Recent Fiction.*

With "These Twain" Mr. Arnold Bennett emerges from his occupation with other matters and finishes, for the time being at least, his great achievement, the "Clayhanger" series. The completed work now stands up in contemporary fiction something as a great cathedral stands up above a crowded town. It is unlike a cathedral in that it has very little that is religious about it, but it is like it in that it is a great monument of popular life with one definite purpose and a thousand details. One can spend an hour here or there in looking at this or that piece of carving, bit of sculpture, problem of architecture; or one can take in the unity of the whole. Mr. Bennett has already given us a book about Edwin Clayhanger and another about Hilda Lessways; this third gives us the union of the two.

The book has a unity in itself, and anyone may read it with pleasure and comprehension by itself. But of course it begins with what has been given before. It is the same Edwin, grown to manhood and still a boy in some ways (just as Hilda is in some ways still a girl); he is, as before, cautious and hesitating yet managing to be successful, longing for romance yet resigned to an ordinary existence, grandiose in conception and slip-shod in execution, making everything do while it would and waiting for things to turn up, timid and proud, meditative and judicial, and yet generally saying, "What does it matter?"—a rebel against authority yet outwardly apologetic, vowing he would never again do what he was about to do the next day, wishing for adventure yet devoted to his home and dependent on its hundred minor comforts, undecided for months and acting on the spur of a moment's impulse,—altogether a very inconsistent and human person. So, also, is it the same Hilda. Not beautiful apparently, originally an "ugly young woman" and still with the same olive complexion and black hair and thick eyebrows, but always attractive, full of vitality, of a passionate vibrating voice, with sparkling eyes, making cheerily the most outrageous remarks that ever woman had made in the Five Towns, hating Edwin for opposing her and understanding in a flash that he loved her, a woman of most tantalizing psychology, only part woman in fact and part child, part sibyl, yet always tingling with life, bent on having her own way because she knew better than he what was best, over-valuing what she had not and depreciating what was hers, possessed by irresistible desires and acquiescing in a commonplace round of affairs,—on the whole, quite as inconsistent and human as her husband.

Being married, and settled down in Bursley, these two were, like many other married people, intent on their own particular business and their own particular desires, as well as on the life in common which is the necessity of married life. Edwin is the clearer figure—in fact the story is chiefly told from his standpoint,—and his position is plain: he is comfortably situated and wishes to remain so. The excitements and enthusiasms and revolts of youth have passed, and he has settled down into a prosperous business man who has few desires beyond business success and home comfort. Hilda is not so obvious, but whatever she is she is something altogether different from that. She is continually reaching out, and always seeing things that she wants more than the things she has got. The two are in love—even, it would seem, when they passed Mr. Bennett's three-year limit,—but neither is so much in love as to sympathize deeply with the other's desires or habits or ways of doing or looking at things.

We might easily enough suppose that there is no more definite idea controlling the development of this book than the conception of these very interesting characters in the given situation, and the willingness to have them act in a natural and characteristic way. That is enough for many a novelist. Tourgueniéff used to say, we are told by Mr. James, that his idea was to think of interesting people, being sure that they would behave in an interesting way. That is an ultra-realistic view,—it says, Whatever happens is a story. There are people who seem to have some such idea to-day, especially those writers who devote themselves to telling the life-story of one or another. On the other hand, however, there are those whose handling of their action is controlled in some way or other. Some are interested in the working out of some definite course of events bound up in a mystery, or an adventure, or an achievement. Some develop their course of events so as to present some definite idea or theory. Mr. Bennett has not of late been one of those who cared much for a definite course of action; nor is he so in this his latest book. Nor does he as a rule use his action as the form of an idea. In this case, it is true, the action is definitely modelled by a clear conception, and that conception a fundamental proposition (it might seem) to married life. The first announcement of the book, and its title, show that it deals with

* These Twain. By Arnold Bennett. New York: George H. Doran Co.

marriage. Incidents in the story, so far as they have anything to do with each other, are illustrations or developments of this idea. The end of the book is a discovery (by Edwin) of the controlling principle which has so far enabled him to be successful in married life. It might be added that the publishers tell us that "Readers new to Bennett . . will find here their own married lives interpreted to themselves." It is not clear whether those who have read Bennett before will know better than to look for an interpretation of marriage or anything else; but the idea of the publishers seems clearly to be that this recital of the married life of Edwin and Hilda was modified and formed by a desire on the part of the author to present the fundamentals of the marriage state. It is true that he deals with one marriage only, and that he alludes to two other marriages as being in Edwin's mind very different affairs. But the thing he presents with most conviction is Edwin's discovery at the end of the book. These books begin with Clayhanger at the bridge, and they end there; they begin with Clayhanger looking forward in life, and they end twenty-five years later with his looking back on it. What he thinks at the beginning is very indefinite, but what he thinks at the end is very definite. At the beginning he wants to get out and be himself; at the end he sees that there is much that is wrong in the world and that "right living" means the acceptance of injustice and the excusing of the inexcusable. He sees that people who are married must often yield to what seems obviously great injustice or unreason on the part of others merely because whether they be unjust, unreasonable, or whatever else, they are the loved ones. This was no novelty. "It was banal; it was commonplace; it was what everyone knew." Clayhanger had known it before, but not until now did he fully realize it.

This seems to give the idea that marriage is a great and passionate war; its bed-rock foundation being the idea of each for himself. Love and hate seem not only consistent but undistinguishable. Its partners are indispensable to each other and intolerable. They are irrational, and they think each other so; yet when they kiss each other they are reconciled to what in the abstract they cannot bear. Such a view of marriage, thoroughly realized, made a part of one, felt in one's bones, become a dominant factor in one's domestic cosmos, would — it seems — make life much easier for persons of incompatible tempers who had got into the habit of living together.

But if anyone is inclined to see in the experience of Hilda and Edwin an interpretation of his own marriage (or possibly hers, though the book seems written from the masculine standpoint), it will be well to remember that in older days Mr. Bennett "took a malicious and frigid pleasure, as I always do, [he adds] in setting down facts which are opposed to accepted sentimental falsities." The facts of "These Twain" are certainly opposed to some accepted sentimental falsities; but it may be that, fact or no fact, they do not constitute a generalization. Seekers after light on the dark river will probably find this interpretation of the problem of marriage as serious and profound as Mr. Bennett's interpretation of the problem of evil in the world. Many people cannot see reason or justice in husband or wife and yet still love and like to please each other. In like manner, people who do wrong incomprehensibly are yet driven to do so by an irresistible force,— namely, they like to please themselves. In both cases they do what they want to do. This comes very near to "A is A," the principle of identity which is the foundation of logical thought.

Mr. Bennett would probably disclaim teaching. When he wishes to teach he writes a "pocket philosophy." In his novels he tells of people who lived and acted thus and thus. His telling is always interesting. Sometimes he is objective, as they say, and tells how everything and everybody looked. He always seems to know, though it does not always occur to him to say much about it. Sometimes he is satirical,—indeed, he always seems a little outside the people he tells us of, never quite to sympathize with them; and in such a position one can hardly help being a little satirical now and then. Sometimes he is extravagant, like the Bennett of old times, the Bennett of "Hugo" or "The Grand Babylon Hotel"; and that, after all, is only another way of being satirical. Most often, however, he is telling us of the inner life of one or another. It is because he knows these things that he can tell the story. He knows what Edwin Clayhanger thought and wanted, and why he did things; and he knows also about Hilda, though not quite so well; and he knows about the others, for of course the book is full of living real people. How he knows these mysteries of the human heart no one can tell; but that he does know is clear from the consistency, the firmness, of the general view. He does not say, "Life is like this," but we admit that that life must have been like that.

There is possibly one thing more to say. We can imagine that a novelist should know

precisely how his people looked, and how their surroundings looked, and what everybody did. We can imagine, too, that a novelist should know everything that his people felt, thought, wished, and so on,—in fact, that is part of the game. But given the second supposition, does a novelist do the fair thing by us if he withholds information concerning certain very large elements in the lives he is presenting to us? In this book we are told much, but much is withheld. We have very slight knowledge of how Edwin conducted his business; we are told that he prospered and became well off, but it seems astonishing that such should be the case. We also have the very slightest notion of what this couple thought of religious matters; it is evident that they thought something, and we should say from general principles and previous knowledge that they thought the matter of some importance. But we know little of it. Mr. Bennett presumably feels that he has told all that is necessary for normally informed people about their relations as man and wife; but in that matter people are so unexpected that common inference is easily at fault. So there are considerable gaps in our acquaintance with the situation. Business, religion, sex,—these are likely to be dominant forces in the personal life; it may be that the result Mr. Bennett presents was caused by reasons of which he does not tell us.

But in spite of all such things, the book, as well as the completed trilogy, is a great achievement. It gives us a sense of reality, of life as we find it, difficult to get elsewhere. And it gives that strange sense of satisfaction with life and approval of it that is a result of great art.

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