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SF PERUSALS

Cement Hands

by Thornton Wilder

A Samuel French Acting Edition

SAMUEL FRENCH
FOUNDED 1830

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FOREWORD TO WILDER'S *CEMENT HANDS*

The Sin of Avarice

From the time he began dreaming up plays as a boy Thornton Wilder's vision of the theater transcended conventional boundaries, and to the end of his life his vision continually evolved and expanded. In 1956, he began work on what grew into an extravagantly ambitious project: two cycles of seven one-act plays based on the Deadly Sins and the Ages of Man. *Cement Hands* represents "Avarice" in Wilder's projected cycle on the Seven Deadly Sins.

In what would prove to be his final dramatic works, Wilder sought not only to explore the theatrical possibilities inherent in the Sins and Ages, but (as he phrased it in his private journal on Christmas Day 1960) to "offer each play in the series as representing, also, a different mode of playwriting: Grand Guignol, Chekhov, Noh play, etc., etc." In short, he envisioned nothing less than a tour de force of dramatic theme and form encapsulated in the economy and intensity of the one-act play.

Wilder did not complete the challenge he set for himself, but he came close. The surviving work enriches his dramatic legacy and deserves to be remembered as more than a footnote to his lifelong conviction (written soon after *Our Town* opened on Broadway in 1938): "The theater offers to imaginative narration its highest possibilities."

The Sins and Ages Then and Now

A brief overview of the history of these plays will help readers place them in Wilder's career as a dramatist. Two Sins, *Bernice* (Pride) and *The Wreck on the 5:25* (Sloth), premiered in English at a special event in Berlin in 1957 (with Wilder performing in *Bernice*). For reasons that have never been clear, for he enjoyed the experience and felt that plays did well, he withdrew them. That same year a third Sin, *The Drunken Sisters* (Gluttony), written as the satyr play for Wilder's full length drama, *The Alcestiad*, proved successful in its premiere on the stage of Zürich's fabled Schauspielhaus.

Five years passed before the continuation of his ambitious scheme appeared on a stage in the United States. In January 1962, two new Ages (*Infancy* and *Childhood*) and a new Sin, *Someone From Assisi* (Lust), opened at Circle in the Square, then located off-Broadway on Bleecker Street, to the reported largest pre-opening advanced sale in that stage's then 11- year history. Billed as "Plays for Bleecker Street," the show of ran for 349 performances.

Then silence. After "Plays for Bleecker Street" closed, no more Sins or Ages appeared. When Thornton Wilder died in 1975 the public record of his 14-play scheme contained only four plays – two Ages (*Infancy* and *Childhood*) and two Sins (Lust and Gluttony).

Today, eleven of Wilder's Sins and Ages are available for production: a completed cycle of the seven Deadly Sins and four of seven Ages of Man. The source of the seven "new" plays is no secret. The missing pieces were found in Thornton Wilder's archives at Yale[1]. From this source, starting in 1995, his literary executor and family released the two plays withdrawn in 1957, *Cement Hands* (Avarice), and four additional titles (*Youth*, *The Rivers Under the Earth* [Middle Age][2], *A Ringing of Doorbells* [Envy] and *In Shakespeare and the Bible* [Wrath]) recovered and completed by the actor, director and friend of Wilder's, F.J. O'Neil. (Mr. O'Neil's valuable notes on the origin of each of these missing links follow the text of each play.)

The public reception of Thornton Wilder's long lost and new plays was gratifying. *The Wreck on the 5:25* was selected as one of the Best American Short Plays of 1994-95. In 1997, the Centenary of the playwright's birth, Kevin Kline starred in a premiere reading in New York of *Cement Hands*, and the works recovered by Mr. O'Neil served as the centerpieces of Actors Theatre of Louisville's 13th Annual Brown-Forman Classics in Context Festival. Finally, as the capstone to the Centenary celebration, TCG Press in 1997 published the 11 Sins and Ages in Volume I of *The Collected Short Plays of Thornton Wilder.*

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[1] No additional one-acts remain to be discovered in Thornton Wilder's archives at Yale.

[2] We believe Wilder intended *The Rivers Under the Earth* to represent Middle Age.

Wilder never followed conventional theatrical practice. As a young writer in his "Classic One Act Plays" of 1931, he swept away scenery and played provocative games with time and place. In the Sins and Ages, his farewell as a playwright, he is no less adventurous by way of settings, techniques, stage-craft and themes. One artistic trend of the day especially "fired his imagination" where these plays are concerned: his passionate belief in the value of the arena stage. "The boxed set play," he wrote in 1961, "encourages the anecdote…The unencumbered stage encourages the truth in everyone." Wilder felt so strongly that audiences should be seated as close to the actors as possible that Samuel French, for several years, was only permitted to license these plays to companies agreeing to perform them on a three-sided thrust or arena stage.

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As part of its celebration of Wilder's one-act plays, Samuel French and the Wilder family take great pleasure in issuing new acting editions for the Sins and Ages long in print and, for the first time, acting editions of the seven new Wilder works. We invite those performing or teaching these plays to visit www.thorntonwilder.com for additional information.

– *Tappan Wilder,*
Literary Executor for Thornton Wilder

CHARACTERS

EDWARD BLAKE, a lawyer, fifty
PAUL, a waiter, fifty-five
DIANA COLVIN, Blake's niece, twenty-one
ROGER OSTERMAN, Diana's fiancé, twenty-seven

SETTING

Corner in the public rooms of a distinguished New York hotel.

(A screen has been placed at the back [that is, at the actors' entrance] to shut this corner off from the hotel guests. A table in the center of the stage with a large RESERVED sign on it. Various chairs. At the end of the stage farthest from the entrance is a low bench; above it we are to assume some large windows looking onto Fifth Avenue. Enter **EDWARD BLAKE**, *a lawyer, fifty. He is followed by* **PAUL**, *a waiter, fifty-five.)*

BLAKE. *(rubbing his hands)* Paul, we have work to do.

PAUL. Yes, Mr. Blake.

BLAKE. There will be three for tea. I arranged with Mr. Gruber that this corner would be screened off for us; and I specially asked that you would wait on us. As I say, we have some work to do. *(smilingly giving him an envelope)* There's a hundred dollars, Paul, for whatever strain you may be put to.

PAUL. Thank you, sir. – Did you say "strain," Mr. Blake?

BLAKE. I'm going to ask you to do some rather strange things. Are you a good actor, Paul?

PAUL. Well – I often tell the young waiters that our work is pretty much an actor's job.

BLAKE. I'm sure you're a very good one. Now the guests today are my niece, Diana Colvin. – You know Miss Colvin, don't you?

PAUL. *(with pleasure)* Oh, yes, Mr. Blake. Everyone knows Miss Colvin.

BLAKE. And her fiancé – that's a secret still – Mr. Osterman?

PAUL. Which Mr. Osterman, sir?

BLAKE. Roger – Roger Osterman. You know him?

PAUL. Oh, yes, sir.

BLAKE. Now it's not clear which of us is host. But it's clear to *me* which of us is host. Roger Osterman has invited us to tea. He will pay the bill.

PAUL. Yes, sir.

BLAKE. There may be some difficulty about it – some distress; some squirming; some maneuvering – protesting. But he will pay the bill.

(a slight pause while he looks hard and quizzically at **PAUL***, who returns his gaze with knowing raised eyebrows)*

Now at about 5:20 you're going to bring Mr. Osterman a registered letter. The messenger will be waiting in the hall for Mr. Osterman's signature. Roger Osterman will ask to borrow half a dollar of me. I won't have half a dollar. He will then turn and ask to borrow half a dollar of you. And you won't hear him.

PAUL. I beg your pardon, sir?

BLAKE. He'll ask to borrow half a dollar of you, but you won't hear him. You'll be sneezing or something. Your face will be buried in your handkerchief. Have you a cold, Paul?

PAUL. No, sir. We're not allowed to serve when we have colds.

BLAKE. Well, you're growing deaf. It's too bad. But…you… *won't…hear* him.

PAUL. *(worriedly)* Yes, sir.

BLAKE. You'll say, *(raising his voice)* "Yes, Mr. Osterman, I'll get some hot tea, at once." This appeal to you for money may happen several times.

PAUL. *(abashed)* Very well, Mr. Blake, if you wish it.

BLAKE. Now, Paul, I'm telling you why I'm doing this. You're an intelligent man and an old friend. My niece is going to marry Roger Osterman. I'm delighted that my niece is going to marry him. He's a very nice fellow and what else is there about him, Paul?

PAUL. Why, sir – it is understood that he is very rich.

BLAKE. Exactly. But the Ostermans are not only fine people and very rich people – they have oddities about them, too, haven't they? – A certain oddity?

*(***BLAKE** *slowly executes the following pantomime: he puts his hands into his trouser pockets and brings them out, open, empty and "frozen".)*

PAUL. *(reluctantly)* I know what you mean, sir.

BLAKE. Have you a daughter, Paul, or a niece?

PAUL. Yes, sir. I have two daughters and three nieces.

BLAKE. Then you know: we older men have a responsibility to these girls. I have to show my niece what her fiancé is like. I have to show her this odd thing – this one little unfortunate thing about the Ostermans.

PAUL. I see, Mr. Blake.

BLAKE. I'm not only her uncle; I'm her guardian; and her lawyer. I'm all she's got. And I must show her – here she comes now – and for that I need your help.

(Enter **DIANA COLVIN**, *twenty-one, in furs. The finest girl in the world.)*

DIANA. Here you are, Uncle Edward. – Good afternoon, Paul.

PAUL. Good afternoon, Miss Colvin.

BLAKE. Will you wait for tea, Diana?

DIANA. *(crossing the stage to the bench)* Yes.

*(***PAUL** *goes out.)*

BLAKE. Aren't you going to kiss me?

DIANA. No!! I'm furious at you. I'm so furious I could cry. You've humiliated me. I'm so ashamed I don't know what to do. Uncle Edward, how could you do such a thing?

BLAKE. *(calmly)* What, dear?

DIANA. I've just heard that –

(She rises and strides about, groping for a handkerchief in her bag.)

– you're asking the Osterman family how much allowance Roger will give me when we're married. And you're making some sort of difficulty about it. Uncle Edward! The twentieth century! And as though I were some poor little goose- girl he'd discovered in the country. Oh, I could die. I swear to you, I could die.

BLAKE. *(still calmly)* Sit down, Diana.

(Silence. She walks about, dabs her eyes and finally sits down.)

Diana, I'm not an idiot. I don't do things like this by whim and fancy.

DIANA. Perfectly absurd. Why, all those silly society columnists keep telling their readers every morning that I'm one of the richest girls in the country. Is it true?

(He shrugs.)

I'll never need a cent of the Ostermans' money. I'll never take a cent, not a cent.

BLAKE. What?

DIANA. I won't have to.

BLAKE. What kind of marriage is that?

(He rises. She looks at him a little intimidated.)

Well, you'll be making an enormous mistake and it will cost you a lot of suffering.

DIANA. What do you mean?

BLAKE. Marriage is a wonderful thing, Diana. But it's relatively new. Twelve, maybe fifteen thousand years old. It brings with it some ancient precivilization elements. Hence, difficult to manage. It's still trying to understand itself.

DIANA. *(shifting in her seat, groaning)* Really, Uncle Edward!

BLAKE. It hangs on a delicate balance between things of earth and things of heaven.

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