporarily destroyed during the act of love, then this Life is universal Joy, a Divine Comedy, whose soul is Laughter. We can even explain the joy of cruelty as a deeper realization of the nature of cruelty, as a piquancy, a sting, in what would otherwise be a detestably sweet wine.

But if we fail to grasp this view, then we are forced to the alternative that Love is only a form of Death. The universe is an abyss of agony. "The mystery of the cruelty of things" is as terrible as Swinburne's "Anactoria" makes it. Everything is sorrow, we are Buddhists, and only in utter cessation is there peace. Buddha himself recognized this clearly enough; his intense distaste for sex is our witness. He saw that it was playing the game of Life to love; it was allowing oneself to be dragged deeper and deeper into the mire of Existence. A monotheism with any perception of the facts of nature — hard nowadays to escape some such perception! — may make its God in the image of the Marquis de Sade. The whole of organic nature is an orgy of murder and lust. There is only one escape from this position; to accept the unity of Love and Death, and to regard Death as mere Delight. Such a realization avoids the snare of Dualism, lays its axe to the root of the problem of the Origin of Evil, and renders Existence possible and desirable for the thinker as well as for the sensualist.

## III.

To the blessed ones who have accepted the Law of Thelema these words will hardly have been necessary. The doctrine is plainly stated in the Book of the Law.

"For I am divided for love's sake, for the chance of union. This is the creation of the world, that the pain of division is as nothing, and the joy of dissolution in all."

"Now, let it be understood, if the body of the king dissolve, he shall remain in pure ecstasy for ever."

"Aye! Feast! Rejoice! there is no dread hereafter. There is the dissolution, and eternal ecstasy in the kisses of Nu."

"Thrill with the joy of life and death! Ah! thy death shall be lovely: whoso seeth it shall be glad. Thy death shall be the seal of the promise of our age-long love."

"Strive ever to more! and if thou art truly mine — and doubt it not, an if thou art ever joyous! death is the crown of all."

This, then, is the will of the Universe; Life eternal and universal, not petty, individual and transient; Life of which we are only conscious when in trance; Life whose consciousness is gained perfectly and permanently by the adept in virtue of his trance in proportion as he becomes fixed therein and makes his daily life partake thereof; Life that works inexorably and deliciously through Love and Death, which are Love. And this is expressed simply, succinctly, perfectly, in that transcendant phrase, the greeting wherewith we close our writings:

Love is the law, love under will.

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Note — Taking a few plays at random we see every one the description of a hunting. Note that the strongest dramas are those in which the hunt is keenest.

Where the hunting interest is weak or masked, the play becomes frivolous and lacking in the stuff of greatness.

Ajax — The hunting of Ajax by Ulysses.

Agamemnon — Agamemnon by Aegisthus.

Oedipus — Oedipus by Fate. Karma is very frequently taken for the hunter. The man's being hunted by himself is particularly funny!

Orestes trilogy — Orestes by Fate.

Bacchae — Pentheus by Dionysus.

Hamlet — Claudius by Hamlet. Here the motive is weakly carried out, and so the play is only interesting for the revelation of Hamlet's soul.

Lear — Lear by Madness.

Macbeth — Macbeth by his conscience, or by the Witches.

Othello — Othello by Iago.

Twelfth Night — The Duke by Viola (note hunter's disguise).

As You Like It — Orlando by Rosalind (ditto).

Romeo and Juliet — Love by Heredity.

Coriolanus — Coriolanus by the mob-spirit.

Julius Caesar — Caesar by Cassius.

Ghosts — Oswald by Heredity.

Hedda Gabler — Hedda by Breck.

Rosmersholm — Rosmer and Rebecca by the wife's ghost.

A Doll's House — Nora by her nascent individuality. (The lack of personal struggle makes this a weak, silly play.)

The Master-Builder — The Builder by Hilda.

An Enemy of Society — Society by Stockmann. (He conquers it, so this is a comedy.)

Brand — Brand by the Hawk.

Peer Gynt — Peer Gynt by Solveig. (Note the way she lurks silent throughout the play. Other exciting episodes are all huntings.)

Mortadello — Mortadello by Monica. (Note disguise at banquet.)

Snowstorm — Nerissa by Eric; Eric by Maud. (Observe hunters' disguises again.)

The Scorpion — Laylah by Rinaldo; their love by the Scorpion. (This is a romance, and neither comedy nor tragedy in the best sense.)

Household Gods — Crassus by Alicia. (Note supreme disguise.)

A Night in an Inn — The Thieves by the Idol.

The Gods of the Mountain — The Beggars by the Gods.

The Blind Prophet — The Prophet (individual life) by Universal Life.

The Argonauts — Jason by Ares.

Adonis — Adonis by Psyche.

Atalanta in Calydon — Meleager by Circumstance. (Here the hunter is not personified, and so the play is weak. But note the comedy of the hunter hunted.)

The Mother's Tragedy — Cora by Karma.

The Fatal Force — Ratoum by S'afi (disguise again).

Jephthah — Jephthah by Jared. (Crude and undeveloped form of the idea.)

The World's Tragedy — Fate by Alexander.