

THE MALVERN FESTIVAL OF 1932

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I.

MALVERN Hills is the setting of Piers the Plowman's *Vision*. That fierce satire on the corruption in Church and State, that exceeding bitter cry of the toiling and oppressed begins with idyllic tenderness. It was on a May morning, when the sun was soft, that the poet clad himself in shepherd's weed and fell asleep under a broad bank by a burn side, soothed into slumber by the merry sound of running water. And as he slept on Malvern Hills he dreamed of a field full of folk, which was fourteenth century England. Long Will Langland must have loved this Malvern which was his home.

And one thinks, not unwarrantably, of a typical English landscape, wooded uplands, gentle slopes and suave contours of swelling downs. Very different is the reality. Geologically, Malvern Hills is a violent overthrust, an abrupt spine of rock in a flat plain, with the older strata on top and the later underneath, a complete reversal. This narrow ridgy geological freak is nine miles long, and not quite three-quarters of a mile at its widest. Its crown is fourteen hundred feet above the level land. It was from "Malvern's lonely height" that twelve fair countries saw the beacon fire, when England rushed to arms at the menace of the Armada.

Clinging to the flanks of this long, narrow ridge are little towns and hamlets. You have a choice of West Malvern, North Malvern, Malvern Link, Malvern Wells; but Great Malvern is your true destination, if you wish to find the home of the Malvern Festival.

Malvern the Great is a beautiful, neat, straggling town of some sixteen thousand inhabitants. It is famous for its scenery, its schools and its spa. Malvern water is reputed to be the purest in England, and it is drunk by the Royal Household in Buckingham Palace. The streets of Malvern should develop the climbing foot of the mountaineer, for they all approach the perpendicular, except the cross-wise terraces. From the highest of these, rightly named Bellevue, the traveller looks down upon a map of England. Below

and far beyond the clustered roofs lie outspread uncounted little fields of rich cultivated shires which seem almost visibly impressed with the word, "Peace". It is a fair prospect.

The Malvern Festival is not a commercial undertaking; it is a rich man's fancy. Sir Barry Jackson's father made a fortune in what are called dairy products. All over England, one sees in advertisements the trade name "Maypole". The brand is famous. He might have chosen any of the usual ways of using, or misusing, his money; but, following a strong natural bent for the stage, he has become the Maecenas of the English drama. He began by forming a band of actors in his native Birmingham, and there he built the Repertory Theatre. He has acquired and he manages several London theatres; and he is a consistent promoter of what is best in stage land. He sinks his title and is plain Barry Jackson on the programmes. It is not without significance that he and Dean Inge read the lessons at morning service in the crowded Priory Church on the Sunday, when the Bishop of Plymouth preached an appropriate sermon on the "acts" of God.

Sir Barry Jackson's public spirit and his services to the cause of literature have not gone without recognition. A gold medal from the Birmingham Civic Society, an honorary degree from the University of Birmingham, and a knighthood witness that he is appreciated in his own country. As far as I could ascertain, the Malvern Festival, now barely three years old, is his own project; and he is its banker. Canadians owe him a debt of gratitude; for he has financed the Maurice Colburne players, thus enabling lovers of the drama throughout the Dominion to enjoy such feasts of wit and mirth as "John Bull's Other Island" and "The Doctor's Dilemma".

The Festival is a new venture. In previous years, it had stressed the works of Shaw; but in 1932, its scope was broadened and it acquired a descriptive by-name, "Four Hundred Years of English Drama". It also took on two faces,—amusement and education, lectures in the morning and plays in the evening. Lascelles Abercrombie, F. S. Boas, Allardyce Nicolls, Bonamy Dobree, all authorities on the drama, were the lecturers. The troupe of actors was, I suppose, as able a company as could be got together. Such a programme had strong attractions for academic persons, teachers, professors and intellectuals generally, and of such were the audiences chiefly composed.

While Malvern forms an admirable background for such a *fiesta*, the actual theatre cannot be called ideal. The *foyer* is narrow, and the entrance to the auditorium makes a right-angled turn up

a stair-case. In the event of a panic-stricken stampede, it would be a well of death. But the interior is simple in its decoration; the acoustics are good; and the stage is plainly visible from all parts of the house. This year the weather was fine, even hot; and the process of finding your way to your seat was slow and unpleasant. For the Suffering Remnant, who are so unfortunate as to dislike tobacco, it was particularly unpleasant, for English-women smoke morning, noon, and night, at all times and almost in all places, like active volcanoes. Luckily, smoking was not permitted in the auditorium, as it is in the picture houses. Contrary to London custom, everybody dressed, and a silent, admiring crowd assembled every evening at the doors to watch the glittering women and black-coated men descend from their motors. This English custom I have not observed in any other country.

II.

The Festival began on Monday, August the first. The play was *Ralph Roister Doister*, the first English comedy, with John Heywood's interlude, *The Wether*, for curtain raiser. One could feel a thrill of expectancy throughout the crowded theatre. What was about to happen who could say? It was certain at least to be something new. The title, as spelled, turned some minds to the Wakefield play of the shepherds and the stolen sheep; but that was a false surmise. The theme was at once ancient and modern, universal and everlasting; it was simply the favorite gambit in ordinary conversation, our stand-by and never failing resource, the weather.

When the lights were turned off, the curtain rose and revealed a bare stage, empty except for a sort of white-curtained tent or bathing pavilion in the centre, guarded by an angel on each side in a long blue robe sewn with gold stars and wearing a gold (paste-board) crown. Each held a flambeau as tall as himself, and maintained this difficult stance throughout the play, except when it was necessary to open or close the curtains of the pavilion. Suddenly there swarmed up from the orchestra-well to the stage the entire cast, a riot of brave colour and medieval costume. A loud-mouthed varlet in red took charge and presented each character to the audience, much as Snout introduces his players to the court of Duke Theseus—the Gentleman, hawk on fist, the Ranger, with his cross-bow, the Wind Miller, the Water Miller, the Merchant in sober black, the over-dressed fine Lady, the stout Laundress,—and many another.

The *motif* of the play is soon apparent. Each character desires the kind of weather that will best suit his particular calling or business. Each in turn is presented by the swaggering self-constituted Master of Requests to Jupiter, who is revealed as a solemn, robed, crowned, sceptred, bearded personage within the bathing-tent. Each kneels at a *prie-dieu* and makes his petition for suitable weather to the invisible Father of Gods and Men. The Fine Lady objects to bright sunlight; it mars her delicate complexion; but the Laundress must have it to dry her clothes. So also the interests of the Wind Miller and the Water Miller are diametrically opposed. From rival prayers, they pass to heated arguments. When these show no sign of ending, Jupiter jingles a hand-bell, as who should say,

No moore of this, for goddes dignitee.

After hearing all the pleas, counter-pleadings, arguments, rebuttals and protests, Jupiter solemnly grants to each one his desire, which means that the weather will continue in its rich variety, as it has from the foundation of the world.

After this simple processional interlude came the main piece, the comedy of *Ralph Roister Doister*. There is little complexity in the plot. Ralph, the protagonist, is the Elizabethan exquisite of the same kidney as Master Slender and Sir Andrew Aguecheek, but without their modest self-distrust. He possesses the fatal gift of beauty, and is discovered lamenting his uncanny power over the female heart, and almost chiding his Maker for endowing him with such irresistible charm. None the less, when he lays siege to the grass-widow Custance, he does not prosper. She will have none of him, nor his amorous epistles, nor his moving serenades. Even his pathological "death" on her doorstep fails to touch her heart. The climax of the play is a battle royal, Custance and her Amazons pitted against Ralph and his myrmidons. It is a feminist triumph; the men are routed. In spite of her more than correct behaviour in his absence, poor Custance incurs the unjust suspicions of her stick of a husband, Gavin Goodluck, when he returns from sea. He is ready to believe the worst about her on his bosun's flimsy evidence.

This dramatic essay by a rather shady schoolmaster meets Aristotle's requirements; it has a definite beginning, middle and end; but its unity is obscured by variety of incidental entertainment, such as singing and dancing. The songs were jolly, such as the lilt beginning,

Whoso to marry a minion wife
Hath had good chance and hap,
He must love and cherish her all his life,
And dandle her in his lap;

but they diverted the attention from the action, such as it was. As a whole, the first English comedy proved its value as an entertainment; it did amuse a critical modern audience. It was curiously free from broad jokes, which is more than can be said of Shakespeare's comedies.

The set was simple but sufficient, the façade of a low-ceiled, two-storey, Elizabethan dwelling. A balcony supported by pillars formed the porch of the front door. Many of the entrances and exits were made by the diamond-paned windows in the second storey. Through them burst the merry maids of Custance. Ralph and Merrygreek used the porch to hide under. It is before the porch that Ralph expires, and then revives, like Bottom playing Pyramus, and has the pleasure of hearing his requiem sung.

III.

The play for the second night was Ben Jonson's massive comedy, *The Alchemist*, which offered a complete contrast to the dramatic experiments of Monday. With critics, it is reputed to be one of the three perfect plots, the others being the *Oedipus* and *Tom Jones*. This means that the plan, the intellectual basis, is as definite and exact as a diagram in Euclid. Nothing could be taken from it without damaging the whole; nor could anything be added. Theoretically, every single scene, every situation advances the action, and contributes to the total effect. Within this firmly drawn frame of plot move recognizable human types, a diversity of creatures, simplified for the purposes of the stage, but offering endless contrast and relief, as they come and go upon the boards. There is nothing experimental, there are no uncertain, fumbling touches in *The Alchemist*. It is complete, finished, rounded out, solid, a masterpiece of the playwright's art. On a twentieth century stage, this Elizabethan comedy seemed neither dated, nor old-fashioned. It acted well, ran smoothly and kept the audience interested and excited until the final curtain fell.

The basic idea is human gullibility. Subtle, the Alchemist, with his confederates Doll Common and Face bamboozle a long train of fools,—a lawyer's clerk, a tobacconist, a man of the world, a country squire and a brace of Puritans from Amsterdam. Each besieges the magician for a boon, ranging from "a rifling fly" to

the philosopher's stone. Each is fooled to the top of his bent; and each is, naturally, disappointed. In the end, the charlatan is exposed and driven into ignominious retreat with the virago Doll.

Again the setting was simple. In the centre of the stage was a heavy columned portico, leading nowhere, and hung with heavy, dark curtains. Above the columns, framed in a semi-circle were the words *Ben Jonson*, in large plain capitals, as a constant reminder of the authorship. This portico, or porch, represented the inner stage, or "room" of the Elizabethan theatre. Its only furniture was a massive Jacobean table and two wooden stools of the period. Sometimes this inner stage was hidden by a curtain. Here much of the dialogue took place, but vigorous action on the bare boards of the outer stage, in strict accordance with the Elizabethan tradition. The actors came and went through the side curtains, and by two doors flanking the portico at the back. There was no attempt at realistic scenery, but the audience accepted this antique simplicity without demur, and found it adequate.

There were difficulties to overcome. The action takes place in and in front of Lovewit's house, for Jonson, the classic dramatist, observes the unity of place. Sometimes the action is supposed to be going on inside and out simultaneously. When the curtains were drawn towards the end of the fifth Act, Lovewit and his neighbors appeared in front of it, as in the street before the house. Much stage effect depends upon the audience playing the children's game, "Let's pretend"! with the actors. While Lovewit, the lawful owner, has been away in the country, for fear of the plague, Jeremy, his butler, has taken Doll and Subtle into partnership. Disguised as a soldier, he decoys the various gulls into Subtle's net, and takes double toll of the fools and the cheats. He is an early lightning-change artist, transforming himself from Face, the captain, to Lungs, Subtle's famulus and laboratory assistant. Ralph Richardson played this part with the same engaging zest that he put into Matthew Merrygreek, the night before. In the violent triangular duel with which the play opens, Doll Common proves herself the best man of the three. She charges Subtle, a spectral, cadaverous person, flings him to the ground and throttles him into submission. Then she attacks Face with his own sword. He uses his helmet as a shield against her fierce lunges at his vitals,—an amusing piece of business.

The part of Druggier, the tobacconist, is a small one, but it was a favorite of Garrick's. It was taken by Cedric Hardwicke, one of England's most accomplished actors, who certainly made the

most of it. His snub nose, upstanding blonde cowlick, confiding smile, and slight hesitation in speaking never failed to raise a laugh. Sir Epicure Mammon, the super-libertine, was a blazing splendor in white and gold. He is Mr. Worldly Wiseman before Bunyan; yet he is fool enough to believe that the poverty-stricken alchemist can obtain illimitable riches for his patron, though not for himself. If he has the secret of the philosopher's stone, why does he not use it for his own benefit? Ananias, the Puritan, wore a red wig, squeaked and sniffled; he was always "protesting" vehemently. Rare Ben Jonson had no love for Puritans. Pertinax Surly, Mammon's friend, who unmasks the knaves, appears disguised as a Spaniard all in mourner's black with a cart-wheel ruff. Dapper, the miserable lawyer's clerk, was not true to his name. He looked like a Rackham grotesque that had been dipped in ink, like the bad boys in *Struwelpeter*. Face, the arch-contriver, who pulls the strings and cheats the cheats, is an English Sganarelle, the traditional knavish servant of the stage.

In the finale, all his knavery is forgiven, because Lovewit loves wit, and because his butler has procured for him an agreeable and well portioned young widow.

In spite of its date, *The Alchemist* was an undoubted success; for gullibility is a constant quantity in human nature, and the supply of fools and swindlers never fails in any age. It was a lively play, full of bustling action, unexpected incident and vivid character contrast. The audience were, I think, surprised to find an old play so modern in idea and so entertaining.

IV.

For Wednesday, the play selected was *Oroonoko*, presumably as a favorable specimen of the Restoration drama. It is the work of Thomas Southerne, an Irish playwright who acquired, in his old age, a reputation for piety. He took his plot from a novel of the same name by Aphra Behn. This lady was a pioneer feminist, the George Eliot or Rebecca West of her period; and she made even that sophisticated generation open its eyes. Part of her experiences was a voyage to the plantations and a residence in Surinam. Here she saw negro slavery for herself, and became, in consequence, the first Abolitionist. Her novel, *Oroonoko*, is anti-slavery propaganda like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

The hero of the play, as of the novel, is the original Noble Savage, before Rousseau had a glimpse of him or even Pope conceived him as running wild in woods. In Africa, Oroonoko was

a king, but he was trepanned by English traders and carried out to the New World as a slave. Worse than slavery is the separation from his dearly loved wife. She is the daughter of a white adventurer, who had saved the life of Oroonoko in battle at the cost of his own. The royal slave is well nigh distracted; he is utterly ignorant of her fate; he is a prey to a thousand fears. Then the long arm of theatrical coincidence endures a violent stretch, and his wife is brought to the same place, also a slave. Here she is exposed to the vehement pursuit of the Lieutenant-Governor, the virtual king of the colony. On the stage he was a most gorgeous personage, resplendent in gold and royal red, and crowned with a broad-brimmed beaver of many plumes. From the villain's persecution she is released by a benevolent Englishman, who restores the lost wife to the rejoicing husband. But both remain slaves. A new complication arises; she is to have a child. Shall it be born a slave? Aboan, Oroonoko's faithful henchman, puts the question to him with passion. The prospect is too terrible. Oroonoko resolves to head a revolt of the slaves, seize the ship in which they were brought over, and return to their own country. But there is to be no violence, no bloodshed; no harm must come to any white man. The vague plan is thwarted. Aboan kills himself. Oroonoko kills the villainous governor, then his wife, then himself.

Oroonoko was played by Ralph Richardson, an excellent actor with a fine presence. His first entrance as the royal slave, tall, dark, strong, exotic, sent an unexpected thrill through the audience before he uttered a word. In his flowing Oriental robe he was every inch a king, with all the poise and dignity of Othello. His speeches were in keeping. They revealed him as the great-souled man, nobly patient under adverse fortune, bearing calmly injustice and wrong, an entirely sympathetic figure. But the initial effect was not sustained throughout the later scenes; the play was diffuse, badly articulated and lacking in emphasis. The sub-plot, designed as comic relief, was always in the way, tripping up the main action and detracting from the unity of effect. Its rancidity would help to account for Mrs. Behn's reputation. The central situation is the same as in *Twelfth Night*, a woman disguised as a man arousing the love of another woman. Restoration dramatists made much of this idea, and put their muddy paws all over it. A comparison of *Twelfth Night* and *Oroonoko* would give the measure of Shakspeare's greatness and his regard for women. Yet this play made Southerne's reputation, and continued a popular favorite far into the eighteenth century.

In stage setting, the producer fell back frankly on the old conventions, the wavering canvas cottage, the forest pushed in from the wings, the painted ship upon the painted ocean. And the audience were complaisant.

V.

After the melodrama came roaring farce.

The career of Henry Fielding spans the transition period between the exhaustion of the dramatic impulse in English literary production and the splendid beginnings of the novel, the new form which was to dominate the nineteenth century. As a young man trying to make his way by his pen, Fielding wrote plays, as the likeliest literary ware, most in demand, and most directly profitable. When the smug little middle-aged bookseller, Samuel Richardson, astonished the world with *Pamela*, Fielding was moved to parody that edifying tale by representing her brother Joseph Andrews modestly repelling the bare-faced advances of Lady Booby. After the first few chapters, he lost sight of his original intention and let himself go in producing a jolly, hearty, thoroughly English novel of adventure; and in that accidental success he found his true vocation.

The same contempt for false sentiment and unreality which inspired *Joseph Andrews*, led Fielding to satirize "greatness" in *Jonathan Wild*, a mock-epic of the "great" highwayman, and to ridicule the empty, pretentious drama of his time in *Tom Thumb the Great*. The original play appeared in 1730, and at once it pleased The Town. As first written, it was a short farce, little more than a curtain-raiser, and could not provide the three hours traffic of a modern stage. But Fielding altered, enlarged, and presumably improved his first draft; and Kane O'Hara grafted on to it a burletta, or musical comedy. This medley was served up with all sorts of trimmings in the way of costumes and stage effects on the Thursday.

Such "a heap of clotted nonsense" is beneath serious criticism; it is not to be analyzed, but to be laughed at. Not being myself a theatre-addict, I could have been quite content with a performance of the farce as Fielding first wrote it. Three hours of unrelieved, chaotic burlesque was rather too much of a good thing. The original satiric intention was overlaid and lost in distracting spectacle and mere clowning.

The beginning was amusing enough. In the centre of the stage was the similitude of such a gate as admits to Hampton Court. Through this pompous, eighteenth-century portal, which

opened on nothing and led nowhere, marched hulking grenadiers in tall, sugar-loaf caps. Round and round they marched through the gate, into the wings and back again. As the procession of red coats, white cross-belts and high-buttoned gaiters showed no sign of stopping, the audience went into giggles and then it laughed. The grenadiers halted, came smartly to attention, and the Royalties made their appearance. King, Queen and Prime Minister had apparently been cast and costumed from Thackeray's illustrations for *The Rose And The Ring*. When His Majesty decided that it was a fine day and therefore a good time to get drunk, three nymphs danced forward, and proffered him a punch-bowl with the necessary ingredients. The monarch unscrewed the end of his sceptre, and lo! it was transformed into a punch-ladle. Fielding's treatment of royalty is no more respectful than Thackeray's. In *Tom Thumb the Great*, a Kaiser Wilhelm would find ample grounds for proceeding against the author for *lèse-majesté*.

The simple humor of physical contrast was naturally exploited. Tom Thumb, the mannikin, is beloved by Glumdalca, Queen of the Giants. Her Majesty was "presented" by a man of mighty thews and sinews well displayed in fleshings such as were worn by ladies of the chorus, before nudism became a cult. "Her" height was increased by a towering red chignon, matching in colour the artless round red patches on "her" cheeks. Two soldiers led "her" on to the stage, each holding the end of a thick rope which bound their captive. Further precautions had been taken against any violence "she" might offer. About "her" neck was a square board, like a Chinese cage; and to her ankle was fastened a huge "iron" ball and chain. But poor Glumdalca looked as if she "had a great disposition to cry,"—a lachrymose, pathetic, feminine giantess, not in the least formidable.

Tom Thumb, the conquering hero, was played by the tiny actor who had already appeared twice on the boards as a boy. Now he was a knight in shining armour, of eighteenth century pattern, the classical cuirass ending in a ballet-dancer's skirt. On his brass helmet, he wore an overshadowing white *panache*, like Henry of Navarre, nearly as big as himself. His doublet was crimson. Altogether, with sword and shield, he was a glittering, impressive figure. To the amorous Glumdalca he is cold. His affections are set on flirtatious Princess Huncamunca, whom he carries off in the teeth of his rival, Lord Grizzle. This may, by courtesy, be regarded as the plot of the play.

A bed-room scene was, of course, inevitable in a comic play. It is no modern invention. Their majesties are discovered asleep

in their regal and virtuous four-poster, their crowns firmly tied on their heads with handkerchiefs. They are haunted (to excess, I should say) by the ghost of Gaffer Thumb, whose relevancy to the plot was not immediately apparent. At last, King Arthur arose majestically, crown and all, from his couch in his perfectly decorous and regal night-shirt. It had a long sweeping train trimmed with ermine; and this apparition amused the house so much that it did not know if the ghost was ever laid.

The bright ever-changing colour, the continual bustle, the eye-taking fantastic costumes provided a sufficiently diverting spectacle. The rule—nothing too much—was not observed; the singing for the most part was unintelligible, and the temporal allusions in the songs were lost upon a modern audience.

VI.

Friday was the day of *London Assurance* by Dion Boucicault. When first produced in London, in 1841, it was an immediate success and set the young author off on his triumphant career. Some of his Irish plays like *The Shaughraun* have been popular in America, but *London Assurance* would almost seem to need a key. The starting-point is the assumption that the metropolis is superior to the provinces. London leads in all qualities, good and bad; and the London brand of assurance, self-confidence or impudence, whichever you please, is therefore the best of its kind. Dazzle is the title embodied. He is a young man about town, with no address and no visible means of support, a first cousin to Mr. Alfred Jingle. By the exercise of his superlative impudence, he insinuates himself into a London mansion in the wake of the dissipated son of the house, and, soon after, secures from a friend of the family, Squire Harkaway, an invitation to visit him at Oak Hall, his country seat. Beyond that the title has not much meaning.

The main plot is concerned with the amorous vagaries of Sir Harcourt Courtley, a be-rouged, be-wigged, attitudinizing, old imbecile, who belongs to the Dandiacal School of Pelham the Puppy. He parades his gentility on all occasions, and he flatters himself, like Falstaff, that he is in the vaward of his youth. A widower in his sixties (which he denies), he proposes to marry his friend Harkaway's daughter Grace, a girl of twenty. But his son supplants him; and, in one of the more plausible scenes, deludes his senile parent into thinking that the youth who faces him is not his son, only a stranger resembling him. Perhaps this is to be accepted as another example of assurance, the London brand.

The one credible character in the play is the celebrated Lady Gay Spanker, the huntin', shootin', sportin' type of Englishwoman. Married to a ninny, she is persuaded to act as lightning-conductor in the Courtley-Harkaway love affair, to flirt with the father, divert his attention from the girl, and let the son have his innings. The plot succeeds to a marvel. Sir Harcourt arranges an elopement with Lady Gay, even sending notices of it in advance to the London papers. Mr. Spanker, the nincompoop husband, spoils his plans. He even awakens a certain amount of sympathy by showing real affection for his dashing spouse, and perfect readiness for a "meeting" with the ravager of his home. So the old Pantaloon is defeated, in accordance with ancient tradition, and Harlequin dances off the stage with Columbine.

Another incomprehensible antique was Mark Meddle, the attorney. In old-fashioned novels like *Lever's* and *Lover's*, attorney is a term of reproach. In fiction, if not in real life, attorneys were regarded as the dregs of the legal profession, and often cast for the part of villain. Such a creature is Meddle, sneaking, cringing, spying, ready to submit to any indignity, provided there is money in it. Once he takes the passive attitude in leap-frog, turns up his coat-tails, and begs to be kicked, so that he will have his action for battery. He was a grimy, white-faced person in black, wearing sable, mutton-chop whiskers.

London Assurance is probably as good an example as could be found of the English drama in the nineteenth century before Archer brought Ibsen to London. It marks a stage in the development, or decadence, of dramatic art before the second blooming in the twentieth century of Galsworthy, Barrie and Shaw. To sit through it was no doubt an educational experience. Our ancestors, it would seem, paid money to witness such plays, and went to see them night after night.

VII.

Saturday, August the 6th, 1932 will be marked with a white stone in the annals of the British stage, for on that date a new play by Bernard Shaw was produced in England for the first time, though it had already been acted in Poland and New York. Once more there was an air of expectancy. The steady theatre-goers felt a sense of approaching climax. The brand new Shaw play was to be the keystone of the arch, the pinnacle of the temple, the *bonne bouche* of the intellectual six days feast. So important was the occasion deemed, that an airplane flew down with a cargo

of journalists and critics, the Messrs Flawn Bannal, from London, to report on the play. In the sequel, it could not find a landing-place at Malvern; it had to go on to Gloucester and forward its precious freight by motor-bus. So the literary gentlemen were late, and missed part of the first Act. Not one of the reports in the Monday papers was wholly favorable.

The entire first act takes place in the bed-room of a young woman. She is sick with the measles, being fussed over by a more than usually foolish mother and attended by a bored and bullied doctor. Perching over the head of the bed, or skipping about the room, is the agile microbe of measles embodied in a sort of pantomime harlequin figure in red. Disease is suggested by mica-colored scales on the costume. When the mother withdraws, the doctor soliloquizes and the invisible microbe makes pertinent replies. Naturally the puzzled man thinks he is suffering from auditory hallucinations, and fears for his reason.

The mother brings in a new night nurse, an efficient looking young person in a trim blue uniform, carrying a small black bag. As soon as she is left alone with the patient, she turns up all the lights, flings wide the French windows, ravishes the extra coverlet and the second hot-water bottle from the bed, and proceeds to make herself comfortable with them in an arm-chair, like a modern Sairey Gamp. The sick girl's protests, shrieks and ravings are calmly disregarded. Presently there enters through the open window a thoroughly Shavian character, a young clergyman who has turned burglar. The nurse is his "Sweetie", and his accomplice. As soon as the poor, stricken invalid understands that they have come to rob her of her pearl necklace, she bounces out of bed, kicks the burglar in the stomach and hurls the nurse upon a chest. Both collapse, and she faints on the bed. When all three have recovered, the burglar-clergyman—he has a tongue Oily Gammon might have envied—makes love to the sick-abled lady, who thinks she is dreaming, persuades her to steal her own necklace, escape from the tyranny of her mother's affection, come with them and live a full, free, happy life. The Microbe, or Monster, drew the moral thus:—

"The play is now practically over. In the next two acts the characters only discuss what has happened in the first. The exits are in working order."

Nobody took the hint. The audience sat out the play to the final curtain; they got their money's worth, and a two-hour sermon into the bargain.

For setting the second Act had the Back of Beyond, otherwise somewhere on the north-west frontier of India. A gallant British

colonel is in charge of an expeditionary force sent out to rescue an English lady from Afridi brigands. He has a long colloquy with an Admirable Crichton of a private named Meek, who is plainly studied from Lawrence of Arabia. It is a "Yes, sir", "No, sir" affair; the bonds of discipline are not relaxed; but it soon becomes apparent that this all-accomplished person in the ranks is really in command. He has conducted the negotiations with the brigand chief, translating the colonel's letter into the vernacular and writing out the reply for the illiterate robber. As the number and variety of Meek's qualifications are gradually revealed, his astonished superior officer bursts out that he ought to be a colonel. With becoming humility, Meek replies that he has been brevetted three times, but he has always reverted to the ranks. The conversation in the officers' mess was not to his taste.

When the super-private departs, Sweetie enters disguised as a foreign countess, attended by the ex-patient disguised as a native girl in a fuzzy black wig, a bolero and a loin-cloth. She carries a parasol, wherewith she prods her mistress in the back whenever the latter says something she should not. To the titled lady, the gallant colonel is politeness itself, and he withdraws reluctantly to inspect his stores. Enter the burglar-clergyman in hot-weather *negligé*, and the three discourse Shavianly on the theme,

"Me this unchartered freedom tires."

They have escaped from the trammels of civilization, they are living the full, free life, apparently *a trois*, but they are sick of it, and of one another. After a long discussion, the colonel returns from inspecting his stores. A quantity of maroons are unaccountably missing. Soon there is an attack of the hostile tribesmen over ground which Meek has carefully prepared and sown with the missing explosives. The private takes control of the situation. He springs up the rocks, snaps out his orders, and routs the Afridis in a bloodless battle. Then the true character of the servant-invalid is revealed. She snatches off her wig and laughs in the colonel's face. Their Act closes in their farcical duet of "Baa, baa, black sheep."

The set for the Third Act was the strangest of all, and the most remote from any pretext of reality. Right and left were two paste-board caves or grottoes; a path led down from the back stage between the two. The right-hand grotto was labelled "St. Paul", and it was occupied by a long black-coated figure with its back to the audience, bowed over a table. In the left-hand grotto, labelled ΑΓΑΠΩΜΕΝΗ, Ralph Richardson was discovered as a serious-minded sergeant with two books in his hands, *The Bible* and *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The War and its aftermath have

taught him their practical value. The City of Destruction is no fantastic myth; it is a dread reality. Paris, London, Berlin are such cities, doomed to perish by fire. His moralizings are interrupted by the seductive Sweetie, who enters by the path between the grottoes. When her blandishments are proving almost too much for the Bible student's virtue, the tall black-coated figure in the right-hand grotto rises to rebuke the erring pair. This is the atheist father of the clergyman-burglar, a modern Jeremiah pouring forth his *Book of Lamentations*. He has lost his faith in Determinism. The scientific spirit wherein he trusted was a will-o'-the-wisp leading him into a sub-atomic world where the law of cause and effect does not hold. Chaos is come again. The world is falling endlessly into the abyss. To physical nakedness has succeeded spiritual nakedness, which is far more terrible. His torrent of grief is interrupted by a comic interlude. Down the path in the centre comes Colonel Tallboy followed by the Idiot Mother, who is plaguing him about the diet of her captive Daughter. Forgetting the best traditions of the British Army, the exasperated officer bashes her with his umbrella. Her bleatings cease; she staggers off the stage; and when she returns, she is a wiser woman. She has come to her senses, and realizes that she has been fed on falsehoods all her life about sacrificing herself for her family. She has made herself a nuisance to her friends. Some philanthropist should have bashed her twenty years ago. The gallant colonel is moved to apologize for his too impulsive action, but firmly refuses, English fashion, to express regret for it, wherein he had the whole-hearted sympathy of the audience. Finally the burglar-clergyman wanders on to the stage clad in fresh white flannels, and parleys at length with his incongruous sire. The aged atheist is almost equally disturbed because his unnatural son has turned parson and turned thief. The curtain falls upon the burglar-clergyman preaching like Chrysostom.

Such is, in rough outline, the latest Shavian comedy, *Too True To Be Good*. Neither the London nor the New York critics liked it; but—I must confess to my poor taste—I enjoyed it. In the first place, it was a jetting, sparkling fountain of ideas; wit never failed; and it presented the Comic Spirit in various guises. Nor did the didactic parts repel me. I was brought up on sermons, and, strange as it may seem, I like sermons, that is to say, good sermons. If, in addition, the good sermons are preached against sins that I've no mind to, I am doubly pleased. I wrap myself in my mantle of Pharisaic self-righteousness.

“Let the galled jade wince! Our withers are unwrung.”

Shaw had a preface in the Festival programme, in which he declares that he is a prophet. *Too True To Be Good* is a series of preachments full of bitter truth. After the first Act, there was not much laughing; the audience took their medicine in silence. When the clergyman-burglar deplores the fact that, with kissing and cocktail parties, the girl of eighteen looks like a demi-rep of twenty-two, it is Shaw the Irish Puritan speaking through the actor's lips. He is on the side of the angels; and modern morals afflict and disgust him. War he satirizes in the person of Colonel Tallboy. As officer commanding, he has nothing to do; he merely tells others what to do; a private in the ranks knows more than he does, and is more expert in the art of war; his chief interest is in the lady-like accomplishment of painting in water-colours; it keeps him from going mad in the dull monotony of his professional duties. The serious-minded sergeant makes a frontal attack on war, which, in one country at least, produced an immediate effect. In his preface, Shaw writes:—

“In Poland . . . the success of the play so terrified the authorities that they sacked the censor, who had, in deference to my reputation, passed the play without reading it . . . he was reinstated three days later . . . and the play was allowed to proceed, subject to excision of the disparagements of war in the last act. I invite the attention of the League of Nations, and of all Pacifist leagues and conferences, to this gesture of the Polish Government, and the light it throws on the real views of Poland as to the moral respectability—not to say glory—of war.”

The Bishop of Plymouth preached the next morning in the Priory Church. He would not have dared to exceed the orthodox fifteen minutes; but the mountebank playwright preached for full two hours, and his flock sat patiently until the end.

With such a scenic background, with such a rich and diversified programme, with such ability directing the whole, the Malvern Festival may be regarded as an established success. In spite of the financial depression of 1932, both receipts and attendance surpassed those of previous years. As the nature and quality of this rich intellectual entertainment is more widely spread abroad, lovely Malvern may well become a place of pilgrimage, like Baireuth, or Oberammergau.