

# THE PLAY

By R. DANA SKINNER

## *What Price Glory*

IT is a lamentable failing in most of us that when we go to the theatre we make liberal allowances for any play that embodies our pet ideas. An editor of one of our contemporary pacifistic weeklies told me that he never expects to see again this season a play equalling or approaching *What Price Glory*. There was a note of unqualified zeal in his approval which leads me to suspect a bias of sympathy rather than calm appraisal. It is a good play, but by no means great, and while I rather resent the charge that it is a parading of pacifist philosophy, there is just enough material in it of the kind that gives the pacifist a good meal ticket to make it highly acceptable in the pacifist bomb-proofs.

It is, as nearly everyone now knows, the photographic and phonographic portrayal of the life of a company of marines near and on the firing lines in France. In it you see the double effect of war on a plentiful variety of men—disintegration on the one hand and heroic discipline on the other. These marines for the most part show an ironic contempt for the realities of war. When opportunity offers, they drink, they curse, they gamble, they fight among themselves and indulge in bare-handed love rivalries. It is not "pretty"—and it is all very true. It shows you war as it is fought, and not at all as it is sung in romantic ballads and the poems of empire. It shows you what men in the midst of war think about war. And their thoughts are in no wise those of the political orator or of the club ancients who discuss the fate of much younger men over afternoon tea substitutes and mellow cigars. To this extent, the play is strong, truthful and courageous. But even this does not, of itself, make it a great play.

In the first place, the true germ of drama which it contains is heavily obscured by verbiage. The verbiage is interesting, just as a phonograph record might be interesting, because it is a transcription of language that you do not hear every day, of thoughts that men express only under great emotional strain, of moods that men experience as a rule only once in a generation. It is interesting as some of Philip Gibbs's later writings are interesting, as a revelation of things long hidden, or as a discussion of the life habits and beliefs of the Negrillos is interesting. If its use were confined to dramatic purposes, to the furtherance of action and situation, it would help to make the impulse of the play more forceful because more truthful.

But for the most part, this verbiage, this slang of the soldier, this philosophy under fire, retards the dramatic movement, and in the case of the rather notorious blasphemies (some of which, I understand, have now been forcibly suppressed) they merely convict the authors of unconscionably bad taste. Decency has compelled the authors, even in their over-zealous quest of realism, to omit many obvious physical details of dugout life. There is no reason why this same decency should not apply to misuse of the name of God or of Christ. The banning of one and the inclusion of the others displays a lack of proportion and judgment, and gives ground for suspicion that in many other ways real drama has suffered through the quest for sensation.

Now the real thread of drama running through this play is the perpetual human conflict, which war exaggerates a hundred times, between self-love and ready sacrifice. I am almost inclined to say that in spite of the authors, it is a play that captures the true heroism of war more than any play of the last decade. There is not a man of this whole company of marines who, under the impact of fire, fails to show the most dogged heroism of which humanity is capable—the determination to obey and to do the hateful and the fearful thing, no matter what the cost. This is not the ballad-singing heroism of the man who knows no fear, but it is most emphatically the sublimer heroism of the man who knows the full agony of terror and still goes on. You may acknowledge, when the play is over, that the price of glory is stupefying, but you will never deny the glory itself—the conquest of a self that has become vastly more assertive, vastly more primitive, vastly more degraded, vastly more destructive as an enemy, through a discipline and a self-sacrifice that have likewise become more powerful—irresistible, in fact. That is why I refuse to call it a pacifist play. The pacifist play would tell you that there is no glory. *What Price Glory* merely asks you a question, one that every sane man asks himself a hundred times a year, whether the glory of war is such that no other way need be found to settle the fate of a dynasty or the control of an oil field.

Without admitting it as a great play, because it is not so much a play at all as it is a record of incidents and pointed situation, I still readily acknowledge that it holds your attention in a firm grip throughout the evening, and that it leaves you with a definite contribution of thought and novel emotion. Moreover, it is well acted. Louis Wolheim, whom most will remember as the Hairy Ape of Eugene O'Neill's play, has a chance here to create a character more within the normal scope of observation, a character of humor, tenderness, irony and unredeemable toughness. He succeeds beyond expectation. Without him, *What Price Glory* would seem far less of a play. He manages to throw about it some of the very glamor of heroism which the authors have tried so diligently to eschew.

## *The Miracle*

WHEN *The Miracle* reopened this fall, the cast included several new members, whose presence I found to be a distinct asset. Chief among them was Mr. Boroslowsky as the Emperor.

This is a part which has suffered in the past productions through lack of dignity. Mr. Boroslowsky makes the Emperor stand out as a truly tragic figure.

We understand that *The Miracle* is to be shown in at least one other American city. Whether or not it would be possible, in any other setting than the one it now occupies, to convey the same sense of mediaeval pageantry and mystic beauty remains to be seen. It is, of its kind, the most stupendous theatrical effort ever made in this country, marred unfortunately, by several serious lapses of good taste, and by the intrusion of stage business inspired more by Freud than by the famous mediaeval legend itself.

### *Bewitched*

IF you can imagine Parsifal boldly setting out for the Gralzburg in a Liberty-motored airplane and handicapped by a Boston ancestry; if, moreover, you can picture him as possessed of a smattering of psychoanalysis, a back-woods accent, no humor whatsoever and armed only with an obtuse skull, then you will have a dim notion of the play with which Edward Sheldon (who ought to know better) and Sidney Howard (who, I am sure, does know better) have presented us.

But you will not get at the full inwardness of *Bewitched* unless you realize that its authors set out to perform an ambitious feat and fell into a snare that has turned their poem into a mocking-bird's travesty. There is, I think, a real reason for their utter failure to achieve the beauty and mysticism they are aiming at—a reason quite independent of their dramatic technique or their patent inability to sustain an artistic height. This reason is a muddled mind—a mind which, as a composite play-writing machine, is so bathed in current materialism and pseudo-spirituality that it can not distinguish between earth and Heaven, between man and God, between the brain and soul. You feel that by instinct these authors are seeking to express something quite fine and noble. But their confused mental judgment blocks their way. They are afraid to accept God as the source of spiritual strength, so they substitute human love.

Perhaps the story will better illustrate my point.

The American aviator crashes in an obscure French forest and becomes the self-invited guest of an impoverished Marquis and his charming granddaughter. Being of the old régime, the Marquis keeps the girl in the dim background. The aviator has caught but one captivating glimpse of her.

During dinner, the Marquis shows his Bostonese guest an old tapestry portraying a family legend. A remote ancestor, who also lived alone with a granddaughter, was a sorcerer. The young knights of France who came to seek the girl's hand were invariably led to their doom—all except Roland, who resisted all the old man's enchantments and temptations and thus broke the spell, winning the maiden's love.

The aviator falls asleep and proceeds to live through the story of Roland—strangely reminiscent of Francis Wilson in *When Knights Were Bold*, but with the important difference that the latter was intentional comedy whereas *Bewitched* is meant to be serious allegory.

In the aviator's dream, the Marquis becomes the sorcerer (of course) and a thinly disguised Mephistopheles. (In Parsifal he is Klingsor.) The granddaughter becomes the girl of double personality, a sweet, loving creature by day instantly enamored of the aviator (Boston ancestry included) and a temptress by night under the sorcerer's spell. (In Parsifal she is Kundry.) Satan, or the sorcerer, wagers with the aviator that before the night is over, he will forget the granddaughter and kiss another woman.

Then ensue several temptation scenes, with green and red lights, ghosts, trap doors, magic curtains and all the paraphernalia of a select musical review, even to the music itself—well intentioned clap-trap that merely offends good taste. Of course the aviator, holding the granddaughter's talisman fast to his heart, resists each onslaught and breaks the Satanic power. The temptations are all very Freudian, supposed to be subconscious longings, even to the threadbare Oedipus complex. The trouble is, first, that the authors laboriously explain each symbolism as it springs up (Satan even talks

about dream analysis to make sure that no one will miss the point) and, secondly, that the love which is supposed to conquer Satan is quite as earthly and insecure and Freudian as the temptations themselves. It seems never to have occurred to the authors that even the subjective Satan hidden in each of us can only be conquered by a spiritual force which the pre-Freudian world called Grace. Wagner knew this when he wrote Parsifal—with the result that he created an enduring dramatic poem. Mr. Sheldon and Mr. Howard do not know it—or perhaps won't admit it—with the result that they have produced a dramatic hodgepodge.

There are two really chaming interludes, however—the opening scene of the dream in the magic forest and the concluding scene on the mountain top. Here we have a flash of poetic instinct of the Maeterlinck order. Throughout the play, the acting of Florence Eldridge as the granddaughter also does much to redeem an impossible muddle. She battles bravely with her part, saves many a situation from becoming ridiculous, shows versatility, personal charm and exceptional diction (for Broadway) and makes us clamor to see her in a better play. Glenn Anders as the aviator is no better than the play in its own worst spots. José Ruben as the Marquis is delightful. As Satan he is grotesque. But I imagine that is chiefly the fault of the authors. For Edward Sheldon a thorough re-reading of the *Divine Comedy* might prove a good mental prescription just now. He is dangerously near becoming a mystagogue—certainly a vulgar fate for so much talent.

### *The Haunted House*

AFTER you have been duly thrilled and tantalized by any of the mystery plays of the last few seasons, and if you are now ready to have a good laugh at your own thrills, you will find *The Haunted House* the correct prescription. Recall from the dim past *Seven Keys to Baldpate* or from recent times *The Bat* or *The Bride* or *In the Next Room*. Recall, too, that in spite of your better judgment, you often sat on the edge of your chair and moaned with suspense. Be frank enough to admit that you enjoyed the hokum of it all—and then you will be ready to see *The Haunted House* with good grace. It is like the times, long ago, when the parlor magician used to expose some of his own tricks—just to make you feel humble—and would then startle you all over again by a new legerdemain. In other words, Owen Davis has prepared some surprises of his own for you. You may still move forward in your chair—only that this time you will feel doubly ridiculous because of the author's broad wink across the footlights.

### *The Werewolf*

OF all the plays with a continental twist, which New York managers have recently tried to foist on the American public, *The Werewolf* is undoubtedly the best example of the kind of play which should never be produced at all.

The chief regret is to see an artist of the calibre of Laura Hope Crewes lending her ability and gracious charm to this performance. The play is a portrayal of mental filth that would find its right lodging only in quarantine.

(A brief summary of many current productions will be given in the next issue.)

## THE QUIET CORNER

*I counsel thee, shut not thy heart or thy library.*—C. LAMB.

THE library of the Calvert Club differs in two respects at least from the ordinary club library. First, it is not simply a place where elderly gentlemen go to sleep, or where you occasionally hunt for somebody who has disappeared—it is really used. And, again, you may talk as well as read in our library. Of course, there are alcoves where the real bookworm, that natural solitary, may retire and be quite alone, but around the fireplace at the end of the long room, where the big window overlooks the great spaces of the park, we may freely talk and swap stories drawn from or suggested by the books or papers we have been reading, or people we have met. From time to time, the librarian jots down some of the things that are said. Perhaps he does so in order to salve a conscience guiltily aware of a propensity to spend too much time in the corner.



Naturally enough, the talk last week was mostly shop talk. The proofs of the first number of *The Commonwealth* were coming from the printer. Sticky, smudgy proofs, with the heads on wrong, the matter bristling with the impish tricks of that especially tricky little devil who is attached to all printers—but romantic, but charming, but beautiful proofs. First proofs! If any editor, still more any writer, ever loses the thrill that galley proofs bring—let him instantly retire to the Old Hacks Home; he is ready for the ladle of the button moulder. And we are not! Even that member of the staff who is known as Doctor Angelicus (for reasons possibly more allied to the bodily than to the mental “form” of the “Dumb Ox”) performed something obesely resembling a dance (and a rather jazzy one). He even made a sort of pun. “At last,” said he, “behold the proofs of our existence. *The Commonwealth* now is—until now it has only been a dream.”



Not only Doctor Angelicus became frivolous—everybody was chattering, everybody was gay, everybody fluttered those charming proofs about. The Statistician was heard saying over and over again (though nobody disputed him): “I always said that this was not a business enterprise. We have started on an adventure!” The Critics (of books, of drama, of science, of art, of Shakespeare and the Musical Glasses, of each other) forgot to look pontifical; perhaps they were too busy looking up (in the proofs) their various proclamations, or bulls. In short, there was a rowdy time in our quiet corner. We shall quite probably have to place a Puritan on the staff, to preserve some sense of law and order, some atmosphere of dignity.



In fact, this idea was suggested, and was promptly voted upon in the affirmative, and Doctor Angelicus was deputized to go forth and find and return with a Puritan. (He will report upon his commission later on.) The Chief Reviewer was reminded by this incident of the curious ideas entertained by otherwise well-informed people on the subject of Papists. Having been reading the galley proofs of *Recollections of a Happy Life*, by the late Maurice Francis Egan, he read us the following anecdote from a passage describing the fast and furious dinner parties that were given by Edgar Fawcett in the olden days. “I never saw Edgar Fawcett so angry as he was at the end of one of these little dinners when he asked me:

“If your priest told you to go out and stand under a cold

shower when you had a fever, would you not be forced to do it?’ I promptly answered: ‘No, I’d see him in Purgatory first!’ Fawcett became red in the face. ‘Notice, gentlemen,’ he said, ‘here is a Papist who not only refuses to obey his church, but he blasphemes!’”



It has to be recorded that a slight chill crept over the group, when the Editor was heard saying that of course he realized that for a mere editor to make suggestions to such exalted beings as modern Critics evidenced extreme temerity, but that nevertheless, he hoped that *The Commonwealth* might be spared from reaching such pinnacles of critical omniscience as seemed to have become the fashion to preach from elsewhere. “After all,” he said, “since most critics disclaim any other than a purely impressionistic basis for their judgments, and deny with vehemence all alliance with ‘dogmatism,’ it is an excessively singular phenomenon of a singular time that so many critics should be expressing themselves in tones full of dogmatic thunder. Can we keep away from it in *The Commonwealth*? It is doubtful, but let us try. As examples of this tone of personal dogmatism, which is so rampant in current criticism, we cull at random from some of our contemporaries.

“In the *Literary Review* of *The New York Evening Post*, I find that Mr. Edwin Bjorkman, writing of Aldous Huxley, says that Mr. Huxley, is ‘an artist highly disciplined, and in full command of every resource, every finesse, every laboriously established tradition of his chosen craft.’ I am quite willing to believe that Mr. Huxley is a skilful writer, but if he is in full command of every resource, every finesse, every laboriously established tradition of his chosen craft, what a monster of perfection in a world where perfection is so rarely achieved must he be. In ‘Books,’ I find Elinor Wylie, reviewing Mr. E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*, speaking of her ‘absolute conviction that he alone of living writers can understand without effort and relate without obscurity the smallest and the greatest reflection of the human mind.’ Which, again, seems rather to place Mr. Forster upon a peak of unique perfection. But he cannot, after all, it would seem, be permitted to occupy that peak in solitary uniqueness—at least not if Mr. Gregory Mason is right in his review of Mr. Rockwell Kent, of whom he says: ‘Kent writes as if he were divinely mad or superhumanly sane. . . Offhand, one can think of no other American writer whose point of view is so like God’s.’

“Yet, possibly,” continued the Editor while the doubtful critics looked upon him with somber eyes, “it may be better for *The Commonwealth* critics to be solemn and impassible pontiffs, in the style just quoted, rather than to subject themselves to such physiological discomforts in pursuing their solemn avocation, as seems to be the sad fate of Mr. Burton Rascoe, according to his report of his experiences when reading Elliot’s *Waste Land*. Here is Mr. Rascoe’s diagnosis of his symptoms—

Discount, then the irrelevant fact that a mere reading of this poem induced in me such physiological phenomena as may be described as a rushing of hot, feverish blood to the head, a depressing sense of weight about the heart, moisture in the palms and eyes, tremors in the nerves, and increased rapidity of respiration—in short, the accountable and visible phenomena attending ecstasy, wonder and despair (or, perhaps, intimations of poignant beauty) and then ask appropriately and reasonably: “But what is the poem’s aesthetic significance? Wherein lies its beauty?”



What the critics replied to the Editor will never be known, as the Editor, refuses as a general rule to run things “to be continued in our next.”—THE LIBRARIAN.