

Book review

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plate of «Akerman» on the ground-floor. Hesitatingly I rang the bell. A woman, about my own age, opened the door.

«Excuse me, but I'd like to inquire into the whereabouts of a certain Mr. Joseph Akerman,» I said, «I used to know him quite well some thirty years ago.»

«That must have been my brother-in-law,» the woman answered.

«Must have been . . .?»

«Yes, he was reported missing in Russia in 1945. We never heard from him again.» When the woman saw my consternation she asked me to come in. She offered me a chair and started talking, mostly about herself and her own family. Finally I asked her whether there wasn't a photograph of Joe left. She went into the next room and came back with a large cigar box crammed with family photographs. She rummaged through them and held out two small snapshots.

«That's my brother-in-law.»

It gave me a slight shock. These were snaps I'd taken of Joe myself some thirty years ago, on a happy, sunny afternoon in my sloping room. I'd lost my own prints with everything else when my house was destroyed during the war. Strange to see the very same snapshots emerge from an old cigar box now.

«Would you be so kind,» I asked the woman, «as to let me have these small snaps? You see, I took these myself ages ago.»

«Of course, you can have them. Gladly. We have others of him.» And I saw the others — Joe, grown older, and, later on, in uniform. For him, as for me, time had not stood still.

I thanked the woman for the pictures and took my leave. At the streetcar stop I sat for a long time on a bench. I looked at the snapshots, and happy memories flitted through my brain. But when I realized that Joe was the first one of my lovers of whose death I had learned, I felt all of a sudden incredibly old.

R.B.

Book Review

MASK OF FLESH by Maxence van der Mersch. London: William Kimber 1960

The doubts and self-questioning of this novel read like the confessions of a dope addict who cannot shake the monkey on his back.

It is almost a diary, vividly describing the shame and remorse of a man who cannot reconcile himself to his homosexuality. He looks back with horror on his awakening to the fact that he cannot be accepted into a world which does not understand his compulsion. He remembers his loving grandmother, his domineering mother and ineffectual father, his quest for love and affection from casual strangers who are seeking only physical release.

A priest, to whom he confesses, spurns him with the words «You are a monster! You are damned!» When he seeks advice from a doctor on whether he should marry, he is given illustrations of such unions which end in chaos and misery. He is not content with advice from his friends-in-experience: «Stink as little as possible. Go on putrefying discreetly.»

His efforts to stifle his «abnormal» desires lead him to aid the Abbe Tiennot. Here he comes to know people who love truly and deeply, despite wretched circumstances. Yet this ends in his forcing himself upon a 17-year old who is disgusted, and his self-recrimination leads him to virtual immolation in an effort to subdue his mask of flesh.

Compassion for human beings in this plight suffuses the entire book. Is it significant that «Mask of Flesh» was written about the time of the author's «Bodies and Souls» but not published until after his death?

D. deAngelis

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