



THREE WEEKS THAT SHOOK THE WORLD

ELINOR GLYN, the "high priestess of romance," is the subject of a BBC radio portrait to be heard from the National Women's Session on Wednesday, July 31. Anthony Glyn, her grandson and biographer, and Robert Gladwell, producer and narrator, draw the outlines, and details have been filled in by her daughters, Margot Lady Davison and Lady Rhys Williams, and by the film celebrities Marion Davies, Mary Pickford, Gloria Swanson, Carl Brisson, and Samuel Goldwyn.

Brought up in the Canadian backwoods, Elinor Glyn moved into European society in 1892 on her marriage to Clayton Glyn. When there was no more money, she turned to writing, and over the years she published some 33 novels. The best known of these, *Three Weeks*, shook the Edwardian social world to its solid foundations, and achieved enormous success when it was published in 1907. As queen of passion and romance she went to Hollywood in 1920, making film scripts of her novels, writing new stories for the screen, inventing a specialised use for the word "It" which helped to launch the screen career of a rising young actress called Clara Bow.

The flamboyant role Elinor Glyn assumed in the popular imagination has quite obscured the qualities her friends mention—her kindness, her willingness to help others, the commonsense of much of her advice, her own physical and mental self-discipline, and her love

of the classics. The BBC programme begins with one of the more purple passages from *Three Weeks*:

"A bright fire burnt in the grate, and some palest orchid-mauve silk curtains were drawn in the lady's room when Paul entered from the terrace. And the loveliest sight of all, in front of the fire, stretched at full length, was his

LEFT: Elinor Glyn—"Those who look beyond will understand . . . the Soul in it all"

tiger—and on him also at full length reclined the lady, garbed in some strange clinging garment of heavy purple crepe, its hem embroidered with gold, one white arm resting on the beast's head, her back supported by a pile of velvet cushions, and a heap of rarely bound books at her side, while between her red lips was a rose not redder than they—an almost scarlet rose. . . She merely raised her eyes and looked Paul through and through. Her whole expression was changed; it was wicked and dangerous and *provocante*."

And so the book goes on down to the inevitable, indispensable asterisks. Roused by these passages, listeners may be tempted to make for the nearest library to discover the thrills of this immortal classic. Or older hands may awaken memories like those of S. J. Perelman, who wrote in one of his *Cloudland Revisited* pieces of the effect *Three Weeks* had upon a certain 15-year-old:

"For a space of three or four days, or until the effects . . . had worn off, the boy believed himself to be a wealthy young Englishman named Paul Verdayne, who had been blasted by a searing love affair with a mysterious Russian noblewoman. His behaviour during that period, while courteous and irreproachable to family and friends alike, was marked by fits of abstraction and a tendency to emit tragic, heartbroken sighs. When asked to sweep up the piazza, for instance, or bike

over to the hardware store for a sheet of Tanglefoot, a shadow of pain would flit across his sensitive features and he would assent with a weary shrug. 'Why not?' he would murmur, his lips curling in a bitter, mocking smile. 'What else can life hold for me now?' Fortunately his parents, who had seen him through a previous seizure in which he had identified himself with William S. Hart, were equipped to deal with his vagaries. They toned up his system with syrup of figs, burned his library card, and bought a second-hand accordion to distract him."

If Perelman is to be believed—a point on which the reader must reach his own conclusion—*Three Weeks* still packs a punch. Re-reading the tigerskin episode did not leave him altogether unscathed. "How high a voltage the protagonists generate in the two remaining weeks of their affair, I cannot state with precision; the dial on my galvanometer burst shortly afterwards, during a scene where they are shown cradled in a hotel on the Burgenstock, exchanging baby talk and feeding each other great, luscious red strawberries. At Venice, to which they migrate for no stringent reason except that the author wanted to ring in a vignette of Mme Zalska biting Paul's ear lobes in a gondola, there is an account of their pleasure dome that deserves attention."

And so on, and so on. But any eroticism lurking here was apparently not intended by Elinor Glyn, who stated in her introductions to the American and later English editions that she "meant it very simply . . . to show the tremendous force of a great love for elevation of character. The minds of some human beings are as moles, grubbing in the earth for worms. They have no eyes to see God's sky with the stars in it. To such *Three Weeks* will be but a sensual record of passion. But those who do look up beyond the material will understand the deep pure love, and the Soul in it all."

Perelman, alas, found a re-reading moved him not to an awareness of the Soul in it all, or even to romantic yearnings, but to laughter. Women's Hour listeners may well find themselves moving in the same direction.



MARY PICKFORD



SAM GOLDWYN



GLORIA SWANSON

Besides tiger-skins and rose bowers, commonsense advice and a love of the classics