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THE CONQUERING LEGION

A Hollywood Transformation

by Mrs. James F. Looram

No news event in history, including the last presidential election and the birth, growth and surging of the very famous Dionne quintuplets, has occupied more space in the public and religious press than the Legion of Decency. To give an adequate return of the purpose, progress and success of that drive and its beneficent effects for all concerned would require not only a high order of eloquence but unlimited time, space and ink. To attempt to do so in a few columns is indeed presumptuous, to say the least.

As all of our Catholic readers know, the Legion was suggested by the Social Service Committee of the American hierarchy in November, 1933. Made impressively aware of the dangerous, demoralizing influence of a certain type of vulgar, obscene, lascivious motion picture the Bishops' Committee set out very definitely to stimulate in the minds of the laity a vivid consciousness of this very delicate menace to Christian morality and to work earnestly and effectively to insure clean and wholesome screen fare.

The Bishops' motion picture committee included their Excellencies, Most Reverend John T. McNicholas, O.P., Archbishop of Cincinnati; the Most Reverend John J. Cantwell, Bishop of Los Angeles and San Diego; the Most Reverend Hugh C. Boyle, Bishop of Pittsburgh and the Most Reverend John J. Noll, Bishop of Fort Wayne.

The leaders of the Drive sought only the elimination of objectionable films, those pictures especially which catered to sensuality or condoned immorality in any form whatsoever, be it gang warfare, the familiar geometrical forms, the triangle, or suicide under the guise of heroism. The Legion asked for nothing more and nothing less than was contained in the producers' own Code of Ethics and Morals to which they had pledged themselves in 1930.

Because the Legion executives proved that they were not interested in federal legislation of morality, that they were not trying to establish a dominating control of the industry, that they were not zealots, fanatics, prides or prohibitionists, they attracted to their fold millions of followers of all creeds, of all races, from all walks of life. Entire religious and civic organizations took the Legion's pledge en masse, i.e., to attend only wholesome motion pictures. The American Legion, for instance, numbering more than a million members, enlisted in the drive, because the members saw in it a patriotic cause, the preservation of national morality. Our own beloved Cardinal of New York said, "Civilization would not long endure if we were a race of physical giants but dwarfed morally."

Because the expressions of the Bishops' Committee were at all times clear, calm, convincing, intelligent and constructive, because they did not assume the role of dictator, because they did not wish to impair the vast material investment of the movie industry, the producers recognized readily and acknowledged the legitimate demands of the Bishops in this matter and asserted not only their willingness but also their determination to correct abuses.

All are acquainted with the fine results of the preliminary meetings between the Bishops and the representatives of the motion picture industry, with the new Production Code machinery going into active operation on July 15, 1934. The producers manifested their good will and sincerity by establishing a system of comprehensive supervision of careful reviewing and of strict enforcement of reasonable regulations and corrections. No one welcomed the Legion of Decency drive more than Mr. Will

Hays himself. A unified, crystallized public opinion was the strength he needed to impress upon the industry the necessity of accepting the spirit as well as the rules of its association. As his critics will well agree, Mr. Hays had the difficult task of dealing with an industry that took much of its material from the current drama and current literature. Our Bureau always claimed that if the source of screen material were lifted to a higher moral plane many of the screen ills would have been cured.

And again there was another angle to consider. When, in the past, the producers whom Mr. Hays was "calling to order" could show him in black and white the net returns, running in uncountable figures on pictures as objectionable as "Goodbye Love," "Bed of Roses," "Midnight Mary," "Made on Broadway" and countless others, and at the same time could show him in red and white the equally large losses on such outstanding productions as "Cradle Song," "Disraeli," "Abraham Lincoln," "No Greater Glory," and many others that were rich in entertainment, artistic and moral values, they were not at all sure that Mr. Hays was speaking for the great American public when he rebuked them for code violations.

However, with the Legion of Decency as his gavel, Mr. Hays could very well enforce his dicta. He now possessed the complete authority which he was supposed to have but never really had until a massed public opinion gave it to him. If Mr. Hays deserved the rebukes which some cynics administered to him, then the indifferent public was to blame!

After placing Mr. Brown in the Production Code Administrator's chair (and we will refer to that esteemed gentleman later on), Mr. Hays gave the following command to the producers: "Say it with Pictures." And glancing over the film fare of the past year we must admit that the industry has said it very eloquently and very beautifully with pictures. The variety, vigor and excellent entertainment values of the present day screen belie those critics who predicted pic-

tures of sugary sentimentalism and pious piffle.

The covers of fine literature and drama have been opened to the country at large and people everywhere are making or are renewing acquaintance with the classics. They have given us not only cleaner films, but productions boasting of finer technique, better drama and excellent entertainment.

"David Copperfield" stands at the very top of motion picture production. Against a background of brilliant direction and exquisite photography, the lovable old story lives as vividly as even Dickens could have wished, with the same rare quality that has endeared it to generation after generation. This picture played for five weeks at the Capitol Theater in New York. Only one other picture, "The Barretts of Wimpole Street," played as long as four weeks there. "The Lives of a Bengal Lancer," another notable example of the finest in screen entertainment, is one of the best money makers in the history of the industry. Its profits are expected to top \$5,000,000. In justice to the industry we must admit that preparations for all three afore-mentioned pictures were started well before the Decency drive. However, their box office success would have been quite problematical had not the motion picture public been awaking to its responsibility: i.e., to support the better products of the screen if it expected a continuance of them.

According to some critics who believed that the church was opposed to the dramatization of sin, stories were expected to be unexciting and uninteresting. When productions like "The Painted Veil," "Age of Indiscretion," "We Live Again," adapted from Tolstoy's "Resurrection," found their way to our "adult" list, these critics were convinced that sex constituted legitimate and acceptable dramatic material if properly treated. What the church leaders objected to was the treatment of its illicit aspects and sordid circumstances. False ethics, false standards, false doctrines, are taboo as far as the church is concerned. We can recall a few productions before the "self-regulation" of the industry where the decent man in the film was often made to appear as a silly "fool," while the good woman was sometimes treated with such flippant condescension that we were tempted to question her intelligence. But that is all a matter of history now—Deo Gratias!

Let us recall in passing, some of the splendid productions which were Hollywood's answer to the demand for better pictures. There was the outstanding Arliss success, "The House of Rothschild"; those two fine Barrie plays, "What Every Woman Knows" and "The Little Minister." The latter production, during its run at the Radio City Music Hall in New York City, broke the house record set up by "Little Women." We had "Clive of India," the story of the British Empire Builder, and "Richelieu," the story of the great Cardinal. We had a wealth of Dickens including "Great Expectations" and "The Mystery of Edwin Drood." We had Stevenson's "Treasure Island," delighting the hearts of young and old, and again that superb adaptation of Victor Hugo's novel "Les Miserables," which in itself would have made any year of motion picture making famous. For clean, intelligent comedy that did not have to resort to salacious bedroom scenes and slimy dialogue for its laughs, we had the truly amusing "Ruggles of Red Gap." For wholesome, down-to-earth homespun yarns we had "Life Begins at Forty," "Doubting Thomas," and "David"

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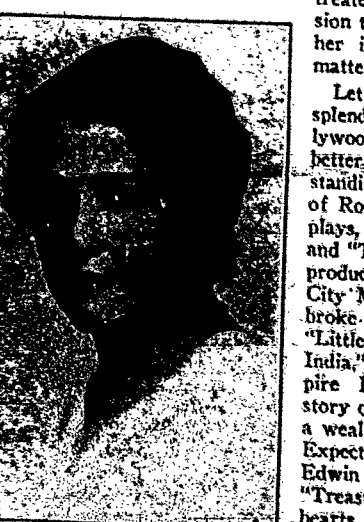
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Movie Mentor



Mrs. JAMES F. LOORAM, as International Chairman of the Motion Picture Bureau of the International Federation of Catholic Alumnae, presents in this article a comprehensive and practical study of the Better Films movement and the purpose, history and activities of the Motion Picture Bureau in the support and furthering of the work of the Legion of Decency. Mrs. Looram, with the assistance of a Hollywood Committee and an editorial staff is responsible for the reviewing, arranging and publishing of the IFCM Movie List as well as the editing of the current movie bulletin "Endorsed Motion Pictures" and the preparation of broadcast material. With the broad and accurate vision that such contacts confer, Mrs. Looram is able to give first-hand information on the subject.

