

## PLAYS IN PRINT

The stage naturally tends to lag behind plays which have as yet got no farther than print, and although plays about airmen have been fairly frequent in the theatre none of them has ventured to study seriously the psychology of the fighter pilot. As a hero *pur sang* he was admirably suited to the needs of anxious war-time audiences, but the real man was, as everyone knew in his heart, something infinitely more complex than a figure of romance. In his first play, *The Day of Glory*, Mr. H. E. Bates raises some of the questions that romanticists have been satisfied to leave in the air.

Is the man flying in cold and darkness and flak and fire flying for flying's sake? Does his courage spring from perfect physical fitness? Are his nerves at least as strong as his imagination? Or does the imagination, exposed to extraordinary influences, develop in power until it has the nerves at its mercy; and must it then be called upon to conquer itself and for the sake of its own integrity to stay the nerves that it has begun to fray? These questions propel the plot of *The Day of Glory*. Its airman hero is during the single day of the play's action in process of ceasing to live on his nerves and beginning to live in his imagination. But to explain him is only a part of the author's purpose. He seeks at the same time to depict the impact of war on three generations of one family and to warn the living that their duty to the dead is more onerous than they seem at present to realize. The airman is seen through the eyes of his uncle, a colonel mentally wrecked by the last war; through the eyes of his adoring young sister, who feels that without her hero there can be no future; and through the eyes of three women. One of them represents the standards and ideals he has so swiftly and disconcertingly outgrown; another the sympathetic imagination alive to the changes which his experiences have wrought in him; and the third is his mother, who with the brilliant and painful vision of motherhood sees in his death the destruction of three generations. Mr. Bates is not one of those intellectual playwrights at whose refusal to consent to their medium Edmond De Goncourt shrewdly tilted; he always succeeds in making his psychological and dramatic clocks strike the hour together. It is an exciting piece of writing; yet there remains a suspicion that the writer has tried to squeeze too much into a single play and that his characters, as specimens of an extraordinary period, are too narrowly representative to be wholly human. Is it possible that his big theme needs the compression of verse?

Mr. Peter Yates in *The Assassin* has a smaller theme—the shooting of Lincoln by the crazily sincere actor and Southern patriot, John Wilkes Booth, but he heightens it effectively with the heightened speech of poetry. Booth, the histrionic patriot obsessed by a patriotic ideal, is first shown as an orator of intense personal magnetism inspiring the hesitant conspirators to carry out plans in which his own is the dangerous part. The climax comes at the end of the act with the shooting of Lincoln. The externals of the second part are the flight of Booth to the South and his defiant death at the hands of the Northern soldiers, but within these externals, firmly and impressively developed, is the paradox that Booth has perpetuated by his crime the very thing he seeks to destroy. Against the fanatic is set the impregnable Lincoln whose shade dominates the play. The story is skillfully

handled, and the verse finds its justification less perhaps in the solemnity of the Chorus of Masks than in its power of making plausible the spell-binding speeches by which Booth becomes the agent of a destructive idea and compels his commonplace followers to his own abstract singleness of mind. Mr. Martin Browne's dream of a revival of poetic drama of contemporary themes is clearly no idle fantasy so long as plays of this dramatic quality are being written in verse.

*Francis Thompson* is a prose play, a play in somewhat small prose. It does not purport to be purely biographical, depending on a fancy of Mr. Jack De Leon that a vague reference in Everard Meynell's biography may be connected with Thompson's lines:—

She passed—a brave, sad, loveliest, tender thing!  
And of her own scant pitance did she give  
That I might eat and live.

He supposes that the poet was befriended in his utmost poverty by a woman of the London streets, that she permitted him to live with her innocently and quietly effaced herself when Mr. Wilfrid Meynell became his benefactor and friend. The double problem which the author sets himself is only half solved. Given Thompson's poetry, it is comparatively easy to make a veracious figure of a tramp who is not perhaps Thompson himself, but a great poet. The capital difficulty of the piece is to make equally plausible the character of a harlot who is capable of spiritual tenderness and alive to beauty yet without hope of reforming herself. Mr. De Leon has concentrated his creative energy on the poet, and he emerges as a gentle, wistful creature half saddened and half exalted by his memory of a selflessly compassionate Ann who might have been De Quincey's Ann. It is a pleasingly sentimental little play written with professional competence.

*Roman Road*, Mr. Harold Herd's portrayal of the "struggle for freedom" that has gone on in this country for nearly 2,000 years, must inevitably suffer by comparison with Mr. Thornton Wilder's *The Skin of Our Teeth*, but the comparison need not be made. Without attempting to be either clever or profound, the author makes pleasant reading of the experiences of the men and women who have lived by a Roman road in the West Riding of Yorkshire.

Playgoers will welcome the printed version of *The Wind of Heaven*, the currently successful play in which Mr. Emylia Williams describes how Welsh villagers came a hundred years ago to believe that the Messiah, in the form of a small boy, had passed through their valley. For Mr. Wilfrid Walter's *Happy and Glorious* there will also be a welcome. It depicts the struggles of a representative He and She in the aftermath of the last war; and in little theatres all over the country has won justifiable affection for its sincerity, its ironic humour and its compassion.

*THE DAY OF GLORY*. A Play in Three Acts. By H. E. BATES. Michael Joseph. 6s.

*THE ASSASSIN*. A Drama in Two Acts. By PETER YATES. Chatto and Windus. 6s.

*FRANCIS THOMPSON*. A Play in Nine Scenes. Based on a Nebulous Episode in the life of the Poet. By JACK DE LEON. Fortune Press. 4s. 6d.

*ROMAN ROAD*. A Play by HAROLD HERD. Fleet Publications (9, Palace Gate, W.8). 6s.

*THE WIND OF HEAVEN*. A Play in Six Scenes. By EMYLIA WILLIAMS. Heinemann. 6s.

*HAPPY AND GLORIOUS*. A Play by WILFRID WALTER. Pendulum Publications Ltd., 10, Old Square, Lincoln's Inn, W.C.2). 4s. 6d.