

# THE DRAMA AND THE WAR

BY CLAYTON HAMILTON

## I

IN INVESTIGATING the effects of war upon the human spirit and the expression of the human spirit in the arts, we must distinguish first of all between little local wars whose outcome does not matter very much to humanity at large, like our own chivalrous and almost charming sally against Spain, and great world-shaking conflicts, like the present struggle, upon whose outcome depends the future destiny of all mankind. A tiny fire in the pantry neither stirs nor tests the spirit; one puts it out, collects the insurance in due course of time, and forgets about it ever after: but a great catastrophe like the conflagration which followed hard upon the heels of the San Francisco earthquake tries men's souls and changes them; for, under stress, it makes the base more base and renders the noble more ennobled.

In little local conflicts, the scales of justice may hang nearly equi-poised and may tremble to the one side or the other "but in the estimation of a hair"; but in every world-historic war, without exception, one side has been emphatically right and the other side emphatically wrong. Such wars have tended always to debase and to deprave the spiritual instinct among the hordes that have been fighting on the side of evil; but they have tended simultaneously to uplift and sanctify the spirit of those nations that have striven to carry on the torch of truth and have

offered up their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honour to make reason and the will of God prevail. The disease of the pacifist arises from the error of dallying with the idea of war as a philosophical abstraction; whereas, by sane and normal minds, a catastrophe is properly regarded as a condition, not a theory. A world-historic war is a fact,—undeniable like measles, and concrete like cobble-stones; and the test that tries men's souls is the unavoidable necessity of arranging themselves on the right side or the wrong side of the argument.

The mills of the gods grind slowly, according to a law that passeth understanding; and the great world-shaking conflicts of recorded history have not always been determined in favour of the righteous side. The finest civilisation that mankind has ever known was overturned by the Romans, at a time when these conquerors were justly regarded by the Greeks as men who did not know. The Romans, in their turn, ascended to a memorable height of civilisation, only to be trampled down at last by the crude and violent Barbarians of the North. Though any reasonable mind rejects by instinct the insidious doctrine that might makes right, it would be equally illogical to assume the antithetic theory that right makes might. From the philosophic standpoint, "In God We Trust" is an enervating and immoral motto; for—as Paul of Tarsus, who created Christianity, has told us—men must finally be

judged not merely by their faith but mainly by their works.

Whenever a world-historic war has been won by the wrong side, all art—which is, of course, the spontaneous expression of the human sense of the identity of beauty, truth, and righteousness—has died the death and has stayed dead for centuries. After Rome was overthrown by the Barbarians of the North—a horde of sinewy blonde beasts more potent to destroy than to create—the world was overwhelmed in shadow for a thousand years. In books of history, these many centuries are commonly referred to as “the Dark Ages.” Throughout that time, there was no drama in the world, no painting, no sculpture, no architecture, and no literature. Mankind had been obscured, for the twinkling of a thousand years, by the momentary triumph of brute force above the finer movements of the mind.

But, whenever in a world-historic war the side of righteousness has triumphed, a great outflowing of art has followed soon upon the fact of victory. The noblest instincts of mankind—aroused in perilous moments fraught with intimations of mortality—have surged and soared, beneath the sunshine of a subsequent and dear-bought peace, into an immeasurable empyrean of heroic eloquence. Whenever right has circumvented might, Art has sprung alive into the world, with the music of a million Easter-lilies leaping from the grave and laughing with a silver singing.

A panoramic survey of the history of art shows, without exception, that the most profuse outpourings of the human sense of the identity of beauty, truth, and righteousness

have occurred in places and in periods where a world-historic war had recently been won by the side that had taken up the gauntlet, under duress, to make reason and the will of God prevail. This basic fact is more than ordinarily apparent in the history of the drama. This democratic art—which is doomed, by its conditions, to hold always an indicatory finger upon the very pulse of the public—has ascended to its most exalted heights in the period of Sophocles, the period of Calderon, the period of Shakespeare, and the period of Molière. Sophocles appeared at that highest point in the oscillating curve of human civilisation when the Acropolis of Athens was acknowledged—by dominance of might as well as right—to be the beacon of the world. Calderon built up his Gothic Cathedrals of gorgeous and fantastic verse at the time when Spain aspired to overlord and tutelise the earth. Our great Elizabethan drama—comprising those hundreds and hundreds of tremendous plays, by many authors, that have been tied into a package by historians and labelled with the adjective “Shakespearian”—would never have been undertaken and given to mankind except for the defeat of the Spanish Armada. The national spirit that has been expressed in Shakespeare’s *Henry V* indicates most clearly the incentive and the motive of the whole Elizabethan drama. Molière—together with those lesser lions of his lineage, Pierre Corneille and Jean Racine—come forward with his plays at a period when his patron, the *Grand Monarque*, was sitting high in the saddle. France had recently been recognised as the preponderant power of Continental Europe; and Molière composed his

comedies in the unassailed serenity of leisure that had been bestowed upon him by the victories of Louis Quatorze.

A swift-winged aerial recognisance of dramatic history might almost tempt the commentator to welcome such a crisis as the present world-catastrophe, because of that superb insurgence of the will that makes for art which would result inevitably in the human spirit from a triumph of the hosts that fight for righteousness against the hordes assembled to sacrifice themselves as cannon-fodder in support of an idea that is desecrating and depraving to the mind.

## II

If the blonde beasts of the North—who have signed and sealed their purpose to destroy the sense of truth and beauty in the world by hurling shells repeatedly against the Cathedral of Rheims, which had stood for seven centuries as an ineradicable symbol of all that is most eloquent in art—if these barbarians should win the present war, there would be no reason for looking forward to the future of the American drama. In that case, there would be no future for this country to look forward to, nor any drama in the world to arrest attention from the commentative mind.

But if we win this war—as win we must—there will arise a drama in America which will be genuinely worthy of the recognition of critics yet unborn. The re-establishment of a reasonable world made safe for democracy will call for celebration with the voice of angels trumpet-tongued; and dramatic authors will arise in response to a demand made insistent by our theatre-going public. So it

has always been, and so it always shall be.

Let us assume—as a departing point for an ascension to regions theoretical—that we are predestined to win this present war, because of the fact that our cause is just, and in spite of the fact that our practical efficiency is almost tragically slack and laggard. In that event, there would be indeed a fruitful future for art in the world, and, in particular, for the drama in America. Even Sophocles, Calderon, Shakespeare, and Molière might, imaginably, be outsoared by some future American poet, if we should win this present world-decisive struggle to make reason and the will of God prevail. This imagining is not, by any means, unbiased upon the facts of history: it is, instead, predicted by the writing on the wall.

## III

Assuming, for convenience, that America is not predestined to falter and to fail in this crusade against the hordes of darkness, the commentator is required to investigate the proper mission of that great American drama which will naturally be demanded by a hundred million people after peace has been imposed upon the enemies of peace, and the world has been made safe for civilisation.

The noblest mission that can be accomplished in the present or the future by an American dramatist is to interpret the essential spirit of this country to the American public of the present and the future. This mission is demanded by the slow accretion of phenomena so little noticed in themselves and so little talked about throughout the course of their almost geologic deposition that the

old traditional America has changed, before our very eyes, without our noticing the change.

A few days after President Wilson had politely handed a return-ticket to Berlin to Count von Bernstorff, Doctor Butler called a general meeting of Columbia University which all students, ex-students, graduates, and teachers were invited to attend. On this occasion, the vast gymnasium was packed with three or four thousand people, standing shoulder to shoulder on every available square-foot of space. President Butler began a patriotic speech in which he outlined the noble part that had been played by students of Columbia in each successive crisis in the history of the United States. Commencing with the Revolutionary period, he said, "When the call came, Hamilton, Livingston, and Jay went forth from the lecture-halls of old Kings College to found a new nation." . . . At that moment, I looked around the vast gymnasium, and my eyes alighted first on Mr. Lipschitz and Mr. Moskowitz, and many other students whose names failed equally to rhyme with Hamilton and Livingston and Jay. In a sudden start, I realised how utterly America had changed within a century. . . . In recording this impression, I have no wish at all to patronise the thousands of eager and earnest students of alien ancestry who now flock beneath the ægis of my *alma mater*,—the largest and mightiest university in the history of education. As a teacher, I have found in practice that a student of Russian Jewish parentage is more likely to apply himself enthusiastically to the task at hand than a student who wears over-lightly a historic name like Hamilton or Livingston or Jay. My

only point is that America has changed, in racial complexion, since the period of the Revolution and since the period of the Civil War.

Throughout the course of half a century of quietude, this country has become a melting-pot for immigrants from nearly all the races and the nations of the elder world. It is no longer possible to compose a line of poetry that shall at all resemble that historic footfall of ancestral syllables which was rendered eloquent by Emerson in the first line of his *Hamatreya*,—"Bulkeley, Hunt, Willard, Hosmer, Meriam, Flint,"—perhaps the finest line of poetry that has ever been composed exclusively of English names.

The new America—which is different from the old America of Hamilton and Livingston and Jay and, very possibly, is greater—remained oblivious of its own existence until it was roused unexpectedly to action by the oft-repeated insults of a power overseas. An undesired knocking at the gate has waked us from our sleep and made us one. A new and fateful summons has required Mr. Moskowitz and Mr. Lipschitz to go forth shoulder to shoulder with Mr. Livingston and Mr. Jay to fight and die for an idea that is ancestrally American.

The selective draft, and our enforced new system of democratic military service, are destined to turn this modern melting-pot of the United States into a nation that shall be spiritually homogeneous. But this new tendency toward national unity, despite all pre-existent ethnologic differences, must still be bruited and blared abroad by every American artist who is gifted with a voice which is eloquent enough to

appeal to the ears of those that wish to hear.

In this connection, we sense at once the most important purpose that may be accomplished by American dramatists in the immediate present and the immediate future,—to interpret and to illustrate the noble spirit of that America which used to be, for the enlightenment and inspiration of that changed America which is now, and is about to be. Any play which may serve to “get us together” at the present moment, when the future of mankind, for right or wrong, is trembling in the balance, is peculiarly timely and particularly serviceable.

#### IV

This is the chief reason why *The Copperhead*, by Mr. Augustus Thomas, must be welcomed most enthusiastically. This play, in other times, might be criticised adversely, by reason of the merely technical consideration that the dramatic interest has been concentrated too exclusively within the narrow limits of the last of the four acts in which the project has been patterned. But this last act of *The Copperhead* is not only notable in sheer technique, but is memorable even more for its inspired evocation of the spirit of America. Mr. Thomas has recalled the shade of Lincoln from the other side of Lethe, and has successfully compelled our martyred hero to revisit once again the glimpses of the moon. This achievement of artistic imagining is sufficiently important to deserve at least a foot-note in the pages of enduring history.

#### V

So long as this great war is being fought, any attempt to ape and boy

its aspects must meet with manifest contempt. This is the philosophic reason for rejecting such manufactured products of theatric journalism as *Seven Days Leave* or *An American Ace* or *The Man Who Stayed at Home*. In the present crisis of the world, a “war-play” designed in accordance with any of the customary patterns is just as objectionable to the human spirit as a sentimental passage composed—let us say—by a trained professor of the jugglery of words to celebrate the sadness of a funeral.

The one “war-play” of recent weeks that has evoked a genuine response of praise is *Getting Together*, an admittedly haphazard undertaking, compounded—in answer to a hurried call of duty—by Ian Hay Beith, J. Hartley Manners, and Percival Knight. This careless and collaborative composition deserves to be remembered as a work of art, because of the profound effect of its manifest sincerity, and by reason also of the scarcely less pronounced appeal of its airy and ingratiating humour.

*Getting Together* was launched frankly as a piece of propaganda by the British and Canadian Recruiting Mission; and after only a single week in New York—which was enormously successful—it is being taken successively to the other leading cities of this country. It appeals more strongly to the public than the average “war-play” of commerce, because of its reality, its humourous evasion of the usual theatrical heroics, and its downright evident sincerity. The soldiers who appear upon the stage are not mere draft-evaders dressed up in military uniforms: nearly all of them are actors who have already served at the

front with the British and Canadian forces, and have been gassed or wounded, and sent back to "carry on" the message of their own experience to a public that is only waiting to awake. The personal appearance on the stage of such a soldier as Lieutenant Gitz Rice—the author and composer of those popular war-songs, *We Stopped Them on the Marne* and *You've Got to Go in or Go Under*—is sufficient to electrify

the audience; for, though he may not be a memorable singer, he "puts his songs across" as if he meant them. In any work of propaganda, it is—first of all—sincerity that counts. A public composed of men who may be called upon, at any moment, to die for those ideas that constitute the ultimate realities cannot be foisted off with shams. The artificial and commercial "war-play" is now cold and dead. The War has killed it.

## A BLINDED POILU TO HIS NURSE

BY AGNES LEE

I KNOW you only by your tears . . .  
 I felt them falling on my face.  
 I had wakened on a hush of dark,  
 And lay I knew not in what place.

O lady, not a dream was mine!  
 Despair had told the truth to me,  
 And I was fearful of life's call,  
 And bitter with my destiny.

But the warm touches of your soul  
 Guided me to the darkened years.  
 Sweet reconciler of my days,  
 I know you only by your tears.