COMPTON MACKENZIE THE LESSER

By Henry A. Lappin

Mr. Compton Mackenzie is assuredly one of the most distinguished of contemporary English novelists. Commencing in 1907 with a volume of poems, he permitted four years to elapse before publishing his first novel, "The Passionate Elopement". His second novel, "Carnival", appeared in 1912, and in the same year also "Kensington Rhymes", his second volume of verse. "Carnival" endeared Mr. Mackenzie's name to the passionate and vociferous few who keep singing the praises of a new artist until the many are intrigued and complacently accept their verdict. The critics found in it "an exquisite sense of beauty with a hunger for beautiful words to express it"—"an heroic scale of conception and achievement"—"a prose full of beauty"—and so on. The enthusiasm of that ordinarily reticent critic, Mr. Clement K. Shorter, urged him to inform two hemispheres that "Carnival" had "carried him from cover to cover on wings".

Indubitably Mr. Mackenzie had arrived. A third novel by him, "Sinister Street" (known to American readers as "Youth's Encounter"), came out in 1913, and was followed in 1914 by the second volume of "Sinister Street", a further instalment of the pilgrimaging of Michael Fane's restless spirit. Next year "Guy and Pauline" (American title, "Plasher's Mead") was published while the author was bearing arms as a lieutenant in the Royal Marines. This novel is a kind of pendant study to "Sinister Street, Vol II", dealing as it does with the exquisite idyl of Fane's Oxford friend, Guy Hazelwood, and Pauline, daughter of the rector of Wychford.

Now, after an interval of three years—in the martial course of which he has been gazetted Captain, created Chevalier of The Legion of Honour, invalided, and returned to duty as Director of the Aegean Intelligence

Service—he gives to the world "Sylvia Scarlett".

The novel ends before Sylvia has attained her thirtieth year, but into her less than thirty years Sylvia has packed an intense and diversified reality of experience. The history of her forebears is detailed in a lengthy prelude; her own story begins for us when she is about four years old, with a very early and rather unedifying memory of her father. After her mother's death and the marriages of her sisters, Sylvia's weak and rascally English father, finding France too hot to hold him, returns to England bringing Sylvia with him.

In London, Sylvia and her wayward parent, in conspiracy with other more or less shady denizens of their boarding-house, engage in several amazing and farcical adventures in crookedness. Uproariously funny are the pages in which the author describes his heroine's visit to the establishment of "The Emperor of Byzantium"; the machinations of the astute Josephe-Erneste, Prince de Conde, ("What about Condy's fluid?" said the irreverent Henry); the extravagant comedy of Sylvia's afternoon at the æsthetic abode of Mr. Corydon.

With the death of Sylvia's father a new phase of her experience begins, for she goes off with, and after a short time is obliged to run away from, James Monkley, a disreputable companion of her father's. A little later she meets with Philip Iredale, a whimsical and gentle scholar, whose sophisticated raillery recalls Mr. W. J. Locke's Marcus Ordeyne. Philip sends her to school and subsequently marries her. Not very long after, realizing the incompatibility of their temperaments, Sylvia cuts the Gordian knot and once more runs away. Going to London in a tempestuous mood of reaction, she adopts the most ancient of feminine professions and exercises it until three months later —on joining a musical comedy touring company—she is able to return to Philip "the last shred of clothing that she had had through him, with a letter and ten pounds in bank notes".

The rest of the book traces her picturesque and vicissitudinous progress in various parts of Europe and America, South and North; her ultimate return to England; her success in London as a new kind of stage impersonator; the disillusionment that descends upon her in the moment of her attaining distinction in her new rôle and as she is on the brink of a great happiness in love. At the end Sylvia goes forth to her coming destiny, packing into the only trunk she took with her that golden shawl of Siamese crêpe that had covered the shoulders of her vagrant-souled ancestress, the shawl from which "had fluttered the airy tremor of invitation" that had stirred the pulses of the Honourable Charles Cunningham at six o'clock in the morning of Ash Wednesday in the year 1847 at the Vendanges de Bourgogne.

Frankly, when one remembers the author's previous achievement, "Sylvia Scarlett" is disappointing. That is not to deny that it is from start to finish a most interesting and vivid book. But in construction, in characterization, in the subtle creation and modulation of atmosphere, it is distinctly inferior to such a performance as "Sinister Street". Only very occasionally, too, does the style recall the exquisite and delicate harmonies of the other books. Indeed, a change has apparently come over the personality out of which Compton Mackenzie's first novels were wrought. His writing has no longer that lyric love-

liness, that serene and unfatigued beauty which seemed almost to lay a spell upon the reader of those earlier pages.

For the rest, whatever truth there may be in his portrayal of valetudinarian existence at "The Plutonian Hotel, Sulphurville, Indiana", Mr. Mackenzie is far from happy in his presentation of New York life. His Undersheriff McMorris in a deliquescent mood may be excellent burlesque, but the life of even an undersheriff in New York is a decidedly more sombre affair than Mr. Mackenzie imagines.

And when in years to come our author, following the best precedent, rewrites this novel for his Collected Edition, he will doubtless lubricate the hinges of chapter eight which at present creak abominably; under his revising hand the transitions in the same chapter will take place with a less bewildering rapidity, and the long arm of coincidence in chapter thirteen will be considerably abbreviated; but, true to the first fine inspiration, he will leave untouched the death of Mrs. Gainsborough in chapter twelve which Sterne himself, it is hardly extravagant to say, would have tried in vain to better.

Sylvia Scarlett. By Compton Mackenzie. Harper and Bros.