

# A Mackenzian Describes Mackenzie's Latest

THE tale seems to be told, for Mr. Compton Mackenzie's latest novel, *Sylvia and Michael*, apparently rounds out the careers of those many figures which have appeared and reappeared at a wave of his pen since *Carnival* first embodied them.

Mr. Mackenzie's has been a singular feat in this (more or less) carrying on of the same characters through five novels, now stressing one of them, now another. After *The Passionate Elopement*, that "vivacious four-de-force in the pommander vein," according to a London review, came *Carnival*. A stunning book, a gorgeous bit of writing, with the spirited Jenny Pearl as its heroine. This story of the ballet girl in all her works, all her vanities (one can scarcely say her pomps), made its author's name prominent among the younger English novelists. Jenny was talked about, written about. No less a personage than the late Canon Scott Holland wrote of her to Mrs. Drew (Mary Gladstone), "I must talk *Carnival*. Jenny is the one and only thing in it. . . . There is a wonderful attempt to give the Atalanta virginity to that whiff of a girl."

Of the book's beginning Mr. Mackenzie himself wrote:

"I was living in a remote corner of the Duchy of Cornwall. I heard the queer tale of a local farmer's marriage. He had lately journeyed up to London on a matter of business and, having stayed for a fortnight in town, returned home with a bride. This sudden choice would have been sufficiently remarkable in one of a cautious race, accustomed to select their wives by a slower process; but the girl herself was actually a barmaid from a notorious cafe in Leicester Square. The grim Calvinist had met her, asked her to marry him, and somehow persuaded her to come back with him to the West of England; and for the rest of her life she would be imprisoned in his storm-beaten farmhouse over whose fields travelled perpetually the salt Atlantic spray. I was moved by the imagination of this couple. I thought of her in the glitter of London lights, her ears familiar with the roar of traffic, her tongue quick with human intercourse. I thought of him, a sinister and lonely man, peering through the cold starshine, the boom of the surf or brooding upon his golden barley in the hot August sunlight. As a matter of fact the history of this pair has never since emerged from dulness; nevertheless their situation haunted my fancy.

## II.

"I left Cornwall not long after this to do some work for one of the great London variety theatres. One afternoon I came out from a long rehearsal, during which I leaned back in the dim, empty stalls watching the corps de ballet flit like gay ghosts about the shadows of the stage. I came out just about the shutting in of a rainy November dusk and noticed an inquisitive figure waiting by the stage door. He was not unlike my Cornish farmer, as he stood there to eye the girls hurrying home to rest before the evening performance, and suddenly I fancied one of them, gay and lovable, transported by circumstance to a storm-beaten farmhouse. I began to imagine the early his-

tory that led to such an event, and as I did so I began to write *Carnival*."

*Carnival* served to introduce, in the person of the one man Jenny Pearl loved, the first of the characters about whom so much was written in the two volumes of *Sinister Street*, volume one of which appeared in this country under the title of *Youth's Encounter*. Michael Fane, his mother, his loves and his friends held the stage's centre in those two books, to the delight of the public, which only grew less toward the end, when Michael, having left Oxford, came up to London to live the sort of life the young Englishman of fiction used so frequently to lead.

Michael's career in *Sinister Street* ended with his starting for a monastery. Steps were retraced and caught up in Mr. Mackenzie's next book, *Plashers Mead*, known in England as *Guy and Pauline*, with the life of Guy Hazlewood as he wrote verse in the "fresh green lap of fair King Richard's land" and loved a charming young English girl. This book, which dyed in the wool Mackenzie admirers say contains Mr. Mackenzie's work at the zenith of his excellence, is, in fact, rather dull for the average reader, with its succession of perfect pictures—its general effect of a marvellous modern tapestry instead of a modern novel.

Then what a shock came with *Sylvia Scarlett*, the next book by our novelist. If *Plashers Mead* is a tapestry, *Sylvia Scarlett* is a movie scenario in adequate English. Written along picturesque lines, with a feminine protagonist, this novel whirled the reader from France through England, about the Continent, to South America, to Morocco, to the United States and back to England, when finally the heroine hops into a cab with the announcement that this time she is off with the "raggle-taggle" gypsies in earnest.

A considerable achievement that, just after producing a book where nothing happens, a book which is a study in place if ever there was one. A novel whose heroine runs such an international gamut and passes through walks of life ranging from chorus girl, street walker, cabaret performer, successful actress and the modern concept of the classic betaira to wife of a country gentleman. Mr. Mackenzie has travelled much. Can he have taken *Sylvia Scarlett* over his own itineraries, hanging a string of neat attitudes on successive stopping places as pegs?

In any case, in this book reappear many characters of *Sinister Street*, including Michael Fane, Lily Haden and Mrs. Gainsborough, who falls rather short of being the immortal creation she promised in the earlier book.

Comes now from the press of Martin Secker *Sylvia and Michael*, book three of *Sylvia Scarlett*, according to the author. *Sylvia*, off with the raggle-taggle gypsies, goes to Russia to sing in a cabaret. At least her occupation is static throughout the book. Strange are her adventures in Russia's capital, then known as St. Petersburg. Her recovery from typhus finds the recent war commenced. Leaving Petrograd she pushes on to Kiev, to Odessa. Constantinople being blocked for her she makes for Rumania, for Bucharest, for Galantza, for Avershti.

## III.

The countless incidents of this progress would unduly prolong an article that mentioned them in detail. *Sylvia* meets Conchetta again, tries to make her take Lily Haden's place and fails as she had failed with Lily. Crossing Bulgaria into Serbia just before Bulgaria threw in her lot with the Central Powers, she arrives at Nish, there to find Capt. Guy Hazlewood, to hear from him news of Michael Fane, now a Red Cross worker in the Balkans, and to take from Hazlewood, dying, his letter for Pauline. *Sylvia* lingers at Nish through some excellent pages of description of that town's confusion when Serbia's calvary commenced under the Bulgar occupation.

Here comes Michael, ill with typhus, escorted by his sister, that efficient genius Stella. *Sylvia* sends Stella off, herself remaining to nurse Michael in the face of the pending occupation of the town by the Bulgars. Which accomplished, and Michael recovered, he and *Sylvia* are packed off for a prison camp, only to be deflected by a *comitadji* leader *Sylvia* happens to know, who permits their escape into Greece. In the course of which Michael, fittingly enough, asks *Sylvia* to do him the honor of becoming his wife.

There, my masters, is good writing which makes interesting reading. Mr. Mackenzie has turned successfully the trick in this new novel he began, with

partial success, in *Sylvia Scarlett*. He is away from his wonderful tapestries; we can regret that. Yet he now writes something more than a movie scenario in good English; we can applaud that!

## IV.

One cannot pronounce *Michael and Sylvia* flawless. Mr. Mackenzie has been in the Balkans during the war. Doubtless *Sylvia* again follows her creator's itineraries. But now Mr. Mackenzie really gets hold of his subject; there is no longer that suspicion about this heroine one had in the earlier book, of her being a peg on which to hang pretty attitudes. Here is a modern novel done in the picaresque manner deserving of praise as a good story to read.

More than mere good reading is in some bits of it. For in its pages artistry is subordinated to true feeling. There are two deserving lines on an aviator who was always longing for his little farm, always thinking of his probable crash, who fought for France and died gloriously for her. . . . "if Paradise might be the eternal present of a well-beloved dream, he would have found his farm; if human wishes were not vanity, he was at peace."

And later in the book come Guy Hazlewood's notable words:

"I remember how the waning moon of dawn came up out of Asia while we were still waiting for news of the Suvla landing. There was a tattoo of musketry over the sea, a lisp of wind in the sandy grass, and in a moment of apprehensive chill I divined that with a failure at Suvla this waning moon was the last moon that would rise upon the old way of thinking, the rare old way of acting, the old, old merry England built in a thousand years."

"But a greater England may arise from that failure."

"Yes, but it won't be our England. The grave of our England was dug by the Victorians; this generation has planted the flowers upon it; the monument will be raised by the new generation. Oh, yes, I know it's an egotistical regret, a superficial and sentimental regret if you will, but you must allow some of us to cherish it, otherwise we could not go on. . . . In the end I'm convinced that it (history) will blame the men who failed to see that England was great by the measure of her greatness, and that the real way to win this war was by what were sneeringly called sideshows. All our history has been the alternate failure and triumph of our sideshows; we made ourselves what we are by sideshows."

Debatable ground. Will England again be the right little, tight little island? Will she be efficient, a triumph of Mr. Pelman's system? Will she be imperialistic? Will she continue to muddle through? True, the old gods are gone and with them that pleasant sense of comfort our world knew prior to 1914. There has been death, which, we are told, has been swallowed up in victory. There is still honey for tea, if one has time to take for tea. And with other times come

other fashions in fiction. Mr. Walpole writes now of Russia; Mr. Cannan seems unchanged, and is more dull than ever; Mr. Mackenzie has left his gallery of word painting to step into the open air of action. More novels will come from him. To-day's *Sylvia and Michael* is done. The girl who was always running away has run to Michael. Will he set her future pace? Will they dwell in Mrs. Gainsborough's cottage—Mulberry Cottage of warm, pleasant memory? Their tale seems told; the tale seems told of Michael's friends.

So, too, the curtain seems to have fallen, fallen on an excellent last act, and on a certain phase of Mr. Mackenzie's writing. One looks forward with eager confidence to the realization of his new phase—a phase of reconstruction, of repetition, of reminiscence of old comforts, or of something quite new. Who knows?

## Love in a Chapel

WHAT an unusual romance! And what a cloister it is that Roger de Sales and his playmate-sweetheart, Rosamond Way, have to romp in! As for goings on at Black Sheep Chapel, it seems to have collected within itself all the black sheep from all the other folds. Bank Chepe Chapel was the original name, afterward corrupted to Black Sheep Chapel, for much the same reason that Roger called George Pencraft "sexton"—it was easier than sacristan to remember.

Of this church Mrs. Baillie-Saunders says: "Perhaps the title really attracted them, for the church became a sort of dumping ground for all the more daring and dangerous spirits from other surrounding churches; it even in time got a reputation—artistic, musical, spiritualistic, unconventional and enterprising generally—further afield; and certain original and interesting sheep from the inner London which is called Society. . . . All kinds of quaint heretics came—dabblers in spiritualism, triflers in Christian Science, people riding on a social hobby, half convinced Theosophists, journalists on vegetable diet, divorced countesses, American faith healers, cranky artists, mad novelists and wandering actors."

Roger, of course, is the hero, and through his early years of wood carving and play writing at the chapel and through Rosamond's service as model for religious statues, a deep current of religion is visible. When he went to Mme. de Sales, his mother, ill and unhappy at heart, though rich, Roger turned from his early training and became a successful playwright. Then comes Rosamond's avowal of love for George Pencraft and Roger makes a decision. He gives up riches and dramaturgy to go into the Church.

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