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BOOKS and the ARTS

Jean Giraudoux

BY KLAUS MANN

AFTER the last World War the younger French writers discovered the Orient Express, the thrills of the Six-Day Bicycle Race and of jazz music, the greatness of Arthur Rimbaud, psychoanalysis, Berlin night life, the genius of Picasso and Charlie Chaplin, the Ballet Russe, and Negro sculpture. The younger generation in Germany, on the other hand, cut off from the world during the war, discovered "Young France." In Paris we encountered a generation of writers who, standing in the line of succession to Proust and Gide, knew how to combine the magic of a new "surrealist" vision with the charm of the *élégance latine* and a certain measure of European common sense. Among those who then held us enthralled was Jean Giraudoux.

In the rich and felicitous stream of his production many elements and charms of the "new France" are blended in the most natural way. His neo-Hellenistic plays—"Amphitryon 38," "La Guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu," and "Electre"—show that mixture of poetry and casual ceremony which we admire in the dramas of Jean Cocteau—though Giraudoux's urbane manner is far removed from the aesthetic radicalism of Cocteau's half-tragic, half-capricious attitude. His novels, among which "Bella" and "Églantine" are my favorites, testify to the experienced master-craftsmanship of the psychologist who has absorbed French narrative art from Stendhal to Proust, yet has himself remained original.

Giraudoux is a man of the world and a diplomat. He knows many countries and languages. Above all, he knows Germany—a knowledge none too common with French intellectuals. The problem of Germany has perhaps exercised him longer and more profoundly than any other—with the exception of the corresponding problem of France. In his play "Siegfried" it is the Franco-German relationship that forms the dramatic theme.

I first made Giraudoux's acquaintance in Berlin. His appearance and bearing at once speak in his favor. One is inclined to take the tall, lean, carelessly elegant gentleman for an Anglo-Saxon or Scandinavian. He has none of the obvious marks of the writer. He lacks, likewise, the non-committal, routine suavity so common in diplomats. Observing him in a restaurant or on board an ocean liner, one might conclude: a very modern, very athletic college professor from Cambridge, Stockholm, or Boston, as deeply interested in tennis and field sports as in a first edition of Montaigne or an essay by Sigmund Freud.

Later I often saw him in Berlin, whither he journeyed

on occasion even after Germany had become the Third Reich. (His new play, "Ondine," was scheduled at the outbreak of the war for performance at the State Theater during the season of 1939-40; thus he personally has little reason to complain of bad treatment in the land of Hitler.) We ate together in Paris restaurants, and I visited him in his office on the Quai d'Orsay. My last personal message from him came from Persia. He was on a sort of journey of inspection to various French legations. In Teheran he met a young diplomat who had married a friend of mine. A line from Giraudoux from such a wild and remote country—it was an agreeable and gracious surprise.

When I read in the newspapers that he had been appointed general commissioner for information I was delighted. The notion of investing a poet and declared friend of the Germans with *pleins pouvoirs* at so critical an hour is typically French—bold, slightly capricious, and very shrewd. For it is shrewd not to descend to the level of an enemy whom one could hardly outdo in resourceful infamy and shrillness of lying. Instead, a delicate and winged voice was chosen to present the cause of justice to the world—and we may be certain it will be stronger than the screams of hatred and the hypocritical whimpers on the other side. Yet M. Giraudoux is no Galahad; he is, among other things, a politician. He will do an excellent job.

His sympathy for Germany can be doubted no more than his earnest and passionate patriotism. He loves his France with deep pride, though not without criticism. It is this proud, critical love of his French homeland that lends character and pathos to his long essay, "Pleins Pouvoirs." The book appeared shortly before the outbreak of the war. It is an important book—not merely because its author today has the title and functions of *Ministre de l'Information*, but because the French spirit here analyzes itself without cowardice or vanity, weighing the chances and dangers of its future with intelligent concern. In large parts it appears to be a most prosaic book. There are statistics about the declining French birth rate and immigration. Detailed plans for public works take up more space than the formulation of moral postulates. The tone and the accent are enthusiastically sober. Giraudoux sees the problem of France chiefly in the guise of an internal problem. To remain *une nation de premier ordre*, to avoid sinking to the position of a vassal state of totalitarian neighbors, France must regenerate itself—"modernize" itself, as our author is inclined to say—while at the same time finding its way back to the great traditions of its history and culture. The situation is very

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