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Sylvia & Michael on Sinister Street

by David Platzer

On the novels of Compton Mackenzie.

Compton Mackenzie (1883–1972), the descendant of a theatrical dynasty, played many parts—though as a writer rather than on the stage. Now remembered by many only as the humorist who wrote farces like *Whisky Galore* (1947), set on a mythical Scottish island, he began his life in London’s West Kensington. In the first phase of Mackenzie’s fame, Henry James praised him as a great hope of the English novel. His second novel, *Carnival* (1912), the tale of the doomed dancer Jenny Pearl and the dilettante Maurice Avery, made Mackenzie a cult novelist among the sophisticated young. Lady Diana Manners (later Cooper, the inspiration for Evelyn Waugh’s Mrs. Stitch) took Jenny Pearl’s phrase “there’s nothing wrong with this little girl” as her own, and she and her friends in the set they called the “Corrupt...”

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