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Lolly Comes to Town

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Abstract

This is a feature interview about Sylvia Townsend Warner, shortly after her arrival in New York in 1929 to work for a month as a guest contributor to the *New York Herald Tribune*.

Keywords Sylvia Townsend Warner; New York; *New York Herald Tribune*.

If all visitors from abroad came to us with the enthusiasm that is Sylvia Townsend Warner's there would be no need for peace pacts and we could go ahead being our own sweet selves. Miss Warner wrote 'Lolly Willowes' and 'Mr. Fortune's Maggot', and fashioned much beauty into two volumes of verse. She came here on Friday from England, to spend four weeks. She came with the interest and curiosity of a child, certain she would like us because she was on a holiday. And, like a child, she takes it for granted that we will like her.

Because her eyes look through her heavy glasses with such candor, you will find yourself joining in her mood. She is so eager and so expectant that you realize all over again how much there is to see and learn on the Isle of Manhattan.

The adjectives 'young' and 'little' may get into this bit about Miss Warner. Yet neither is accurate save to suggest the first impression she makes. She is somewhere in her thirties, one guesses; rather tall, seeming even taller than she is because she is so slender. Her speech is high and quick.

She is the daughter of an English schoolmaster and still seems just that until she begins to talk. When she left her paternal roof to

go on her own in London, she tried to fashion beautiful music. But she found after a good try at this that the music other people wrote sounded sweeter to her, and she took that to mean that she was not much good.

Then, just seven years ago, she decided she would write. She was told that her novels had evoked a high degree of enthusiasm.

'Yes, you know I think they are the nicest books that ever were written,' was her reply.

It was not said in the manner of a Shaw, stating the incontrovertible. It was more like a child who has built a snowman and looking at it believes it to be the 'nicest' snowman that ever was fashioned. That naive admission of delight in her own work was an additional reason for liking her.

And how she makes you like America! She was asked what she wanted to see. 'The Woolworth Building,' she exclaimed, without a moment's thought.

She had seen it as she came up the bay, but she wanted more.

'Your city is like an enormous fortress,' she said. 'Why any one should go to see Venice when they can look at what I have seen to-day, I can't understand. I have only one complaint. The Statue of Liberty should be bigger. We expect something more immense.'

Her next desire in this country is that of an adult, yet, as she explains it, one sees in it the wish of a youngster to go to a circus.

'I want to hear a Fundamentalist.' Just that.

She told of hearing Aimee Semple MacPherson¹ in London, and being greatly excited at the show and marveling at the charm the woman exerted over her audience. But Mrs. MacPherson did not completely satisfy. She wants to hear one in his native lair.

'I want to see New York dancing, for I understand you dance here better than anywhere.' That was her next wish.

She hadn't said a word about prohibition, which seems, after all, one of the most curious things here, so she was asked if she had no curiosity about a speakeasy. No, she had none. She was a little afraid, because she had heard that the stuff sold here is rather dangerous to a 'sophisticated drinker.' That jarred, because one had been talking to a child and suddenly heard that. But in a minute she was back.

'I want to make more American friends.' And she will, too.

'I want to try American cooking. You must have wonderful things.'

We tried to tell her that our best chefs were French chefs. We thought of trying to get 'American' food in a great dining hall here. But

that wasn't what she meant. 'Your Southern chicken, it must be fine,' she explained. As she went on she made one listener realize that on a cold day there could be nothing better than a pot of pork and beans as a New England housewife cooks them.

She has come to see America on her first trip outside of England. But what she is really going to do is make the Americans she meets realize there is something here to see. She is going to make her friends here become enthusiastic Americans.

New York Herald Tribune, 27 January 1929

Note

- 1 Aimee Semple McPherson (1890–1944), Pentecostal evangelist preacher and founder in 1927 of the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel.