Passionate Puppets

NOCTURNE. By Frank Swinnerton. Doran; $1.40.

In his pleasant introduction to this new novel by his friend Frank Swinnerton, H. G. Wells points out that here we encounter an art different in kind from his own. "It bores me to look at things unless there is also the idea of doing something with them." But Swinnerton "has no underlying motive. He sees and tells. His aim is the attainment of that beauty which comes with exquisite presentation." In other words, dealing though it does with rarely Cockney Londoners of the lower middle class, "Nocturne" has no purpose other than to give us that pleasure which can always be got from sheer beauty, that beauty which St. Thomas Aquinas defined as "id cuius ipsa apprehensio placet." What is more, Mr. Swinnerton succeeds in his aim, and criticism has left only to essay with clumsy fingers to turn the eye to details and harmonies not wholly obvious. Yes, and in this book's case, to give expression and so some easement, however vain, to those emotions which so tragic a masterpiece must inevitably evoke.

The genius of the author bites his subject hard and shakes it with so exhaustive an intensity that in these short 250 pages we feel that every nook and corner of its life has been searched out, and that after Jenny's last cry, "Keith . . . oh Keith! . . ." one more

shake would be rhetoric. The style has the invisibility of perfect glass, and unaware of it we see only the figures of these passionate puppets, outlined so deathly black against the crude gray of an unconscious universe.

The events of the story take place all in one night. A good part of the book is given to painting the doldrums of life in Kennington Park, a rather poor district of London. There the two sisters, Jenny working the day in a milliner's, Emmy doing the housework at home, companion their Pa Blanchard, a half imbecile wreck. A touch is given to the stagnant atmosphere by mention of Pa's pension, which emphasizes the impersonal and unadventurous quality of this too assured existence. Alf Rylett, whose hair is "of a common but unnamed colour, between brown and grey," aspires to keeping company with Jenny, the more vivid and less hobbled sister. A little whiff of air seems about to blow when Pa elicits from Alf news of a ten thousand dollar fire, only to evaporate at the knowledge that "the insurance companies are too wide to stand all the risk themselves. . . It's a mere flea-bite to them." Thus a hopeful bigamy pans out at only "ten pound three and fourpence" and in the "train smash . . . nobody killed."

In order that fate, however abetted by industrial civilization, may alone take the responsibility, thus making the tragedy unavoidable and therefore more capable of beauty as well as easier to be endured, all the characters are made to partake, though some of them frugally, of our pitying love. The three men, each in his own way quite shamelessly self-seeking, are yet not to be blamed by us. Pa in his second childhood is too obviously down to admit of any judgment upon him; Keith, Jenny's sailor-lover, has weathered too many evil strokes; and even the calculating Alf will not desert his landlady, "because if anybody asked me if he should go there, I couldn't honestly recommend him to . . . and I shouldn't like to leave her in the lurch."

When the drudge Emmy has been fobbed off upon the disgruntled Alf and those remarkable lovers have left for the theatre, when Pa has been put to bed, Jenny sits alone staring at the clock. " 'Wound up to go all day!' she thought, comparing the clock with herself." Here we have the final touch to that mechanistic horror which so completely involves all the characters depicted. Then comes the unexpected ring at the door, the apparent shattering of the hated web, the hours of bitter love upon the yacht, and then the ride home with its realization of the "sequel to endure." The very word "sequel" is poignantly ironic. This is not because of the body of Pa stretched unconscious across the kitchen floor, still less because of possible repentance. The irony is that even in this passionate adventure our poor heroine was but a cog in the all-embracing mechanism, that there are in life such things as sequels—cogwheels that turn with cogwheels. Whether or not Jenny be lacerated, anyhow she is enslaved. In a world such as this we can only regard conscious existence with awe, and marvel at the ridiculous gallantry of living. This essential bitterness in life is seldom so clear as in the portrait of Jenny Blanchard. It is not only her eyes that flash and glitter in "the paltry gaslight." If to understand her position is to suffer for this fine and fiery soul, to think of her even by herself gives us pain: she is so keen that merely to conceive her character, as to grasp something that is all cutting edge, hurts our mind.

When alone in her room, in the anguish of self-reproach for Pa's misfortune and in the more lancinating anguish of her doubts of Keith's love and in the merciless knowledge that at any rate she has irretrievably consigned to him her freedom, she gently calls upon her lover, her voice is "barely audible"—audible, God knows, to us, but unheard, we fear unimagined, of Keith. How frail and expressive is this human cry in the huge mechanism of London. Outside the unlit chamber we fancy the dead revolving moon, so hideously alien to the human heart, so hideously at one with the unmeaning revolutions of the city's life in death. With Jenny, in her last broken grasp at the old way of seeing things, we too say, "What a life! Golly what a life!" But with another crunch the machinery takes her, and to annihilate Distance, Time, and Fate she throws herself upon the bed and buries her face in the pillow, there without the mocking audibility of her former cry, with its tragic suggestion of measure and so of inadequacy, to repeat again "Keith . . . oh Keith!" We also are pathetic figures; for in anguish of heart and vainly, O ludicrously, we see only this crumpled child and children ourselves, we strain our arms into and through the thin text seeking to embrace and cherish this unhappy girl—to give her such small comfort as it might be to her to know we comprehend and that, between her and "they," only she matters, and that a world in which she is not "right" is not itself "right" for any man with heart and head.

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