Compton Mackenzie's "Carnival"*

Carnival is bound to attract attention. The author of *The Passionate Elopement* has deserted wigs and patches for a stern, relentless study in realism. Frequently crude and over elaborated in phrasing amidst long stretches of vivid easy writing, suggestive, too, at times of other writers, it nevertheless stands as an unusual study of a ballet girl's soul. Aside from photographic reflections of certain phases of English life—middle class mediocrity, dancing schools, provincial theatres, ballet environment with all its casual accessories, and finally, the cramped oppression of a farm at Cornwall—that which gives *Carnival* a touch of the unusual is the element of fate which seems to brood over the entire story. Jenny just couldn't help being herself: a mass of strange contradiction, with moments of rebellion and long hours of acquiescence, she is a throbbing little person who seems to live her life without sustained motivation though full of tailless impulse. "Who cares," is the *leit motif* of her existence. This philosophy of indifference with which she explains all the rebuffs of her life, comes early. Compton Mackenzie cleverly paints Jenny's youth and inheritance and suggests how potent with disappointment her life is bound to be. The child of a loveless marriage, with a father who is, so far as she is concerned, merely an accessory to her existence, she finds herself oppressed and baffled in the unsympathetic atmosphere at home. Jenny's one great joy is dancing—it is an instinct—and with its expression arises the problem of her little life: for she meets opposition in the one thing which to her means freedom and joy.

Life was a series of hopes held out and baffled desires, of unjust disappointments and aspirations unreasonably neglected. She lay there a mite in floating time, sensible only of having no free will.

*Carnival. By Compton Mackenzie. New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1912.

Through the intervention of Mr. Vergoe, an old clown, however, Jenny is encouraged in her dancing and succeeds finally in gaining her mother's consent to obtain proper instruction at Madame Aldavini's dancing academy. But effort breeds impatience and Jenny is not happy with the routine necessary. Still, she became a professional ballet girl, resenting her enforced living at home and her mother's instinctive attempt to mould her with warnings about the world.

It would have been wiser to let her alone, but nobody with whom she was brought into contact could realise the sexlessness of the child. The truest safeguard of a girl's virtue is familiarity with the aggregated follies of man's adolescense.

Though Jenny is slowly drawn into the hectic atmosphere of her life, and partakes of the usual suppers and excursions, which seem to be the natural perquisites of a dancer at The Oriental Palace of Varieties, she, however, is never attracted by men, but rather has an instinctive antagonism to them. This protects her until a real experience comes in the person of Maurice Avery, an artist. The reactions between the two, so subtle sometimes that the reader feels they need further phrasing, is the most interesting part of the novel. It is not a sordid picture save for its inevitable futility, and it is touched with delightful episodes. But Jenny refuses to surrender herself to him and Maurice leaves her. Then in disgust at his not understanding her desire to surrender herself only "with the whole of her womanhood," Jenny breaks with all her own struggling faith, and in order to make a return to it impossible, gives herself to a casual acquaintance, whom she immediately throws aside, not even offering him the satisfaction of knowing he was not one of many. Here the author has portrayed with remarkable insight how little the actual event may be in a character's march toward completeness, how trivial and over-exaggerated its importance when it is merely a technical and not psychic surrender. Jenny's inherent bitterness against men is increased and her own sense of futility is deepened by the discovery that her mother's insanity and death is really due to what seemed sure proof of her *liason* with Maurice. The irony of all this throws her into marriage with a farmer, who seems to offer her, at least, a release from her surroundings. She has nothing in common with him, though when her child is born she begins to believe she will find some reason for her life. Maurice returns to England and secretly comes to see her; but it is too late.

You can't mess up a girl's life and then come and say you're sorry the same as if you'd trod on her toe. . . . Once *I* was mad, too. I *nearly* died. I didn't care for nothing, nor for *any*thing. You was the first man that made me feel things like love. You! And I gave you more than I'd ever given any one, even my mother. . . . But they're all animals. All men. Some are nicer sorts of animals than others, but they're all the same. . . . Now I've got a boy and he's like *me*. He's got my eyes and I'm going to teach him, so he isn't an animal, see? . . . Go away, Maurice, leave me. I don't want you. I can't forgive you. I can only just not care whether you're not there or not. But go away, because I don't want to be worried by other people.

No mere outline of the story which ends with her murder by the husband in a fit of jealousy over his discovery of this final interview with Maurice, could indicate the real value of the characterisation of Jenny. The author has followed the chronicle style and has merely torn a page out of life, leaving many ragged edges. But *Carnival* is a vivid novel, as full of promise as it is of accomplishment.

George Middleton.