

The unknown: a play in three acts



Somerset Maughams play *The Unknown* (1920) is one of those texts from the early twenties where disquiet about the War is expressed as a loss of religious faith. E.M.Delafields novel *The Optimist* is another example, and so I suppose is Douglas Goldrings lurid *The Fight for Freedom*. A key feature of such texts is that of the pontificating and ultimately dishonest clergyman. In *The Unknown*, the Rev. Poole is a manly vicar who bemoans the fact that his health kept him from going to the front. He believes in war almost as firmly as he believes in God: It is the great school of character. Amid the clash of arms the great Christian virtues shine forth with an immortal lustre. Courage, self-sacrifice, charity, self-reliance. No one knew before the war what a pinnacle of heroism was within the power of our brave lads at the front. When John Wharton returns from France minus his faith, this vicar is called in to re-convert him. Much of the play is a debate about the possibility of a good God in a world of suffering. The characters discuss the nature of faith, and the human hunger for religion when facing extreme pain and fear. Johns fiancée Sylvia asks Are you sure you wouldnt call on God instinctively to help you? and John replies: And if I did? That wouldnt be me, that mangled, bleeding, starved, delirious thing. Its me now that speaks, now that Im well and conscious and strong. Its the real me now. I disclaim and disown anything I may feel or say when Im tortured with pain and sickness. It would give my real self just as little as a prisoner on the rack gives the truth.

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