



Tol'able David **Essay by Walter Coppedge**

The stories that fill us with the deepest sense of meaning, that connect us to something beyond ourselves in time and place, are invariably those that figure some universal truth: a fruit is tasted and the garden is forfeited, a beast is loved and he turns into a prince, a maiden is kissed and she awakened into consciousness, a proud man isolates himself and terrible suffering ensues, a gentle youth defeats a fearful adversary against impressive odds. Stories of this sort are testimonies to the experience of life; primal stories repeated again and again which are basic to our understanding of life are called myths (from *mythos*, a Greek work for story). TOL'ABLE DAVID draws openly upon the David and Goliath myth, as we see David for the first time studying the picture of the young shepherd confronting the menacing giant. As a boy he fleets the time, carelessly enjoying the pleasures of his youth and the green world.

Young David lives in a place called Greenstream; it lies in a gentle valley behind three great ranges of mountains. The skies seem to be bluer in Greenstream, it is always summer, and the country flows with sparkling streams bordered with wild mint. Soft mountain light bathes the valley, and meadows dotted with grazing sheep roll up to the wooded crests.

The film dwells lovingly, perhaps romantically, on this experience of nature. For this reason it is clearly in the ancient tradition of the pastoral – and not of the melodrama as some commentators have described it.

The pastoral is a form of nostalgia, the longing of one caught up in the complex life of the metropolis for a simpler time. Rural life is the essential subject of the pastoral, as a biographer of Frost has written, or – to quote the *Oxford Companion to English Literature* – “the essence is simplicity of thought and action in a rustic setting.” And so it was in Virgil’s Arcadia and Shakespeare’s Arden.

TOL'ABLE DAVID by Virginia Henry King may be the most perfect film example of the form. A few instances clearly relate TOL'ABLE DAVID to this tradition. The Biblical David was, after all, a shepherd who played a lyre and composed songs. David Kinemon has no lyre or oaten pipe but he plays his harmonica. The opening title in the silent picture alludes to “the pastoral valley of Greenstream” – shortly after which follow, in the convention of the form, “idylls” – Greek for little pictures – a cock crowing, a wild cherry in blossom. Hot cakes and coffee, a swimming hole and evening prayers, trout-spearing and mumble-peg: these are the images which evoke the country life which surrounds David. David’s activities are bucolic pastimes: he plays with his dog Rocket, looks lovingly at Neighbor Hatburn’s granddaughter Esther (who, among her activities, herds cows), swings on a gate, and sits on a split rail fence to fantasize about driving the mail himself and receiving the admiration of Esther (at which point the fence collapses, paralleling the collapse of his dream).

But TOL'ABLE DAVID is also a story about coming of age, or the rite of initiation which signifies the passage from adolescence into adulthood. David longs to take his place in the community; but he is too young for a drink, for a cigar, for a pipe. His attempt to smoke makes Esther laugh. As his mother reminds him, he is her baby; nevertheless he is tol'able, tol'able. So far, the intention of the film is comic.



But, as the title has it at this point, "trouble like a dark cloud descends upon the peaceful valley of Greenstream." Three outlaws from the adjoining state invade the home of their Hatburn relatives.

Desperate men, they quickly assume command of Esther and her grandfather in the terrorized home. Luke Hatburn attacks Allen, David's appealing elder brother, stomping him mercilessly so that he lies motionless in the dust. The mute grief of the Kinemons upon learning of Allen's life-long paralysis is followed by Hunter Kinemon's resolution to avenge his son's crippling. But under the stress of the decision Kinemon suffers a fatal heart attack – and now the dual burden of avenging his brother's injury and supporting his family falls upon David's young shoulders. At this moment an agonizing conflict develops – for David cannot do both. Honor and the code of the community require that the fugitive Hatburns, a law unto themselves, be punished; but his mother, now realizing that David must become the support of the family, pleads tearfully for her son to stay home. Life an anguished suppliant in Greek epic, she falls to the ground to clasp her son's knees. (This scene, it must be noted, usually draws some condescending laughter from audiences unaccustomed to the larger-than-life acting styles of the silent film. Yet it is in actual face a re-enactment of a scene which had occurred some twenty years earlier in the life of the director when young Henry got out his father's firearm to go after the man who announced that he would shoot his dog. Mrs. King fell to the ground and clasped his knees to beg Henry to put away his gun.)

Reluctantly, David accedes to his mother's request, a decision which incurs the disapproval of the elders of the community for shirking a moral responsibility. Unable to manage the land they have been farming, the Kinemons sadly pack their possessions and move to the village where Mrs. Kinemon will take in washing. David has now lost home, his father, and Esther, and Allen has been invalidated for life. Sweeping floors at John Galt's store seems the only future open to him.

One day, however, the mail driver shows up too drunk to drive. A passenger on the carrier protests that he will miss his connection unless he can get to the depot. With no alternative, Galt (who is also the postmaster) turns to David who joyously seizes the opportunity which will allow him to show his mettle. He can take on a man's job. He fails to reckon, however, with the depraved Luke Hatburn who steals a bag of the mail which has fallen from David's buggy. David fearlessly confronts the hulking giant and the two wrestle with one another in a ferocious contest.

The finale of the film builds masterfully to an anxious tension as the camera crosscuts between shots of David and Luke in a fight, which even today is vividly convincing (in 1981 King recalled that the actor playing Luke fell so hard that his head dented the floorboards) and of Mrs. Kinemon chatting with her neighbors while she waits at the store ("Whatever can be keeping David?"). But David has not been defeated. He survives the grueling ordeal which marks his passage into manhood. To audiences incredulous today that a boy should risk his life to get the mail through, the director Henry King spoke from his own experience of growing up in a hamlet not unlike Greenstream: "People don't realize that in a small town to drive the hack to carry the U.S. Mail was a responsibility – the biggest responsibility there was." The driver of the mails connected secluded communities like Greenstream to the world. Like D.W. Griffith, Henry King was born into pre-automotive America; they were both products of the South and the rural community. Their films could speak to old-fashioned values of determination, family and responsibility because these filmmakers believed them; and although Griffith could never move with the times, King was



able to continue to make excellent commercial and sometimes artistic pictures because he mastered the evolving techniques of the developing cinema. At the same time he remained at heart an interpreter of vanished America, as such nostalgic pictures as *State Fair* (1933), *Jesse James* (1939), *Chad Hanna* (1940), *Margie* (1946), *The Gunfighter* (1950), *I'd Climb the Highest Mountain* (1951), and *Wait Till the Sun Shines, Nellie* (1952), were to show. One should add that King never thought of himself as "making art;" he insisted that he was a storyteller. As a storyteller his duty was to make the film come to life by creating the atmosphere that makes for the sense of place.

That sense of atmosphere is what the Soviet director and film theorist V.I. Pudovkin called "color." TOL'ABLE DAVID evokes a feeling which verges on poignancy of "that's the way it must have been." Summer afternoons when men and boys play marbles together; the fiddlers bowing away on their instruments at the village social; the congregating of town folk awaiting the daily mail; the gathering of the family for evening prayers; the sharpening of knives and scrubbing of clothes; the celebration of a special event with a jug of local brew; the use at mealtimes of a flywhisk made from shredded newspapers; the bucolicism of winding lanes and old mills – there are the "idylls" or little pictures in which King recalled the country he grew up in; they are the details that made for the atmosphere Pudovkin was to pay tribute to.

You can see Greenstream, for yourself, a place that really exists; only on the map of Virginia, it is called Blue Grass. You can go there once you get to Monterey; then you must travel toward the West Virginia border on 640. You will pass small Victorian churches set amidst rolling farms. When you have passed Hightown, shortly afterward on the left you may notice, on the other side of a split rail fence, an old cottage with a stone chimney. That is the home of David Kinemon.

There are a few changes since 1921. The sight of a seventeen-year-old today playing mumble-peg seems as likely as hearing a pop idol sing "Turkey in the Straw," but Blue Grass residents remembered how people used to gather in a circle and play mumble-peg, and the pit in front of the general store exists where high school boys used to play the game. Most older people interviewed recalled (as did Henry King) the tradition of family prayers, and prayers in the morning as well as the evening. Since Mrs. Kinemon and Esther are both seen serving rather than seated with the menfolk, it seemed appropriate to ask whether this custom obtained in the recollections of older residents. Women prepared and served the food, and at least one woman in the family would wait until everyone was served before taking her seat. In one detail, the film is incorrect: the scene at the school social could not have taken place, for nobody in the area did "round dancing" – square dancing certainly – there was plenty of that, but round dancing was not approved of by the church-going community. The social was actually shot at the old Biograph Studios in New York (as were all the interiors) and the scene of the fiddlers was cut into the film subsequently. It would not have been unheard of for a seventeen-year-old to drive a mail route. The contract was put up for bids, and whoever won it could keep it till retirement. The last hack stopped around 1927 – about the same time that the riverboat's paddlewheel stopped turning.

The coming of the crew to Blue Grass was a memorable event – "one of the most exciting things" recalled a lady who went out daily to view the filming, joining mothers, children, babies and those men in the condition that Blue Grass people refers to as *Loafers' Glory*. One was struck to remember that the handsome star Richard Barthelmess *looked just like he did in the picture!* But this was not the case for Ernest Torrence, remembered another elderly resident about the actor who played Luke Hatburn: "He was such a nice



person without all that make-up. He was a *gentleman*" (in fact Torrence was an operatic baritone with degrees from three European conservatories).

Mr. "Scoop" Swecker was a twelve-year-old who can be glimpsed in the picture riding a mule; he remembered a number of vivid details as he followed the crew: how the trout was already in the bucket in the trout-spearing scene; how Torrence was instructed to show his hunger by biting into an onion from the soil, and the distaste on his face when he spits out the onion off camera; how ("by gosh") Gladys Hulette (who played Esther) was the prettiest thing he had ever seen. Swecker explained that because there were no automobiles then, the sheriff had more time for such activities; his chief duties were tracing moonshiners and serving notices for bad debts.

To get to Blue Grass in 1921, the crew, which was assembled chiefly in New York, boarded the train for a ten-hour ride to Staunton. From there a caravan of cars and commissary and equipment trucks took them on steep and precipitous roads over three ranges of mountains. When the actors arrived in Monterey – so it is reported – all lights were blazing in expectation of a visit from a gang of outlaws called the Ryder boys. No doubt Barthelmess exaggerated when he claimed that the company "found primitiveness that could not be imagined." Progress, he declared, had not laid hands on that part of the country.

Mrs. H.B. Marshall, who worked at that time in the family store at Blue Grass, remembered the visit clearly. "We'd give the cast anything they'd want if they asked for it. I reckon we should have given them the shirt off our backs." She remembers how Forrest Robinson (Grandfather Harburn) would wander in and out of the store to borrow items he needed; and how Gladys Hulette (Esther) borrowed an apron from her mother and a "split bonnet" (a sunbonnet stiffened with cardboard rather than starch and with ribbons to the shoulder). All Blue Grass seemed to welcome them, and at that time they were glad to get a dollar a day for standing around in crowd scenes. Despite the "primitiveness" Barthelmess alleges he found, Blue Grass in 1921 was considerably more populous and active than it is now.

Time passed quickly for the cast and the townspeople. Within six weeks the film was complete. Happy to have escaped the steamy heat wave that enveloped New York that July, they enjoyed working in the cool Virginia mountains. High spirits are evident in Cronjager's pictures taken in moments of relaxation, and in one resident's snapshots which show some horsing around.

The film opened to reviews in New York and throughout the country with an enthusiasm which bordered on delirium. King brought the entire production in for \$86,000, an impressively modest sum even in those times. Barthelmess became, after Valentino (whose career was just taking off), the country's brightest young star; he and King were to make four more pictures together. During this decade and part of the next, he shone brightly in the Hollywood firmament.

Of the cast, only Barthelmess went on to stardom. But the film completely changed the career of Ernest Torrence who became a familiar featured player and one of the most memorable heavies of the silent cinema. The debonair Warner Richmond (who played the sympathetic Allen) continued to play prominent second (and occasionally first) leads through the decade, although, again, TOL'ABLE DAVID was his best picture. Gladys Hulette of the silken tresses and compassionate eyes defied the vogue for flappers and stayed busy



as an artless innocent until the coming of sound when the calls stopped for her as they did for many more celebrated actors.

The company formed to produce this film, engagingly named Inspiration Pictures, produced two of Lillian Gish's finest vehicles: these two, *The White Sister* (1923) and *Romola* (1924) were also directed by King. King's scenarist Edmund Goulding pursued a dual career as a successful screenwriter, and as a sensitive director who went on to work with such outstanding talents as Crawford, Garbo, Swanson, Miriam Hopkins and Bette Davis, four of whose best pictures were made with him. The cinematographer Henry Cronjager worked actively in the twenties, but little of his work now survives; no subsequent film, however, was as notable as TOL'ABLE DAVID.

The first of King's numerous critical successes, TOL'ABLE DAVID won *Photoplay's* Gold Metal Award for 1921's Best Picture in a year which produced some unforgettable films.

Warner Richmond's career had declined notably by the end of the thirties when he was reduced to making cowboy films for Monogram. In 1939 he fell from a horse, and in one of those uncanny turns of fate which the accident in TOL'ABLE DAVID seems proleptically to have envisioned, he remained paralyzed for the rest of his life, ending his days in the Motion Picture Actors' Retirement Home in 1948.

Miss Hulette in 1982 was living as a ward of the state in a place eerily called the Monterey Sanitarium in Rosemead, California. Forgotten by the world, she lived among the elderly and neglected. One remembers Frost's lines: "Not the memory of having starred/Atones for later disregard." All those connected with TOL'ABLE DAVID are gone now, but as Horace reminds us, "Ars longa, vita brevis est." As long as people study the art of the motion picture, Greenstream will still shine, and David and Esther will forever be young in the land of streams alive with trout and meadows blowing with cherry blossom. Greenstream is an American version of Arcadia. And there too is the presence of mortality, as Guercino's famous painting where there is a skull with the inscription "Et in Arcadia ego" (Even in Arcady there am I) must remind us, and to which the fate of the rest of the actors whose bright image the celluloid has captured will testify. Against the inevitability, art is our sole protest.

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