

"THE BETTER 'OLE," A PLAY OF HUMOROUS AND PATHETIC WAR INCIDENTS, AS SEEN BY BRUCE BAIRNSFATHER



WHEREVER you go these days, whether it is between the acts at the theatre, at a dinner, or among a group of friends at the Club, you hear people saying: "And do you remember that especially amusing sketch by Bairnsfather, the one where *Old Bill*—who is reproaching a comrade for being dissatisfied with his trench—says, 'If you know where there is a better 'ole, go to it?'" There are many others as amusing and as vividly presenting the war as the men in the trenches see it. Because Bairnsfather has found the unconscious humor of the trenches and knows how to portray it so that the men at home, as well as the boys over there, understand him, a series of his most amusing sketches have been made into a play called "The Better 'Ole." This play has been running for over a year in London and is the delight of the soldier on leave, the officer on furlough, the titled lady from the munition works and the shopgirl.

Because of the practically universal delight in Bairnsfather's humor, the Coburn Players (whom we know so well in America as lovers of the best of the new as well as the best of the old plays) have decided to produce "The Better 'Ole" for the first month of their occupation of the Greenwich Village Theatre, which they have taken for the season. They will of course follow the English production somewhat, adding to the scenery the beauty and interest that is essential to the production of a play in America.

The music for "The Better 'Ole" has been composed by Herman Darewski and the orchestra is under the skilful direction of Elliott Schenk. The Coburns describe "The Better 'Ole" as a "farce comedy, with a few musical skits in it, staged entirely at The Front." In the opening scene a soldier comes splashing down the trench and his comrade cries: "Say, Alf, take your muddy feet out of the only water we have got to sleep in," and from this on a series of instances are presented in which the three soldiers, *Old Bill*, *Bert* and *Alf*, figure in the foreground.

It is quite possible that at a first glance we may not realize the splendid attributes that underlie the humor these three old soldiers present. We may see them only as rough members of the British nation for whom beef and beer are the standard requirements of daily existence; but in time we are bound to respond to Bruce Bairnsfather's understanding of these men. He gives us through his keen vision, his instinctive grasp of character and magic pen a real comprehension of these men as heroes, the salt of the British Empire.

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TWO SCENES FROM "THE BETTER 'OLE" AS PRODUCED IN ENGLAND, WHERE IT HAS BEEN RUNNING FOR OVER A YEAR TO THE GREAT DELIGHT OF BOTH OFFICERS AND "TOMMIES"



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"THE BETTER 'OLE": A TRENCH COMEDY

Most eloquently does he represent the men who have thrown down pickaxe and spade for bomb and bayonet, the sturdy citizens who have quitted the primitive surroundings of humble life for the stern realities of existence in trenches and billets, the men who went to make up the first hundred thousand. Through Flemish clay and Leeds khaki cloth, shine forth the unsophisticated humor and sturdy commonsense of a man of the people; the man whose humble but true sense of patriotism leads him to leave wife and children to risk life and limb for his country.

OLD BILL stands out with the vividness of a Shakespearian creation, as forcible as *Falstaff*, as quaint as *Dogberry*. It is for this reason that he has caught the imagination of the public, that he attracts myriads to the theatre, and fills them with the glory of their race. In the depths of his nature, *Old Bill* stands equally for peer and peasant, his rough figure idealizes national sentiment, the unostentatious sense of duty, the abnegation of self, which dominate officer and private. He commands the tears of laughter as well as those of pathos. He fills us with the milk of human kindness as well as with the meat of human courage. He is an inspiring figure in the book of life.

From the professional playwright's point of view, there is but one dramatic episode in the piece as it was pictured in London. It is the acquisition of the Spy's letter containing the information as to the mining of the bridge over which the French are going to attack: when, with the aid of *Victoire*, *Bill* realizes its import, he determines to frustrate the enemy's intention by blowing the bridge in advance. He takes upon himself the responsibility and danger. His mission fulfilled, he finds himself under arrest for disobedience to orders; he is further compromised by the possession of the incriminating enemy document; death by a firing party at dawn appears to be his imminent fate. But a kindlier fate has interposed in the person of *Victoire*. She has gone to the French Headquarters with the story of his gallantry, and an officer of the French staff arrives bearing with him the glorious Cross of Honor with which France dears those of her sons who have rendered her faithful service. Throughout it all, *Bill* thrills us with his rugged genuineness.

As a further tribute to *Old Bill* we quote with pleasure a eulogy, on the London production, by Max Pemberton. "Nightly," he says, "you may see guardsmen laughing and little milliners' assistants weeping, and hear the cheers of the men in khaki who know—Mother and son, the son who fought, sit side by side, and are holding hands, and he tells her proudly, 'It's just like that out there.'"

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"THE BETTER 'OLE": A TRENCH COMEDY

"Yes, it was and is 'just like that out there,' and no surer tribute could be paid. So many others have failed where this artist has succeeded, and they have failed because they have brought no wide vision to bear. Until Bruce Bairnsfather made himself known to us, the humanities of war were undiscovered. The 'Censure,' as *Old Bill* would say, did for us. It was all 'somewhere in France,' and the good God shut it from our yearning eyes. It was Captain Bairnsfather who changed all this—slowly, laboriously, with an unflinching sense of humor, and an atmosphere which is incomparable. Well may the War Office have said to him, when recently he was wounded at The Front, 'Your pen is worth more to us than your sword.'

"The public listening to *Old Bill*, roaring at *Bert*, rocking at *Alf*, or alternately crumpling the handkerchief which the men would hate you to see, says, 'Here is the war—here are the men who have saved our homes—here are the friends whose hands we desire to clasp.' And it is right and sure in its judgments, as it is always right. For it is conscious of atmosphere, and of all things in the dramatic convention, atmosphere alone is priceless.

"No creation just like *Old Bill* has ever been known to us. There are three musketeers here, but how different from those the great Dumars handed out to us.

"No pushing *Gascon* or lovesick *Athos*, no *Porthos* of the rotundities, but men who say things that *Bill* in the street would like to say, types eternal, the expression of all that has been felt and endured since the beginning. Their very illiteracy endears them to us. 'Don't tell me,' says *Old Bill*, 'that you have been to Eton or Harrods.' and we are very glad that we are educated at neither seminary.

"A great entertainment in brief; a revue of the war most admirable. It will be a prodigious success in America and the far lands. We have nothing like it, I repeat, and assuredly there is that here which will make the whole civilized world akin."

We are glad that the pleasant playhouse in Sheridan Square has been leased for the present season by Mr. and Mrs. Coburn, not for the purpose of "reforming" anything, but for the adequate acting of good plays—old or new, classic or popular.

The Coburns' plan to give a different play each month, for a run of four weeks, includes the first presentation in America of "The Better 'Ole" by Bruce Bairnsfather and Arthur Eliot; the premiere of Theodore Dreiser's "The Hand of the Potter," Alice Herzberg's dramatic of "Alice in Wonderland"; revivals of George C. Hazelton and Benrimo's "The Yellow Jacket," Moliere's "The Imaginary Invalid"; Shakespeare's "The Taming of the Shrew" and "Macbeth," with others. The theatre opened October nineteenth.

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