

who presently appears and informs them that it is from her husband, and was despatched last night from Lake Nyanza. Being asked by a servant whether there is a telegraph at the Lake, she explains that the wires have just been extended so far by the result of her husband's enterprise. He intends to return forthwith. She wonders what sort of breakfast he is having in Africa, and hopes that he will not meet with any accident on the road back. The table is laid, and the lady is sitting down to it, when there is a ring at the bell. Enter the husband's courier, who announces that his master is detained for a few minutes at the terminus, but is coming immediately. He dilates upon the discomforts of the Overland route and the breaking-down of an Italian train. The husband follows accordingly. He describes the success of his explorations. The lady receives him with rapture but without any surprise. In conversation with him she says nothing of the telegram, nor he to her. And so ends the first scene.—Now at this point of the story we might either know the key to the riddle (if the author were dramatizing a popular novel) or we might wait for the solution in the sequel. But what would be the bewilderment and the dismay of the audience if it should prove that there was no solution, and that the mysterious telegram, introduced with so much circumstance, had no bearing on the story whatever! I submit that this is not the way in which the crowns of the drama may be won, and that the most rigorous proof should be required before we assume that it ever was.

And so we come to our third point, that these glaring and dangerous defects of construction are also useless and gratuitous. After all, this is perhaps the chief matter. The imagination will work for very moderate wages; but it does expect to be paid something, and a little extra for over-time. There is perhaps no limit, there is certainly no ascertainable limit, to what men will grant to a narrator in the way of supposition, so long as he justifies the concession by making use of it and gives interest for the loan, or in plain words, so long as the supposition is required by the story. A classical example is the story of *Oedipus*¹; but in fact almost every story illustrates in some degree this principle of criticism, and the readers of fiction are applying it every day. If a romancer were to declare that a whole fleet was wafted, spirited, or what you will, five hundred miles in five minutes, and if out of this fiction were developed incidents of interest requiring the supposition, it is quite possible that

¹ See the remarks of Professor Jebb in his Introduction to the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, p. xlv.