The Eternal Triangle

A PLAYLET

By GERALD RAFTERY, *Elizabeth, New Jersey*

Cast of Characters: Three boys, herein referred to as First, Second, and Third.

Properties: Small chair, blackboard, chalk which first boy carries in his pocket, mathematics book with protractor which he carries in his hand, two books and foot-rule which second boy carries (if stage is large a yard-stick may be necessary and can be placed near the black board), book containing small sheet of paper which third boy carries.

(Discovered, FIRST BOY *center Rear, reading a book.* SECOND BOY *enters, Right, whistling and swinging two books and foot-rule. Walks on a few steps, notices* FIRST BOY; *stops whistling and walks on watching him; walks past looking over shoulder. Stops just before exitting and turns back; starts whistling again and walks back past him watching him closely.* FIRST BOY *reads on, turning page of book.* SECOND BOY *approaches curiously and looks over reader's shoulder.* FIRST BOY *reads on.* SECOND BOY *stares at reader, then book, then reader again, and at last passes his open hand, palm, slowly between reader's eyes and book, as if to see if he is conscious.*

FIRST *(looking up angrily).* What's the matter? Are you sick?

SECOND. No. *(Pauses, startled).* I was just wondering what was the matter with you. That—that's a math book, isn't it?

FIRST *(pugnaciously).* Well, what about it?

At this point, THIRD BOY *enters, and watches the two with interest, drifting closer to the pair until he is behind* SECOND BOY *when his* (THIRD BOY'S) *turn comes to speak.*

SECOND *(hesitantly).* You—you weren't reading it, were you?

FIRST *(angrily).* Yes. What about it?

SECOND. Well—I—you see—uh—well, I was wondering why?

FIRST. What do you mean—why?

SECOND *(embarrassedly).* Well, uh, haven't you anything else to do?

FIRST *(still angry).* I suppose I could go around snooping over peoples' shoulders and waving my hand in front of their faces.

SECOND. Well, don't get angry! I mean do you have to read it?

FIRST *(loudly).* NO; I don't have to read it. I'm reading it because I like to read it.

SECOND (*steps back and touches his chin with his forefinger; speaks as though unbelieving and seeking re-assurance*). You like to read it?

FIRST (*firmly*). I like to read it.

THIRD (*comes up quietly and from arm's length taps* SECOND BOY *on the shoulder, who turns;* THIRD BOY *half-whispers*). He likes to read it? (SECOND BOY *nods dazedly.*)

There is a pause while both turn and face the audience, THIRD BOY *with hands sunk deep in his pockets,* SECOND BOY *scratching his head; they both stare at the footlights and shake their heads sadly, then repeat together—*

BOTH (*in a soft voice*). He likes to read it!

FIRST BOY turns back to his book while the other two confer for a moment in unheard whispers, glancing at him frequently. They seem to come to a decision and after urging the SECOND BOY, the THIRD BOY approaches FIRST BOY and taps him on the shoulder, starting slightly as he looks up.

THIRD. Say, we know what you're trying to do. You want us to read that book; like Tom Sawyer when he had to whitewash a fence. He made believe he liked it, and then all the other boys wanted to do it.

SECOND (*adds, before third boy has quite finished*). Yes; sure; you can't fool us.

FIRST (*indignantly*). I *don't* want you to read it. Go on away and don't bother me. (*Goes back to his book in disgust, then looks up again to inquire sarcastically.*) Didn't either of you fellows ever read a book?

SECOND. Sure I did.

THIRD. Of course; why I go to the library twice a week.

FIRST. I mean don't you ever read a school-book. Or do you just carry them around so people won't think you work for a living?

NOTE: *The next four speeches are to be spoken in rapid succession, the players almost running them together.*

SECOND. Say, are you trying to be funny?

THIRD. Of course I read them.

SECOND. Lots of times I read them.

THIRD. Sometimes in study periods, when I haven't anything else to do, I read them.

SECOND (*Pauses, as though about to tell something scarcely credible*). Sometimes I even read them when I'm home.

FIRST. Well, then, what are you gaping at me for?

SECOND. But—but—(*stutters helplessly; turns to third boy and gestures impotently at the first.*)

THIRD (*bursts out*). But that's a *math* book!

FIRST (*rises, bangs book down upon chair and clenches fists, placing them on his hips; he stares menacingly at the other two*). WELL! *The* Second *and* Third Boys *start back alarmed. There is a pause.*

SECOND (*apologetically*). Now if it was, say, history, that would be different.

THIRD. Or maybe geography. (*Proffers the book in his hand.*) They're sort of interesting, kind of, sometimes.

SECOND. Yes; all about (*waves his hand vaguely*) er-ah continents and things, and—ah administrations. (*He appears quite proud of the words.*)

THIRD (*nods his head in vigorous agreement.*) There you are. (*He points to the books.*) There's something you can get a hold on. Hemispheres and wars and things.

SECOND (*also nodding agreement*). Yes sir! (*Makes a contemptuous gesture toward the math book.*) That stuff! All about triangles and such.

THIRD (*levels an argumentative finger at the first boy.*) Did you ever see a triangle?

SECOND BOY *nods and smiles, holding his coat lapel with one hand and rocking back on his heels in an attitude suggesting that the first boy must be quite vanquished by the last remark.*

FIRST (*laughs*). Did you ever see a hemisphere or an administration? And triangles? (*gestures widely*) Why I can see them wherever I want to!

SECOND *and* THIRD boys *start back, frightened, and fall together, clutching each other's shoulders.*

BOTH. Wha—what!

FIRST (*laughs*). I mean I can imagine them anywhere I want to. When you walk straight toward something, don't you just imagine a straight line? Well, that how I see triangles.

SECOND (*sighs, very much relieved*). Oh (*Pauses and swallows*). I see.

THIRD (*loosens collar briefly with one finger*). I thought you were crazy or something.

FIRST. I suppose you think anybody who reads a math book is crazy. (*Turns away impatiently.*)

SECOND (*with alarmed politeness*). No-o, no-o, nothing like that. You see (*very soothingly*) we were just sort of wondering, kind of.

THIRD. Yes, we were wondering just what you liked about it.

FIRST. Well, it (*hesitates*) it's interesting.

SECOND (*surprised*). Interesting?

THIRD. How?

FIRST. Why, if you know all about triangles you can tell how far things are away from you, and all that.

> NOTE: *The next five speeches are to be spoken in rapid succession as the speakers move nearer to the first boy.*

SECOND (*surprised*). You can?

THIRD. You mean a trick, like?

SECOND. With your eyes shut, can you?

THIRD. Where does it tell you that?

SECOND. I never found anything like that.

> (*They both reach for the math book.*)

FIRST (*impatiently*). No, it's not a trick. (*Pulls math book away from them.*) And you have to keep your eyes open.

SECOND (*skeptically*). Aw, I bet it's a trick.

THIRD (*gestures contemptuously*). Sure it is.

FIRST (*patiently*). I tell you, it's just a matter of knowing how.

SECOND. Well, you'll have to show me.

THIRD (*shaking his head emphatically*). Yes *sir!*

FIRST. All right. Do you see that corner over there? (*Reference may be made, instead to a pillar, clock, door, or other object.*)

SECOND. Of course I see it.

THIRD (*expectantly*). How far away is it?

FIRST. Guess. (*Then when they both stare at him, he addresses the second body particularly.*) Go on, take a guess.

THIRD (*pats his shoulder encouragingly*). Go on, guess.

SECOND (*folds his arms, puts his head on one side and squints at the corner*). Oh, I'd say about a hundred, er, and fifty, or uh, maybe two hundred, or ——

FIRST (*mimicking*).—or maybe three hundred and fifty or six hundred.

SECOND (*angrily*). All right, you don't have to be so wise about it!

THIRD (*sympathetically*). No; why my scoutmaster says that judging distance ——

FIRST (*interrupting*). Are you a boy scout?

THIRD. Sure I am.

FIRST (*turning to second boy*). And you?

SECOND (*nodding vigorously*). Uh-huh.

FIRST. All right. (*Goes over to a certain spot; looks at his feet and then at the corner.*) Pace me off ten yards in that direction; both of you do it, and check each other. (*Marks the spot with chalk which he takes from his pocket.*)

> *Pulls a foot-rule from the second boy's books and goes to the black board where he marks off a ten-inch line.*
>
> NOTE: *The line on the stage is to be drawn in such a fashion that it will be the base of a triangle of which the indicated corner, post or other object will be the apex.*

SECOND. Say, his ten yards comes to there and mine comes to here. We can't both be right.

FIRST. You're probably both wrong. Just take a spot half-way between the two. (*He goes over to where they stand and marks the spot with chalk.*) Now throw me over that math book. (*Takes book and removes protractor, measuring the angle.*) You see that line on the wall up there; that's ten inches long and each inch of it represents a yard of this line you fellows paced off (*Goes over and adds angle to one end of the chalk-line, and goes on to the other mark on the floor.*)

SECOND. Say, let's see that thing you've got.

THIRD. What is it? Some trick thing?

FIRST (*returning to the board after measuring other angle.*) Don't be silly. It's just a protractor. (*Adds second angle to triangle and closes it up.*) Now watch this. The triangle here is just a little picture of the big triangle that I imagined from here (*points to the floor*) to the corner over there (*points*). It's a scale drawing, and that means that each inch here represents a yard out there.

SECOND. Oh, a scale drawing! Sure, I think I saw something about them in my Scouts' Handbook once.

THIRD. Yes, sure. Where it tells about map-making——

FIRST. Is that one of the books you read sometimes in study periods when you haven't anything else to do?

SECOND. Well . . . yes. (THIRD BOY *nods but is rather embarrassed.*)

FIRST (*sarcastically*). What do you do? Look at the pretty pictures?

THIRD. Aw, hey, don't ride us! We're no geniuses; we don't pretend to be.

SECOND. That's right.

FIRST. Do you have to be a genius to do a little thing like that: finding the distance to that corner?

SECOND. Well, how do we know? You haven't finished it yet.

THIRD. No; go ahead and show us.

FIRST (*incredulously*). What? I haven't finished it? Why all you have to do now is measure one of the side lines. (*Slowly and patiently he explains.*) That triangle there (*points to it*) is a little picture (*measures a space with his hands*) you know, like a picture in a book, picture, picture—of this (*points*) triangle on the ground.

SECOND (*inquiringly*). Well?

THIRD. Yeah?

FIRST (*stares hopefully at their faces but shakes his head sadly at their puzzled look and continues*). Every inch in that triangle (*points to it and then goes over and touches it*) triangle, triangle—represents a yard on the ground, ground (*stoops and pats the floor*) ground.

> *The second and third boys stare a moment at the first boy, then break into a slow grin.*

BOTH. O-oh . . . ye-ah . . . I—see.

> *Under cover of laughter from the audience they start to explain to each other, going over to the board.*

> NOTE: *The following two speeches are to be repeated simultaneously to get the effect of jumbled and excited conversation, and may be spoken twice, in whole or in part.*

SECOND. Sure, each inch stands for a yard. Don't you see that? You count the inches and then turn them into yards. Why it's easy; inches stand for yards.

THIRD. Why, of course. Each inch in one of these lines means a yard on the ground. Sure; this is just a little picture, like. You just take yards for inches.

> *After a pause, the second boy picks up a rule, foot or yard, and measures the distance.*

SECOND. Then the corner is —— yards. Gee; that's easy.

THIRD. (*walks away a few steps, staring at the ground and rubbing the back of his head; after a short pause, then:*) Now that's all very well, but wouldn't it be almost as easy to measure the distance, or pace it, or something?

FIRST. Don't be silly. Suppose it was on water, or over a river or a quarry. Or maybe the triangle would be a couple of miles long.

SECOND. Could you really measure a long distance like that?

FIRST. Well, you could get a pretty good idea of it this way. But to get it exactly, that is, right down to an inch or so, you'd have to use a surveyor's transit.

THIRD. Oh, I know what they are. They're those things that look like a telescope on three legs.

SECOND. And you can measure a couple of miles right down to the inch with them? I didn't know they were so exact.

FIRST (*gestures with his hand*) Sure they are. Why there's a certain kind of transit gun that's so darned exact that they have a fellow standing around all the time just holding an umbrella over it to keep the sun from expanding the different parts.

SECOND. Aw, I don't believe that!

THIRD. That sounds to me like so much ——

FIRST (*interrupting vehemently*) It's a fact. My brother worked for the Park Commission one summer, and he told me he saw it.

SECOND. Well, maybe that's because those things can tell heights, too. Maybe that's why they're so delicate.

THIRD. Say, you can't tell how high things are. You can't tell that.

FIRST. Who can't? Of course I can!

THIRD (*who has started back in alarm*). Gee, don't get angry. I was just asking you.

SECOND (*looks about in slight confusion*). How—how high is that wall over there? (*Points to side wall of auditorium.*)

FIRST. Got a piece of paper?

THIRD (*takes paper from the book in his hand*). Here you are.

FIRST (*takes paper and folds one corner so as to bisect a right angle*). Now you have to imagine another triangle running up to the top of the wall. (*He squints along the paper, moving back and forth.*) All you have to do is line this up with the top of the wall; and you must remember to keep the bottom parallel to the ground. There, think that's it. (*He stops moving, looks a second, then takes the paper down from his eye.*) Yes; there you are.

SECOND. Where?

THIRD. What?

FIRST. Oh, I forgot; you fellows don't know anything. All you have

to do now is measure the distance to the wall and add my height which is about five feet, and there you are. That will be the height of the wall.

SECOND. Say, that's pretty good. (*Paces off the distance, counting aloud, by threes, and adds the five feet*) —— feet; why you can measure trees or anything that way.

THIRD (*walks in the other direction, scratching his head; there is a pause*). Now that's all very well, but isn't there some easier way?

FIRST. Well, you could use an instrument they call the hypsometer. You just find your distance from the tree or wall, and set the hypsometer. Then you sight it at the top of the wall, and read the height right off the instrument. That works by triangles, too.

SECOND. Gee, you can do a lot with triangles, can't you?

FIRST. You certainly can. You can figure out your location anywhere in the world by using triangles.

SECOND. Is that a fact?

FIRST. It certainly is. That's how ships find where they are out on the ocean.

SECOND. How do they do that?

FIRST. Well, you use an instrument called the sextant. It helps you figure out a great enormous triangle (*this speech to be done slowly and impressively with wide and sweeping gestures*) with the sun at one corner and the horizon at another corner and the ship at the third corner. And that tells you where you are, far out at sea, miles from land.

SECOND (*in an awed voice*). Gosh, that's great!

THIRD (*walks away a few steps, scratching his head*). Now that's all very well, but isn't there some easier way?

> *The first and second boys make disgusted gestures and exit while the third boy follows.*

THIRD. Aw, listen, fellows—I was just ——

CURTAIN