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J. Derrick McClure
Aberdeen University

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J. Derrick McClure

"Purely as Entertainment"? Adventures of Monsieur de Mailly as a Representative Work of David Lindsay.

Unquestionably, David Lindsay's historical novel is a vastly entertaining book: colourful in its setting, abounding in vividly portrayed characters, rapid and lively in its action, at times riotously funny; and also providing, to an astonishing degree, the pleasure which arises from seeing a device of brilliant ingenuity which is at once totally unexpected and totally logical. It is certainly the most immediately likeable of all his works, and the one which might have been least expected to lapse into near oblivion. At a first reading, moreover, it seems as dissimilar to the unearthly fantasies of A Voyage to Arcturus as to the quieter probings of The Haunted Woman and Sphinx. Yet to dismiss it as a mere pot-boiler, and to suggest that it stands wholly apart from the rest of Lindsay's work, are alike unperceptive. Though it contains virtually no supernatural elements (and certainly the "black dog" incident in Chapter VI did not require the imagination of a Lindsay for its conception: it would hardly be out of place in Dumas), it deals no less than his other novels with the questions of illusion and reality; to what extent those can be distinguished, and whether an ultimate reality in fact exists. And here as elsewhere, Lindsay firmly asserts a positive answer to the latter question; but not before treating the reader to

2 Throughout, I omit from consideration not only the unpublished novels but Devil's Tor, of which I have so far been unable to locate a copy.
3 "... his only true 'pot-boiler', The Adventures of Monsieur de Mailly ..." C. Wilson in The Strange Genius, p. 75.
4 "... a surprising freak or sport, a complete departure from Lindsay's characteristic vein. ... It cannot be considered in the body of Lindsay's work." E. H. Visiak, "Devil's Tor," in The Strange Genius, p. 135.

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such a degree of inversion, reversal, turning inside out and general mangling of his assumptions that his whole concepts of truth and pretence are called in question. Mailly is a historical romance to the same extent that Arcturus is a science-fiction novel and The Haunted Woman a ghost-story: it is a penetrating and disturbing philosophical speculation in the superficial disguise of a common literary genre; and I at least, on completing the book, felt scarcely less shaken, though much more pleasantly, than after my first reading of Arcturus.

When a reader comes across a book which he regards as deserving of a wider public than it has, his natural reaction is to recommend it to others; and one way of doing this is by writing an article which will call attention to its merits. In the case of this particular book, however, a difficulty arises: the last thing a considerate critic could wish to do is to spoil the effect of the book for future readers by giving away even one of the intricate twists in its plot. As it is clearly impossible in discussing the book to avoid this completely, I offer the following cautions at the outset of the essay: Here is a book which will assuredly be enjoyed by anybody who has found other works of its author interesting, or indeed by anybody who has a taste for a good story; and I strongly recommend that people in these categories, before reading about Mailly, should read the book itself (if they can find a copy). That said, I return to the discussion of the novel.

Mailly, in its chronological position in the sequence of Lindsay's works, represents a natural stage in the development of his thought, or of his use of fiction to reveal his thought. In Arcturus, he systematically demolishes each of the possible attitudes which may be used as defences against reality, and finally presents a terrifying picture of the universe as it appears when all comforting delusions are gone. The protagonist wanders from one false position to another, adopting the attitudes of the characters he meets in each successive episode, only to find that altruism, egoism, moral dedication, domesticity, devotion to art, religious fervour, and sexual infatuation are alike useless in the face of the real world. (It is not necessary for my present purpose to go beyond this obviously simplistic summary of the book). The Haunted Woman (which is certainly no more like Arcturus than Mailly is like either) is much less far-reaching; but conveys with no less success, through the medium not of an episodic
fantasy but of a low-toned novel constructed with classical regularity, the notion of another world—beautiful, enticing, dangerous, but "real"—behind the conventional masks which constitute life for most people: the author repeats in a much less spectacular form part of the previous book's message, as if to emphasize its relevance to the lives of his readers. *Sphinx* at first sight seems to be merely a more elaborate and cumbersome treatment of the same theme; and certainly the supernatural element is used for virtually the same purpose as in *The Haunted Woman*, namely to provide glimpses of the reality behind formal social patterns. It differs noticeably from its predecessor, however, in placing much greater emphasis on the delusions which exist within the natural world. By depicting a social milieu in which the guiding principle (at least for the females) seems to be that each person must maintain his-or-her own mask intact while trying his-or-her level best to penetrate behind that of everybody else—and in the full awareness that everybody else is acting with precisely the same purpose—Lindsay is able to suggest that not one but several layers of error may overlie the ultimate truth. Evelyn's conviction that she sees through Celia and Celia's conviction that she sees through everybody, Nicholas's increasing inability to comprehend the mental processes of the women, and the diverse and changing attitudes expressed towards Lore, combine to leave the reader with disquieting doubts concerning the true natures and circumstances of the characters. As in *Arcturus* but without the machinery of fantasy, and certainly without the same attempt at differentiating and categorizing the various poses, Lindsay explores the complex fancies of error which must be passed through before reality is reached. The same concept is symbolized in the final vision, what first appears as Lore's shadow being then seen as a real Lore, herself casting a shadow subsequently revealed as a third Lore. It is perhaps significant of his greater involvement with the natural world that the supernatural—that is, the "real"—can be reached, in this book, only in dreams or after death: in *The Haunted Woman* (and also in *Arcturus*, for the death of Maskull is not the death of a human being but merely the destruction of the conventional persona behind which the real self is hidden) the suggestion has seemed to be that a true vision can be attained, though only with great difficulty and danger, through the everyday world. The dream sequences, too, take up a proportionally smaller part of the book than do the supernatural
scenes in *The Haunted Woman*. Mailly simply represents the next logical step: in this novel Lindsay focusses his whole attention on the misconceptions and misunderstandings that can occur in ordinary life, and the attempts of one man to discover reality, or create his own reality, in a world of posing and intrigue; and without invoking a supernatural world suggests that whatever the ultimate truth may be, several co-exist realms of fraud remain steadily in front of it. (Is it an accident that the story is set in the Paris of Louis XIV, where social ceremonial was developed to a degree rarely surpassed?—though in all conscience, the English society portrayed in *The Haunted Woman* and *Sphinx* is a close rival.) *Sphinx* without the dream sequences would be a novel of the same kind as *Mailly*, though a much less satisfactory one. As much as in any of the earlier novels, the reader is left wondering, after several enforced reconsiderations of the evidence presented to him, precisely what he has in fact seen and whether he has interpreted it correctly. Undoubtedly the book is much more light hearted in tone than its predecessors (though it is typical of Lindsay's refusal to conform to convention in literature any more than he does in philosophy that an episode of stark and completely unexpected tragedy occurs in the middle of the novel), and it is unusual too in that the protagonist is in complete control throughout the book of whatever situation presents itself to him; but these features are by no means sufficient to exclude the book from consideration in an assessment of Lindsay's achievement.

The second of the novel's four virtually self-contained episodes provides a clear illustration of the author's method: the surface effect of delightful comedy is obtained by the presentation of an intricate network of misconstructions arising from a casual joke, in which each of the participants has his own distinct interpretation of the real circumstances. Mimizan sets the train of events in motion by facetiously suggesting what he knows, and expects Mailly to recognize, as an outlandish place and time for Puy's rendezvous with M'dle. Molfetti. He fails to realize that however familiar a courtly custom may be to a courtier it has not the status of a universal law, and therefore forms no part of the world-view of a man who, like Mailly, does not frequent the court; that is, he mistakes a convention for ultimate truth. (His surprise and anger on finding that Mailly has taken his suggestion literally show how far he was from antici-
pating that this might happen.) Mailly, however, in his ignorance of the usages of Versailles, regards Mimizan’s joke as seriously meant. His innocent delivery of the message to Mdle. Molfetti is interpreted by her as a cruel insult directed against her as a foreigner, and by her companion as a deliberate jest, when in fact it is neither. The companion now reacts in the light of her own view of the situation: to a clever and witty lady such as she obviously is, what could be more natural than to counter the jest by an equally preposterous suggestion of her own, that Mailly should arrange another rendezvous on her behalf with the Comte de Luxelles? (The appearance and manner of Luxelles, when he is introduced, show just how preposterous is the notion that this girl could desire a rendezvous with him.) And to Mailly, what could be more natural, albeit disagreeable, than that she should wish to accompany her younger friend at a meeting with a gentleman whom neither knows well, and should take an escort herself in anticipation of possible undesirable developments? The conversation in which each of them talks from a different viewpoint is admirably conceived. Mailly, still taking the lady’s suggestion at its face value, is perceptive enough to realize that a joke is involved; but reacts by constructing a totally erroneous view of the situation: Mimizan is using him, Mailly, in a trick on Puig. Throughout, the reader is of course as innocent as Mailly, sharing his puzzlement but provisionally accepting his interpretation of the circumstances. Reader and hero are equally taken aback, therefore, when Luxelles, after enjoying with his retinue a good laugh at Mailly’s expense, enlightens him regarding the false name given by Mdle. Molfetti’s companion—which seems to explain adequately not only Luxelles’s amusement but that of the two girls. This, however, is another trick on Lindsay’s part: now that Luxelles has apparently destroyed the illusion under which Mailly and the reader have been labouring, the inclination is to accept everything which he says as reliable. Furthermore, he knows the lady in question despite the false name, which seems to confirm that the affair had a basis in reality. It is not until Mailly’s third interview, with Mme. de Noircamp, that it becomes clear that Luxelles has not ended but elaborated on the joke. (Luxelles himself is under a misapprehension:

1A similar device is employed more than once in Arcturus. This is examined in “Language and Logic in A Voyage to Arcturus” by the present writer; forthcoming in Scottish Literary Journal.
he evidently takes Mailly for a mere fool, as is shown by his choice of woman with whom Mailly is to arrange, on his behalf, yet another rendezvous—though even this is supplied by Mailly with a perfectly reasonable conjectural explanation. The extent of Luxelles's error is already known to the reader and will be reconfirmed shortly; yet from his circumscribed viewpoint, that of a conceited and somewhat dull man for whom the world is bounded by the walls of Versailles, a man who acts as Mailly has done could be nothing but a fool.) It now turns out that the entire sequence of actions performed by Mailly since his arrival at Versailles, awkward and embarrassing enough in themselves, has been based on a false assumption: that the Terrace of the Orangery is open to the public, which everybody except he (and the reader) knows as a matter of course that it is not. No wonder he is "angry, nervous and humiliated" (Chapter IV). This, surely, is the last stage: the actual truth on which all that has gone before is based has now been shown. But this is not enough for Lindsay. He has already demonstrated Mailly's talent for refashioning reality to suit himself; for example, his splendid handling of the gentleman who mocks him when he first appears at the court, and his equally skilful riposte to the other nobleman who asks him for tickets to the Terrace of the Orangery. This hero is not daunted by mere facts: a gentleman can become an attendant if it suits Mailly, and does. The whole of his present discomfiture is a result of the fact that, to all Versailles, it is an unshakeable law of nature that anybody of lesser rank than a Prince of the Blood could no more walk on the Terrace of the Orangery than on the moon (in a court where it is recorded that a certain nobleman, on being asked the time by the King, replied "Il est l'heure qui plaira à Votre Majesté," this is hardly an overstatement). He now causes the ground to vanish from under the feet of his tormentors by persuading King Louis—who emerges as the only clear-sighted man at Versailles, besides Mailly himself—to make a special exception to his decree enforcing the privacy of the Terrace, and is thus transformed from the laughing-stock of the court to the privileged recipient of the King's favour.

A superb comic story, but not only this. Every character has put his own interpretation on the facts, and the various interpretations are neither accurate nor mutually consistent. The final coup involves a guarantee that all the illusions will be superseded not by realization
of the truth but by a new illusion: the court is to be left with the impression that Louis had already decided to open the Terrace, when in fact his decision was made on Mailly's suggestion. This misinterpretation will, besides, have a retrospective effect: the general view of the entire sequence of events from Mailly's arrival at Versailles will have to be revised; and Luxelles's behaviour shows how completely it is revised. Furthermore, the final resolution is a grand joke played on the court by Mailly and Louis; but can any decision of an absolute monarch, treated with something like idolatry by his subjects, be a joke? If the King wants the court to think that what has happened and is to happen was entirely in accordance with his will, who will question it? Louis himself, of course, is under no illusion: Lindsay's gift for character drawing is admirably revealed in his perceptive and sympathetic portrayal of a monarch who, though accustomed to flattery and deference, recognizes it for what it is and realizes that most of his courtiers are gifted with little else but skill in flattery; but for the rest of the court the deception is complete. As in Arcturus, Lindsay conducts his characters, and readers, through a maze of events in which fact and fiction are inextricably jumbled. And at the very end, a new aura of unreality is added to the whole affair by the revelation that it need never have happened, arising as it did from Puy's desire for closer acquaintance with a girl who, unknown to him or to any of the other participants, had been betrothed since the previous day.

In the tragic episode of Ventailles, the story likewise hinges on a tissue of errors and misconceptions. Three views of the basic situation are expressed before any of the characters have even appeared: by Fleurus, that the woman is mad; by Mailly at first that the Marquis is a scoundrel, and later (having learned the identity of the Marquis) that the woman is greedy and spiteful. And during Mailly's journey through Ventailles's estate, every detail which he observes leads him to a new conjectural reconstruction of the situation, which has thus been presented in several different lights to the reader even before he knows what it is. Despite all the conjecture, it turns out to be much more remarkable than anybody has, or could have, suspected: Ventailles has knowingly married, from a pair of twin sisters, not the one he loves but the one he rather dislikes. The explanation which follows reveals that each character once again has acted on his own independent interpretation of the information
presented to him, and that as none was in possession of the actual facts the results have been disastrous. The case of Claire is in no way an exception; in concocting her elaborate scheme for tricking Ventailles and Villary-Loguette, she omitted to take into account the necessary consequence that the latter would demand satisfaction of the former, which, given the impossibility of duelling to which Ventailles refers, would entail at least the chance of her new husband's losing his marquisate (her only reason for wishing to marry him). Here again, the characters have acted under illusions, which have since been destroyed. But is the unattractive reality which has replaced them reality indeed, or can it too be altered? Mailly's astounding proposal for rectifying the whole situation to the satisfaction of all concerned (except the villainess, who will receive her just punishment) involves, as in the Versailles episode but with much greater elaboration, a total restructuring of past and present—one can hardly go further in this direction than by inventing on the spur of the moment a tradition dating back to the Gauls of Caesar and Germanicus—which, from his comprehensive exposition of his plan, seems to have no flaw. Certainly the projected situation which his scheme will bring into being will be based on a falsehood; but as few people will know this and those who do will certainly not reveal it, from what point of view can it be described as false? Moreover, Ventailles wanted, intended, and both morally and legally ought, to be married to Aglaé, and Villary-Loguette likewise to Claire. Can a device which ensures that the sisters are thus assigned be classified as a falsification? The philosophical speculation is forced on the reader, though on the surface the story resembles a piece of straightforward, if unusually clever, romance.

However, Lindsay as always refuses to do what might be expected of him. Mailly's stratagem is never put into operation, and the question whether it would have worked or not remains unanswered. Deliberately, Lindsay leaves the reader puzzling. Deliberately, too, he immediately provides a distraction in the shape of a violent and fast-moving sequence of events: Mailly is faced with a piece of reality which even his ingenuity cannot undo, and, though forced to take on the completely undesired role of protector of his friend's murderess, shows that he is as capable in a situation which requires speed and boldness as in one which requires intellectual subtlety. Ventailles's attempt to cross the frontier between the worlds
of actuality and fantasy has ended, like those of Judge and Nicholas, in disaster. But after the excitement is over, the reader is inescapably drawn back to the scene of Mailly's exposition of his plot (an inclination reinforced by Mailly's actual return to Ventailles's chateau to retrieve his hat; a detail which, though perfectly in character, is surely too unexpected to have been included for no reason at all) and obliged to ponder on what might have happened if this incredible device had been put into practice. Surely no author but Lindsay would invent a scheme at once so ingenious, so far-fetched and so elaborately worked out only to throw it away unused, but it is entirely typical of him. What better way for an author to involve his readers in the questions of the nature of fact and fiction which he raises than by inviting them to speculate on a plot he did not write? (The same effect is present, though to a much lesser extent, in the Jambac episode, where Mailly also proposes an outlandish but seemingly viable method of resolving a difficulty only to be unexpectedly thwarted by brute facts.)

The last and most elaborate of the four "adventures," which takes up more than half the book, is of a complexity which almost defies analysis. Against the deceptively reassuring background of solidity and stability provided by the intense clarity, detail, and realism of Lindsay's visual descriptions (a feature invariably present in his work, whether he is describing an unearthly dream world, a stately English manor-house, a pleasant path beside a river, or a domestic interior in Paris) and the meticulous precision with which he enumerates each gesture, and the exact moments of entrance and exit, of the various characters, a story is played out which involves a sequence of deceptions, cross-purposes, mistaken identities and misinterpreted motives so intricate that long before the end a reader is liable either to have fallen several steps behind or to have given up all attempt to do anything but enjoy the story as a simple thriller. Yet the plot is entirely self-consistent, and the logic of events flawless. Lindsay—almost unfairly—also reinforces the devastating effect of the story on the reader's intellect by ensuring that the action is so rapid and exciting as to give him no time, or inclination, to pause and disentangle the growing complexities of the plot. What he achieves in Arcturus by his remarkable imagination he achieves here by his gift for sheer drama: the reader is swept along by the appeal of the book to one level of enjoyment so that the questions which it raises are
pushed into the background of his mind, providing a disturbing undercurrent while he is in process of reading the novel and emerging, cumulatively reinforced, into full consciousness when he has completed it. The question in his mind while absorbed in the novel is: can Mailly's audacity and wit carry him unscathed through a very dangerous situation? It is not until he closes the book that a deeper question forces itself on his awareness: what precisely was the situation? I will cite only one illustration of the intricacy of this section of the novel. Concerning the identity of the woman hiding in the apartment, Pontchartrain and Chastelnoir each believe it to be the same person, though neither would accept the other's reasons for expecting that person to be there; Mdle. Passy and Argenson share a different impression of her identity, but Argenson is wholly taken aback to learn (as he thinks) of the appearance of a woman whose presence to Mdle. Passy is a matter of course. In fact she is neither of the women expected; yet on the one hand her presence would have seemed entirely natural to anybody acquainted with all the circumstances, and on the other none of the four characters mentioned, with the knowledge at his disposal, could have reached any other conclusion than he did reach. The conjecture of Polecrab in Arcturus that "We are each of us living in a false private world of our own, a world of... distorted perceptions" could hardly be more clearly illustrated.

Lindsay’s concern, in this book no less than in his others, is with fact and fantasy; with the simultaneous existence of several worlds, or at least of several views of the world, each of which may be attractive or even unavoidable to the people who hold it but not all of which can be valid. He may, as in Arcturus, examine each of them in turn, or, as in Sphinx and to a greater extent in Mailly, focus on their complex interaction; he may end by destroying all illusions or by stating the necessity of maintaining at least one (in Sphinx, Evelyn's final discovery of the relationship between her father and Lore will never be known to anybody but her); but his basic theme is the same. The ending of Mailly might be seen as a particularly grim example of a deception maintained: the hero has triumphed and confidently expects further successes; but this may be the gravest error of all, as few readers can be unaware that the imminent war referred to, in which he will be commanding a regiment, resulted in disastrous defeat for France. However, Mailly is
unique among Lindsay’s protagonists in that, though the world in which he moves is shifting and unstable, he himself is not affected. His adroitness, audacity, and self-possession remain absolutely consistent, and sufficient for the handling of any situation which presents itself (correctly or otherwise) to him. We need not doubt that he will cope equally well with anything that may arise in his subsequent career.

Lindsay is not a writer whose works would appeal to all; this may be admitted at once. Yet the almost total neglect of such a remarkable and gifted novelist is astonishing; though less so, unhappily, in Scotland than it would be elsewhere. His connection with the Scottish literary tradition is at first sight tenuous, certainly: he owes as little to tradition as any man could; but his interest in the supernatural is shared by, among others, Scott, Hogg and Stevenson; and, more importantly, his intense and persistent questioning of the nature of reality is of the same kind as that which gives rise to much that is characteristic in Scottish literature. The case for a revival of interest in his work has been cogently argued elsewhere, though of course the best case is contained in his novels themselves. Yet *Adventures of Monsieur de Mailly* has been virtually ignored even by those who have written with admiration and insight on his other books. Enough has been said here, I hope, not only to call attention to the novel as a fascinating work in its own right, but to suggest that it is much more characteristic of its author than has been supposed.

*Aberdeen University*

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6Cf. Kurt Wittig, *The Scottish Tradition in Literature*, (Edinburgh, 1958), pp. 248–50 and elsewhere. I am indebted to Mr. Freddie Freeman for suggesting to me Lindsay’s connection with this aspect of the Scottish literary tradition.


8F. B. Pick in “The Work of David Lindsay,” *SSL*, i (Jan. 1964), fails even to mention the book.