EDWARD GARNETT.

AN APPRECIATION OF A GREAT CRITIC.

By H. E. BATES.

I FIRST met Edward Garnett in 1926. I was twenty. I was out of work, with no assets at all except my parents and the MS. of a novel, which Garnett had read. That novel was *The Two Sisters*, and later that year it appeared with a preface by Garnett. In the whole literary world of that day—and it contained some considerable figures—there was nobody whose praise I would rather have had than Edward Garnett's, and that remained true, for me, for the ten years or so until he died.

The late Mr. Edward Garnett.

Edward Garnett was the friend and counsellor of great men, and it is my opinion that he was a great man himself. Other critics have had, in the past forty years, bigger and more assertive reputations, but not one of them could claim, as Garnett could, to have been the inspiration behind so much that was best in contemporary literature. Conrad, Galsworthy, Hudson, Edward Thomas, T. E. Lawrence, Stephen Crane, Doughty, Liam O'Flaherty, D. H. Lawrence, W. H. Davies—Garnett was behind them all. Garnett discovered or matured or shaped or inspired them all with tireless affection, the most ruthless insight, and the most unselfish ardour. From somewhere about 1890 down to the day of his death Edward Garnett must have laid his blessing on more literary heads than any other man of his time.

A mistake and a compliment.

I was hopelessly young when I met Garnett, on a January day of 1926, at a restaurant in Charlotte Street. Indeed, I think he was almost shocked by my extreme youth. But he was shocked also by something else: he was astonished to find that I was masculine at all. Garnett did not make many mistakes, but he made a mistake, and it was the highest sort of compliment, about the authorship of *The Two Sisters*. He felt that no man could have written that book; so I had been addressed by my publishers, and I think at Garnett's instigation, as Miss Bates. Garnett relished the joke hugely, and I took it as the compliment it really was. But later he paid me a better: "Conrad would have liked your work," he said.

It was, of course, because of Conrad that I had heard of Garnett, but I did not know, until I heard it later from Garnett's own lips, the extraordinary story of the association of the young publisher's reader, himself, and the cosmopolitan aristocrat-seaman who had sent the MS. of *Almayer's Folly* to the firm of Fisher Unwin.

The discovery of Conrad.

Garnett at that time was reader to Unwin, very young, witheringly witty, and intensely independent. It was his first job. He had, on the very first morning, turned up something like two hours late, taking a cab in order to do it. He got to the office simultaneously with Unwin himself. But to his astonishment Unwin was profoundly impressed. A young man who could turn up two hours late, and afford a cab to do it in, was unusual.

Unwin was right. Garnett was unusual. And he proved it a little later, conclusively, by seizing upon the qualities of Conrad's first MS., that piece of sensuous and romantic realism which was to introduce a wholly new note into the literature of the 'nineties.

Then he met Conrad. It was 1894. Conrad was ten years his senior. And it is curious to note that Conrad had, at that first meeting, exactly the same impression of Garnett as Garnett had, thirty years later, of me. He was dismayed by Garnett's youth. "The first time I saw Edward I dare not open my mouth. . . . That cannot be Edward so young as that, I thought."

His debt to Garnett.

From that meeting a singular friendship sprang up, a friendship encouraged rather than hindered by the difference in age, in nationality, in experience, and not least in the temperament of the two participants. Gifted with intense and almost passionate curiosity, Garnett revelled in the opportunity to explore the recesses of the complex and nervous Conradian system, with its aristocratic blood and its vast store of adventurous memory, and above all its latent genius.

Conrad, in turn, looked almost desperately to Garnett for guidance. A seaman, writing in a strange language, utterly foreign to a literary world which was, in his own words, "as inviting as a peep into a brigand's cave and a good deal less reassuring," he needed precisely the impulse and assurance and exhilaration that Garnett's temperament could give.

Then, under that impulse, Conrad's talent blossomed. "After that," Garnett has said, "my part indeed was simple—to appreciate and criticize all that he wrote and to ask for more, more."

A flair for talent.

To us, indeed, it sounds simple: to say to a great man: "You're great. Go on being great." But only a man of Garnett's own peculiar and unselfish insight could, in fact, have done it. In that respect, it seems to me, Garnett himself was great. He saw not only existing talent, the surface qualities which after all any fool can see, but he perceived, with magnificent instinct, the latent genius behind that, the rich potentiality of a mind that was still unresolved and immature. And that faculty remained with him, as fresh and strong as always, right up to the time of his death. It was the faculty which enabled him to see *The Rainbow* beyond the immaturities of *The White Peacock*; the *Forsyte Saga* beyond the early, feeble, middle-class Galsworthy; and the genius of Hudson, Edward Thomas, and Charles Doughty where others missed it.

I think he saw in me, from the first, a short-story writer. "You're a novelist of essentials," he said, and he was right. He worked unselfishly to shape me. For I had developed, in 1927, the most atrocious style in baroque verbosity that could be imagined.

The outspoken critic.

Garnett had urged me to write a novel. I wrote it, and it ran, I think, to about 150,000 words. When Garnett saw it, after a period of angelic patience, he was in despair. It was, he said, the most utter idiotic windy rot. And he was right again. He tore up that novel, so to speak, and threw it in my face. He damned me with such vigour that my heart was sick. I felt for a moment as if I should never write again.

But Garnett was never wholly destructive. It was typical of him to knock you down one day and then pick you up the next. I should know, for he was doing it to me, on and off, for six or seven years, tearing me to bits, praising me, blasting me, soothing me, but always, unceasingly, in pursuit of whatever latent talent I had.

He was doing it, at the same time, for many others. Yet he was never too busy to read MSS., never too stale to discuss a story, however stupid either it or its creator might be.

Never lost patience.

At times I was inconceivably stupid. We would sit in the garden of his cottage in the Surrey hills and discuss my work for hours, and at the end, often, I was no nearer the light. But Garnett never lost patience. Then I would produce something that satisfied his most rigorous demands, and I came in for the flow of that warm and exuberant praise that was all the sweeter for having so stern a background.

For a long time I was, like others, afraid of Garnett. He was an extremely large and forbidding figure, and he had the beauty, roughly, of a grizzly bear. He was rather short-sighted, and he wore spectacles which made his large, grey eyes look fearsome when they were on and possibly more fearsome when they were off. They were diabolical, impish eyes.

Garnett was a playboy of the Western world, proud of an Irish ancestry, a merciless fun-maker, and a great conversationalist, with a marvellous turn of irony and fantasy and a wicked way, until you knew him, of leading you, for the sheer devilry of it, up the garden path.

His wife's translations.

That combination of faculties made him a great hater of hypocrisy and a still greater hater of all manifestations of the middle-class mind. He was angry, especially, at the indifference displayed, at first, to Mrs. Garnett's translations of the Russian classics, Gogol, Tolstoy, Turgeniev, Tchehov, and Dostoievsky, all of whom he championed with profound insight and vigour. To Edward and Constance Garnett, indeed, the English literary world of to-day owes an astonishing and irreducible debt.

It has been said that those translations were the joint work of Mr. and Mrs. Garnett. This is not so; they are the work, solely, of Constance Garnett, to whom every English writer of any consequence to-day owes a special and profound debt. What Edward Garnett did was to champion those translations, of Turgeniev especially, as they appeared.

He did it by writing prefaces which are still, to my mind, of incalculable value to any young writer. Those who aspire, and never came into contact with Garnett, should read his prefaces to Turgeniev.

A fertilizing power.

With typical unselfishness he wrote scores of prefaces. Some were poor; some need never have been written. But he knew that the English middle-class mind is, in its receptiveness to the best in art, as porous, roughly, as a piece of cast iron. He knew that only hammer blows could impress it, and his prefaces were his hammer blows.

These, together with a few excellent volumes of criticism and a play or two which do not matter, are his material contributions to the literature of our day. The rest of his work has no material form under his own signature. It was a large and anonymous work, a great fertilizing power of unselfish and ardent sympathy, the real fruits of which are in the work of others.

When Edward Garnett died, suddenly, on February 19th, contemporary literature lost, in fact, an irreplaceable personality, a unique and complex temperament, ironic, independent, unselfish, tender, very lovable; and I, in common with many other young writers, lost someone to whom I already owed a debt I could never repay.

ONE merit of poetry few persons will deny: it says more and in fewer words than prose.—VOLTAIRE.