

A Return to "the Novel of Essentials"

THE TWO SISTERS. By H. E. Bates. With an Introduction by Edward Garnett. 32 pp. New York: The Viking Press. \$2.

EDWARD GARNETT, whose services to literature have been about equally those of discoverer and critic, points out in his foreword to this latest "find" of his by an author of 21, what perhaps is its greatest virtue. It is a return, he says, to the novel of essentials. "The Two Sisters" is in sharp contrast, structurally, to one of the most popular forms of contemporary fiction—the novel of detail. It is almost impossible nowadays to encounter a biographical or chronicle novel which does not pursue the experiences of its chief characters from the day of their birth to the day of their death, amassing a multitude of facts about them, and describing minutely their adventures, their thoughts, their emotions, their manifold interrelationships. Mr. Bates has a story to tell of the lives of two sisters, yet he does not tell it as the day-by-day record of many years. His method is different. "The Two Sisters" is not a spare outline of scenes cut to a minimum; it is, if anything, slightly longer than the usual full-length novel. But it seeks quintessences instead of a heap of details. It is conceived in

of the story begins with Michael's coming and Tessie's falling in love with him. He does not respond and Tessie becomes upset. When Jenny upbraids him, she learns it is she with whom he is in love, and suddenly discovers how much she reciprocates his emotion. The truth drives Tessie away from home. Later, her father, an absorbingly queer but not wholly successful creation, dies. Tessie, hidden in a neighboring town, having heard a rumor of his death and driven by a desire to see Michael, goes back one day to Bromsweald. The same afternoon the river is in flood, the barges are endangered; Michael is busy helping, and late that night, when the situation is worse, goes on a rescue party. Jenny has a final scene with him and soon after encounters Tessie. They spend a terrible night of fear and waiting, and find out in the morning that Michael has drowned.

Mr. Bates concludes his story with a scene years after, a mellow and beautiful scene showing the two sisters linked together by common memories of a common love. It is in keeping with Mr. Bates's already discernible excellences as a novelist that the scene is kept free of all sentimentality. It is a scene, too, so thoroughly poetic in temper that it lacks a sense of personalities—it

is like a picture, an almost universal embodiment of two people healed by sharing a joint sorrow. In a sense it overcomes the feelings one had earlier of a weakness on Mr. Bates's part in so little characterizing the sisters. Jenny, perhaps, is adequately characterized, but Tessie not at all. But in the portrayal of Michael we have a weakness the sense of which persists to the end. One feels that the nature of his attraction and charm for the two girls should have been communicated to the reader, and one is given instead a man of whom one knows nothing, a mere symbol. It is the one glaring shortcoming of the book, however much it seeks for essentials, since the amount of space expanded with subordinate effect on the girls' father could much better have gone toward the creation of a living Michael.

The type of reader who is prone to skip should be warned away from this book, not only because nearly every sentence counts, but also because it is so written that he would be tempted to skip everywhere. The book moves slowly. The first forty pages describe Jenny's return home from the village. But into them Mr. Bates gets not only an excellent sense of what she is like as a child, but the whole mood and tone of the book as well. Thereafter-

the poetic spirit and presented, as in a mirror, almost indirectly, that its poetic truth and reality may be the more direct. Its beauty, its drama, its tragedy reach us without that superficial and immediate quality of realism which is achieved by a marshaling of facts; but we get them in essence, in a universal sense rather than a specific, with that lingering quality of realism which is achieved through the imagination. When we get this in the highest degree we have, of course, a work of genius. Mr. Bates has not quite given us that, often has not nearly given us that. But, all question of his age left out, he has written an unusual and lovely book.

"The Two Sisters" is the story of Jenny and Tessie Lee and of Michael Winter, all three of them living near a small English town called Bromsweald. Jenny, the older of the sisters, is the more serious and the more sensitive to responsibility, and because their mother is dead, maternally watchful over Tessie. Tessie is far more emotional and lively. The real drama



the simple story unfolds without haste, increasing its tempo only at times of stress, such as Jenny's scene with her father and the fine river passages. There is a remarkable quality to the account of Michael's last night on the river, of Jenny's frenzied passage from house to wharf and back again, of Tessie's superhumanly controlled waiting in the "morbidly quiet" room. In its writing, too, the book, though often lacking in sure mastery, shows a very definite talent. It lacks, no doubt, a certain guiding power as it lacks insight into character, strict narrative unity, and a continuously compelling interest. But these are compensated for by less usual merits, and even many of its shortcomings are justified by the aims of the book. Of "The Two Sisters" this much surely can be said: It makes its appeal to real lovers of literature, to connoisseurs. True enough, it will not completely and overpoweringly satisfy them, but it will make them very eager to read the next book that Mr. Bates may write.

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