From Moliere to America
By Owen Wister
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Jean
Baptiste
Poquelin
Moliere.
Born
in
Paris
1622.
Died
Feb.
17,
1673.

At the meeting of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, April 24, the first meeting at which the French Academy, its prototype, was officially represented, Marshal Joffre was also an honored guest, along with M. Jusserand, the French Ambassador, and the two French Academicians, Maurice Donnay and André Chevrillon. The occasion was the official celebration of the 300th anniversary of the birth of Molière. Owen Wister introduced the address which follows with a few words in Franch, and in the course of them quoted the epitaph of Lieut. Gen. Chevert—the epitaph inscribed upon that long dead hero's monument in Verdun. It may be roughly translated as follows:

" Without family, without fortune or influence, an orphan from his infancy, he entered the service at 11 years of age. He rose in spite of ill-will by the sheer force of merit and each step was the prize of a brilliant action."

This furnished Mr. Wister with his text.

TO THE PEOPLE OF FRANCE, BRAVE IN PEACE AS IN WAR!

Yes; as those words on the monument at Verdun to General Chevert fitted him when he lived two centuries ago, so do they fit his country at this hour. She, too, is rising, in spite of envy, by force of merit.

Three hundred years ago was born another brave Frenchman, also without ancestors, without fortune, without backing, who has left a monument vaster than that of Lieut. Gen. Chevert. Were Chevert's statue to be destroyed, nothing of him would live in the world's mind; but if every likeness of Molière should be obliterated from the face of our planet, his monument would be here still. Not only on the stage—right round the globe you would find it, standing on a million bookshelves. More than that: in the Republic of Letters which has no frontier, the mere names Tartuffe, Harpagon, Scapin, are become universal coinage. They are the minted gold of the brain which passes current far outside and beyond its age and territory. They are short cuts to understanding. When thousands of living men wish to describe a particular sort of hypocrite, all they need say is " Tartuffe," and thousands will know what they mean without another word said.

To add to the permanent hoard of human knowledge a character, an idea, or a phrase, is perhaps the most valid proof of intellectual power, and those rank highest who have added most. The name Ulysses is at least twenty-five centuries old; how many things it says to us today! Almost as old is the saying " art is long, life is short." To how many thousands does the word Quixotism save a whole paragraph of explanation! They may try to suppress Greek—undèr 'lyar, nothing in excess, will continue to be the two wisest words ever graven on a civic stone; they may do away with Latin—*carpe diem*, do it now, will remain the pithiest advice ever written by a poet. With those men, then, Cervantes, Horace, Hippocrates, Homer, and all that highest company who have given characters, ideas and phrases to succeeding generations, does Molière belong.

Three centuries ago died the only other supreme dramatist of modern times. He, too, minted gold of universal currency; he, too, provided us with short cuts to understanding. To say that a man is like Hamlet is enough; " in my mind's eye " has put a difficult idea into four words so simple that they are final.

Both of these dramatists wrote comedies. Place these comedies together and a flash of light revealing the fundamental chasm between the two races issues from the comparison. What are some of Molière's best-known plays? — " Tartuffe," " L'Avare," " Le Misanthrope," " Le Medecin maigre lui," " Le Malade Imaginaire," " Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme," "Les Précieuses Ridicules," are some of them. What are they about? Each is a bundle of arrows shot at a chosen target, and each target is some human fraud or foible personified. We have the hypocrites, the miser, the quack, the profiteer, the glass of fashion—and the ass of fashion; the female of this species Molière ungallantly draws as more deadly than the male.

The comedies of Shakespeare, with one possible exception, are made on quite another plan. Think of a few: Viola and the Duke, Rosalind and Orlando, Beatrice and Benedick, Perdita and Florizel, Miranda Prospero and Ferdinand, Bottom and Titania, Imogene—in each one a romance. Even when a fool sings, he says journeys end in lovers' meeting. Ah, it isn't true, but we like to say it! Into no lips, wise or foolish, did Molière put any sentiment so sweet and so false. Behind the Frenchman's lightest words the edge of irony gleans constantly. Not so with Shakespeare. He is clement, he spares. Is it that he did not see? Oh, yes, he saw! But in these comedies of his, although human foibles are shown up, they are smiled at, they are not pierced with an arrow. Malvolio is incidental; when Falstaff comes to die, his old comrade the King exclaims, " I could have better spared a better man." Shakespeare's whole indulgence is in those words. His ridicule is by the way, he is not leveling premeditated shafts of satire at a chosen target, he is painting various characters in the course of a fanciful romance.

It is indeed a chasm deeper than the difference of language which divides the comedies of these two masters. With the Frenchman entertainment is the means to an end, with the Englishman it is the end in itself. The one detested sham in all its disguises, and his main preoccupation was to tear these disguises off—he died in the very act; the other appears to have detested hardly anything. His terrifying vision of human vileness—in Macbeth, Lear, Othello—would seem to have left him sad, but serene, so that at the end what he had to say about it all was this: " We are such stuff as dreams are made on; and our little life is rounded with a sleep."

Is anything more English than Shakespeare, anything more French than Molière? Each side the chasm that is deeper than speech stands their comedies, the essence of France, the essence of England. Molière is intellectual sincerity. Shakespeare is tolerance. Tolerance and sincerity--England and France.

America has produced neither a Molière nor a Shakespeare as yet. [We are only in our second century. Perhaps we are not destined to give any such supreme mind to the world; it has not been the lot of every nation—and certainly it had not been the lot of France and England when they were at our tender age. Up to the present our particular need has called forth from our art one most extraordinary and original creation, the skyscraper. I do not think that the American pen has written any work so new and so beautiful as that is in some cases.] Has not our pen written best when in the hands of our men of action? It is true that Leatherstockings walked in other lands, that Hester Prynne has made her way beyond English speech, that the gambler of the California mines and the boy on his raft in the Mississippi have voyaged beyond their native shores. It is true that certain pages of American verse and prose are set high by other nations. But how many do they number? How many short cuts to understanding, how many gold coins of the intellect have we uttered that pass everywhere? Where is our Ulysses, our Quixote, our Falstaff, and where any native word of wisdom compact and universal? If such are to be found at all, I think we shall discover the best of them in pages written by our men of action. He who identified lightning with electricity changed science, and his sayings have made the Bonhomme Richard remembered. In his day they were translated into almost every tongue, and some still live on the lips of men. He remains our greatest intellect, and he was first and foremost a man of action. Then, he who wrote a certain Farewell Address which we count among our few classics, was another man of action. And he who wrote " with malice toward none, with charity for all," left us in that, as well as in his Gettysburg address, two more classics. Each of those three has written enduring pages more widely known today outside their country, and of more intrinsic weight, than any that I can recall by our men of letters.

I must name to you, but without discussing them, certain menaces to our chance for a great literature.

We are developing ragtime religion. Homer and Virgil were founded on a serious faith.

Our education too much resembles an elaborate bill of fare with the kitchen range gone out.

The classics are in eclipse. To that star all intellect has hitched its wagon.

Literature has become a feminine subject in our seats of learning. What female Shakespeare has ever lived?

Recent arrivals pollute the original spring. We are less ourselves today than when the embattled farmer fired his shot, or Sheridan rode through the valley. It would be well for us if many recent arrivals could become departures.

The dollar is our financial unit. What is our intellectual unit? Not the book. It is the periodical or the morning paper. In most American towns the book, if sold at all, has no house of its own, but is a boarder with soda water, cough drops, stockings and other merchandise. Books are beginning to be sold by troy weight. I saw lately an advertisement of a work in several volumes, each volume guaranteed 2 pounds 4 ounces. If such is to be the plight of the book in our country, what gifted man of sense with his way to make will write one? He will turn to the newspaper or the magazine, hoping some day to be free. Freedom will not come soon, but age and loss of inspiration will.

These are external menaces. Deep beneath them lies the fact that America has known but little adversity. Before Molière and Shakespeare came, their countries had suffered much.

Still deeper than this lies our chief American quality, restlessness. What *nomadic race* has ever produced a great literature? Dickens, Scott and Thackeray did not move to Canada. Emerson lived in Concord.

Is there then no comfort? Is it all as black as that? Is the Sunday newspaper to be our Paradise Lost? I hope not.

[When Solomon declared that there was nothing new under the sun, he forgot one thing. New, oh, yes, eternally new, is the adventure of every human soul born upon this earth! To every separate soul its own adventure is new. As a nation our adventure is new to ourselves.] We are young, and youth is a time of action; reflection comes later. It is not therefore strange that from our men of action should have come on the whole the best that we have as yet given to the world. We cannot know if Roosevelt's words will stand eventually beside those of the Bonhomme Richard and the Gettysburg address; but what American book of our day has more caught the attention of mankind than " The Strenuous Life "? Possibly one, " The Influence of Sea Power in History," written not by a literary man, but a Captain in our navy. The greatest American autobiography was dictated by a man of action on his deathbed—General Grant.

Being young, action is our best state; and when it comes to that, we can show something that rises above all other modern action as supreme as Molière and Shakespeare rise above all other modern drama. It is a treasure imponderable, the golden coinage of our youth, passed not from hand to hand, but from spirit to spirit. Each time this coin has been uttered the date has fallen in the month of April; it is a mintage of Spring.

The first sign of it was on that April 19, 1775, when the embattled farmer fired his shot. One hundred and forty-two years later, on April 6, 1917, it flashed out in its full glory. Between these times it was plainly to be seen in April, 1861, when the Civil War began; in April, 1865, when it ended, and on April 21, 1898. It lurked behind the words " no taxation without representation." It spoke out more clearly when Grant went to Appomattox.

What is it, then? This: Within the memory of thousands of living *men we Americans have fought three* wars, not for gain, not for revenge, not even for self-defense, not for any of the usual causes of war, but purely for the sake of an idea: First, the ideal of the Union and the freedom of the slave behind it; next, it was the freedom of Cuba. What was it in 1917? Any one who says that was even self-defense slanders us. Not one American in a thousand suspected any danger to ourselves. Once more it was a war against slavery, and this time the enslaving of Europe. At Appomattox we asked nothing; from Cuba, nothing; nothing from Europe in 1918. What nation in the whole world can show anything like that in any sixty years of its history?

That is our chief glory, our greatest gift to mankind. When a people can thus rise, even a Shakespeare may be hoped for some day, in spite of the Sunday papers.

There are two sorts of Americans that I admire very little: the man who is always bragging about his country, and the other man who is always apologizing for his country. In the name of common sense, in the name of self-respect, need we do either? Let us by all means try to mend our shortcomings. But are we not great enough to stand upon our feet, quietly, ready for whatever is to come? I, at any rate, believe so.

This brings me back to France, our friend and sister; and with her I finish, as I began with her. If in the past sixty years America has fought three wars and asked nothing in return for her service to liberty, she has but followed where France led the way. In that first treaty which France made with us during our struggle for independence she, by a special clause in the treaty, stipulated that for the help she gave us she was to receive no recompense of any sort whatever. It was an act of generosity without precedent in the annals of nations. We have profited by her great example.

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