

## Tradition

BY GEORGE MIDDLETON

George Middleton, one of the first to write and publish a volume of one-act plays in America, was born in Paterson, New Jersey, 1880. He was graduated from Columbia University in 1902. Since 1921 he has been literary editor of *La Follette's Weekly*, and, in addition, has been a frequent contributor to magazines and reviews on dramatic and literary subjects. During the last few years he has spent much of his time abroad.

George Middleton's chiefest interest has been in the one-act play. He has been an ardent champion of the shorter form of drama. Among his three volumes of one-act plays are *Embers* (including *The Failures*, *The Gargoyle*, *In His House*, *Madonna*, and *The Man Masterful*), *Tradition* (including *On Bail*, *Their Wife*, *Waiting*, *The Cheat of Pity*, and *Mothers*), and *Possession* (including *The Grove*, *A Good Woman*, *The Black Tie*, *Circles*, and *The Unborn*). Other one-act plays are *Criminals* and *The Reason*. His longer plays are *Nowadays* and *The Road Together*. Mr. Middleton has lectured widely on the one-act play before colleges, in Little Theatres, and clubs. Perhaps his most notable article is *The Neglected One-Act Play*, which appeared in *The New York Dramatic Mirror* in 1912.

*Tradition* is one of Mr. Middleton's best and most popular one-act plays; and it most nearly conforms to the organic technic of the one-act play.

FIRST PERFORMANCE AT THE BERKELEY THEATRE, NEW YORK CITY, JANUARY 24, 1913.

(Produced under the personal direction of Mr. FRANK REICHER.)

THE PEOPLE

GEORGE OLLIVANT MR. GEORGE W. WILSON

EMILY, *his wife* MISS ALICE LEIGH

MARY, *his daughter, an actress* MISS FOLA LA FOLLETTE

TRADITION[B]

SCENE: *The sitting-room at the OLLIVANTS' in a small town up-State. It is an evening late in the spring.*

*A simple room is disclosed, bearing the traces of another generation. Old-fashioned window-doors at the right, overlooking the garden, open on a porch; another door in back opening on the hall-way. A large fire-place at the left, now concealed by an embroidered screen; the horsehair furniture, several terra-cotta statuettes, and a woodcut or two on the walls create the subtle atmosphere of the past. There is a lamp on the table, and another on a bracket by the door in back. Moonlight filters through the window-doors.*

*The OLLIVANTS are discovered together. MARY, a rather plain woman of about twenty-five, with a suggestion of quick sensibilities, is standing, lost in thought, looking out into the garden. Her mother, EMILY, nearing fifty, quiet and subdued in manner, is seated at the table trimming a hat. Occasionally she looks at MARY, stops her work, glances at her husband, closes her eyes as though tired, and then resumes. The silence continues for some time, broken only by the rattle of the town paper which GEORGE OLLIVANT is reading. He is well on in middle life, with a strong, determined face not entirely without elements of kindness and deep feeling. When he finishes, he folds the paper, puts it on the table, knocks the ashes carefully from his pipe into his hand, and throws them behind the screen; takes off his spectacles and wipes them as he, too, looks over toward his daughter, still gazing absently into the garden. Finally, after a slight hesitation, he goes to her and puts his arm about her; she is startled but smiles sweetly.*

OLLIVANT. [*Affectionately.*] Glad to be home again, Mary?

MARY. [*Evasively.*] The garden is so pretty.

OLLIVANT. Hasn't changed much, eh?

MARY. It seems different; perhaps it's the night.

OLLIVANT. I guess it isn't up to its usual standard. Haven't seen your mother there so often this spring.

EMILY. [*Quietly.*] This dry spell is not good for flowers.

OLLIVANT. It's only the cultivated flowers that need care; can't help thinking that when I see the wild ones so hardy in my fields on the hill. [*Turning to EMILY and patting her.*] Is there any of that spray mixture left, Emily, dear?

EMILY. I haven't looked lately.

OLLIVANT. I'll order some to-morrow. [*Taking up his pipe again and looking for the tobacco.*] Think it would be a good idea, daughter, if you'd spray those rosebushes every couple of weeks. The bugs are a pest this spring. Where's my tobacco?

EMILY. On the mantel.

OLLIVANT. Wish you would always leave it on the table; you know how I hate to have things changed.

[*OLLIVANT goes to the mantel, filling his pipe, and while his back is turned, MARY makes a quick questioning gesture to her mother, who sighs helplessly. MARY ponders a moment.*]

MARY. How's Ben been doing these two years, father?

OLLIVANT. Hasn't your brother written you?

MARY. Only once--when I left home; he disapproved, too.

OLLIVANT. Had an older brother's feeling of wanting to take care of you, Mary.

MARY. Yes; I know. How's he doing?

OLLIVANT. He's commencing to get on his feet. Takes time and money for any one to get started these days.

MARY. But he's still in partnership with Bert Taylor, isn't he?

OLLIVANT. Yes. He'd have been somewhere if he'd worked in with me as I did with *my* father. Things should be handed down. Offered him the chance, tried to make him take it, as your mother knows; but that college chum--nice enough fellow, I've heard--turned his head another way. [*Lighting his pipe and puffing slowly.*] It's best to humor a young fellow's ideas if he sticks them out, but I'd like to have had us all here together now. The place is big enough even if he should want to marry. Your mother and I came here, you know, when your grandfather was still alive.

MARY. Then Ben isn't making any money?

OLLIVANT. [*Reluctantly.*] Not yet--to speak of.

EMILY. [*Quietly.*] But he's promised to pay his father back, Mary.

MARY. I see. [*Thoughtfully.*] College and then more help to get started, because he's a man.

OLLIVANT. [*Complacently.*] He'll have to support a family some day; I've had to keep that in mind.

MARY. I'd like to have a real talk with him.

OLLIVANT. When did his letter say he'd be coming for a visit, Emily?

EMILY. The fifteenth.

MARY. Not till then? That's too bad.

OLLIVANT. Eh?

MARY. [*After exchanging a quick glance with her mother and gaining courage.*] Father, I hope you didn't misunderstand my coming back?

OLLIVANT. Not at all. We all make mistakes--especially when we're young. Perhaps I was a bit hasty when you left home, but I knew you'd soon see I was right. I didn't think it would take you two years--but perhaps if I'd written you before you'd have come sooner. I told your mother I'd like to make it easy for you to come home.

MARY. Mother suggested that you write me?

OLLIVANT. Well, I suppose you might put it that way. I always felt she thought I was a bit hard on you, but I'm not one to back down easily.

MARY. Don't blame me then, father, if I showed I was your daughter.

OLLIVANT. Let's forget my feeling; but naturally I was set back.

MARY. Because you didn't take my going seriously until I was actually leaving.

OLLIVANT. I couldn't get it into my head then, and I can't now, how any girl would want to leave a home like this, where you have everything. You don't know how lucky you are--or maybe you have realized it. Look about you and see what other girls have. Is it like this? Trees, flowers, and a lake view that's the best in the county. Why, one can breathe here and even taste the air. Every time I come back from a business trip it makes a new man of me. Ask your mother. Eh, Emily? When I sit out there on the porch in the cool evenings it makes me feel at ease with the world to know that the place is *mine* and that I've raised a family and can take care of them all. Ben had to go, I suppose--it's the way with sons; but I thought you, at least, would stay here, daughter, in this old house where you were born, where I was born, where all your early associations----

MARY. [*Shuddering.*] I hate associations.

OLLIVANT. [*Eying her.*] Well, I'd like to know where you get *that* from. Not from your mother and me. *We* like them, don't we, Emily? Why, your mother's hardly ever even left here--but you had to up and get out.

MARY. Yes. That's right, father; I *had* to.

OLLIVANT. [*He stops smoking and looks at her sharply.*] Had to? Who made you?

MARY. [*Reluctantly.*] It was something inside me.

OLLIVANT. [*In spite of himself.*] Tush--that foolishness.

MARY. [*Quickly.*] Don't make it hard for us again.

OLLIVANT. I made it hard, Mary? Because I objected to your leaving your mother here alone?

MARY. I remember; you said I was a foolish, "stage-struck" girl.

OLLIVANT. Well, you're over *that*, aren't you?

MARY. That's just where you are mistaken, father. [*Slowly.*] That's why I asked you if you hadn't misunderstood my coming back.

OLLIVANT. [*Suspiciously.*] Then why did you come at all?

MARY. I'm human; I wanted to see you and mother, so I came when you generously wrote me. I'm not going to stay and spray the roses.

OLLIVANT. [*He eyes her tensely and controls himself with an effort.*] So you are not going to stay with your mother and me?

MARY. [*Affectionately.*] I'll come see you as often as I can and----

OLLIVANT.--and make a hotel of your home? [*MARY is silent.*] Don't you see your mother is getting older and needs somebody to be here?

EMILY. [*With a quiet assurance.*] I have never been so well and contented.

OLLIVANT. [*Tenderly.*] I know better, Emily; can't I see you're getting thinner and older? [*Stopping her protests.*] Now, let me manage this, dear. It's a girl's place to stay at home. You know my feelings about that. Suppose anything should happen to your mother, what would *I* do?

MARY. So it's not mother alone you are thinking of?

OLLIVANT. [*Tersely.*] I'm thinking of your place at home--doing a woman's work. I'm not proud of having my daughter off earning her own living as though I couldn't support her.

EMILY. George!

MARY. I thought it was only because I was on the stage.

OLLIVANT. Well, it's not the most heavenly place, is it? A lot of narrow-minded fools here in town thought I was crazy to *let* you go; I knew how they felt; I grinned and bore it. You were my daughter and I loved you, and I didn't want them to think any less of you by their finding out you were leaving against my wish.

MARY. [*Slowly, with comprehension.*] That's what hurt you.

OLLIVANT. Well, I blamed myself a bit for taking you to plays and liking them myself.

MARY. People here will soon forget about me and merely be sorry for you.

OLLIVANT. [*Persuasively.*] Why, Mary. I've made it easy for you to stay. I told every one you were coming home for good. They'll think me a fool if----

MARY. [*Tenderly.*] You meant what was dear and good, father; but you had no right to say that. I'm sorry.

OLLIVANT. I did it because I thought you had come to your senses.

MARY. [*Firmly.*] I never saw so clearly as I do now.

OLLIVANT. [*Bluntly.*] Then you're stubborn--plain stubborn--not to admit failure.

MARY. [*Startled.*] Failure?

OLLIVANT. I know what the newspapers said; Ben sent them to me.

MARY. Which ones?

OLLIVANT. Why, all of them, I guess.

MARY. Did he send you the good ones?

OLLIVANT. Were there any?

MARY. Oh, I see. So Ben carefully picked out only those which would please you.

OLLIVANT. [*Sarcastically.*] Please me?

MARY. Yes; because you and he didn't want me to succeed; because you thought failure would bring me home. But don't you think I'll let some cub reporter settle things for me. I'll never come home through failure--never.

OLLIVANT. [*Kindly.*] Ben and I only want to protect you, Mary.

MARY. Why do men always want to protect women?

OLLIVANT. Because we know the world.

MARY. Yes; but you don't know *me*. Father, you still think I'm only a foolish, stage-struck girl, and want flowers and men and my name in big letters. It isn't that.

OLLIVANT. Well, what is it, then?



MARY. Oh--I want to be an artist. I don't suppose you can understand it; I didn't, myself, at first. I was born with it, but didn't know what it was till that first time you took me to the theatre.

OLLIVANT. So it was all my fault?

MARY. It isn't anybody's fault; it's just a fact. I knew from that day what I wanted to do. I wanted to act--to create. I don't care whether I play a leading lady or a scrub-woman, if I can do it with truth and beauty.

OLLIVANT. Well, you haven't done much of either, have you? What have you got to show for our unhappiness? What have you got ahead of you?

MARY. Nothing--definite.

OLLIVANT. [*Incredulously.*] Yet, you're going to keep at it?

MARY. Yes.

OLLIVANT. What do you think of that, Emily?

MARY. I am going to the city Monday.

OLLIVANT. [*Persistently.*] But what will you do when you get there?

MARY. What I've done before: hunt a job, tramp the streets, call at the offices, be snubbed and insulted by office-boys--keep at it till I get something to do.

OLLIVANT. Come, come, Mary; don't make me lose patience. Put your pride in your pocket. You've had your fling. You've tried and failed. Give it all up and stay home here where you can be comfortable.

MARY. [*With intense feeling.*] Father, I can't give it up. It doesn't make any difference how they treat me, how many times I get my "notice" and don't even make good according to their standards. I can't

give it up. I simply can't. It keeps gnawing inside me and driving me on. It's there--always there, and I know if I keep at work I will succeed. I know it; I know it.

[MARY *throws herself into the chair, much stirred*. EMILY'S eyes *have eagerly followed her throughout this as though responding sympathetically, but OLLIVANT has stood in silence, watching her apparently without comprehension.*]

OLLIVANT. [*Not without kindness.*] Something inside. Huh! Have you any clear idea what she's talking about, Emily?

[MARY *gives a short, hurt cry and goes quickly to the window, looking out and controlling herself with an effort.*]

EMILY. [*Softly, as she looks at MARY.*] I think I understand.

OLLIVANT. I don't. Something inside. I never had anything like that bothering me. What's it all mean?

EMILY. [*Quietly.*] So many people use the same words, but cannot understand each other.

OLLIVANT. Well, you seem to think it's mighty important Mary, whatever it is; but it's too much for me. If you had something to show for it I wouldn't mind. But you're just where you started and you might as well give up.

EMILY. George!

OLLIVANT. Now I don't know much about the stage, Emily, but Ben does. He says you're not made for an actress, Mary; you haven't got a chance.

MARY. [*Turning.*] Father!

OLLIVANT. Can't you see your failure isn't your own fault? If you were a beauty like Helen Safford or some of those other "stars"--but you're not pretty, why, you're not even good-looking and----

MARY. [*With bitter vehemence.*] Oh, don't go any further. I know all that. But I don't care how I look off the stage if only I can grow beautiful on it. I'll create with so much inner power and beauty that people will forget how I look and only see what I think and feel. I can do it; I have done it; I've made audiences feel and even got my "notice" because the stage-manager said I was "too natural." Helen Safford--what's she? A professional beauty with everything outside and nothing in. You think of her eyes, her mouth, and her profile; but does she touch you so you remember? I know her work. Wait till I get a chance to play a scene with her--which they may give me because I'm not good-looking--I'll make them forget she's on the stage the first ten minutes--yes, and you and Ben, too, if you'll come. Helen Safford? Huh! Why, people will remember me when she's only a lithograph.

OLLIVANT. Well, then, why haven't you had your chance?

MARY. [*Quickly.*] Because most managers feel the way you and Ben do. And not having a lovely profile and a fashion-plate figure stands between me and a chance even to read a part, let alone play it. That's what eats the heart out of me, mother; and makes me hate my face every time I sit down to put on the grease paint.

OLLIVANT. Well, don't blame me for that.

MARY. [*Going to her mother, who takes her hand.*] You can laugh at me, father; you don't understand. It's foolish to talk. But, oh, mother, why is such beauty given to women like Helen Safford who have no inner need of it, and here am I, with a real creative gift, wrapped up in a nondescript package which stands between me and everything I want to do? [*With determination.*] But I will--ultimately I will make good, in spite of my looks; others have. And what I've suffered will make me a greater artist.

OLLIVANT. [*In a matter-of-fact tone.*] Are you sure all this isn't overconfidence and vanity?

MARY. I don't care what you call it. It's what keeps me working.

OLLIVANT. [*Quickly.*] Working? But how can you work without an engagement?

MARY. That *is* the hard part of our life; waiting, waiting for a chance to work. But don't think I stand still when I haven't an engagement. I don't dare. That's why I keep at my voice work and dancing and----

OLLIVANT. [*Suddenly interrupting.*] Dancing and voice work when you have no engagements. Would you mind telling me who is paying the bills?

MARY. [*Indignantly.*] Father!

OLLIVANT. I think I have the right to ask that.

MARY. Have you?

OLLIVANT. I am your father.

MARY. [*With quiet dignity.*] You thought you'd force me here at home to do as you wished because you paid for my food and clothes; when you took that from me you *ceased* to have that right. Don't forget since I left you've not helped me with my work or given me a penny.

OLLIVANT. [*Suspiciously.*] Mary.... No, that's not why you went away from home?

MARY. No.

OLLIVANT. Or you met some man *there* and....

MARY. No.

OLLIVANT. There is some man.

MARY. Why a *man*?

OLLIVANT. Damn them; I know them. [*Breaking.*] Good God, Mary, dear, you haven't...? Answer me, daughter.

MARY. [*Calmly.*] No, there's been no need of that.

*[He has been violently shaken at the thought, looks at her intently, believes her, and then continues in a subdued manner.]*

OLLIVANT. Then who helped you? Ben?

MARY. How could he help me? Are men the only ones who help women?

EMILY. [*Quietly.*] Tell him, Mary; it's best now.

OLLIVANT. [*Turning slowly to her in surprise.*] You knew and have kept it from me?

EMILY. [*Calmly, as she puts down the hat she has been trimming.*] I found I hadn't lost my old skill, though it's been a good many years since I held a brush--since before we were married, George. I had an idea I thought would sell: paper dolls with little hand-painted dresses on separate sheets; they were so much softer than the printed kind, and children like anything soft. I wrote to Mr. Aylwin--you remember--he was so kind to me years before. He had called here once before when you were away and asked after my work. He used to think I had such promise. He found an opportunity to use the dolls as a specialty, and when I explained he induced some other firms to use all I can paint, too. They pay me very well. I made enough each month to help Mary when she went behind.

OLLIVANT. [*Incredulously.*] You! After you heard me say when she left I wouldn't give her a cent?

EMILY. [*Looking fondly at MARY.*] You were keeping Ben, weren't you?

OLLIVANT. But--that's--that's different.

EMILY. I didn't see why we shouldn't help *both* our children.

OLLIVANT. [*Perplexed by this he turns to MARY.*] And you took it?

MARY. Yes.

OLLIVANT. You knew how she got the money?

MARY. Yes.

OLLIVANT. Your mother working herself sick for you, and you took it?

EMILY. I told you I've never been so happy.

MARY. [*Simply.*] I couldn't bargain with what I felt. I had to study. I'd have taken anything, gotten it anywhere. I had to live. You didn't help me. Ben and I both went against your will, but you helped him because he was your son. I was only your daughter.

[*OLLIVANT eyes her and seems to be struggling with himself. He is silent a long while as they both watch him. Finally, after several efforts he speaks with emotion.*]

OLLIVANT. Mary, I--I didn't realize how much you meant to me till--till I thought of what might have happened to you without my help. Would--would you have stayed on in the city if--if your mother hadn't helped you?

MARY. [*Firmly.*] Yes, father; I would have stayed on.

OLLIVANT. [*After a pause.*] Then I guess what you *feel* is stronger than all your mother and I tried to teach you.... Are you too proud to take help from me--now?

MARY. [*Simply.*] No, father; till I succeed. Then I'll pay you back like Ben promised.

OLLIVANT. [*Hurt.*] You don't think it was the money, daughter? It would have cost to keep you here. It wasn't that.

MARY. No; it was your father speaking and his father and his father. [*Looking away wistfully.*] And perhaps I was speaking for those before me who were silent or couldn't be heard.

OLLIVANT. [*With sincerity.*] I don't exactly understand *that* any more than the feeling you spoke of driving you from home. But I do see what you mean about brothers and sisters. You seem to think boys and girls are the same. But they're not. Men and women are different. You may not know it, but your mother had foolish ideas like you have when I first knew her. She was poor and didn't have a mother to support her, and she had to work for a living. She'd about given up when I met her--trying to work at night to feed herself in the day while studying. But she was sensible; when a good man came along who could support her she married him and settled down. Look how happy she's been here with a home of her own that is a home--with associations and children. Where would she be, struggling to-day trying to paint pictures for a living? Why, there's lots of men who can paint pictures, and too few good wives for hard-working, decent men who want a family--which is God's law. You'll find that out one of these days and you'll give yourself as she did. Some day a man will come and you'll want to marry him. How could you if you keep on with your work, going about the country?

MARY. [*Quietly.*] You leave mother at times, don't you?

OLLIVANT. I've got to.

MARY. So may I.

OLLIVANT. And the children?

MARY. They'd have a share of my life.

OLLIVANT. A mighty big share if you're human, I tell you. Ask your mother if you think they're easy coming and bringing up.

MARY. And now they've left her. Dear mother, what has she to do?

OLLIVANT. Well, if you ever get a husband with those ideas of yours you'll see what a wife has to do. [*He goes to her.*] Mary, it isn't easy, all this you've been saying. But your mother and I are left alone, and perhaps we *have* got different views than you. But if ever you do see it our way, and give up or fail--- well, come back to us, understand?

MARY. [*Going to him and kissing him.*] I understand how hard it was for you to say that. And remember I may come back a success.

OLLIVANT. Yes. I suppose they all think that; it's what keeps them going. But some day, when you're in love and marry, you'll see it all differently.

MARY. Father, what if the man does not come--or the children?

OLLIVANT. Why--[*He halts as though unable to answer her.*] Nonsense. He'll come, never fear; they always do.

MARY. I wonder.

OLLIVANT. [*He goes affectionately to EMILY, who has been staring before her during this.*] Emily, dear. No wonder the flowers have been neglected. Well, you'll have time to spray those roses yourself. I'll get the spray mixture to-morrow. [*Kisses her tenderly.*] Painting paper dolls with a change of clothes! When I might have been sending her the money without ever feeling it. No more of that, dear; you don't have to now. I shan't let you get tired and sick. That's one thing I draw the line at. [*He pats her again, looks at his watch, and then goes slowly over to the window-doors.*] Well, it's getting late. I'll lock up. [*Looking up at sky.*] Paper says it will rain to-morrow.

EMILY. [*Very quietly so only MARY can hear.*] At the art school they said I had a lovely sense of color. Your father is so kind; but he doesn't know how much I enjoyed painting again--even those paper dolls.

MARY. [*Comprehending in surprise.*] Mother! You, *too*?

EMILY. [*Fearing lest OLLIVANT should hear.*] Sh!

[*OLLIVANT closes the doors and eyes the women thoughtfully.*]

OLLIVANT. Better fasten the other windows when you come. Good-night.



*[He goes out slowly as mother and daughter sit there together.]*

THE CURTAIN FALLS