

CORRESPONDENCE

TO THE EDITOR OF BLACKFRIARS.

SIR,—The notice of Anomaly's *Invert* in the September BLACKFRIARS must have set your readers thinking and wondering, painfully at first perhaps. We are so apt, many of us, to treat the unfamiliar as inaccessible and to find too late that the (to us) unfamiliar occupies a large area on the map of human destinies. Mr. Compton Mackenzie's new novel, *Vestal Fire*,¹ is another sign that your commendation of Anomaly was well-timed. Without it, a timid reader might have been non-plussed, he would have of course given unstinted praise to the wit, the fun, the truth, the pathos—however Charles II the wit, boisterous the fun, unwelcome the truth, uncommercialised the pathos—but what *ought* he to have felt about the subject? Should a novel reflect the manners of the period? Should it, without hypocrisy and without exhibiting the fear of being misunderstood—and it must be said without Victorian delicacy, modesty, refinement—should it, in the language of the day, enable us to see as human beings Marsac, Carlo, Acott, Burlingham, Nigel Dawson—even the 'three owl-eyed young men of the moment with solemn and intelligent faces and dank devitalised hair—votaries of Athene who scoffed at romantic passion, looked askance at humour, and found a footnote of Dr. Ernest Jones as stimulating as cantharides.'

"And do you mean to tell me, Mrs. Macdonnell, that those homely little students I saw walking up from the Grande Marina this morning are all so many Nigel Dawsons?" Miss Virginia asked later on.

"Immortality on Sirene was never so rife," Mrs. Macdonnell declared with uncton.

"I guess I've lived too long," the old lady sighed; "and maybe I've always been foolish and sentimental; but I think that a man with queer ideas ought to look kinda bold and bad and picturesque."

'Yet Nigel Dawson, who was just half Miss Virginia's age, felt as much out of the present as she, when sitting at one of the tables in Zamponi's and surrounded by a group of these ruthless young moderns, he was asked if he had been up at Oxford with Oscar Wilde. And they did not even pay either him or Wilde the compliment of pretending to be interested in the answer.'

¹ Cassell.

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Mr. Compton Mackenzie is not less aware than M. François Mauriac of the almost overwhelming difficulties threatening a Catholic novelist. It is good for a novelist to be a Catholic; it is unhappy for a Catholic to be a novelist. Did not François Mauriac say something of the sort? It would be interesting to compare and contrast the two novelists, but out of place in a letter to the Editor of BLACKFRIARS. Should the readers of *Vestal Fire* complain of an absence of what they sometimes call the Catholic spirit, let them remember the scene between Count Marsac and the Parish Priest, and also the sane and humane treatment of Carlo, now no doubt a good Catholic.

'Carlo was not yet demobilised, and Marsac, feeling that it was time he did something to impress Sirene, decided to become a Catholic. He was still supporting existence on what his mother could allow him while the commercial affairs of Europe were being tidied up. He could not afford to travel, even had there been the facilities. He required a change after the strain of the war. He wrote, as he would have written to a doctor, and asked the *parroco* to give him an appointment.

'Don Pruno seemed strangely unelated by the prospect of receiving the Count into the Church. Marsac, supposing that his temporarily straitened circumstances were leading the priest to imagine that he was no longer rich, reassured him. "But this is not a question of money," said the priest in French.

"*Ah non, mon père*, I am not suggesting such a thing. But naturally I should wish to express my appreciation of the Catholic Church by some slight gift—a new chapel, the endowment of a school, extensive benefactions to the poor—oh, there are so many ways in which I perceive that I should be desirous of assisting you as soon as I shall be in possession of my properties again."

'Don Pruno took a pinch of snuff, and bowed.

"Far be it from me to discourage a penitent sinner from trying to give practical expression to his remorse," said the priest; "but the Church requires from a soul his heart. She is not content to pick his pocket."

"*C'est entendu*," said Marsac cheerfully. "So, please make the necessary arrangements for my immediate reception, which will give much pleasure to my mother, who is already a Catholic."

"There will have to be a long instruction," said Don Pruno.

"An instruction in what?" Marsac asked in lofty surprise.

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“ A doctrinal instruction.”

‘ The aspiring neophyte chuckled complacently

“ I think that is not very necessary in my case. I am already acquainted with the doctrines. I have examined the claims of Catholicism with much care, and I was startled to find how closely they accorded with my own ideas. I assure you that I was most agreeably surprised to find how much of what I have thought for myself has been adopted by the Church. Oh, yes, I can certainly congratulate the Church on its intelligence.”

‘ One had an impression that he was patting the Pope’s head; but Don Pruno took another pinch of snuff.

“ And the long instruction will have to be preceded by a sign that you are serious, Monsieur le Comte.”

“ But naturally I am serious *mon père*. I am not accustomed to waste my own time or the time of other people.”

“ *C’est bien*,” the priest replied. “ And first of all I shall require an assurance from you that you will dismiss your secretary.”

“ Pardon? ”

“ It would be impossible to consider your request as serious unless the association between you and your secretary came finally to an end.”

“ Am I to understand, Monsieur, that you are permitting yourself to plan my future life? Let me tell you that nobody has ever dared to tell me what I must do. I imagined that you would welcome the intellectual surrender of a man like myself, but I perceive you are incapable of esteeming the sacrifice I am willing to make. No priest shall ever arrange my private conduct. That, I venture to say, is entirely my own affair. Indeed, I can assure you that I find your suggestion excessively impertinent. The suggestion that you should instruct me was merely *bête*. At that I could afford to laugh. But when you presume on my goodwill to attempt to manage my household . . . ah, no, that I find a little too strong.”

‘ The Count marched back to the Villa Hylas, head in air; and as he sat down at his desk to pour out in verse his indignation, he muttered: “ *Les Chrétiens ne sont que des Juifs . . . mais je n’accepterai jamais la circoncision de mon cœur . . . jamais!* ”

A.R.