

## INTRODUCTION

BY EDWARD GARNETT

IN calling attention to *The Two Sisters* I think critics of insight will agree that the novel is a signal example of a rare species, and one, moreover, easy to be overlooked in the yearly cataract of fiction. A friend, a story-teller of reputation, was at first surprised that a novel of so poetical a character should emerge to-day, but after consideration he agreed: 'Yes, what we need now is the novel of essentials, for the realistic chronicle novel threatens to suffocate us by mere weight.' Perhaps. But if this is so it is because most novelists will insist on telling us too much. They follow the easy plan, 'I am going to tell you all about myself and my friends, the characters, and their families, and their neighbours, and their surroundings, and their past, and their present and everything else just as I think of it. Yes, you shall hear everything. Only listen!' It is much too much, because our civilization, that octopus, has its elastic tentacles stretching everywhere, assailing each individual — too many interests, activities and engagements, too much to attend to, too much to read and consider and too much to hear. Just as the ordinary room holds unnecessary furniture so the ordinary novel is crowded with an excess of detail, with a plethora of information and a congestion of comments. One sighs for the sparse line, for grace of outline, for the rare gift that extracts the essential word from the shallow rapids of conversations. One longs to get back to essentials, especially to the essential of beauty. And the element of beauty that our utilitarian civilization pushes out more and more with its 'tubes' and 'wireless', with its newspapers and telephones and other disseminating, speeding-up mechanics of life, is an element that pervades *The Two Sisters*.

The author, of course, has the advantage over most of us of being quite young. His novel is about Youth at the period when youth absorbed in its own ardours and frustrated longings



can make grief itself into a luxury of passion. And his achievement is that, while identified with his creations, Jenny, Tessie and Michael, the author has known how to detach himself from these figures of eternal youth and show them, with all their tumultuous, passionate emotions, in a beautiful mirror. That is remarkable in an author of twenty years.

I leave it for others to pick out this or that weakness in the story. That may be safely entrusted to the hands of others. But to those (and I am sure that there will be writers among them) who, like myself, are grateful for beautiful things, I would instance the pages on Jenny's rest in the church (pp. 23-27) and the chapter which describes Tessie's visit to the Dance Hall (pp. 50-54). In such little scenes the author guided by his sure instinct, instead of over-loading his descriptions with details, has pierced to the spirit of things by swift intuition and intensity of perception. How admirable is artistic economy may be seen by the conversations between the two sisters. Thus Tessie's rapt, artless sigh in bed, 'It was very wonderful', tells us everything about herself at the dance, in a single line. Not in twenty lines but in one. Great is artistic economy. I may be excused for dwelling on this aspect for we moderns have forgotten that it is the begetter of grace and beauty. Truth to essentials, implying both precision of insight and precision of touch in the writer, is exemplified by his treatment of the tensivity of feeling, growing and growing between Tessie and Jenny and Michael (Chapters VI to VIII in Book Three) and bursting in the final cry, 'You will be able to go about with a smile'. All the sweet turmoil of first love's absorption in itself soon fades, however, from the memory of the middle-aged who may here live again in their early emotions in following Michael's feelings before he meets Jenny on the backwater (pp. 147-148). 'He felt too stupendously happy to return to Jenny.' This is the bloom of youth's ecstasy of feeling, like the bloom on youth's cheek.

The author's artistic handling of dramatic suspense is evident throughout the story, but nowhere more so than in the remarkable River chapter (Chapter XV) where the unforeseen happens.

The claim that *The Two Sisters*, wherever it may fall short, is of a rare poetical order, is attested by the opening scene of Jenny's homeward journey and clenched by the atmospheric truth and beauty of the angry River ending.

This said, it is best to hazard no conjecture about the author's future work. There is the path of art endlessly difficult and the path of facile achievement and it depends on the youthful writer's star which he shall follow.

EDWARD GARNETT

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