

Clay-Clogged Cornwall

WILDING GRAFT. By Jack R. Clemo.
New York: The Macmillan Co.
1948. 284 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by HARRY BULL

LITERARY acquaintance with Cornwall based on the Arthurian legends and the "Pirates of Penzance" is no proper preparation for this first published novel by a thirty-two-year-old native whose forthcoming autobiography is to be called "Confession of a Misfit."

It is a harsh story he has to tell of poor farmers and clay-workers in a Cornwall almost too remote to feel itself a part of England at war—mostly sullen and bitter people living in an atmosphere that both encourages and reflects their hostility. On the second page, the assertive, grating quality of the book is well established in the sentence: "Along this gulch the clay-clogged Fal oozed turbidly, little more than a stream here, twenty miles northeast of Falmouth."

Just as the author, who holds his copyright under the name of Reginald John Clemo, shows his determination to be one of the people by signing his name "Jack," and yet cannot quite abandon the now incongruous formality of a middle initial, so he attacks our refined senses with the "turbidly oozing gulch of the clay-clogged Fal," until in self-defense we are ready to disbelieve in it entirely, and then proceeds to locate it exactly in actual geography. Through the rest of his pages we are reminded again and again of the date, hour, and scene of what at first seemed unlikely disasters.

Indeed, although they talk in dialect, his surprisingly articulate characters are sometimes reminiscent of the mouthpieces employed with such hilarious effect by Max Beerbohm in "Savonarola Brown" to inform the audience, under the thin guise of on-stage conversation, of what happened before the curtain rose. Whether the author is still essentially more of a provincial or more of a misfit it would be hard to say. Certainly he is as stubborn as his Cornish cast, and in time his persistence forces the apparent contradictions of his style and his story into a texture so thickly woven as to blot out temporarily the rest of the world. The very anguish of his drive compels acceptance of Garth Joslin, the hero of the title adapted from Browning's lines,

The great gardener grafts the excellence
On wildings where he will.

As used by Clemo, the quotation is proof of John Jay Chapman's conten-



tion that in Browning's verse God did duty as a "noun, verb, adjective, adverb, interjection, and preposition." And once you have accepted the deeply religious nature of Garth and his Job-like trials at the hands of ignorant, inquisitive neighbors, you will find yourself admitting that the writer has probed his own provincialism and maladjustment to the point where he can make them yield up some aspects of universal truth. Among the most unexpected of these is an insight into the primitive acceptance of the psychosomatic nature of much of the suffering in Cornwall.

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In the Days of Caesar

A GODDESS TO A GOD. By John L. Balderston and Sybil Bolitho. New York: The Macmillan Co. 1948. 213 pp. \$3.

THE GLADIATOR. By Thames Williamson. New York: Coward McCann, Inc. 1948. 344 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by FLETCHER PRATT

I FEAR there is not too much in either of these books that a Roman would recognize as belonging to his age or his republic. It is not that the scene sets are out of focus or the production badly staged. To be sure, Mr. Williamson, who is supposed to have spent years in gathering material for his novel, should have known better than to introduce sulphur matches into ancient Rome, and is not on very firm ground in the use of whip grafting, but these are exceptions. In most physical details both books are accurate with the meticulous accuracy of the movies. But only the names, costumes, and scenery are Latin; the whole approach to life, the habits of thought and the interests of the characters belong to the USA of the 1940's rather than to any date that can be expressed in two figures. This goes even for "A Goddess to a God," which is an infinitely better book than the other.

Both these books thus have to be taken as fantasies in a sense, built around created worlds, in which the authors have used historical places and names to lighten their own task and that of the reader.

This is perhaps not quite fair to "A Goddess to a God," whose authors protest they have some justification for their thesis that Cleopatra was trying to bring into being Alexander the Great's "All men are the sons of one father." They have been to the great Doctor Tarn, who knows more about Hellenistic civilization than any man who ever lived, so they are possibly right here. It is not the basic theme, expressed in this book through a series of letters from the fatal queen to the Roman dictator, that forms the anachronism, but the ideological vehicle in which that theme is carried.

For that matter the pivotal idea is not allowed to develop gradually; it springs full blown into being after the birth of Caesarion and is merely walked around and examined. The resulting story is thus somewhat static, most of its motion is in emotion. Yet the emotion itself is real enough, changeable enough, carries with it enough of analysis of the personalities involved to make the book considerably rewarding. If it throws no new