

## Juicy Medieval Morass

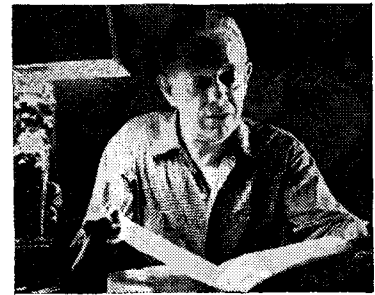
**"The Prince of Taranto,"** by **Tiffany Thayer** (Dial Press, 3 vols. 1,267 pp. \$12.50), comprises the first portion of the writer's projected twenty-one volumed "Tiffany Thayer's Mona Lisa," all of which will, according to its author, set the world straight on a few points of Renaissance history and particularly on the qualities of the women of the time.

By James Kelly

**T**RANSFERRING the Bobby Clark leer to fiction is not easy, but Tiffany Thayer manages it. In fact, he has built a writing career on it. Beginning with the naughtily inventive "Thirteen Men" (1930), continuing the jazzy view of femininity in "Thirteen Women," the creaky vulgarity of a prostitute's life in "One Woman," and a dozen or so other volumes, the author has maintained a steadfastly ribald point of view. You might say he writes after Rabelais,

quite a long time after, and that a quick reference in his introduction to the present work gives the thematic clue: "Sixteen years ago I would buy any bit of writing or printing offered to me on the subject of Mona Lisa, the painting or the sitter, because it had been suggested that I was just the lad to find out what made her smile like that. Your memory probably doesn't go back so far, but sixteen years ago there was a popular American superstition to the effect I knew more about women than any other articulate male since Solomon and before Kinsey."

So now we know what Mr. Thayer has been up to for the past sixteen years. He has been heeding his call to look into the mystery of Mona Lisa and the medieval fifteenth-century morass from which she came. Claiming to have discovered a long-lost prose manuscript of the rascalion poet François Villon the author pretends to read from it the tumultuous tale of those days when the nymphomaniac Queen Joan II ruled the Kingdom of Naples despite a running in-



Tiffany Thayer—"heeding his call."

trigue on the part of the Prince of Taranto and others to unseat her. Says Mr. Thayer wickedly: "What I have Englished out of the obscurities of some twenty-two languages is the juicy part that those other fellows thought better not to mention in our mother tongue. The books on this subject which they gave you in school were intended to cover up what we have here, and most of the books you have read about these times since you left school have been written by women who could not tell a fairy from a Harvard man if Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis, and Freud were all in the room with anatomical charts and pointers."

Among the few uncontroversial claims made for the book by the author is that it is the *longest* ever written about the Renaissance. This

**"THAT DIRTY BOY":** Tiffany Thayer is "loaded for the critics," whom he defies to prove any event false in the 46,000-page, hand-written MS. comprising "Tiffany Thayer's Mona Lisa," the first three volumes of which, entitled "The Prince of Taranto," have just been released. A former actor, artist, and screen writer, the author of "Thirteen Men" and "Thirteen Women" has since 1939 immersed himself in this fictional behemoth, devoting to it six months' annual leave from the ad agency of Sullivan, Stauffer, Colwell & Bayles, for whom he hawks Pall Mall cigarettes. And after office hours he grinds happily away at it until three in the morning. "The sheer physical effort has been a delight," he insists. Reporting that "The Prince" has been made required reading by New York University, he said, "I would much prefer to publish the books as history because I have utter conviction that what I have written, aside from dialogue, is more accurate than you can read in any

other book. That was a lot of work, and I spent an awful lot of money on it—at least five or six thousand dollars. I have had books translated that have never been in English before, and I taught myself to read Italian. I made nine corrections in the Encyclopedia Britannica in the course of these years. Went to Italy, looked the place over, corrected a few of my notions. I found out everything I could regarding the various theories about the sitter [for the "Mona Lisa"]. I cover all the documents, straddle the fence so they can't prove me wrong. You can get all the books you want about Renaissance Florence, Venice, Rome, and Milan, but when you come to Naples all the writers say is, 'Now, the court of Naples was the most corrupt of the period'—period. And that's where I began. I wanted to know who paid what to whom. The actual events are the plot, and the people, except for a very few supernumeraries, are actual people that lived, and all I

have done is put words in their mouths." But such jazzy words? "I did that purposely," he said, "to demonstrate that the speakers spoke slang: although they didn't use the same words that we use today they had the equivalent in their own language. I made them talk like human beings." Albeit Rabelaisian? "You must cross yourself when you say Rabelais! He is the Master," said Thayer. "I don't want any reader to blame me for the sexual antics of these people. I didn't invent them. These people acted this way. You see, I never use dirty words, but what people can't forgive me is that I don't take the sex angle seriously. I laugh at it. This facetiousness of mine has kept me from being appraised on my skill with words. I spit on the most sacred household idols, and I am 'that dirty boy.' But I can't help it," he said, "I am incorrigible. I like to give my friends a laugh—that's all. Literature? To hell," said Mr. Thayer, "with literature."

—ROCHELLE GIRSON.

first section of "Tiffany Thayer's Mona Lisa," subtitled "The Prince of Taranto," runs to three volumes and 1,226 pages, not counting a forty-page glossary. It covers only the years 1414-1432, and a publisher's note assures us that it will require at least six more sections of equal length to reach the concluding date of 1506 or so. Any piece of sustained writing involving an estimated nine thousand pages and three million words is pleonasm on too grand a scale to be dismissed as one man's whimsy. Whether all of the historical imaginings stay fairly close to discernible facts is a matter for trained medievalists to decide and much less fascinating than the idea that a shapeless mass of this size could pass through the brain and hands of a normally constructed human being. The author's own quiet regard for the finished work is revealed when he calls it "a performance which stands alone and unmatched among the books of the world. It is as if Benvenuto Cellini had written the 'Decline and Fall'!"

Yet, despite the lurid billing these first three volumes of "Mona Lisa" contain no more shock-value than a sophisticated reader of historical novels would expect to find in any gargantuan treatment of familiar materials. Perhaps Queen Joan is extra startling in her frank and direct response to male proximity and her total lack of feminine modesty. But most of the time she is closer kin to the comedic queens Alice met behind the looking glass, and the affairs of her court are presented too facetiously to be titillating. The Queen's henchmen are roughneck swashbucklers very recognizable by this time, the bluster-and-brawl types who draw first and ask questions later.

**E**VEN the Prince of Taranto, key figure in a thousand schemes and skirmishes aimed at control of Rome and Naples, seems pretty much a stock character. He is a man of few surprises as he wenches, lays about him with the broad sword, and consorts with his virginal, sexless, mystical wife, Anna Colonna, who thinks babies are found under bridges and cabbage leaves. From this background din are popped many of the Renaissance names vaguely remembered from the history books: the Borgias, the Assisis, Aragons, Bourbons, Clermonts, popes, kingmakers, bedwarmers, and even Jeanne d'Arc. But they really don't show up in the foreground of our story, and not many onlookers will feel much compunction for Joan and her gorillas in the closing pages when the jig is all but up.

Just where is Mona Lisa through

all this? She will be born much later, circa 1473, but we are promised a meeting with her grandfather in volumes to be published "nine months hence, in memory of Anna Colonna, who discovered that it takes longer to build a palace in Naples than it does to make a baby."

Staying with a straight narrative style throughout, spattering his pages with proper names and historical allusions, and adopting a staccato delivery in which sentences are quite often paragraphs, Mr. Thayer achieves a kind of narcotic euphoria for the reader. He is usually in full command of a patois of his own invention, vaguely reminiscent of anachronistic conversations conducted by the Yankee at King Arthur's court. And when he wishes to deliver extra background lore he simply leads the reader

aside in interlocutory passages labeled "Mr. Thayer Intrudes." As might be expected from all this, characters have become costumed figures in the crowd; plot hides itself behind a ceaseless ebb and flow of unfocused intrigue; and the staggered but game average reader must face moments when he can't make heads or tails of the pages before him. Bemused observers will find this no handicap to fascination, and may even decide that historical fiction gains impact from being approximately as long as the historical period reported upon. With regard to the total stature of "Tiffany Thayer's Mona Lisa" we shall see what we shall see. It may be that (to borrow an aphorism from the historians) no critic should attempt to evaluate it until at least fifty years after publication of the final volume.

## The Savor of a Summer Love

**"The Ripening Seed," by Colette** (Farrar, Straus & Cudahy. 186 pp. \$3), a product of France of the early Twenties, is a somewhat full-flavored tale of the love of two adolescents—a tale which has been called a modern version of "Daphnis and Chloe."

By Otis Fellows

**T**HE late Colette was long considered the finest French prose writer of her day, and devotees of good fiction owe it to themselves to read at least one of her novels in the course of a lifetime. Among these novels is "The Ripening Seed," a work whose defects Colette herself readily acknowledged. Yet she held it in singularly high esteem among the forty-odd volumes which comprise her work.

The novel is a story of an awakening love between two adolescents. It is also a product of the early Twenties which first appeared as a serial in a Paris newspaper until it showed signs of becoming too full-flavored for readers' tastes. At that point the installments abruptly ceased.

In it Colette tells of a Parisian boy and girl who have known each other since earliest childhood and who, with their families, spend each long summer vacation together at the seashore in Brittany. There they fish, swim, or, hand in hand, take walks along the rock-strewn beach. So absorbed are they in one another and

in their mutually shared pastimes that even the most intimate members of their families hover indistinctly around the edges.

But Philippe with the black, curly hair is now sixteen, and Vinca of the periwinkle eyes is only slightly younger, and the wind and sun have turned their lithe bodies a golden brown. As the last days of summer draw near a newly acquired capacity for feeling and for suffering at unexpected moments mingles with the troubled melancholy of youth. Then, quite suddenly, the lady in white, Madame Dallery, enters this little world of uncertainty, misgiving, and budding love. The intrusion is brief but heavy with consequence.

**I**N MANY ways the novel is characteristic of Colette's stories in general. A relatively slim plot reveals two or three principal characters who are unaware of or indifferent to the moral implications of their acts. The characters grope for happiness through the exciting and necessary intoxication of their physical being. More often than not the women are endowed with a warm indulgence, an acute sensibility, and an intuition that goes beyond mere knowledge. The men are vain, weak-willed, and though driven by their impulses undergo the anguish of learning only through experience. In this sense Colette is a feminist.

But she is also much more. "You do not read Colette, you see what she sees," it was pointed out when