

**THE WHITEHEADED
BOY: A COMEDY IN
THREE ACTS**

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The Whiteheaded Boy: A Comedy in Three Acts by Lennox Robinson

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A COMEDY IN THREE ACTS

BY
LENNOX ROBINSON

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
ERNEST BOYD



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INTRODUCTION

A chapter in the history of the Irish Theatre was closed in 1907, when *The Playboy of the Western World* was produced, bringing in its train notoriety, fame and a relative degree of popular success. The recognition of the genius of J. M. Synge was the culminating point in the movement for the creation of a national folk-drama which he had initiated in the company of Lady Gregory, Padraic Colum and William Boyle. These were the pioneers of the peasant play and each contributed a definite element to that type of drama, marking the limitations within which it was to develop. As a result of the enhanced prestige of the Theatre and of the extension of its influence, a great number of new playwrights came forward, including several whose names were to attain a prominence which has obscured the prior claims of their predecessors, the dramatists, who laid the foundations of the success enjoyed by the Abbey Theatre after the death of Synge in 1909. A convention had been created and it was not long before a host of peasant melodramatists arose to fulfil the demand for such

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plays. What was obvious in the verbal exuberance of Synge, in the profound realism of Padraic Colum, in the drollery of Lady Gregory, could be imitated, and popular folk-drama came to be manufactured according to a formula.

One of the young men who at that time was influenced by seeing the performances of the Irish Players was the author of *The White-headed Boy*. Mr. Lennox Robinson is the son of a clergyman and was born in Cork in 1886. He was one of a group of writers in that city who have in recent years given to Irish literature some of its best work. His own plays and the novels of Mr. Daniel Corkery have already been acclaimed beyond the borders of Ireland. But back in the days of the Synge controversies the theatre was the chief preoccupation of that circle to which the Abbey Theatre now owes many of the most successful and some of the best, plays in its repertory; among others, *Birthright*, by T. C. Murray, and *The Yellow Bittern*, by Daniel Corkery. They had founded a local organization for the production of their work and one, at least, of Mr. Robinson's 'prentice efforts was staged there, but has never been published or otherwise acknowledged by him. It is called *The Lesson of Life* and the very title suggests reasons for the author's discretion. Indeed, he himself has been the sharpest critic of his early writings,

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and is not disposed to take very seriously even the first of his plays to be accepted by the Abbey Theatre. In the order of their production these were *The Clancy Name* (1908), *The Cross Roads* (1909) and *Harvest* (1910).

It is doubtless unkind to dwell upon the early experiments of a writer who more or less disowns them, but apart from the perfectly legitimate interest which such things have for the critic, the remarkable development of Lennox Robinson's gift for the theatre is nowhere more effectively shown than in the contrast between those three plays and the maturer work which has been crowned with the great and deserved success of *The Whiteheaded Boy*. In the little one-act play, *The Clancy Name*, merits are discernible which are not so apparent in either of the more ambitious pieces which followed it. The conflict arises between a mother, whose pride of race is the passion of her life, and her son, whose sense of duty compels him to confess that he is guilty of a crime to the authorities who do not suspect him. She tries to prevent him from bringing disgrace on the family name, but the young man resists the appeal and goes off to give himself up. By the device of having him killed while trying to rescue a child from being trampled by a runaway horse, the dramatist solves too easily the problem which he had presented with convincing force.