

MARY ROBERTS RINEHART: A STUDY IN CAREER

By Grant Overton

A PITTSBURGH girl of good family who had chosen to train as a hospital nurse became, when nearly twenty, the wife of a physician. Three sons were born to them in the next ten years and the mother's health was poor. Toward the end of this period of invalidism, when she was in her twenty seventh year, she began to write little articles, verse for children and even short stories. One day, having sold a poem or two, she went to New York and made a discouraging round of publishers. With one thing and another, in the first year of sustained effort at writing, she made \$1,200; a certain amount of tolerance in the family changed toward encouragement and she continued to write, sometimes on a card table, then with two fingers on a typewriter. It had mostly to be managed when the children were out for a walk, asleep, or playing. After three years her first book was published. It was a popular success and has since become a landmark in mystery-detective fiction.

At forty one the woman who had been an invalid spent forty days in the saddle through unknown mountains in Montana and Washington, as unwearied as her sons. Earning an annual income of \$50,000 or more from her writing was no trick at all. She was shortly to refuse the editorship of a great woman's magazine, double and treble her income, take her place as one of the distinguished hostesses in

the society of the national capital, and write her best book to date.

In the worn phrase of the book reviewer, but in all seriousness, I say that with the publication of her new novel, "Lost Ecstasy", Mary Roberts Rinehart stands on the threshold of a great career.

She who has had a half dozen careers is about to have the one she has always wanted. The fact that any one of her careers would have been a triumph for most women and many men is neither here nor there.

And what has she wanted? She said, a few years ago — forgetting or else underestimating "K." — that she was a "story teller. Some day I may be a novelist." I think she has always wanted to feel that she was a novelist in the sense of having power to make her story a commentary on life. Well, it is one of those achievements of which one can be most frequently unaware. It is an achievement of which one may remain wholly skeptical. A pronounced skepticism of this sort, a constant and humorous self depreciation, is Mrs. Rinehart's outstanding trait. I have no doubt that she thinks "Lost Ecstasy" merely the work of a story teller.

There is a story, sure enough, in this new novel. But as a matter of fact the book is the most fundamental expression of Mrs. Rinehart's creed I have encountered. I dare not say that it offers all her personal wisdom

in the art of living, but it offers a good deal — and all, surely, that one novel should be made to contain.

Nothing, in outline, could be simpler than this tale of a cowboy and an eastern girl. A little curve must have formed and deepened in the corners of Mrs. Rinehart's mouth as she considered the incredible number of books presenting a cowboy and an eastern girl. This, of course, could only come afterward; Kay Dowling and Tom McNair came first. You know how it is with your friends, enemies, and other intimates: they are strongly differentiated in your mind and it requires a distinct effort to recall that on the anatomical side they are markedly similar.

Kay Dowling is the granddaughter of old Lucius Dowling whose L. D. ranch locates itself in Montana or Wyoming. There is little of old Lucius in his son, Henry, Kay's father; and when the L. D. commits the capital crime of losing a lot of money the ranch is sold. But in the painful preliminaries to the sale, while a sort of financial autopsy is taking place on the spot, Kay and Tom McNair have met each other and ridden the range together. Herbert, so efficient, quiet, and impeccable, so set apart as Kay's future husband, must be held on the whole to have helped rather than to have hindered an association of which he anxiously disapproves.

Separation takes place automatically with the return of the Dowlings to the east. After it has lasted for some time Kay has an unexpected chance to see her cowboy in her own world — one with which he is completely unfamiliar and in which he shows to no great advantage. His appearance is brief and after it comes the return to Herbert, the acceptance of Herbert,

the preparations to be married to Herbert. And, as the wedding presents pour in and are catalogued and insured, as the gowns are fitted and the country house is made ready, there comes panting to a slow climax the apotheosis of Herbert, nothing passionate you understand but a gradual summit of human perfectibility, already nearly scaled, where one will rest through a serene long life hand in hand with Herbert in peace and Herbertude.

With the swift action which has often the character of mad folly, but which may equally be final wisdom, Kay deserts Herbert for Tom. The rich girl and the cowboy marry and Mrs. Rinehart rides into the bad lands where most "story tellers" have no sufficient knowledge and far too little courage to venture.

I could almost take oath that no one has ever done a real job with the cowboy before.

In thinking of western stories I imagine most of us still hark back to "The Virginian" as a standard of comparison; I know I do. It had never struck me, until I closed "Lost Ecstasy", that even in Owen Wister's renowned story the cowboy is distinctly sentimentalized. Of course, the fact that he was a Virginian duly qualifies him as one of nature's noblemen, but there is sentimentalization over and beyond that large license. I am afraid "Lost Ecstasy" makes "The Virginian" seem a bit mushy. Mrs. Rinehart, intent every instant on giving Tom McNair his due, exhibiting all his worth and according him all merited sympathy, does not sentimentalize him at all.

Tom is human. Like all egoistic males, he takes his time about falling for a girl. The ranch expression was that he was "God's gift to women"

but Tom's customary behavior indicated a faith that women were God's gift to him, and a gift not to be overrated, either. He is the kind of fellow who expects a girl to endure hardships with perfect stoicism but who, should she light a cigarette to see her through the grim ordeal, reaches over and takes the cigarette away from her. He can bring Kay to a wretched shack with no real comprehension of its misery for her; strive anxiously to make her warm and comfortable; and then, when he sees she is still shivery, become peevish as a little boy and make mean, resentful remarks about the abandoned Herbert. "It's a fine wife I've got. Now if you'd married *Percy* —" One can say "*Percy*" much more poisonously than "*Herbert*".

And Kay? She is a thoroughly nice girl, not blind to Tom's disqualifications to be her husband but pretty well at the mercy of physical attraction as most nice girls are. Mrs. Rinehart conveys whole sides of her with simple and significant strokes. All her life Kay had heard her father and mother say goodnight:

"Goodnight, Katherine."

"Goodnight, Henry. Don't forget to open your window."

It did not escape Kay that marriage with Herbert would be like that. Herbert was "rather sweet". But there were the other sides of Kay — the adventurous courage inherited from old Lucius, her grandfather; something of his passion for the far west; and she had also the woman's strange power to make a single look or tender gesture compensate for every physical stress. . . .

Nor is Herbert less well done. I can just see him, when the rich array of wedding gifts was pouring in, going around and meticulously recording

them. "There is a very large sum of money invested here and it requires protection." It is a pity that Herbert could not take out insurance on the wedding, only on the presents.

For some time now I have been under the conviction that I know little or nothing about literary values in a piece of writing. This is most humiliating for one who has spent much time with books. I still feel that I know the qualities of a good prose; I am by no means insensible to the beauties of literary style. But I have seen, and I still see, these beauties singled out for admiration to the serious neglect of other, and vastly more important, elements of literature. The book juries, of which we have now so many, have not infrequently selected novels that I should not dare to broadcast indiscriminately. The books so chosen have been poetic, fanciful, and altogether lovely as to prose, but quite meaningless to the majority of readers, even book readers. Their authors have sometimes thought that realistic detail makes reality, which is not the case. Without exception the characterization in these novels has been hopelessly anæmic. But as it happens, good characterization is almost the whole art of the novel, from Defoe and Fielding to date. It may now have become advisable to abandon this splendid achievement and substitute for it prose poems of 60,000 words or over — or polemical tracts of 180,000 words more or less. But let us have no illusion in the matter.

The literary values of Charles Dickens are uncertain, but he was a novelist. The construction in the novels of Thomas Hardy is lamentable, especially for one trained as an architect, but he was a novelist too. On the other hand literary values, as each

interpreted them, have killed George Meredith and have seriously damaged Stevenson. Multiply with your own examples.

It is not the larger public that is at fault, only a few critics and reviewers. The larger public may suffer the pundit, not very gladly, but in the end it will overthrow him. And so I return to "Lost Ecstasy" to observe that although none of the scenes is laid in Poictesme, and although none of the persons is a Kentucky mountaineer, and despite the fact that there is nothing to cause the book's suppression in Boston, Mrs. Rinehart has written that substantial thing, a novel. A convincing story about convincing people, if you get me.

Mrs. Rinehart's books fall into several classifications and she has enough in each class to establish her spades, hearts, diamonds, or clubs, as the case may be. "Through Glacier Park", "Tenting Tonight", "The Out Trail", and "Nomad's Land" are travel books of personal experience; all the rest of her books are fiction.* There are a number of collections of short stories, such as "Love Stories" and "Temperamental People", and there are the integrated tales of the spinster Tish which have accumulated at the rate of a book every five years since Tish made her debut in "The Amazing Adventures of Letitia Carberry", so that there are now four Tish books. It is in the remaining volumes, mainly book length fiction, that Mrs. Rinehart's career as a novelist is clearly to be traced.

She began with "The Circular Staircase".

The most remarkable thing about

* Except "Kings, Queens and Pawns", a record of experiences as war correspondent at the front, published in 1915.

this story was its construction, and it still holds a chief place in mystery-detective fiction because of this point. As I have said before, most writers, having brought about the murder of Arnold Armstrong in the opening pages, would merely lead the reader through a suitable maze to the revelation of the murderer. Mrs. Rinehart makes the murder merely a dreadful incident in a mysterious crime that is more and more evidently in the process of being committed. A baffling and increasingly desperate struggle with the unknown criminal is what gives "The Circular Staircase" a quality of drama rare in books of its kind.

With such brilliance in an ever popular type of story, it was natural that Mrs. Rinehart should go on with mystery-detective books. But "The Circular Staircase" had other constituents of more importance, ultimately, in her writing than any gift for plotting. No one who reads it fails to be struck by its characterization and its farcical humor. The humor was a humor that meant outright laughter and it was created by the impact of character and situation, one on the other. Mrs. Rinehart was to develop this vein in the Tish stories particularly; and the presence of this farcical quality was to insure the great success on the stage of "Seven Days" (from her book "When a Man Marries") and "The Bat" (founded on "The Circular Staircase"). Her humor, which is always an illustration of character, contributes to her characterization; conversely, if she could not characterize so thoroughly her humor would lack all its robustness. After a while she did one or two romantic novels, such as "The Street of Seven Stars", which is the love story of a little American girl in Vienna. And then came "K."

This astonishingly intricate — yet

always clear — study of emotional relationships has never been surpassed in a single novel of the usual length. The emotional substance of half a dozen ordinary novels is compressed into the story of some eleven people. It was both extravagant and magnificent — an over-generosity that only an abundant talent could indulge and an art that most authors of novels cannot command. Mrs. Rinehart rested from it with a romantic adventure story of southeastern Europe, "Long Live the King"; with the fun of feminine adolescence in "Bab: A Sub-Deb" and with that irresistible love story, "The Amazing Interlude".

When she returned to the novel in "Dangerous Days" and "A Poor Wise Man" it was to put all her story teller's talents back of a serious purpose. But her difficulty of adjustment was perceptible. Too much of a novelist to write a diatribe of Sinclair Lewis's sort or a piece of journalism of Philip Gibbs's type, she was also too honest to be merely sensational and too well versed in human nature to be successfully unfair. I think she will probably give us at least one more novel with an incidental and biting commentary on contemporary ideas and attitudes and I think it will make these earlier ones seem frankly experimental.

As they were; what writer worth his salt does not experiment? No experimentation, no growth. In "The Breaking Point" Mrs. Rinehart used again her skill in the story of mystery; but kept it wholly subordinate to the study of character. "The Red Lamp" was a return to the mystery tale for the

mystery's sake and also a demonstration that such a return is impossible. As the ingenuities of plot multiplied you felt every nerve in the author's body screaming its protest against the monster, Action, and his steamroller, Event. What could all this Contrivance mean to one who knew her people?

And so she came to "Lost Ecstasy" with a relief and a delight that give a double significance to the title. It has been her fortune to develop all her talents and to find herself, on the threshold of middle life, in ripe possession of the greatest one of them all.

Having once written about her work under the heading, "The Vitality of Mary Roberts Rinehart", I met her shortly afterward. She said: "I have a bad cold. I am afraid you will find the vitality which you have celebrated very low this morning." But it is a vitality of the mind, almost independent of the body. She has personality as few women have it. No other woman novelist does male characters so well, which may be the reason why no other woman novelist numbers so many — or near so many — men readers. And yet, what a woman she is! She took part in the most famous debate in history and she took the woman's part against a man. True, he was not Edmund Burke, nor even Daniel Webster; but who shall say that Irvin S. Cobb is less redoubtable than either? You have perhaps read "Isn't That Just Like a Man" and its valiant counterblast, "Oh, Well, You Know How Women Are!" Then you know that Mrs. Rinehart gets the decision. If you don't, I'm telling you.

THE LONDONER

An Interview in the "Observer" about H. G. Wells's New Book — Some Kipling Rarities — Sir Ernest Hodder-Williams — Butler Relics and Alfred Emery Cathie — Nathaniel Hawthorne — Sir Frank Mackinnon

LONDON, June 1, 1927.

IT is not very often that a publisher can do himself much good by advertising a book six months before it is to be published, and it is not very often that a publisher can secure that an interview with himself shall be published in a leading periodical six months before the book about which he is interviewed can possibly appear. Still less often can a publisher — as it were — speak his own press notices in advance. So the action of Victor Gollancz in granting to a representative of the "Observer" an interview wholly devoted to the subject of H. G. Wells's new novel, which will be published in September next, is something of an event in the world of book production. Mr. Gollancz is a director of the very enterprising firm of Ernest Benn, Ltd., and his genuine enthusiasm for Mr. Wells is one of the happiest features of the affair. It averts any thought of "stunt", for there is no question at all of the good faith of the publisher in this instance. He has a book which he regards — rightly — as an event of the greatest importance. In his delight, he expresses that admiration to a representative of the press. And the completion of a new book by Mr. Wells is treated with highly becoming excitement. I venture to believe that we are all eager to read what Mr. Wells writes. Even those who seethe with anger at Mr. Wells read his books — if it is only in order to have something to snort about! And as Mr. Wells is

nothing if not topical in his themes — since his active interest is in the world as it appears to him, and as it may become, and as it should be — this new novel is in a special degree a document of the day. It deals with the late coal strike, and it is called by the menacing title "Meanwhile". "The very centre of this novel", said Mr. Gollancz, "is an absolutely ruthless criticism of the Conservative Government, and particularly of Mr. Baldwin and Mr. Churchill, for their conduct of the coal dispute. . . . The leading character is Philip Rylands, a young and an enormously rich coal owner, . . . and the upheaval is seen through the eyes of Philip, who is drawn as ignorant and idealistic, but active-minded and honest. . . . I do not want to give the impression that the interest in this novel is exclusively political. As I have said, it is full of witty conversation, and there are many exciting episodes. But the strongest impression left on my mind is that of the enormous vivacity of the political pictures, and the brilliant satire of Mr. Wells's denunciation of a certain type of mind." It seems to me to be impossible to read this interview with Mr. Gollancz without wishing very strongly to read the book which has inspired his enthusiasm, and I should not be surprised to learn that booksellers and libraries are already bombarded with demands for the book. I ask whether the same result could be expected from any similar interview