Will This New Author Prove a Second Conrad?

James Huneker, the Noted Critic, Prophesies About William McFee, Whose Story of the Sea Has Captured Literary London

By James Huneker

William McFee.
(From an original drawing by Arthur J. Elder.)

PICTURE to yourselves the engine room of an oceangoing steamship, not one of those floating palaces that carry bored millionaires or society folk bound for newer golf links across polite seas; but a freighter without style, and run by men whose muscle and wit are their only capital. Imagine an engineer, not the chief, but a subordinate, who devotes his leisure to hard reading, who is in love with the English language, English classics, a born phrasemaker, and determined to write novels. And you will have imagined William McFee, whose name, despite his English parentage, smacks of the Celt.

A newcomer with only two books behind him, and some miscellaneous writings, he has suddenly achieved a critical recognition that must have surprised him, for, like most rough diamonds, he is modest, though, unlike most rough diamonds, he is singularly sophisticated. Practically unknown here, his new book is called "Casuals of the Sea," and it deals with a small group of English folk, both on land and sea. It reeks with actuality, for the author's sincerity is a form of his talent.

William McFee was born at sea in 1881. His father, a sea Captain, was nearing the English coast after a long voyage when the happy event took place. Dedicated from the cradle, one might say, the boy spent some years before he again sniffed the salt spray. The family settled in North London, perhaps not far from the spot where his story begins. He underwent the usual schooling and was soon in an engineering shop at Aldgate. He fell in love with machinery about the same time he read Kipling. That writer settled his future. He affianced himself to the sea and to letters, and this polygamous union has proved a happy one. When at leisure he spent his time in the reading rooms of the Northampton Institute and the British Museum. He read omnivorously. His appetite for information was voracious. He met down Chelsea way, where he lived for a time at Cheyne Walk, such writers as Hillaire Belloc, Oliver Onions, Nicholls, Tweed, and Herbert Allingham. In 1905 he had his first job on a ship bound for Trieste, and as an engineer he has spent the last decade, with interludes of landlubbering, in various remote countries as well as in England and America. He began writing "Casuals of the Sea" in 1908 in Japan. He has been in South America, and, since the outbreak of the war, at Saloniki and Port Saïd. At the present writing he is somewhere in the Mediterranean. With a romancer's luck he was in the Liverpool Street Terminal at the moment of the Zeppelin raid in 1914, and wrote an extensive account of that thrilling episode.

But it is the formidable amount of literature that he devoured on his voyaging that impresses most. He has said: "I know that one's luck must be backed by hard work, and writing in one's bunk after eleven hours' manual toil, plus anxiety and the certainty of being hauled out at midnight, is horrible." Horrible, too, the list of his favorite writers, Sallust, Livy, Florus, Paterculus, Shakespeare, Gibbon, Horace, Balzac, Tolstoy, Whitman, Goethe, Emerson—not to mention Joseph Conrad and Hawthorne. A seemingly indigestible mess if absorbed by a weak or dyspeptic stomach. Fancy an engineer reading and assimilating a library, and in his own composition leaving little or no traces of those magnificent mental rations. Whatever his faults, and he has many, his books are not "literary." He has temperament, for without temperament there is no talent; he has vision, and no doubt the voice will be perfected as to express his own native music.

The man has been described by a friend as "reserved." He is big boned, with blonde hair, blue eyes, a typical Briton. He is as strong as a bull, very gentle, fond of children and cats. His physical endurance is remarkable. "I have never seen him tired," adds our informant. Evidently strong, even stronger than a professional book reviewer, with the muscular equipment of a blacksmith. His opinion of himself and his work is not exalted, but behind the diffident mask are an iron will and plenty of ambition. He does not write for a popular audience, nor does he despise the public. But he insists on telling his tale in his own fashion, and if the verdict is favorable, well and good; if not—that won't keep him from sleeping. It is my notion that Flaubert is his major god; indeed, he has been compared with the great Frenchman, which rather taxes one's idea of critical credulity; also with Dickens, Zola, Conrad, and William De Morgan.

These comparisons are not altogether futile taken as indices of Mr. McFee's literary ancestry, yet they are in the air. The new man is individual. As an artist he is incomplete, faulty, given to prolixity; above all, not an architect. "Casuals of the Sea" leaves much to be desired in the matter of construction. Whether the author emulated Conrad's elliptical method in "Chance" is not for us to say; certainly he has failed if he did, for with all its apparent discursiveness "Chance" is carved from the single block, and, as if at a sitting.

"Casuals" might be split asunder in three parts. The three sections, "The Suburb," "The City," "The Sea," are in reality three separate stories, lightly yoked by a conventional manoeuvre. You have assisted at the evocation of a sordid family history. This loosely spun pattern does not interfere with the reader's enjoyment, and after finishing the novel and getting the proper perspective, you are struck by its persistent if unobtrusive design, and in his modulation of events his simplicity is sometimes baffling. McFee envisages life in this desultory, unrounded manner. It is all an enigma, this existence of ours between earth and sky.

He is not a romantic pessimist like Hardy, nor does he philosophize brilliantly like Meredith. He is not "modern," not "smart." He is not a stylist. He reminds one at times of Dickens, especially in his humorous passages, but otherwise he does not see life in the least like that master. I should say that, personal temperament aside, McFee has been influenced more by the Russians, Dostoievsky and Tolstoy, and the French realists, Balzac, Flaubert, and Zola, than he would care to admit. He sees objectively. He has the gift of projecting upon paper vivid images that instantly evoke a character, a place, a situation. He is a romantic realist. Never sentimental, like the majority of his contemporaries, nevertheless his book is suffused with pity. He loves humanity. Art will never get in the way of his sympathy for suffering and the lowly, the stepchildren of nature who lead humble lives in corners of cities and ships. Best of all, he has genuine power, and that is worth a wilderness of technical shortcomings. A writer of virile power is a rarity in this hour of insipid embroidery and mucilaginous sentimentalists.

Little Hannibal Gooderich—whose surname throws much light on the mental processes of his parents—became first fond of the sea in the schoolroom. No one suspected it. He was more than a backward pupil; he was positively stupid. A lazy child, he grew up into a loutish lad. His mother fairly despaired of his future. She was a widow when she went to live in Jubilee Street E., after leaving Maple Avenue, in North London. Her other son had gone to Africa and had been killed. Her daughter, Minnie—the fruit of an unconventional union before her marriage—was off on the Continent in God knows what company. So Mrs. Gooderich had only Hannibal to console her, and the filial consolation was still to come. She did charwork in offices hard by her home. Her brother-in-law, a prospering builder over at Kennington, got her the job. It was poorly paid and the work exhausting. The poor woman had not always been in such a strait. Her husband, an engineer, had kept the roof over her head, and if Minnie had been less intractable and if Bert had not gone soldiering, the conduct of Hannibal might have been better regulated.

But Minnie had left for parts unknown with a moneyed man, and the elder Gooderich had fallen into a pond while drunk, and the widow was practically alone. Her nearest friend, an American woman, Mrs. Gaynor, lived in North London, but one day came with her son to see Mrs. Gooderich. That put a flea into the worthy lady's ear. If young Gaynor could go to sea why not the obstreperous Hannibal? She consulted Mr. Brown, her portly brother-in-law, who scoffed at the idea. Preposterous! Let Hannibal be apprenticing himself to some master who won't spare the rod. Then Amy Brown, one of the three delightfully vulgar daughters of the builder, burdens herself with the cause of Hannibal. She sets up a shop, the "Little Brown Box," where the pair of young people play at selling tobacco. The business proved unexpectedly successful. But Hannibal has the growing pains of an embryo sailor. He is bored by the shop, bored by Amy's evident preference for his company, and he resolves to cut the whole enterprise. An unexpected encounter with a seafaring man settles the matter. Without a word to Amy, who deserves gratitude, he goes to sea on a tramp steamship, first as a boy in the mess room of its engineers, later as a coaler in that hell called the boiler room.

Alas! the romance of the sea vanishes at the first qualms. Hannibal is deadly sick. He recovers and attends to his prosaic duties as steward for three engineers. These characters are carved with crystal clearness. The author has a gift of characterization, and, while he is often diffuse in his descriptions, his humans are always veracious portraits. Hannibal's mother and the American woman, a practical mystic—as are most mystics — Hannibal, his father, his brother Bert—for the few chapters in which he appears—the Brown family, the crew, officers, engineers, are all viable figures.

McFee's pages are sometimes overcrowded; he has at least a tithe of Zola's aptitude in the handling of masses; but the clarity of his style, combined with his eye of a painter, never fail to produce precise, sharply defined images. Hannibal suffers, develops through suffering, and when we part with him he is almost a man. That you will like him is another question. There is no reason why you should, if you adhere to that most venerable of heresies in the Church of Fiction, the "sympathetic character." However, Hannibal interests, and that's the next best thing. His passive adventures in the Far East—he is hardly a dynamic nature—make admirable reading. Mr. McFee has "lived" all these happenings. I shan't call him the "Conrad of the engine room"—Conrad the archangel of the phrase magical—nor make other fatuous discoveries; but he has strength, sincerity, and a marked talent for painting a picture, evoking a mood, creating atmosphere. And, somehow, his story of the sea is "different" in the Stendhal sense. He plays with the same counters as Kipling, Conrad, and the rest, and he, no more than any writer handling such an enormous theme as the sea, does not escape monotony.

There is little danger that Minnie Gooderich will ever become a "Burning Topic" at the women clubs. She is not a downright bad one; she is like the majority of men and women, neither black nor white, a mediocre gray. She "sins" with wide-open eyes, sins joylessly, though profitably. She is not a Magdalen over whom sentimentalists weep becomingly. Her motto is: Get money! But to accomplish her ends she is not an Iago in petticoats. She will never enter Lady Gophir's House of Reclamation. She sees through that exhausted sensualist's philanthropic game. Her speech to Antony Gilfillan, the man with whom she enters the primrose path, is illuminating: "Was I right, after all, when I said it was money did everything?" This rings as true as Balzac. She craves luxury — she does not possess a planturous temperament; because it means power, freedom. The metallic clink of gold coin reverberates in her own metallic soul. She is as hard as steel, and not particularly attractive. The adventuress is not in her make-up, despite her talk of adventures, her desire to see the world. She is not the harlot of the romancers. She will never go to the devil. Well-poised, absolutely devoid of morals—rather on the other side of good and evil—she neither enthralls nor disgusts. Firmly etched this girl lives before us. She runs off with Gilfillan, does not pose as a "deserted" victim, and catches a gullible sea Captain, who later marries her.

Mr. McFee balances the scales in his moral judgments. He is, I venture to say, an immoralist, that is, he does not condemn Minnie's action, nor does he pronounce it good. He knows that evil and good have been since the beginning of time, and still are bedfellows. There is no Lecky-like embellished pity for the prostitute as a class. So he casts no stones, does not moralize. Life is his quest and Minnie is alive, and if her profession—surely the saddest in the world—is abhorrent she is not set before us on the pedestal so often accorded her sisters, the pedestal of the "reclaimed woman." That way sentimentalism lies.

The frame in which she is shown is both real and diverting. Mrs. Olga Berenice Wilfley, "authoress" of such a "sobbing" book as "The Licencees of Love," is a "lady journalist"—may her tribe never decrease because of the gayety of nations!—and engages the greenhorn Minnie as typist and general houseworker. Minnie has one weakness concealed within the iron carapace of her nature. She is given to reading "At the Mercy of Tiberius," which she prefers to her employer's effusions. How she goes to Mrs. Wilfley, how she sits through a "conversazione" at the studio in company with a half dozen concrete cults is all the finest fooling. Mr. McFee has a light hand with the knout. Antony Gilfillan, the advertising magnate, looms up in the page portentously, and is the unvarnished portrait of a semi-monstrous personality. But Minnie and her ineluctable selfishness tops him. "Casuals of the Sea" is more than a promising book from a beginner. If it may be chopped into a trinity of tales, if it is too episodical, if it slowly gets under way, it is, withal, a novel of undeniable distinction.

Mr. McFee has written especially for The New York Times his impressions of life in the British transport service. They will be published in the Magazine Section next Sunday.

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