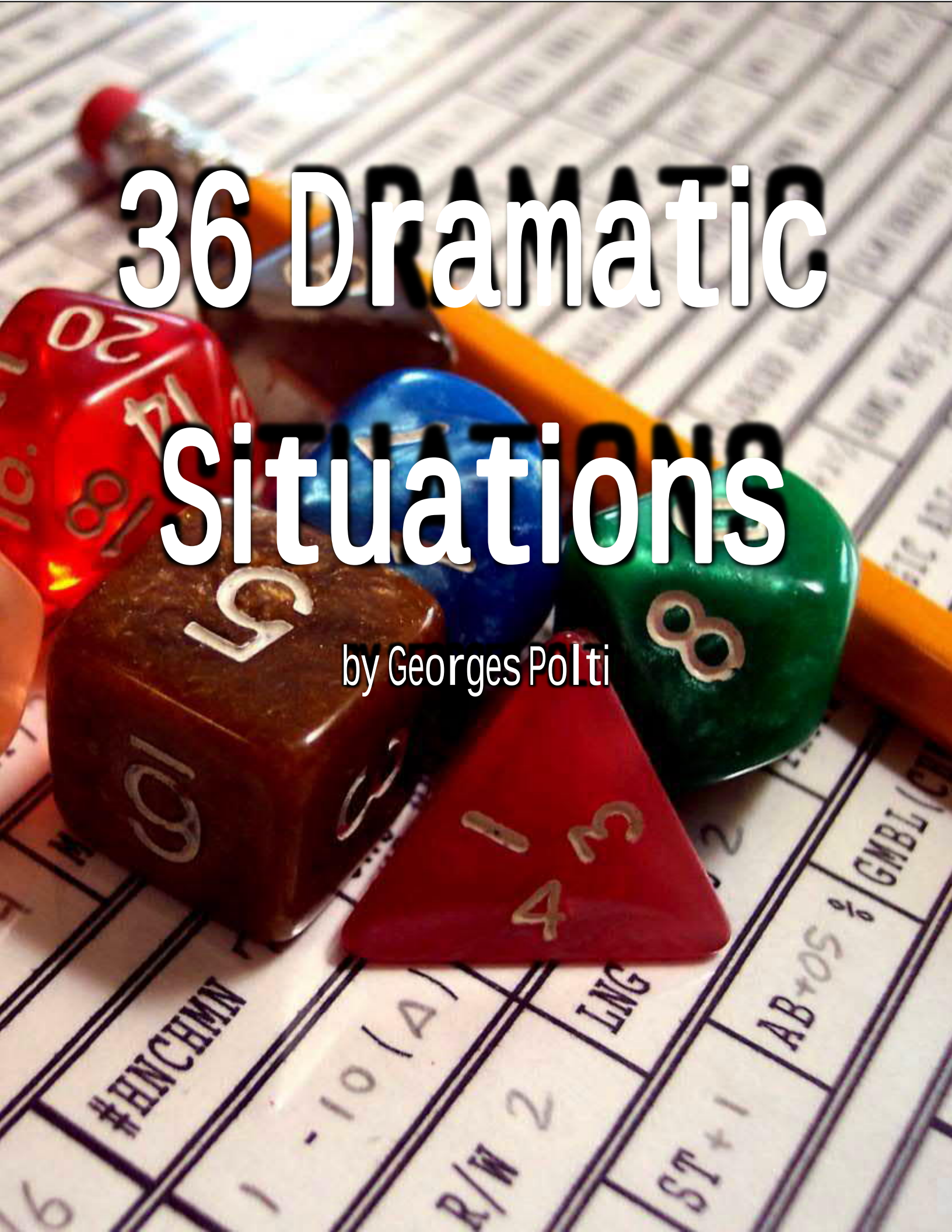
36 Dramatic Situations

by Georges Polti



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When thinking of running your next RPG campaign, go epic. Tap into great stories that have been told throughout history.

Fortunately, Georges Polti did the legwork. He surveyed a vast array of literature and boiled the plots down to 36 dramatic situations.

Crafting your hook for roleplaying is essential. You want your players to completely buy in to the world you are creating.

Read through the situations below and choose one or more as the core of your campaign story.

Also, use what your players give you.

If a player says his character's sister disappeared years ago, look through the dramatic situations. Find out how to mine that situation and make it even more dramatic.

The Thirty-six Dramatic Situations
by Georges Polti

1. SUPPLICATION

(The dynamic elements technically necessary are: a Persecutor; a Suppliant; and a Power in authority, whose decision is doubtful)

A.

(1) Fugitives Imploring the Powerful for Help Against Their Enemies

(2) Assistance Implored for the Performance of a Pious Duty Which Has Been Forbidden

(3) Appeals for a Refuge in Which to Die

B.

(1) Hospitality Besought by the Shipwrecked

(2) Charity Entreated by Those Cast Off by Their Own People, Whom They Have Disgraced

(3) Expiation: The Seeking of Pardon, Healing or Deliverance

(4) The Surrender of a Corpse, or of a Relic, Solicited

C.

(1) Supplication of the Powerful for Those Dear to the Suppliant

(2) Supplication to a Relative in Behalf of Another

Relative
(3) Supplication to a Mother's Lover, in Her Behalf

2. DELIVERANCE
(Elements: an Unfortunate, a Threatener, a Rescuer)
A.
(1) Appearance of a Rescuer to the Condemned
B.
(1) A Parent Replaced Upon a Throne by His Children
(2) Rescue by Friends, or by Strangers Grateful for Benefits Or Hospitality

3. CRIME Pursued by Vengeance
(Elements: an Avenger and a Criminal)
A.
(1) The Avenging of a Slain Parent or Ancestor
(2) The Avenging of a Slain Child or Descendant
(3) Vengeance for a Child Dishonored
(4) The Avenging of a Slain Wife or Husband
(5) Vengeance for the Dishonor, or Attempted Dishonoring, of a Wife

(6) Vengeance for a Mistress Slain
(7) Vengeance for a Slain or Injured Friend
(8) Vengeance for a Sister Seduced
B.
(1) Vengeance for Intentional Injury or Spoliation
(2) Vengeance for Having Been Despoiled During Absence
(3) Revenge for an Attempted Slaying
(4) Revenge for a False Accusation
(5) Vengeance for Violation
(6) Vengeance for Having Been Robbed of One's Own
(7) Revenge Upon a Whole Sex for a Deception by One
C.
(1) Professional Pursuit of Criminals

4. VENGEANCE Taken For Kindred Upon Kindred

(Elements: Avenging Kinsman; Guilty Kinsman; Remembrance of the Victim, a Relative of Both)
A.
(1) A Father's Death Avenged Upon a Mother
(2) A Mother's Death Avenged Upon a Father
B.

(1) A Brother's Death Avenged Upon a Son
C.
(1) A Father's Death Avenged Upon a Husband
D.
(1) A Husband's Death Avenged Upon a Father

5. PURSUIT
(Elements: Punishment and Fugitive)
A.
(1) Fugitives from Justice Pursued for Brigandage, Political Offenses, Etc.
B.
(1) Pursued for a Fault of Love
C.
(1) A Hero Struggling Against a Power
D.
(1) A Pseudo-Madman Struggling Against an Iago-Like Alienist

6. DISASTER
(Elements: a Vanquished Power; a Victorious Enemy or a Messenger)
A.

(1) Defeat Suffered
(2) A Fatherland Destroyed
(3) The Fall of Humanity
(4) A Natural Catastrophe
B.
(1) A Monarch Overthrown
C.
(1) Ingratitude Suffered
(2) The Suffering of Unjust Punishment or Enmity
(3) An Outrage Suffered
D.
(1) Abandonment by a Lover or a Husband
(2) Children Lost by Their Parents

7. FALLING PREY To Cruelty Or Misfortune
(Elements: an Unfortunate; a Master or a Misfortune)
A.
(1) The Innocent Made the Victim of Ambitious Intrigue
B.
(1) The Innocent Despoiled by Those Who Should Protect
C.
(1) The Powerful Dispossessed and Wretched
(2) A Favorite or an Intimate Finds Himself Forgotten

D.
(1) The Unfortunate Robbed of Their Only Hope

8. REVOLT
(Elements: Tyrant and Conspirator)
A.
(1) A Conspiracy Chiefly of One Individual
(2) A Conspiracy of Several
B.
(1) Revolt of One Individual, Who Influences and Involves Others
(2) A Revolt of Many

9. DARING Enterprise
(Elements: a Bold Leader; an Object; an Adversary)
A.
(1) Preparations For War
B.
(1) War
(2) A Combat
C.
(1) Carrying Off a Desired Person or Object
(2) Recapture of a Desired Object

D.
(1) Adventurous Expeditions
(2) Adventure Undertaken for the Purpose of Obtaining a Beloved Woman

10. ABDUCTION
(Elements: the Abductor; the Abducted; the Guardian)
A.
(1) Abduction of an Unwilling Woman
B.
(1) Abduction of a Consenting Woman
C.
(1) Recapture of the Woman Without the Slaying of the Abductor
(2) The Same Case, with the Slaying of the Ravisher
D.
(1) Rescue of a Captive Friend
(2) Of a Child
(3) Of a Soul in Captivity to Error

11. THE ENIGMA
(Elements: Interrogator, Seeker and Problem)

A.
(1) Search for a Person Who Must Be Found on Pain of Death
B.
(1) A Riddle To Be Solved on Pain of Death
(2) The Same Case, in Which the Riddle is Proposed by the Coveted Woman
C.
(1) Temptations Offered With the Object of Discovering His Name
(2) Temptations Offered With the Object of Ascertaining the Sex
(3) Tests for the Purpose of Ascertaining the Mental Condition

12. OBTAINING
(Elements: a Solicitor and an Adversary Who is Refusing, or an Arbitrator and Opposing Parties)
A.
(1) Efforts to Obtain an Object by Ruse or Force
B.
(1) Endeavor by Means of Persuasive Eloquence Alone
C.
(1) Eloquence With an Arbitrator

13. ENMITY Of Kinsmen

(Elements: a Malevolent Kinsman; a Hatred or Reciprocally Hating Kinsman)

A.

(1) Hatred of Brothers -- One Brother Hated by Several

(2) Reciprocal Hatred

(3) Hatred Between Relatives for Reasons of Self-Interest

B.

(1) Hatred of Father and Son -- Of the Son for the Father

(2) Mutual Hatred

(3) Hatred of Daughter for Father

C.

(1) Hatred of Grandfather for Grandson

D.

(1) Hatred of Father-in-law for Son-in-law

E.

(1) Hatred of Mother-in-law for Daughter-in-law

F.

(1) Infanticide

14. RIVALRY Of Kinsmen
(Elements: the Preferred Kinsman; the Rejected Kinsman; the Object)
A.
(1) Malicious Rivalry of a Brother
(2) Malicious Rivalry of Two Brothers
(3) Rivalry of Two Brothers, With Adultery on the Part of One
(4) Rivalry of Sisters
B.
(1) Rivalry of Father and Son, for an Unmarried Woman
(2) Rivalry of Father and Son, for a Married Woman
(3) Case Similar to the Two Foregoing, But in Which the Object is Already the Wife of the Father
(4) Rivalry of Mother and Daughter
C.
(1) Rivalry of Cousins
D.
(1) Rivalry of Friends

15. MURDEROUS Adultery
(Elements: Two Adulterers; a Betrayed Husband or Wife)
A.

(1) The Slaying of a Husband by, or for, a Paramour
(2) The Slaying of a Trusting Lover
B.
(1) Slaying of a Wife for a Paramour, and in Self-Interest

16. MADNESS
(Elements: Madman and Victim)
A.
(1) Kinsmen Slain in Madness
(2) Lover Slain in Madness
(3) Slaying or Injuring of a Person not Hated
B.
(1) Disgrace Brought Upon Oneself Through Madness
C.
(1) Loss of Loved Ones Brought About by Madness
D.
(1) Madness Brought on by Fear of Hereditary Insanity

17. FATAL Imprudence
(Elements: The Imprudent; the Victim or the Object

Lost)
A.
(1) Imprudence the Cause of One's Own Misfortune
(2) Imprudence the Cause of One's Own Dishonor
B.
(1) Curiosity the Cause of One's Own Misfortune
(2) Loss of the Possession of a Loved One, Through Curiosity
C.
(1) Curiosity the Cause of Death or Misfortune to Others
(2) Imprudence the Cause of a Relative's Death
(3) Imprudence the Cause of a Lover's Death
(4) Credulity the Cause of Kinsmen's Deaths

18. INVOLUNTARY Crimes Of Love
(Elements: the Lover, the Beloved; the Revealer)
A.
(1) Discovery that One Has Married One's Mother
(2) Discovery that One Has Had a Sister as Mistress
B.
(1) Discovery that One Has Married One's Sister
(2) The Same Case, in Which the Crime Has Been Villainously Planned by a Third Person
(3) Being Upon the Point of Taking a Sister,

Unknowingly, as Mistress
C.
(1) Being Upon the Point of Violating, Unknowingly, a Daughter
D.
(1) Being Upon the Point of Committing an Adultery Unknowingly
(2) Adultery Committed Unknowingly

19. SLAYING of a Kinsman Unrecognized
(Elements: the Slayer, the Unrecognized Victim)
A.
(1) Being Upon the Point of Slaying a Daughter Unknowingly, by Command of a Divinity or an Oracle
(2) Through Political Necessity
(3) Through a Rivalry in Love
(4) Through Hatred of the Lover of the Unrecognized Daughter
B.
(1) Being Upon the Point of Killing a Son Unknowingly
(2) The Same Case, Strengthened by Machiavellian Instigations
C.
(1) Being Upon the Point of Slaying a Brother

Unknowingly
D.
(1) Slaying of a Mother Unrecognized
E.
(1) A Father Slain Unknowingly, Through Machiavellian Advice
F.
(1) A Grandfather Slain Unknowingly, in Vengeance and Through Instigation
G.
(1) Involuntary Killing of a Loved Woman
(2) Being Upon the Point of Killing a Lover Unrecognized
(3) Failure to Rescue an Unrecognized Son

20. SELF-Sacrificing For An Ideal
(Elements: the Hero; the Ideal; the 'Creditor' or the Person or Thing Sacrificed)
A.
(1) Sacrifice of Life for the Sake of One's Word
(2) Life Sacrifice for the Success of One's People
(3) Life Sacrificed in Filial Piety
(4) Life Sacrificed for the Sake of One's Faith
B.
(1) Both Love and Life Sacrificed for One's Faith, or

a Cause
(2) Love Sacrificed to the Interests of State
C.
(1) Sacrifice of Well-Being to Duty
D.
(1) The Ideal of 'Honor' Sacrificed to the Ideal of 'Faith'

21. SELF-Sacrifice For Kindred
(Elements: the Hero; the Kinsman; the 'Creditor' or the Person or Thing Sacrificed)
A.
(1) Life Sacrificed for that of a Relative or a Loved One
(2) Life Sacrificed for the Happiness of a Relative or a Loved One
B.
(1) Ambition Sacrificed for the Happiness of a Parent
(2) Ambition Sacrificed for the Life of a Parent
C.
(1) Love Sacrificed for the Sake of a Parent's Life
(2) For the Happiness of One's Child
(3) The Same Sacrifice as 2, But Caused by Unjust Laws
D.

(1) Life and Honor Sacrificed for the Life of a Parent or Loved One
(2) Modesty Sacrificed for the Life of a Relative or a Loved One

22. ALL Sacrificed For A Passion
(Elements: the Lover, the Object of the Fatal Passion; the Person or Thing Sacrificed)
A.
(1) Religious Vows of Chastity Broken for a Passion
(2) Respect for a Priest Destroyed
(3) A Future Ruined by Passion
(4) Power Ruined by Passion
(5) Ruin of Mind, Health, and Life
(6) Ruin of Fortunes, Lives, and Honors
B.
(1) Temptations Destroying the Sense of Duty, of Piety, etc.
C.
(1) Destruction of Honor, Fortune, and Life by Erotic Vice
(2) The Same Effect Produced by Any Other Vice

23. NECESSITY Of Sacrificing Love Ones
(Elements: the Hero; the Beloved Victim; the Necessity for the Sacrifice)
A.
(1) Necessity for Sacrificing a Daughter in the Public Interest
(2) Duty of Sacrificing Her in Fulfillment of a Vow to God
(3) Duty of Sacrificing Benefactors or Loved Ones to One's Faith
B.
(1) Duty of Sacrificing One's Child, Unknown to Others, Under the Pressure of Necessity
(2) Duty of Sacrificing, Under the Same Circumstances, One's Father or Husband
(3) Duty of Sacrificing a Son-in-law for the Public Good
(4) Duty of Contending with a Brother-in-Law for the Public Good
(5) Duty of Contending with a Friend

24. RIVALRY Of Superior And Inferior
(Elements: the Superior Rival; the Inferior Rival; the Object)
A.

(1) Masculine Rivalries; of a Mortal and an Immortal
(2) Of a Magician and an Ordinary Man
(3) Of Conqueror and Conquered
(4) Of a King and a Noble
(5) Of a Powerful Person and an Upstart
(6) Of Rich and Poor
(7) Of an Honored Man and a Suspected One
(8) Rivalry of Two Who are Almost Equal
(9) Of the Two Successive Husbands of a Divorcee
B.
(1) Feminine Rivalries; Of a Sorceress and an Ordinary Woman
(2) Of Victor and Prisoner
(3) Of Queen and Subject
(4) Of Lady and Servant
(5) Rivalry Between Memory or an Ideal (That of a Superior Woman) and a Vassal of Her Own
C.
(1) Double Rivalry (A loves B, who loves C, who loves D)

25. ADULTERY
(Elements: a Deceived Husband or Wife; Two Adulterers)
A.

(1) A Mistress Betrayed, For a Young Woman
(2) For a Young Wife
B.
(1) A Wife Betrayed, For a Slave Who Does Not Love in Return
(2) For Debauchery
(3) For a Married Woman
(4) With the Intention of Bigamy
(5) For a Young Girl, who Does Not Love in Return
(6) A Wife Envied by a Young Girl Who is in Love With Her Husband
(7) By a Courtesan
C.
(1) An Antagonistic Husband Sacrificed for a Congenial Lover
(2) A Husband, Believed to be Lost, Forgotten for a Rival
(3) A Commonplace Husband Sacrificed for a Sympathetic Lover
(4) A Good Husband Betrayed for an Inferior Rival
(5) For a Grotesque Rival
(6) For a Commonplace Rival, By a Perverse Wife
(7) For a Rival Less Handsome, But Useful
D.
(1) Vengeance of a Deceived Husband

(2) Jealousy Sacrificed for the Sake of a Cause
(3) Husband Persecuted by a Rejected Rival

26. CRIMES Of Love
(Elements: The Lover, the Beloved)
A.
(1) A Mother in Love with Her Son
(2) A Daughter in Love with her Father
(3) Violation of a Daughter by a Father
B.
(1) A Woman Enamored of Her Stepson
(2) A Woman and Her Stepson Enamored of Each Other
(3) A Woman Being the Mistress, at the Same Time, of a Father and Son, Both of Whom Accept the Situation
C.
(1) A Man Becomes the Lover of his Sister-in-Law
(2) A Brother and Sister in Love with Each Other
D.
(1) A Man Enamored of Another Man, Who Yields
E.
(1) A Woman Enamored of a Beast

27. DISCOVERY Of The Dishonor Of A Loved One

(Elements: the Discoverer; the Guilty One)

A.

(1) Discovery of a Mother's Shame

(2) Discovery of a Father's Shame

(3) Discovery of a Daughter's Dishonor

B.

(1) Discovery of Dishonor in the Family of One's Fiancee

(2) Discovery than One's Wife Has Been Violated Before Marriage, Or Since the Marriage

(3) That She Has Previously Committed a Fault

(4) Discovery that One's Wife Has Formerly Been a Prostitute

(5) Discovery that One's Mistress, Formerly a Prostitute, Has Returned to Her Old Life

(6) Discovery that One's Lover is a Scoundrel, or that One's Mistress is a Woman of Bad Character

(7) The Same Discovery Concerning One's Wife

C.

(1) Duty of Punishing a Son Who is a Traitor to Country

(2) Duty of Punishing a Son Condemned Under a Law Which the Father Has Made

(3) Duty of Punishing One's Mother to Avenge One's Father

28. OBSTACLES To Love
(Elements: Two Lovers, an Obstacle)
A.
(1) Marriage Prevented by Inequality of Rank
(2) Inequality of Fortune an Impediment to Marriage
B.
(1) Marriage Prevented by Enemies and Contingent Obstacles
C.
(1) Marriage Forbidden on Account of the Young Woman's Previous Betrothal to Another
D.
(1) A Free Union Impeded by the Opposition of Relatives
E.
(1) By the Incompatibility of Temper of the Lovers

29. AN ENEMY Loved
(Elements: The Beloved Enemy; the Lover; the Hater)

A.
(1) The Loved One Hated by Kinsmen of the Lover
(2) The Lover Pursued by the Brothers of His Beloved
(3) The Lover Hated by the Family of His Beloved
(4) The Beloved is an Enemy of the Party of the Woman Who Loves Him
B.
(1) The Beloved is the Slayer of a Kinsman of the Woman Who Loves Him

30. AMBITION
(Elements: an Ambitious Person; a Thing Coveted; an Adversary)
A.
(1) Ambition Watched and Guarded Against by a Kinsman, or By a Person Under Obligation
B.
(1) Rebellious Ambition
C.
(1) Ambition and Covetousness Heaping Crime Upon Crime

31. CONFLICT With A God
(Elements: a Mortal, an Immortal)
A.
(1) Struggle Against a Deity
(2) Strife with the Believers in a God
B.
(1) Controversy with a Deity
(2) Punishment for Contempt of a God
(3) Punishment for Pride Before a God

32. MISTAKEN Jealousy
(Elements: the Jealous One; the Object of Whose Possession He is Jealous; the Supposed Accomplice; the Cause or the Author of the Mistake)
A.
(1) The Mistake Originates in the Suspicious Mind of the Jealous One
(2) Mistaken Jealousy Aroused by Fatal Chance
(3) Mistaken Jealousy of a Love Which is Purely Platonic
(4) Baseless Jealousy Aroused by Malicious Rumors
B.
(1) Jealousy Suggested by a Traitor Who is Moved by Hatred, or Self-Interest
C.

(1) Reciprocal Jealousy Suggested to Husband and Wife by a Rival

33. ERRONEOUS Judgment
(Elements: The Mistaken One; the Victim of the Mistake; the Cause or Author of the Mistake; the Guilty Person)
A.
(1) False Suspicion Where Faith is Necessary
(2) False Suspicion of a Mistress
(3) False Suspicion Aroused by a Misunderstood Attitude of a Loved One
B.
(1) False Suspicions Drawn Upon Oneself to Save a Friend
(2) They Fall Upon the Innocent
(3) The Same Case as 2, but in Which the Innocent had a Guilty Intention, or Believes Himself Guilty
(4) A Witness to the Crime, in the Interest of a Loved One, Lets Accusation Fall Upon the Innocent
C.
(1) The Accusation is Allowed to Fall Upon an Enemy
(2) The Error is Provoked by an Enemy
D.

(1) False Suspicion Thrown by the Real Culprit Upon One of His Enemies
(2) Thrown by the Real Culprit Upon the Second Victim Against Whom He Has Plotted From the Beginning

34. REMORSE
(Elements: the Culprit; the Victim or the Sin; the Interrogator)
A.
(1) Remorse for an Unknown Crime
(2) Remorse for a Parricide
(3) Remorse for an Assassination
B.
(1) Remorse for a Fault of Love
(2) Remorse for an Adultery

35. RECOVERY Of A Lost One
(The Seeker; the One Found)
A.
(1) A Child Stolen
B.
(1) Unjust Imprisonment

C.
(1) A Child Searches to Discover His Father

36. LOSS Of Loved Ones
(A Kinsman Slain; a Kinsman Spectator; an Executioner)
A.
(1) Witnessing the Slaying of Kinsmen While Powerless to Prevent It
(2) Helping to Bring Misfortune Upon One's People Through Professional Secrecy
B.
(1) Divining the Death of a Loved One
C.
(1) Learning of the Death of a Kinsman or Ally, and Lapsing into Despair

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