

MEN IN PRISON

NOW BARABBAS. By William Douglas Home. Longmans, Green & Co., London.

(Reviewed by M. H. Holcroft)

INTELLIGENT men sometimes go to prison. If they write afterwards of what they have seen and heard, they do not always give balanced reports—partly, perhaps, because the intellectual sees more than the average prisoner, and imagination gives depth and intensity to experiences which for other men may be merely grey and tedious. William Douglas Home has avoided distortion in his play about prison life. Possibly he found it easier than most men to be detached, for his offence was to place conscience above duty. During the war he refused to lead what he thought was "a needless attack on a town with a civilian population," and a man of that type should be armed in spirit against the temptations of false or over-coloured reporting. He has no grudge against society, no ailment of mind which could make him see authority as tyranny, no frustration which could blind him to the more humane features of life in prison.

After his court-martial, Home was sent to Wormwood Scrubs and Wakefield Prison, where he saw for himself what happens to men of diverse types when they are thrown together under constraint. His play seems to have been "safe" enough to deserve a foreword by H.M. Commissioner of Prisons; but it should be pointed out that Wakefield—where Home spent most of his time—is by no means an ordinary prison. According to the Commissioner, it "has been set aside for many years as a training centre for selected prisoners, in order that they may be kept apart from professional criminals, and may in an environment that is surprisingly free from scrutiny and suspicion be given a chance to train themselves for freedom on discharge." The discipline may not be harsh; but the play leaves an impression that there is plenty of "scrutiny," and also that much depends on warders who appear to be men of modest education and widely differing temperaments. Jackson, for instance, likes to assert himself, is needlessly particular about regulations of minor importance, and looks forward to earning a little extra money by assisting at an execution. In

contrast, King is a favourite with the prisoners, is always ready to wink at small transgressions, and will even help a man to smuggle in a packet of cigarettes.

The prisoners in the play are suitably mixed. Most of the comedy is supplied by Anderson, a talkative and irrepressible Negro, and by the cockney Brown, a heavily married man who pesters the governor for permission to send a letter to his "unofficial wife." Paddy O'Brien remains true to the literary tradition which makes Irishmen spend their time damning the English, while contriving to live with them comfortably enough; and there is an ex-schoolmaster, Medworth, who seems to have homo-sexual tendencies. Several newcomers are used to bring out the difficulties and frustrations of the older inmates. Most of them are serving fairly short sentences. In the background, however, is a deeper shadow. The condemned cell (surely an incongruous fixture in a "special" prison?) is occupied by Tufnell, a young murderer who is waiting to hear the result of his petition for clemency.

THE scene moves from Ten Mess to the condemned cell, the governor's office and the recreation room. Tufnell is told that "the law must take its normal course," and the tension grows as the morning of the execution draws nearer. This theme is handled with deep

insight. Tufnell's struggle to prepare himself for death is treated with restraint, but with an underlying compassion which makes him a tragic figure. Elsewhere in the prison the shadow is spreading. It is resisted by the prisoners with casual or nervous comment; and the good-tempered officer, King, becomes unnaturally harsh and irritable. (His attitude is stated succinctly: "I never seen no good in 'angin'. Never 'ave, an' never will.")

It is good psychology, but I wonder sometimes how far this sort of treatment can be successful. The sensitive onlooker, who has been convinced long ago that capital punishment is barbarous, and that its effect on the community is harmful enough to outweigh its alleged value as a deterrent, is in no need of conversion. And the individual who needs a change of heart may see what happens in the condemned cell merely as a dramatic episode which lifts the play to its higher moments of excitement. Many people like to think about hangings, real or imaginary.

The condemned cell may shortly lose its dramatic value for English playwrights. There are, however, other features of prison life, and of the legal system, which await their attention. Homo-sexuality is not once mentioned directly in *Now Barabbas*, but its influence is noticeable, both in the treatment of Medworth, who seems to be

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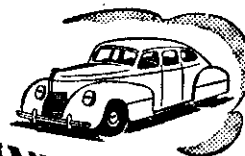
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