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VIEWS & REVIEWS

The Gate and the Gout

BILL MAULDIN

THIS SUMMER, while touring Italy's ancient ruins and poking reminiscently through the ones I had helped make not so long ago, I stopped for gas in Genoa, and the service-station attendant motioned me, with a jerk of his thumb, to the end of a waiting line at the pump.

I had spent two long war years in Italy and even now was finding it hard to adjust to seeing the country through the eyes of a peaceable tourist rather than those of an invader. When I noticed that the car waiting ahead of me was a Volkswagen full of Germans, I couldn't help thinking how ironic and yet how nice it was that here we were, representatives of the two warrior tribes which had raked the length and breadth of this Italian gasoline salesman's country, meekly queuing up at a wiggle of his thumb.

I was headed for Portofino, to be house guest in a mountain villa rented for the summer by an American couple and their two small children. Actually, the wife had discovered and rented the place while her husband was in Paris on a business trip; he was due to arrive the same day as I. The house had been described in the letter of invitation as being huge, well staffed, and amazingly reasonable in price.

There was one drawback, my hostess-to-be had said in her letter. The only way to get to the villa was up a mile-long ox trail which was steep, rocky, and narrow, impassable for ordinary vehicles. I was to dispose of my car and phone her upon arrival so she could meet me in a jeep her Italian landlady had bought in war-surplus days and now let out to tenants along with the house, cook, and maid.

Half an hour after I had called

the mountaintop and left word that I was waiting with baggage at the bottom, my hostess arrived on foot, out of breath and embarrassed.

"You're going to have to hoof it," she said. "I came down to boost your morale during the climb—it's a stinker—and help with any small bundles you may have."

Halfway up the hot, steep trail, we had to squeeze around the side of a huge, locked iron gate barring it.

"This is the trouble," my hostess said. "I haven't been able to use the jeep since I rented that darn place. I can't even take the kids to the beach. They're too little to climb and too big to carry."

"Didn't you know about the gate when you made the deal?"

"If you want to hear that same question asked in more colorful language, wait'll John gets here tonight. He's got a sore foot. He says it's an old piece of shrapnel but I think it's the beginning of gout. Whatever it is, he can't stand walking." She seemed about to cry.

I picked up a five-pound rock and advanced on the gate.

"My military career included many encounters with Italian locks," I said. "The bigger they come, the easier they crack."

"Stop! You can't do that!" she cried. "They'll have the law on us."

"The law?" I said. "The law?" I put the rock down.

"You're right," I said. "This is 1953, the year you line up behind Germans in an Esso station."

"When I first took the place," she told me, "I hardly noticed the gate because it was open. Next day I put the kids in bathing suits and started down in the jeep, and the gate was shut, just like it's been ever since."

"Of course, I was furious, and

asked the maid and cook who was responsible for the gate. They said it was Signor Piazzola, a big real-estate man who lives on the mountain near me and actually owns the road, so he has a perfect right to lock the gate. The cook told me in confidence that Piazzola is feuding with my landlady."

"Have you tried talking to this Pianola?"

"Piazzola. I don't think a lady is supposed to call on a strange gentleman here. Maybe I could send a note, though. I hadn't thought of that. Maybe you can think up something proper and tactful. You've dealt with Italians before."

AFTER gulping down several gins-and-tonic, I began ghost-writing.

"Dear Signor Piazzola," I began, "This is a friendly letter from an American lady whose husband gave you a can of G.I. spaghetti and meatballs ten years ago when your belly button was beating a tattoo on your backbone.

"I have just rented a villa belonging to a crooked old bat whose fight with you is no concern of mine, so would you please open your gate, so my husband, whose leg was shot off while kicking Germans out of your parlor, won't have to hobble up the cliff? Sincerely yours, signature."

"I think," said my hostess over my shoulder, "that I'd better just call on him after all. It may not be proper but this is a desperate situation."

"That's what I told you to do in the first place," I said. "Put on something fresh and low-cut and get his Latin blood boiling. But don't wheedle. Be proud. Remember John's sacrifices."

SHE WAS BACK in twenty minutes, clutching the key.

"He came to the door himself," she said. "He knew who I was and what I wanted, all right, and he was out to show me that all the charm in the world wouldn't move him. So I started to play on his pity by using that thing you wrote about John being crippled in the war, but I was so nervous I told the truth and said he had gout instead of shrapnel in his foot. Right away the old man was all sympathy and kindness. He said he suffers terribly from gout himself. . . ."



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It May Be Box Office, But Is It the Bible?

WILLIAM LEE MILLER

IT SEEMS we have had Salome all wrong. According to the Columbia movie "Salome," she was a good girl—as good, that is, as you could expect a fun-loving Rita Hayworth character to be—but she was betrayed by her evil mother. Rita—pardon me, Salome—liked to enjoy herself and all that, but she wouldn't want anybody's prophet killed, particularly not Stewart Granger's. Really, Mr. Granger had converted her, in one of the easiest and vaguest conversions on record, to The Law or Humanity or something, and she was going straight. She did her dance to try to save John the Baptist, and she was all busted up when they brought in John's head on a platter, his glassy eyes staring up at the ceiling through the ketchup. It was heart-rending.

The improvements that the moviemakers have worked in Salome's character are as nothing to the improvements that they have been working in the Bible for years. With the memories of "Quo Vadis," "David and Bathsheba," and "Samson and Delilah" still vivid, one would think we had had quite enough of Hollywood's own peculiar brand of Biblical interpretation for a while, but the movie men plainly have decided that we need still more spiritual food. According to a report in the *New York Times*, we are to be treated to no fewer than twelve of these "inspirational" pictures, including "The Robe"—now released after years of breathless anticipation; "The Prodigal," starring Ava Gardner (presumably as part of the Riotous Living); and "The Story of Mary Magdalene," in which Rita Hayworth will demonstrate her piety once more. Cecil B. De Mille, famous for his efforts in bringing the Bible to the multitudes, is going

to persevere in good works by re-making "The Ten Commandments," and our Ambassador to Italy, Mrs. Luce, has written the screenplay for "Pilate's Wife." It's going to be a big year.

"SALOME" represents this genre in something like its worst form: It has sex, crowds, noise, color, thrills, religious sentimentality, big names, and at the heart of it all a monumentally fatuous plot. The picture would not be worth further discussion if it were not that there are so many such pictures and they cost so much and so many people go to see them and they are so very bad.

They are not bad in just an ordinary way; they are bad in Hollywood's own colossal way. The stupidity at the center often is surrounded by all kinds of secondary excellence. The big stars show themselves in these movies, and serious performers, too, are somehow persuaded to appear in supporting roles, as Judith Anderson, Charles Laughton, and Sir Cedric Hardwicke do in "Salome." One of Hollywood's more intelligent directors, William Dieterle, directed "Salome." The color may be colorful, the music may be musical, the cutting and camera work and costuming and sets may all be the best of their respective arts. Subordinate parts of the plot may even make some sense. These Biblical spectacles represent an impressive display not only of material abundance but also of technical skill and creative ingenuity. And all of this is expended to make a picture whose high moment is a shot of Rita Hayworth rolling awkwardly on a rug.

The American motion-picture industry—and some would say America as a whole—seems to be more able to