

Reproduced by kind permission of Evensford Productions Limited and  
Pollinger Limited. Copyright c Evensford Productions Limited, 1932.

## FOREWORD

THE meticulous art with which David Garnett constructs his stories often strikes me as being comparable with the art that the chaffinch brings to the building of its nest. The chaffinch builds a nest that is perhaps more delightful than all others in its exquisite shape and finish, cunningly delaying it until the hawthorn has burst into leaf and can camouflage its soft greenness. I used to know as a boy the secret places of a great many birds' nests, from the earliest sky-lark's my grandfather used to find for me among the coltsfoot-flowers to the fourth or fifth brood of moorhens hidden in the tall summer reeds ringing the pond. Nests were always a delight to me, as I suppose they are to every child, but the most delightful was the neat green cup of the chaffinch, perfect to the last hair warmed and pressed into shape by the bird's body. I used to wonder, and I sometimes still wonder, how it was done, but nothing so defies men's conjectures and analysis as the nest of a bird, and I am inclined now to accept the nest of the chaffinch as H. G. Wells first accepted *Lady Into Fox*: "I have

nothing to say about how it was done, because I think it is properly done and could not have been done in any other way."

Quite apart from this comparison with the chaffinch there is I think something very bird-like about David Garnett's work; its uncanny perfection of balance, its delicacy and grace, its beautiful rhythm, its gay fantasy and brilliance, its attractive combination of simplicity and perky mockery. He has a peculiar genius for describing things very much as a bird might see them, swiftly and simply, but with a marvellous comprehension and clarity of detail and colour.

Out of the corner of his eye he catches sight of a beautiful object, alights quickly, describes it in a flash and is off again. To my mind this is a great art and one which few writers share with him. He satisfies himself with a flash of colour, a word, a look, a stream, a cloud, with the result that his work is often more like etching or painting than writing. Contemporary prose is certainly more pictorial than discursive, but in Garnett's work there are examples of pictorial prose which place him far above countless of his contemporaries.

There are few artists indeed with whom we can satisfactorily compare him. I have seen him described as being as austere and coldly perfect as Bach, but words like austere and cold fit neither Bach nor Garnett in the slightest degree. More generally and perhaps more truthfully he has been compared with Defoe, and I daresay he is already sick to death of the comparison. Every writer is in some degree like another writer and there would be something wrong if it were not so.

Garnett shares with Defoe an apparently simple cunning which may be conscious or unconscious, but which both use so effectively that it becomes the easiest thing in the world to believe in the actuality of the things and people they are describing. Garnett used this gift perfectly in *The Sailor's Return*, when one believes absolutely in the negress Tulip, and in a lesser degree he uses it again in *A Terrible Day*, when the girls and the old gentleman are most vividly alive.

*A Terrible Day* is characteristic of Garnett in another respect. It is an experiment. Perfect though some of his stories are he can never rest on their perfection or the laurels they bring him. After the success of *Lady Into Fox* a

lesser artist would have plagued us with young litters of fox-cubs until he had forced us all in desperation to become hunters. Garnett chose instead to write a trifle about an English sailor who brings home a negress, and he is so diversely interested that it might easily have been an Eskimo or the tragedy of the business man in *A Terrible Day*. His mind is so fresh and alive that it would not in the least surprise me to know that he was writing at this moment the history of a Japanese poacher, or the story of a Polish countess, or the travels of a gentleman in Spain during the eighteenth century, or a satire on modern Chelsea. He is equal to any one of them, and therein lies perhaps the secret of his unusual charm and force as a writer.

H. E. Bates.

Little Chart, 1931.