

**THE CRAFT OF THE
TORTOISE; A PLAY
IN FOUR ACTS**

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The craft of the tortoise; A play in Four Acts by Algernon Tassin

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ALGERNON TASSIN

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A Play in Four Acts

BY
ALGERNON TASSIN



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PREFACE

THE tortoise of the fable finally won the race for two reasons. The major one was preëminently masculine; the minor one was preëminently feminine.

Although the hare himself in a moment of contemptuous boasting had suggested it, the idea of their being pitted against each other was so ridiculous to a person of his nimble legs that he looped all over the adjacent territory and then took a nap. He felt confident that whenever he elected to return to the course he could easily whisk in ahead. Thus it was not at all that he disdainfully tossed her a specious advantage by this gallivanting (as is the habit of his human prototype); or that he desired to throw in for the benefit of the sole spectator a few pyrotechnics (also a mannish characteristic); or even that he tried to stimulate his own languid interest, in a race so one-sided, by developing an artificial excitement (which would have been behavior eminently human). It was merely that the thought of her as a real competitor never entered his silly head.

Those possessing the confidence of an enormous advantage, as Æsop would say, have ever underestimated not so much their competitors as the difficulties in the way of recovering lost time and making a brilliant last-moment finish. The idea has ever intrigued the vigorous. Indeed, it lends the crowing exuberance to vigor, this feeling that there is plenty of time for the final easy demonstration of one's superiority. Nor can it be denied that to make the grand tour yet win the race at the same time is the summum bonum of human existence.

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That is possibly the reason why the deathbed repentance occupied for so many centuries the principal place in the imagination of the Christian church and actuated so many of its forms. Not only had Holy Writ furnished instances of the most colorful and romantic nature, but many of its soberer teachings were calculated to enhearten the philanderer who would throw himself panting and victorious over the line at the last moment. If the wages of the eleventh hour servant equalled the wages of those who had borne the heat of the day, why report for duty any earlier than necessary? If there is less joy in Heaven for the ninety and nine that need no repentance than for the one sinner that returneth just as grace is finally over and the meal is being spread, why not contribute noticeably to the delight of the angels? Especially as, the passage hinting substantially at boredom, it would seem prudent to enter so permanent a community not only as the welcomest of citizens but with a reputation already established as a dispenser of smiles and an enlivener of tedium.

To men as to angels the plodder has ever been unattractive. Terrestrially speaking, only in human society is the drone encouraged. In school and college, the children of the species delight to dub him "greasy," an epithet so loose as to seem picked for its opprobrium. In maturer social circles, the thoughtful spender laying foundation for future solidity is stigmatized as a tightwad; and a spendthrift who scatters coin in one's own direction is approved by the most hardened of moralists. Nor is there lack of scriptural authority. Jesus admired the lilies of the field because they toiled not nor spun; and he is represented, in the most curious of passages, as administering a somewhat ungracious rebuke to one of his hostesses, the plodding Martha who looked out for his creature comforts, in favor of her sister, although manifestly the house could not have kept itself. Our fiction exploits the prodigal; there is no romance

in the ledger, its balancing or its balancer. The knight errant is the pictorial personage, not the knight who stayed at home and managed his farm, though there must have been several of these unknown to song and story. Say what you please, he that kissed and rode away has inspired more delightful memories than the lover who settled down to the humdrum business of paying the rent and feeding the children. Wherever one looks, in the teaching of the church or in the sorry habit of the world, the dull sensible plodder is discouraged.

The church, of course, catered to the weakness of humanity in this matter; and the prevalence among men of this tradition so sedulously cultivated, points to some basic reason. May it not be man's elaborate justification of his prevailing vices? For the edifying ending of all our novels and plays is simply hoakem; nobody would read stories which began as they finish. What we really want is the tale of an irresponsible gallivanter who undergoes a last page conversion to the proprieties we like to consider an appropriate influence for the young; who breaks every moral maxim except the only attractive one setting forth that it is never too late to mend. Even a priest finds a sizable sin surprisingly grateful in the tedious round of small confessions; and the mildest of ministers sniggers when a reprobate hails him as a gay dog. The fleeing Joseph is subject for laughing everywhere but in a book. Here he ceases at once to be entertaining, and his thwarting of promising adventure becomes an unmixed exasperation. What is the use of books, we say, unless they are more interesting than most of us allow ourselves to be? And as nowhere in life are brilliant finishes provided outside of the realm of religion, let us minister to our craving and at the same time uphold the teachings of the church by providing them in literature. For, as some one has remarked, the last page conversion is as comforting to all concerned as the deathbed repentance. It is impossible to demon-

strate its inefficacy; one has had all the delights of the feast while the appetite still remained keen; and the eternal verities are reëstablished just as indigestion sets in.

Yes, the tortoise had only the virtue of the plodder; and it is of all virtues—where all lack zest to the spectator—the least colorful. The occasional conflict with vice enlivens even the possessor of virtue with a brief exhilaration, but the tortoise struggles with nothing so lively as vice—merely with its juiceless shadow, temptation. The only comfort of the plodder, putting aside one after another the endless enticements to pleasant loitering and pleasanter aberration, is to keep the physical eye upon the ground covered inch by inch and the spiritual vision upon the distant goal. The heroism of the plodder has never been rightly applauded since it is entirely unspectacular. It consists not only in rigorously shutting out the scenery but in as rigorously closing the mind to a recognition that would paralyze all endeavor. At any moment the hare may dash joyously back from adventure and come rollicking in ahead, cutting the tortoise out of the rewards of the race and of the manifold privations upon the journey. Yet who shall say that this stern limitation of the horizon is a heroism after all? It may be only that mute dependence upon fundamental human psychology which still exists among us despite the teachings of the church to the contrary. The habit of gambolling is not to be put off at will. The hare is a gamboler still, even when the tortoise is nosing the line. Glancing back from the heights of the beckoning adventure, he beholds the tortoise dragging her slow length past the stake—yet before her hinderparts are well across, he may still crop that biggest daisy just beyond and frisk triumphantly in, his victory more golden than it is snatched from apparent defeat just as umpire fox is about to award the prize. So it is ever with the hare, and who shall say that the thought has not buoyed

the plodding tortoise from the moment she set out? If plodding is the least colorful of the virtues, it is the only one which does not wait until heaven to find its reward. Perhaps this is after all the final reason why the tortoise is humanly unattractive. Not only have men and theologians got together to belittle her, but the jealous other virtues have also entered the social conspiracy to cheapen her invariable success. The entire human fabric saves its face at the expense of the plodder.

Yet though decidedly handicapped by a virtue which we have been taught to detest, the tortoise is not devoid of human attractiveness. What is the essence of our eternal delight in the tramp, the vagabond? Not that he roams, surely; but that wherever he roams he is always at home, and in a house for which he pays no rent. To carry one's house on one's back, to be able to retire within it upon the slightest threat of danger, to drop asleep in one's tracks with perfect security from marauders, to extrude oneself delightfully in the morning and set off without any formality and with the knowledge that one will not have to oust an unwelcome tenant at nightfall—all this is a convenient union of domesticity and adventure. These are abilities which the frisking hare, nay even the stalking lion, might covet. Let others burrow or build or search for partial security in cavern or crevice, the tortoise is provided by birthright with both shelter and armor. And so another item of fundamental psychology may have buoyed the tortoise in her toilsome journey. She came slowly but she carried her house on her back. Not for nothing is the tortoise in the ancientest mythology the earth-bearer, the symbol of the origin of things and their permanence. The tortoise, wherever she strays, is an essential house-keeper.

The moral support of a well-fitting back has been alluded to by a brilliant lady who understood one of the more obvious functions of woman's clothes—to humiliate