

6 Churches Were the First English Theatres

It may surprise some people to learn that a movement is on foot for promoting the performance of stage plays at Canterbury Cathedral. But the plan, if it goes forward, will be a renewal, not a beginning.

The scheme began 18 years ago, when a sacred play by the Poet Laureate was presented in the cathedral chapter house and six other plays followed in subsequent years in the same historic setting. With a resumption of dramatic performances planned for next summer, it is now desired to equip the chapter house with a proper stage and adequate accommodation for orchestra and performers.

If this excites wonder, it may be to many a matter for still greater surprise that our drama actually began in the Church. Centuries before a theatre was built in England plays were written and performed by monks and priests, and their pupils. So long ago as 1110 Geoffrey, a Norman monk, afterwards Bishop of St Albans produced a play at Dunstable Priory with St. Catherine as heroine, and her life-story as the drama. All the early plays came from such sources. They were acted in the churches, or in tents in the churchyards, or in adjoining houses, or the great yards of the ancient inns. These Miracle plays, as they were usually called, took the form of Bible history, of the sufferings and triumphs of the saints, and dramas with characters representing vices and virtues in-conflict.

But the old writers who provided the sacred plays introduced the wildest knockabout fun into their works. One showed Noah's

wife as a shrew, beating her husband. Another had a sheep-stealing scene in the adventures of shepherds on their way to behold the infant Jesus at Bethlehem, the action including the hiding of the stolen sheep in a bed, and the law officers at first mistaking it for a great baby.

Many plays of this kind were performed in our cathedrals and churches. They were among the high lights in the lives of the poor people who dwelt in squalid hovels. The brasses on the tombs were the people's portrait gallery. The painted windows pictured the story of the Bible and the supposed miracles of the saints for multitudes who could not read. The old dramas, mingling laughter with piety, were the theatre and cinema entertainment of the Middle Ages, moving audiences of devout, simple folk alternately to tears and smiles, and sending them home all the happier.

So Canterbury Cathedral is only reviving once more a very ancient practice. The example it set in 1928 with Mr Masefield's sacred play, and later with T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, has been followed by other places of worship. But it is beyond dispute that the Church was the cradle of the theatre, and of the flowering of the dramatic art which gave us the matchless plays of William Shakespeare.

CROMWELL'S BATTLE PSALM

ON the request of the Cromwell Association a memorial is to be erected near Dunbar to commemorate the Battle of Dunbar on September 3, 1650, when Cromwell defeated a Scottish army.

Never was Cromwell nearer defeat than on that occasion. The Scottish commander, Sir David Leslie, had cornered the English army in an apparently hopeless position in the peninsula of Dunbar. Nor were the Parliamentary forces—in their leader's own words, "poor, shattered, hungry, discouraged"—in any shape for a battle after their long march north.

Then Leslie, with victory within his grasp, made the fatal mistake of descending from the high ground where he had dominated the situation. "The Lord has delivered them into our hands," said Cromwell, and gave the signal to attack.

Nothing could withstand the disciplined onslaught of his superbly-trained cavalry, and the Scots were completely routed.

It was characteristic of Cromwell that he should call a halt in the pursuit of the scattered Scottish forces so that his army might sing the 117th Psalm in gratitude for their victory.



Introduction to a Rhodesian

One of the twenty boys who left recently for the Fairbridge Memorial College in Rhodesia is fascinated by his first sight of a stuffed rhinoceros in Rhodesia House, London. He may, perhaps, be seeing many live ones in the future.

ECLIPSE OF THE MOON

By the C N Astronomer

If the sky is clear on Sunday evening, December 8, a very fine eclipse of the Moon should be witnessed. It will be a total eclipse.

The Full Moon will rise at about 3.35 p.m. in southern England, and up to about 20 minutes earlier in the north. The eclipse will begin at 4.10 minutes past 4 o'clock, when a dark patch will begin to spread over the Moon's face from the lower left side, as indicated in the drawing.

The Moon will then have entered the *umbra*, or dark



shadow cast by the Earth, and for the next 63 minutes this shadow will creep across farther and farther until the lunar surface is entirely immersed in it. The Moon will then be what is technically called *totally eclipsed*, and will remain thus for 59½ minutes, though her dusky disc will be just perceptible with either a greyish or coppery hue.

At 6.17 p.m. the Moon will begin to emerge from her passage of some 2000 miles through the Earth's shadow. Sunshine will then be seen appearing to light up the left side of the Moon's disc at the place indicated. This will increase during the next hour, the curved edge of the Earth's shadow being noticeable as it passes over the Moon until, by about 7.25, she will be clear of it. But there may still be seen a dusky disc lingering over the right side of her surface, particularly near where the *umbra* had left it. This dusky disc is called the *penumbra*; it represents that part of the Moon's surface from which only a portion of the sunlight is obscured by the dark body of the Earth. This area, of course, gradually decreases as

the Earth passes from between the Moon and the Sun.

Were we on the Moon during the progress of this eclipse, it would constitute, instead, a complete eclipse of the Sun, in the true sense, for the Sun would be hidden by the great dark sphere of the Earth. A scene of grandeur would be witnessed far exceeding what we see in this so-called *total* eclipse of the Moon. Instead, when the Sun was totally hidden, all the glory of the pearly light and streamers of the Solar Corona and the lesser diffused Zodiacal Light would be seen mingling with thousands of starry gems, and in the midst of all would be seen a brilliant ring of light with the colours of the rainbow or a terrestrial sunset, but chiefly red and orange. This would be seen all round the dark sphere of the Earth, which would appear nearly four times wider than the Moon appears to us. It is this light which will illuminate the Moon's surface to make its dusky disc visible even while it is immersed in the Earth's shadow.

This wonderful ring of light is produced by the sunlight shining through the Earth's atmosphere. This light, on being refracted, assumes the prismatic colours of a sunset, providing our sky is generally free from clouds. If these conditions prevail, the eclipsed Moon will appear coppery in tint; otherwise it will have a greyish hue.

The Moon will be almost at her nearest to us and but 222,000 miles away, so she should appear at her best.

G. F. M.

FEATHERS AND FUR

A HEN has adopted five kittens in a cowshed on a farm at Thetford, in Norfolk. She is so zealous for the welfare of her charges that she pecks angrily at anyone who attempts to disturb them, and allows the mother cat to approach them only at feeding-time.

BEDTIME CORNER

THE FAVOURITE

I'VE such a cupboard full of dolls;
There's Gollywog, who's black,
And Mistress Bess, who's rather vain,
And jolly sailor Jack,
And Lady Clare, and Teddy Bear,
But pretty little Polly
I love far more than all the rest,
She's quite my fav'rite doll!



It's not because she's grand as Bess
And clever—it's not that,
She only wears a little dress,
And tiny woollen hat.
Mistress Bess can close her eyes,
And Lady Clare, she talks;
But Polly is the very size
For me to take for walks.

Guy and His Kite

GUY never could bear anyone to have anything better than he had, and so when he and his friends decided to make a kite each, he made up his mind that his should be the biggest of them all.

In the loft he found two long, very light, sticks, and just the stuff he needed for covering and tail.

"You had better wait till the week-end to fly it, and let me help you," said his father, on the night when the huge thing was finished. But Guy was too anxious to show off his lovely kite.

Directly he came home from school the next day, he took it out on the common. With very little trouble he managed to get it into the air, and it was flying beautifully when a strong gust of wind took him unawares. Almost pulled off his feet, he tripped over a small bush and fell face downwards in a very muddy ditch.

Pride goes before a fall.

Prayer

DEAR LORD, I ask no better praise
At setting of the sun,
Than that Thou can't look down and say
My day's work was well done.
Amen.