

## After the Play

DRAMAS that capitalize the charm of nursing the wounded, the romance of waving a flag, the sadness of lovers leaving for the front—these have a right to be mentioned by virtue of being so thoroughly offensive. There was something horrid about even Bernhardt wearing a bloody shirt and dying pro patria at the end of a loud recitation. The war is like radium in its intensity as a theatrical subject. Misused, it is doubly like radium in doing atrocious harm. For these reasons, reasons pregnant with recollection for New York playgoers this season, one hates to confess that J. M. Barrie's new playlets are mainly about the war.

The signal fact, however, is that Barrie has written *The New Word* and *The Old Lady Shows Her Medals* with a decency that is utterly impossible to the second-hand and third-hand playwrights, who merely appeal from their own vulgar preconceptions to the vulgar preconceptions of their audience. The war about which Barrie is writing is not a sentimentality derived from day-dreams of prowess, Kipling fantasy, school yarns of knighthood, pleasant fancies of endless effort and cheery self-sacrifice without a single hint of flagging energy, depression, poisonous fatigue. Slick and smug as the outsiders make war, Barrie has forgotten all that he ever dreamed of unreal heroisms and has aimed to give back through art the war-time London in which he is immersed. Tender, whimsical and sensitive he remains, with all his old conviction that human beings are ever groping for each other through a fog of inarticulateness, but the unity that the war has given to his England has put him in sober possession of his own people in London, and he writes of them with a sense of the meaning war has for ordinary people such as the American pot-boiling playwrights have entirely missed.

Quite often at Barrie plays I find myself unpersuaded by the author. I resent having him suggest how misunderstood I am, and how forlornly sympathetic, and how I keep lighting a signal in the window of my heart for a lover who never, never comes. If such preoccupations existed, I'd be for curing them, and not so much for nursing them into a solitaire romance. But in the two war playlets there is such humor mingled with the recognition and indulgence of sensibility, and such excuse for it under the circumstances, that only a man with a heart of leather could fail to respond. The Barrie mood has not greatly altered, but the theme is perfect for it, and so delicately accommodated to the beloved familiarities of Barrie's nature that a finer result could scarcely be supposed.

The first one-act play, *The New Word*, did not seem so well performed as *The Old Lady Shows Her Medals*, and for my own part I remember *The Old Lady* with deeper satisfaction. As a searching account of the human animal, however, *The New Word* is incomparable. A middle-aged middle-class Englishman is left alone with his young son, who is in his uniform as lieutenant and next day is to depart for France. The father is proud of his boy and the boy loves his father, but neither of them has ever overcome the embarrassment of close kinship, and Barrie exhibits them in all the awkwardness of their emotional illiteracy. For a really civilized person, perhaps, this playlet would have little or nothing to say. It would mean no more to such a rare person than the periodic grunts of visiting Indians mean to us, or the immeasurable silences of babies inspecting one the other. But far as we may have progressed beyond the mute Indian or the mute baby, most of us are aware of relationships that ache

inside us like life awaiting birth. There is a peculiar estrangement that is bred by the very similarity of temperament between father and son, and an affinity that makes expression seem indecent. This is so gently, so humorously, suggested in *The New Word*, that the mawkishness of meaningful theatrical handclasps is avoided. Father and son do come near to each other, but Barrie is satisfied to leave them British to the end. Had he made them more articulate it might have been more admirable, but it would have destroyed their realness. To the last embarrassed cough of Mr. Trevor the father is real.

A chorus of London charwomen gave the second war playlet its body of flavor. However little the war may be theirs in point of advantageousness, it is indubitably theirs by association and sentiment and preoccupation, and Barrie shows how the tentacles of maternal emotion have fastened about the riddled hulk of Europe without regard to anything but the personal and regimental adventure to which these women give their sons. It is enough for those women that their sons are at the front to become parties themselves to the pomp and circumstance of war, and just this home proprietorship in the task of the empire excites a lonely charwoman, "Mrs." Dowey, to wish herself the mother of a soldier. She becomes adopted in that capacity after harsh resistance by a singularly outspoken, uncompromising and breezy Scotchman. The first interview between the demure though pertinacious Mrs. Dowey and the angry male who has fallen into her clutches is exceedingly racy and yet touching, and the maneuvering of the gigantic Black Watch soldier by the small body that wants to mother him is all the more amusing because it is so clearly recognized by both woman and man. Wonderfully acted by Miss Beryl Mercer and Mr. John M. McFarlane. If Barrie had been sentimental in this playlet, if he had made the man talk to slow music about the trenches, it would have been an unbearable nuisance. It is exquisitely enough that the man should say in his resonant tone that the men in the trenches are thinking of "chiffon" and then ruthlessly inspect the old lady's best dress to see if he can take her to the theatre. The melting of Dowey is finally admissible, and his formal reception of parting gifts from the other charwomen, including *The Submarine*, is a nice touch. Here, with or without the silent finale, there is a mood of the war that is true for a whole people, one that gilds dark depths with silvern light.

When the Barrie program was first arranged there were three war plays, but the possibility of including Miss Barrymore in *The Twelve Pound Look* caused the management to retire one war play from active service. The exchange could not but be wise. Barrie has never contributed anything more incisive, more capacious, more generous, more profound, than this short stinging commentary on male illusions, and Miss Barrymore has never given so serious or so spirited a performance. In a short play there are all kinds of technical difficulties. To prepare for an incident is almost impossible and to present an incident without preparation is to leave out the dimension that makes for reflectiveness. The author of *The Twelve Pound Look* surmounts these difficulties like a master. With a few strokes of characterization and reminiscence we have before us three complete persons, the woman who rejected the egoist, the woman who accepted the egoist, and the egoist. The broadness of Mr. Dalton's acting as the successful man rather detracts from the play, but Miss Barrymore is always in the picture—reasonable, ironic, perceptive, vigorous, humane. She is the event of the evening.

F. H.

## Books and Things

A FRIEND of mine says his dearest wish is to serve his country in this crisis. But what can he do? He is past military age. Life has not taught him how to organize and administer. From his vocation he has learned nothing but the art of detaching, sorting, labeling and depositing coupons. He is hunting for some official person who will set him a definite task.

He is sincere when he names his dearest wish. But I think he is mistaken. I think his desire to serve is two-fifths desire to serve and three-fifths desire to be ordered about. His deepest need is to have his decisions made for him, to have responsibility for his actions lodged outside himself. His agitation will not subside until he has given his will into somebody's keeping.

Since the war broke out a like impulse to surrender our wills has infected many of us. Distracted by all this new world, which differs to our sense most sharply from our older world in this, that we are never under the illusion that we understand it, we are sometimes tempted to give up the struggle to understand, and we look for peace of mind in submission to an authoritative guide.

Have you never felt, when you were climbing a mountain you didn't know, and had been making one difficult traverse after another, and were exhausted by the strain of deciding which of the too few handholds and footholds would bear your weight, have you never felt, upon coming to the last traverse across the last rock-face, a thrill of escape from labor and danger when you saw, fastened to the cliff, an unhoped for chain, over which you had only to hook your arm in order to loiter at ease across that mountain wall? You haven't? Neither have I, but this defect of experience shall not keep me from saying that nowadays, when "weary of myself and sick of asking," I look, as I have often looked for that chain, for a mind and a will I can cling to. I look, and do not find.

Remains the alternative of strengthening the will which is one's own. The magazines advertise many books on will-training. Each of them promises to heal the sick self, to strengthen the feeble knees, to turn the poor in heart into dominating personalities, to make live wires out of hard-bound brains. Pleasant is the picture, very pleasant and alluring, which these advertisements paint of the future. Your inhibitions shall be cast out of you, they shall perhaps enter into your Gadarene competitors, who shall be driven violently down a steep place into the sea, leaving your once faint heart free to win fair wages. Unless, indeed, your competitors happen to better their wills by buying and reading these same books, in which case the future looks less clear.

Yet it is not this chance that holds me back, or any kind of doubt. I do not doubt that the will-books can perform what their advertisers promise, or that this cloud of witnesses speak truth. Many a man who once was timid and uncertain whenever he had to approach the captains of industry, and whose lot it often was to be turned down cold, unheard, is now aggressively gainful, full of pep and propositions, having the punch. He has an eye of steel, a chin of granite, a compelling smile, and he has the big men, the smokers of maravillas and the riders in Rolls-Royces, coming round to his office and eating out of his glad hand.

What books have done books may do. It is not doubt of their power which keeps me from reading them. It is fear. I am afraid they would change me beyond recognition by any friend, any child, any wife. Your new

convert is notoriously a bigot, and I might fall to dominating the home, the office, the day coach, the golf links, the club, the saloon, the church. My own rector would not know me when he saw me in his own vestry. I should have gained the whole world and lost my own identity, which, after all, I rather like, being used to it, and to the special faults of which I have cultivated a pertinent blindness.

Your plight may resemble mine. You may shrink from strengthening and aggravating your will, lest it should crush the rest of the world and of you. You may have abandoned hope of finding an authority to whom you can surrender it in toto. So be it. But why not tone down your longing to surrender, why not put up with a second best, why not look for an authority which will control you in a few details of life, say in your diet, smoking, reading or exercise? Are you a believer? Then listen to the voice of the Church. Suffer yourself to be guided by her firm inerrant hand. She will tell you, for example, as she has told so many of the faithful through many ages, what not to read. Even if you are not a believer there is nothing to prevent your acting like one, which you may easily discover how to do. No need to buy one of the more expensive books about the Index. For thirty-five cents, either direct from the publisher, B. Herder, St. Louis, or at any Catholic book shop, you can procure *The Roman Index of Forbidden Books, Explained for Catholic Booklovers and Students*, by Francis S. Betten, S.J.

"That the Church has the right," says Father Betten, "to legislate on the publication and use of all books that touch on questions of faith and morals must be evident to every Catholic." I could wish this truth were as evident to me, since I am about to let the Church direct my reading. My best course is to proceed as if the truth were already plain, to assume that the Church, as Father Betten says, "is the kindest of mothers; but she is also the wisest." But I shall not be reckless. I shall not imitate those early Christians at Ephesus, who burned all the superstitious books in their possession, and of whom Father Betten writes: "This example of loyalty to the Church cost them, as Holy Scripture says, between eight and nine thousand dollars."

No, I will not be precipitate. I shall pick my way. Perhaps I shall begin by restricting my reading to those thousand books which in 1897, when Leo XIII was Pope, were dropped from the Index. Or I may browse upon books still forbidden, taking my cue from Father Génicot, who says: "Were one to read only a few lines which he sees contain doctrine directly opposed to faith or good morals, he would sin grievously. But when nothing so extraordinarily harmful occurs, good moralists hold that as much as six pages may be read without mortal sin." Or perhaps the simplest plan would be to consult the short list printed at the end of Father Betten's book, to compile therefrom a list still shorter, to resolve not to read, for the next six months or so, either Addison's *Remarks on Several Parts of Italy*, Goldsmith's *Abridged History of England from the Invasion of Julius Cæsar to the Death of George II*, Erasmus Darwin's *Zoönomia*, Hallam's *Constitutional History*, Mill's *Political Economy*, or Whately's *Elements of Logic*. Such a partial surrender of the will will be balm to my troubled spirit, but it does nothing for the friend mentioned in the first paragraph. Like Prince Florizel of Bohemia, who confessed he had no great opinion of books, except to amuse a railway journey, my friend could eschew all reading without noticing a difference in his life.

P. L.