

Three

PLAUSIBILITY IN FICTION

Although the writer of fiction creates his own world, peopling it with such invented characters as David Copperfield, Silas Marner, Eustacia Vye, and Holden Caulfield, he is not altogether free. We have to feel that his fictional world hangs together, that one thing more or less leads to another. This is not to say that there can be nothing fantastic in a story: only that what is fantastic must be presented in a context that makes the fantastic seem plausible.

The following two stories may seem equally plausible or implausible upon a casual reading, but a closer reading will reveal a significant difference.

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM (1874-)

Mr. Know-All

I was prepared to dislike Max Kelada even before I knew him. The war had just finished and the passenger traffic in the ocean-going liners was heavy. Accommodation was very hard to get and you had to put up with whatever the agents chose to offer you. You could not hope for a cabin to yourself and I was thankful to be given one in which there were only two berths. But when I was told the name of my companion my heart sank. It suggested closed portholes and the night air rigidly excluded. It was bad enough to share a cabin for fourteen days with anyone (I was going from San Francisco to Yokohama), but I should have looked upon it with less dismay if my fellow passenger's name had been Smith or Brown.

When I went on board, I found Mr. Kelada's luggage already below. I did not like the look of it; there were too many labels on the suitcases, and the wardrobe trunk was too big. He had unpacked his

Mr. Know-All 17

toilet things, and I observed that he was a patron of the excellent Monsieur Coty; for I saw on the washing-stand his scent, his hairwash, and his brilliantine. Mr. Kelada's brushes, ebony with his monogram in gold, would have been all the better for a scrub. I did not at all like Mr. Kelada. I made my way into the smoking room. I called for a pack of cards and began to play patience. I had scarcely started before a man came up to me and asked me if he was right in thinking my name was so and so.

"I am Mr. Kelada," he added, with a smile that showed a row of flashing teeth, and sat down.

"Oh, yes, we're sharing a cabin, I think."

"Bit of luck, I call it. You never know who you're going to be put in with. I was jolly glad when I heard you were English. I'm all for us English sticking together when we're abroad, if you understand what I mean."

I blinked.

"Are you English?" I asked, perhaps tactlessly.

"Rather. You don't think I look like an American, do you? British to the backbone, that's what I am."

To prove it, Mr. Kelada took out of his pocket a passport and airily waved it under my nose.

King George has many strange subjects. Mr. Kelada was short and of a sturdy build, clean-shaven and dark skinned, with a fleshy, hooked nose and very large, lustrous and liquid eyes. His long black hair was sleek and curly. He spoke with a fluency in which there was nothing English and his gestures were exuberant. I felt pretty sure that a closer inspection of that British passport would have betrayed the fact that Mr. Kelada was born under a bluer sky than is generally seen in England.

"What will you have?" he asked me.

I looked at him doubtfully. Prohibition was in force and to all appearance the ship was bone dry. When I am not thirsty I do not know which I dislike more, ginger ale or lemon squash. But Mr. Kelada flashed an oriental smile at me.

"Whisky and soda or a dry martini, you have only to say the word."

From each of his hip pockets he fished a flask and laid it on the table before me. I chose the martini, and calling the steward he ordered a tumbler of ice and a couple of glasses.

"A very good cocktail," I said.

"Well, there are plenty more where that came from, and if you've got any friends on board, you tell them you've got a pal who's got all the liquor in the world"

Mr. Kelada was chatty. He talked of New York and of San Francisco. He discussed plays, pictures, and politics. He was patriotic. The Union Jack is an impressive piece of drapery, but when it is flourished by a gentleman from Alexandria or Beirut, I cannot but feel that it loses somewhat in dignity. Mr. Kelada was familiar. I do not wish to put on airs, but I cannot help feeling that it is seemly in a total stranger to put mister before my name when he addresses me. Mr. Kelada, doubtless to set me at my ease, used no such formality. I did not like Mr. Kelada. I had put aside the cards when he sat down, but now, thinking that for this first occasion our conversation had lasted long enough, I went on with my game.

"The three on the four," said Mr. Kelada.

There is nothing more exasperating when you are playing patience than to be told where to put the card you have turned up before you have had a chance to look for yourself.

"It's coming out, it's coming out," he cried. "The ten on the knave."

With rage and hatred in my heart I finished. Then he seized the pack.

"Do you like card tricks?"

"No, I hate card tricks," I answered.

"Well, I'll just show you this one."

He showed me three. Then I said I would go down to the dining room and get my seat at table.

"Oh, that's all right," he said. "I've already taken a seat for you. I thought that as we were in the same stateroom we might just as well sit at the same table."

I did not like Mr. Kelada.

I not only shared a cabin with him and ate three meals a day at the same table, but I could not walk round the deck without his joining me. It was impossible to snub him. It never occurred to him that he was not wanted. He was certain, that you were as glad to see him as he was to see you. In your own house you might have kicked him downstairs and slammed the door in his face without the suspicion dawning on him that he was not a welcome visitor. He was a good mixer, and in three days knew everyone on board. He ran everything. He managed the sweeps, conducted the auctions, collected money for prizes at the sports, got up quoit and golf matches, organized the concert and arranged the fancy-dress ball. He was everywhere and always. He was certainly the best hated man, in the ship. We called him Mr. Know-All even to his face. He took it as a compliment. But it was at mealtimes that he was most intolerable. For the better part of an hour then he had us at his mercy.

He was hearty, jovial, loquacious and argumentative. He knew everything better than anybody else, and it was an affront to his overweening vanity that you should disagree with him. He would not drop a subject, however unimportant, till he had brought you round to his way of thinking. The possibility that he could be mistaken never occurred to him. He was the chap who knew. We sat at the doctor's table. Mr. Kelada would certainly have had it all his own way, for the doctor was lazy and I was frigidly indifferent except for a man called Ramsay who sat there also. He was as dogmatic as Mr. Kelada and resented bitterly the Levantine's cocksureness. The discussions they had were acrimonious and interminable.

Ramsay was in the American Consular Service and was stationed at Kobe. He was a great heavy fellow from the Middle West, with loose fat under a tight skin, and he bulged out of his ready-made clothes. He was on his way back to resume his post, having been on a flying visit to New York to fetch his wife who had been spending a year at home. Mrs. Ramsay was a very pretty little thing, with pleasant manners and a sense of humor. The Consular Service is ill paid, and she was dressed always very simply; but she knew how to wear her clothes. She achieved an effect of quiet distinction. I should not have paid any particular attention to her but that she possessed a quality that may be common enough in women, but nowadays is not obvious in their demeanor. You could not look at her without being struck by her modesty. It shone in her like a flower on a coat.

One evening at dinner the conversation by chance drifted to the subject of pearls. There had been in the papers a good deal of talk about the culture pearls which the cunning Japanese were making, and the doctor remarked that they must inevitably diminish the value of real ones. They were very good already; they would soon be perfect. Mr. Kelada, as was his habit, rushed the new topic. He told us all that was to be known about pearls. I do not believe Ramsay knew anything about them at all, but he could not resist the opportunity to have a fling at the Levantine, and in five minutes we were in the middle of a heated argument. I had seen Mr. Kelada vehement and voluble before, but never so voluble and vehement as now. At last something that Ramsay said stung him, for he thumped the table and shouted:

"Well, I ought to know what I am talking about. I'm going to Japan just to look into this Japanese pearl business. I'm in the trade and there's not a man in it who won't tell you that what I say about pearls goes. I know all the best pearls in the world, and what I don't know about pearls isn't worth knowing."

Here was news for us, for Mr. Kelada, with all his loquacity, had

never told anyone what his business was. We only knew vaguely that he was going to Japan on some commercial errand. He looked round the table triumphantly.

"They'll never be able to get a culture pearl that an expert like me can't tell with half an eye." He pointed to a chain that Mrs. Ramsay wore. "You take my word for it, Mrs. Ramsay, that chain you're wearing will never be worth a cent less than it is now."

Mrs. Ramsay in her modest way flushed a little and slipped the chain inside her dress. Ramsay leaned forward. He gave us all a look and a smile flickered in his eyes.

"That's a pretty chain of Mrs. Ramsay's, isn't it?"

"I noticed it at once," answered Mr. Kelada. "Gee, I said to myself, those are pearls all right."

"I didn't buy it myself, of course. I'd be interested to know how much you think it cost."

"Oh, in the trade somewhere round fifteen thousand dollars. But if it was bought on Fifth Avenue I shouldn't be surprised to hear that anything up to thirty thousand was paid for it."

Ramsay smiled grimly.

"You'll be surprised to hear that Mrs. Ramsay bought that string at a department store the day before we left New York, for eighteen dollars."

Mr. Kelada flushed.

"Rot. It's not only real, but it's as fine a string for its size as I've ever seen."

"Will you bet on it? I'll bet you a hundred dollars it's imitation."

"Done."

"Oh, Elmer, you can't bet on a certainty," said Mrs. Ramsay.

She had a little smile on her lips and her tone was gently deprecating.

"Can't I? If I get a chance of easy money like that I should be all sorts of a fool not to take it."

"But how can it be proved?" she continued. "It's only my word against Mr. Kelada's."

"Let me look at the chain, and if it's imitation I'll tell you quickly enough. I can afford to lose a hundred dollars," said Mr. Kelada.

"Take it off, dear. Let the gentleman look at it as much as he wants."

Mrs. Ramsay hesitated a moment. She put her hands to the clasp.

"I can't undo it," she said. "Mr. Kelada will just have to take my word for it."

I had a sudden suspicion that something unfortunate was about to occur, but I could think of nothing to say.

Ramsay jumped up.

"I'll undo it."

He handed the chain to Mr. Kelada. The Levantine took a magnifying glass from his pocket and closely examined it. A smile of triumph spread over his smooth and swarthy face. He handed back the chain. He was about to speak. Suddenly he caught sight of Mrs. Ramsay's face. It was so white that she looked as though she were about to faint. She was staring at him with wide and terrified eyes. They held a desperate appeal; it was so clear that I wondered why her husband did not see it.

Mr. Kelada stopped with his mouth open. He flushed deeply. You could almost see the effort he was making over himself.

"I was mistaken," he said. "It's a very good imitation, but of course as soon as I looked through my glass I saw that it wasn't real. I think eighteen dollars is just about as much as the damned thing's worth."

He took out his pocketbook and from it a hundred-dollar bill. He handed it to Ramsay without a word.

"Perhaps that'll teach you not to be so cocksure another time, my young friend," said Ramsay as he took the note.

I noticed that Mr. Kelada's hands were trembling.

The story spread over the ship as stories do, and he had to put up with a good deal of chaff that evening. It was a fine joke that Mr. Know-All had been caught out. But Mrs. Ramsay retired to her stateroom with a headache.

Next morning I got up and began to shave. Mr. Kelada lay on his bed smoking a cigarette. Suddenly there was a small scraping sound and I saw a letter pushed under the door. I opened the door and looked out. There was nobody there. I picked up the letter and saw that it was addressed to Max Kelada. The name was written in blockletters. I handed it to him.

"Who's this from?" He opened it. "Oh!"

He took out of the envelope, not a letter, but a hundred-dollar bill. He looked at me and again he reddened. He tore the envelope into little bits and gave them to me.

"Do you mind just throwing them out of the porthole?"

I did as he asked, and then I looked at him with a smile.

"No one likes being made to look a perfect damned fool," he said.

"Were the pearls real?"

“If I had a pretty little wife I shouldn’t let her spend a year in New York while I stayed at Kobe,” said he.

At that moment I did not entirely dislike Mr. Kelada. He reached out for his pocketbook and carefully put in it the hundred-dollar note.

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM has said that his stories and those of his master, Guy de Maupassant, are basically anecdotes, each relating “an incident which is curious, striking and original.” One can read such a story at least twice, Maugham says, first for “what happens” and second for “the cleverness of the telling.” Let us see what happens in the two preceding stories, and let us see whether they are cleverly told. And then let us see whether they are meaningful.

Maugham’s story is indeed very close to an anecdote. We have the feeling that we are listening to Maugham across a dinner table, recounting a curious happening that he witnessed. The happening is curious because it concludes surprisingly: Mr. Kelada, who seemed to be imperceptive and boorish, is at the end revealed to us as a man who is shrewd and gallant. And there is a curious irony; whereas usually a decent act adds to one’s reputation, Mr. Kelada’s decent act lessens his reputation. But is Mr. Kelada’s act plausible? Suppose we look; at the story again, to admire “the cleverness of the telling.” On re-reading it, are we convinced that the Mr. Kelada whom we meet at the outset would do what Mr. Kelada later does? Would a man who showed to an unwilling acquaintance three card tricks, a man who “would not drop a subject, however unimportant, till he had brought you round to his way of thinking,” a man who might have been kicked downstairs without “the suspicion dawning on him that he was not a welcome visitor”—would this Mr. Kelada care enough, especially in a moment of “triumph,” not only to notice Mrs. Ramsay’s terrified expression but to put together in an instant the whole story of Mrs. Ramsay’s infidelity? And would he care enough to be gallant, if it meant humiliating himself in order to protect the reputation of a casual acquaintance? (In fact, to conjecture— as apparently Mr. Kelada does— that Mrs. Ramsay’s reputation will be ruined if he tells the truth about the pearls, is somewhat melodramatic, for his insistence that the pearls are genuine would probably not at all shake Mr. Ramsay’s certainty; Mr. Ramsay “was as dogmatic as Mr. Kelada,” and their discussions “were acrimonious and interminable.”) Maugham tells us that certain things happened, but is the story compelling? Contrast it with “The Widow of Ephesus,” which, at first thought, is

also a story about the impossibility of judging a book by its cover. The widow's virtue is thoroughly established at the outset, yet within a few hundred words so convincing a picture has been drawn of the forces working on her that her surrender to the soldier is thoroughly plausible. The ironic contrast between her deep grief at the outset and her deep love at the conclusion is gained not by saying she wasn't at all what she seemed, but by vividly outlining a believable series of happenings that would lead her from grieving over her husband's body to desecrating it.

Of course, on re-reading "Mr. Know-All," we realize that the narrator is a snob and that his description of Mr. Kelada has not been entirely fair. But even if we allow for the narrator's bias, we have seen in the early part of the story that Mr. Kelada is a boor. Maugham's find! effect is achieved, one feels, through the sudden introduction of an aspect of Mr. Kelada's personality for which one is entirely unprepared.

Related to this point (indeed, inseparable from it) is the problem of whether Maugham's story is meaningful. When we read "The Widow of Ephesus," we feel that it is not only plausible but meaningful: tears are shed, but life goes on. Virtuous young widows mourn, but they often remarry. Egomaniacs, however, do not usually humiliate themselves to save a lady's reputation. The effect that Maugham's story leaves, whether after one or several readings, is of cleverness; the effect that "The Widow of Ephesus" leaves is of truth.

Earlier it was suggested that irony is present when Mr. Kelada's gallant act loses for him whatever respect the passengers might have had. He is thoroughly shown up, yet he is in the right. Similarly, there is irony in Petronius' story; it is ironic that a widow devoted to the memory of her husband should use her husband's body as a means of preserving her lover. In this sense, *irony* denotes a contrast between original intentions and outcome**. Maupassant's story, too, is ironic; like Petronius' story, but unlike Maugham's, the irony does not seem tricky. The "incident which is curious" (to use Maugham's phrase) in Maupassant's story is the son's innocent inheritance of his father's mistress. The story does not suffer by re-reading; it is thoroughly plausible, as Maupassant presents it. Though neither the father nor the son would ever have conceived of the outcome, as Maupassant arranges his story the outcome seems inevitable. Maupassant skilfully identifies the son with the father: hautot junior is "almost as tall as his father," and he is filled with "respect and deference for the wishes and opinions of

** such irony is not to be confused with verbal irony. See pages 352-353.

Hautot senior.” On the first visit to Caroline Donet he tells the story of his father’s death while the meal intended for his father is kept warm on the stove, and then, when pressed, he eats the meal. Before the second visit, he draws some comfort from the fact that in Caroline and her son (his half-brother) he has “a kind of family.” On the second visit the table is set as it was for his father, but now, quite reasonably, the crust has not been removed from the bread. After the meal he smokes his father’s pipe and bounces Emile on his knee. A third visit is inevitable; we have moved, yet with no violence to character or probability, from filial reverence to something akin to filial usurpation. Because of this apparent inevitability, the story adds up to a believable representation of an aspect of life: sons grow up and replace their fathers. Hautot junior, on his father’s death, acquires his father’s name and all his property.

QUESTIONS: *Mr. Know-All*

1. How does Maugham prepare us to be cautious about totally accepting the narrator’s attitude toward Mr. Kelada?

2. Does the description of Mr. Kelada’s possessions and appearance help to substantiate the narrator’s prejudice toward him?

3. Although Mr. Kelada says that he is “British to the backbone,” wouldn’t the phrase ordinarily apply more appropriately to the narrator? Why? Or is the conclusion of the story an ironic verification of Mr. Kelada’s self-characterization?

4. Until the argument over the pearls, Mr. Kelada “had never told anyone what his business was.” Is this a surprising fact?

5. What is the function of the last sentence?

6. Maugham has said (in *The Summing Up*): “The value of art, like the value of the Mystic Way, lies in its effects. If it can only give pleasure, however spiritual that pleasure may be, it is of no great consequence or at least of no more consequence than a dozen oysters and a pint of Montrachet. If it is a solace, that is well enough; the world is full of inevitable evils and it is good that man should have some heritage to which from time to time he may withdraw himself; but not to escape them, rather to gather fresh strength to face them. For art, if it is to be reckoned as one of the great values of life, must teach men humility, tolerance, wisdom and magnanimity. The value of art is not beauty, but right action.” Does this theory seem true? By this standard, is “Mr. Know-All” a work of art?

An Introduction to Literature: Fiction, Poetry, Drama/Sylvan Barnett, Morton Berman, William Burto. Toronto: Little, Brown & Co., 1963, pp. 17-23.