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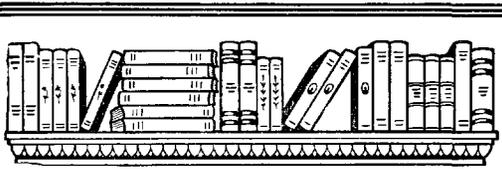
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The Engineer's Bookshelf

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Once again Maxwell Anderson has descended upon us, this time with "The Eve of St. Mark" under the auspices of the Theatre Guild, with a second rate cast, a few members of which did not even know their lines. During the second act one entire scene was omitted in the production that I saw at the Hartman theatre on the second night of the three day run in the city. That scene may or may not have detracted from the value of the story that Mr. Anderson tried to tell; but to the members of the audience who had read the play or who knew what was coming, it presented a disappointing experience.

Something has happened to Mr. Anderson, and even after a re-reading of the play following the production, I have been unable to find out just exactly what it is. His construction is still perfect; he is ever the master craftsman; the right character is introduced at the right time and says the right thing. The fault probably rests with the way he says it, as I shall try to show you later on. Anyway, Mr. Anderson has been maintaining his high standard as the seasons roll. "Winterset" was a high point in his play construction career; that was 1936. The next year we had "High Tor," equally as good. The downfall started about 1938 with "The Wingless Victory" which even Miss Katherine Cornell, as lead, could not pull out of the depths. Then followed "The Star-Wagon," "Key Largo," and "Candle in the Wind." Now, at the bottom of the list rests "The Eve of St. Mark."

"The Eve of St. Mark" is the story of Private Quizz West; Quizz is in the army and like most army men, he has a girl back home. She is Janet Feller. Their families are farm folk, and the action of the story begins on the farm where Quizz was born. Through two very short acts, and by means of nine or ten brief scenes, the action moves rapidly to the training camp with its discipline and its temptations, to a Pacific convoy, and finally to a courageous stand led by Quizz and his handful of men on a little lost rock among the Philippine Islands.

In order to make possible in the last act two none too convincing dream scenes, Mr. Anderson has used an old device of telling his audience on the printed program that the eve of St. Mark, according to an old legend, is the eve when a girl may see the ghost of her lover if he is among those to die that year. Therefore, this legend acts as the basis of the play; but without the in-

formation on the program the audience would not know exactly what the dream scenes are about, especially with Quizz in the southwest Pacific and Janet on the farm in New York state. According to the church calendar, by the way, the Eve of St. Mark fell on April 24.

Many words have been written and spoken about the inability of playwrights to write a good war play while war is still going on. Friends of Mr. Anderson, however, claim that he has accomplished this feat when he wrote this play; and, they point out, he is the first of the playwrights to do this. You must recall, of course, the first war play that Mr. Anderson wrote was done in collaboration with Laurence Stallings. "What Price Glory!" was written in 1926, eight years after the close of the war whose scenes it portrays. "All Quiet on the Western Front" and "Journey's End" followed in the 1930's. Those are good war plays; they were written after the Next-To-the-Last-World-War, as the late Alexander Woolcott called the 1917-1918 fracas. "The Eve of St. Mark," however, is a play about the Last World War, written while it is still in progress; and Mr. Anderson's friends to the contrary, it is not a good play.

Let me show you some of the lines from the best of Mr. Anderson's plays, "Winterset." For example, there is that beautiful scene in the last act between Mio and Miriamne, with Mio speaking:

Now all you silent powers that make the sleet and dark, and never yet have spoken, give us a sign, let the throw be ours this once, on this longest night, when the winter sets his foot on the threshold leading up to spring and enters with remembered cold-let fall some mercy with the rain. We are two lovers here in your night, and we wish to live.

And then, Mio speaking again:

I love you and will love you after I die. Tomorrow, I shall still love you, as I've loved the stars I'll never see, and all the mornings that might have been yours and mine. Oh, Miriamne, you taught me this.

Now this passage from "The Eve of St. Mark." It is the night of April 24, Janet is in bed in her farm home in Upper State New York, while Quizz, at high noon —on a besieged atoll in the southwest Pacific talks to her. This is Janet speaking:

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(continued from page 14)

Oh, Quizz, come home! And oh forgive me, please forgive me now for knowing so little when you went away, for letting you leave me, mine and not yet mine—for I didn't know— but the empty days and nights have taught me now how if you've missed your love there's nothing to put in its place. So you must come home.

And this is Quizz:

Seeing you there in your bed where I've never lain, it seems that I'd give all heaven and all the earth, and all men ever had, to put my arms

around you once. You're more than I remembered.

Well, judge for yourself. To me the beauty in those lines from "Winterset" can hardly be equalled in modern drama.

Mr. Anderson's friends say that the comedy in "The Eve of St. Mark" is unsurpassed. There is a scene in the barracks at Port Grace that is amusing, but the comedy in it comes from the director's care in manipulating the action and not from the lines themselves. There is also a scene in the Moonbow Restaurant with two semi-professional prostitutes—I'll let the reader make his own definition of a semi-professional—which grows rather bawdy when one of the girls drinks too many Cuba Libras; but it can boast of no scene as funny as a few I can recall off hand in Mr. Anderson's "What Price Glory!" (his first war play written eight years after the war it portrays): the private who loses his identification tag; Cognac Pete prefers charges against Quirt; and the arrival of the two shave-tail lieutenants. The language in "What Price" is rich and racy, virile and Rabelaisian; but even at that it is not a veracious transcript of soldier's talk. I know; I remember. However, it adequately suggests the language of the soldier, and that is not always the case in "The Eve of St. Mark."

So, Mr. Anderson, please wait until this war is finished and then write us a play about it. If you make it only half as good as your "What Price Glory!", you will have a far better play than you have in "The Eve of St. Mark." Also, Mr. Anderson, let Sir James M. Barrie handle dream scenes as he did in "The Well Remembered Voice" and "The Old Lady Shows Her Medals." It takes a Barrie to write a dream scene. Mr. Anderson, you should stick to your war plays after the war is finished.



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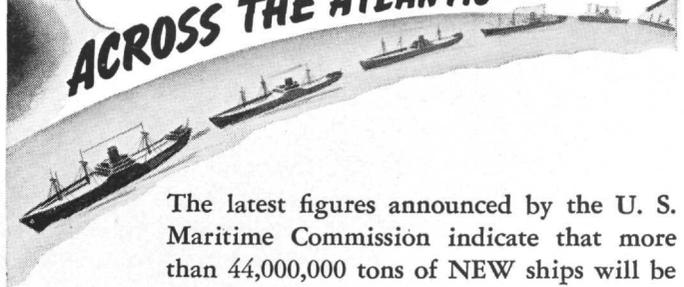
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