

you were sitting in the catbird seat, because you thought no one would believe me when I told it! My God, it's really too perfect!" She brayed loudly and hysterically, and the fury was on her again. She glared at Mr. Fitweiler. "Can't you see how he has tricked us, you old fool? Can't you see his little game?" But Mr. Fitweiler had been surreptitiously pressing all the buttons under the top of his desk and employees of F & S began pouring into the room. "Stockton," said Mr. Fitweiler, "you and Fishbein will take Mrs. Barrows to her home. Mrs. Powell, you will go with them." Stockton, who had played a little football in high school, blocked Mrs. Barrows as she made for Mr. Martin. It took him and Fishbein together to force her out of the door into the hall, crowded with stenographers and office boys. She was still screaming imprecations at Mr. Martin, tangled and contradictory imprecations. The hubbub finally died out down the corridor.

19 "I regret that this has happened," said Fitweiler. "I shall ask you to dismiss it from your mind Martin." "Yes sir," said Mr. Martin, anticipating his chief's "That will be all" by moving to the door. "I will dismiss it." He went out and shut the door, and his step was light and quick in the hall. When he entered his department he had slowed down to his customary gait, and he walked quietly across the room to the W20 file, wearing a look of studious concentration.

## Plot

### I

The word *story* implies a series of tied-together events; and *plot* is the technical term that applies to these connected events in a story. To build a plot, experienced writers carefully select certain details and just as carefully reject many more; they are interested not in compiling a precise record of a character's actions but in choosing only those details that have a direct bearing on the story. In "The Catbird Seat," for instance, between the time Mr. Martin enters his office and the time Mr. Fitweiler summons him, many unimportant events might have occupied Mr. Martin—answering a phone, filing papers, addressing his assistants. But Thurber wisely passes these over; he's interested only in Mrs. Barrows' eagerness to report Mr. Martin's behavior and in Mr. Martin's carefully prepared reaction.

Every detail selected must serve a specific purpose. Had Thurber mentioned Mr. Martin's answering a phone, for instance, while

awaiting Mr. Fitweiler's summons, that detail would have had to contribute somehow to the development of the plot or of Mr. Martin's character. A famous Russian short-story writer, Anton Chekhov, made the point clear by saying that if a revolver is mentioned in the first paragraph of a story, it must be used sometime before the close.

But even a series of carefully chosen, related events doesn't necessarily constitute a plot. Paragraphs 16-19 of "The Catbird Seat," for instance, make up just such a carefully selected series. There's a richly drawn scene, the suggestion of a story, but no plot. A plot must deal with the straightening out of a question mark: some *conflict* must be dramatized that is in some way *resolved*; some *problem* must be set up that is in some way *solved*, at least for the moment. In "The Catbird Seat," the problem is that Mr. Martin must get rid of Mrs. Barrows before she gets rid of him. In the four paragraphs just cited we have the *resolution*—the account of his success. Read the paragraphs again with these comments in mind to see the difference between a well-organized *scene* as part of a story and a well-organized plot as the framework for a whole story.

### II

*Plot*, then, refers to a series of interrelated events, during which some conflict or problem is resolved. (And the conflict or problem doesn't have to be earthshaking; it can be essentially unimportant, even trivial.) Plot can be looked at for purposes of discussion as if isolated from the people concerned with those events and that conflict or problem. There are, of course, many ways in which authors can arrange the details selected. Since events in the real world take place one after the other, the obvious way to tell a story is chronologically, in the manner of "...and then...and then...and then." Most simple tales are told this way, and there's no reason why a rather complex story can't also be handled chronologically. Some very good stories in this book ("The Cask of Amontillado" and "Flight," for instance) are so handled. It would be foolish to say that Thurber would have had a less successful story had he followed a strictly chronological development; a skillful writer plays a skillful game no matter how he chooses to play it.

By avoiding a chronological treatment, however, Thurber plunges us into the heart of the story immediately. There's no point at which the focus is not directly on Mr. Martin. This concentration could not have been achieved had much time been spent establishing Mr. Martin's past and Mrs. Barrows' activities in a chronological ordering. Mr. Martin's behavior patterns, so necessary to the story,