

THE BRIDGE

(By the late Marjorie L. C. Pickthall)

[A Review by Francis J. Dickie.]

Since the following review of "The Bridge" by Francis Dickie reached our hands, people of literary interests in British Columbia and throughout Canada have been shocked by the report of the death in Vancouver of Marjorie Pickthall.

Marjorie Pickthall heretofore seems to have been known to Canadians solely as a poetess. Her book of verse, "The Drift of Pinions," in 1913, and the later volume with additional titles, "The Lamp of Poor Souls," produced a stir in reading circles both in Canada and the United States. It was after the publication of these books that no less an authority than Professor MacMechan, of Dalhousie University, in the course of a public address on Canadian literature, made the arresting statement, "for over twenty years I have been a watcher of the skies for the appearing of new stars. In that time four only have appeared, the greatest of whom is a woman—Marjorie Pickthall." And yet in spite of the remarkable character of her work and the wide appreciation she has had, there is still a large percentage of the body politic who have not heard of Marjorie Pickthall. We venture to say that the appearance this spring of her second novel, "The Bridge," Canadian in setting and universal in appeal, will spread the fame of this gifted writer far, for Canadian literature has reached a high level indeed in her book.

Maclear, the young engineer has built a bridge—and skimped its foundations. It is something that other contractors do every day to save a few dollars, but the bridge has collapsed, and in its fall has taken all that is dearest to him—his only brother. His brother's wife comes to him in his agony after the accident, pitying him and branding him as a murderer. She calls him "Poor Cain." The cut of her accusation unnerves him, but he will not admit his guilt even to himself. He did not intend the disaster; he believed he had left a wide margin of safety, and he had loved Gordon better than anything else on earth. He looks at his picture, he almost crawls before it in his terrible grief and admits nothing but a mere accident. Finally he walks past the blinded and shuttered house of his brother.

"Maclear stopped. This was the house where she and Gordon had lived. He turned and went away. He wondered why his feet had led him here. Everywhere he went there was some thought of Gordon, his ugly sweet face under its reddish thatch, smiling from the night. Maclear began to talk with him, as, in the back of his brain, he had talked for days and days.

"'You know I didn't mean it?'"

"'I know.'"

"'You know I'd have died to save you anyway, Gordy?'"

Maclear waited with trembling insistence for the answer. The imagined face seemed to look on him pitifully too; he could not endure it. "You know where you are, I'd have died to save you?"

After this phase the scene centres upon the Great Lakes, and the book is divided into three poetic episodes by the writer's own headings, "The Sand," "The Mist," "The Snow."

The gist of the story is that Alan Maclear disappears. After unsuccessfully attempting suicide, he is carried by a trusted boatmaster in his employ to an overgrown island in the lake, where he is determined to thrash out in his own mind the question of his guilt or innocence, and to renew his weakening hold on life. At length he believes he has succeeded—until one morning in his walk across the sands, he finds tracings of the structure of the Berimis Bridge perfect in every detail—he has outlined it

upon the beach in his sleep. The struggle is immediately renewed, and that night in a raging storm he is driven, half mad, across the shaggy undergrowth of the island. Hurling against a figure which stands facing the sea, he is rescued from the elemental ferocity of the night by a young girl who takes him to shelter in a deserted old hotel, called "Morning House," and it is from this point on that the real theme of "The Bridge" takes its course.

In the atmosphere surrounding "Morning House" the epitome of mysticism has been achieved. The old wooden building has sagged and sunken throughout the length and breadth of its many corridors, rooms and landings, until the dusty sand had penetrated its every cranny. Its inmates are Sombra, the woman, her brother Sal, and a blind periodically insane old-man cousin. Behind the drama which is enacted under the spell of that old place, looms the inevitable force of heredity, ancient hate and thwarted passion, a fiery Spanish sea-roving descent, and the intense elemental simplicity of homely unpolished lives; while out of the whole of it has been evolved the most inspiring and vital beauty. For the keynote of this novel, outside of its human purport, is its compelling beauty, unretouched beauty.

The tracing out of the psychology of the story is accomplished with ease and demonstrated by scenes that are thrilling and (oh, grateful find to the jaded reviewer) absolutely new. The action of the story laid upon the water and the beaches of the Great Lakes is appealingly real and in many cases almost overpoweringly touching. Nor is there a shade of affectation or overdoing of pathos or sacrifice. The extreme simplicity of nature of the people whom Alan finds to be inhabiting the island with him, the force of the things they do, the deep meaning that everything has for them, seems to reflect the influences of wind and water which have governed their lives and produced the vehement strength of their desires, loves and conscience. In the development of the character of the girl Sombra, for instance, there is forced upon the reader a realization that here is emotion in its purest form, here is an outlook that the ways of the life of today would make impossible, a sincerity that could not flourish outside of the natural isolation of the girl's existence. There are many incidents that would enhance this description, but I cannot help but feel that it would be unfair to sacrifice their freshness in mere reviewing. They must be enjoyed by everybody as his own discovery.

The conclusion of "The Bridge" is not obvious, and yet it is inevitable. Not until he has gone through every pang of loss and unreasonable circumstance, does Alan admit to himself and the woman he loves, his responsibility for his brother's death and his real guilt. After that, comes peace.

I have quite unconsciously, and without seeking them out, come across passages at random in this book which are comparable only to Stevenson at his best—bits of poetry of concept, felicity of expression that make reading an experience. There are dramatic incidents that are positively heart-gripping, and there are one or two pages of the most exquisitely turned humor. These are strong phrases, perhaps, but we urge "Read the book and see them borne out." It is in truth a rare piece of fiction, more, a rare piece of prose. Its appearance is an event of which any country