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The Heart of a Legend

The Writings of Ada Leverson

IT IS an unjust fate for a great artist to become so much entangled in a legend that a personality is better known than an achievement. This has been the lot of Ada Leverson, whose name is so honourably remembered, and whose writing remains disproportionately unread. The legend is a particularly obstinate barrier to her art, because it is threefold: one part of it misleadingly surrounding her own self, the other two parts willed on her by fellow artists whom she loved and served.

To dispose first, if one can, of the most tenacious of these legendary reputations: the one arising from her friendship for Oscar Wilde. Now, of Oscar Wilde it is impossible, in most senses, to write with other than a total admiration. The human person—who, though known only to us by report, is instantly realised to be as splendid as extraordinary—and the writer of the one great play (but I think of nothing else) can never be praised enough, nor honoured. But as for the trials and their ensuing catastrophe, the time has surely come to say that they have become an appalling nuisance and, so far as Wilde the artist is concerned, essentially an irrelevance.

It must be said—though with entire commiseration for his suffering—that Oscar Wilde the “homosexual martyr” was no martyr, and Oscar Wilde the “artist-hero” was no hero. That he did not say out loud and clear, in 1895, “Very well, I am—now justify your law” is all too understandable; yet only by saying this would he have been heroic. That the social rules on homosexuality, however idiotic and inhuman, were perfectly well known, must mean that anyone who provoked their drastic application was no martyr. Wilde was not pursued and persecuted by authority: he invited it to ruin him. His provocation was no desperate device to discredit an evil law: he accepted the rules, and imagined he could twist them. And when

the inevitable ensued, one cannot but feel—if alone from the evidence of his own previous writing—that the catastrophe was one he in some ways had always longed for. All this makes his fate pitiful, certainly; and furnishes no excuse to those who, from the passage of the bad law until his final condemnation, first baited and then sprung their snare. But it was not a tragic fate, despite his dignity and courage: it was one pathetic and self-chosen.

THE DEEP, THE MORBID, the strangely excessive interest in Wilde’s trials is due, I believe, chiefly to our own equally morbid, excessive, and grotesque obsession with the fact of homosexuality: of which we have contrived, with poisonous effect, to make a “problem” altogether vaster than its real moral, personal, and social problems are. This sick interest, it would also seem to me, is that of a people fundamentally indifferent and even hostile to art and artists, since the trials present, to such superficial minds, the triple advantage of demonstrating that one of our most gifted and attractive writers was a monster; more still, of satisfying a distortedly “dramatic” conception of what “the artist” is (a man of self-sought sorrows and not, as essentially, a creative worker); and mostly of relieving such persons from the necessity of reading anything Wilde wrote: since thanks to the trials (and to the infinity of books, and now films, that monotonously and inaccurately describe them), everyone “knows all about him.”

As also is now well known, among the half-dozen men and women in all Europe who, in his disaster, were true to their friendship for Wilde (and to all they had said to him, and about him, in his days of glory), the most outstanding—and most beautiful by the practical tact of what she did for him—was Ada Leverson. The best account of what took place

remains her own;¹ and I should wish to add—as this is usually neglected—that it seems to me the conduct of her husband, Ernest Levenson, was also most noble: since—as we must always remind ourselves when giving its true weight to what she and he both did—“society,” in 1895, could be irrevocably ruthless to those who offended it; and conduct deemed “inappropriate” in a husband might well have been judged even more severely than would his wife’s. What Ada Levenson herself did is quite beyond praise: it all seems so obvious now, and yet a moment’s honest reflection should persuade most of us that we would not ourselves have done it—perhaps not even thought of doing it. Nevertheless: anyone who thinks, as I most surely do, that Ada Levenson is in her own right and by her own achievement a very great artist indeed, may feel that from the point of view of her own literary reputation (which is, of course, a factor that her generous soul would not even have considered), the most fatal step she ever took was to behave, to Wilde, so well and so unselfishly. For Wilde, most unquestionably, is in the matter of his “legend” a terrible vampire: like some strange, greedy planet, his name and repute have absorbed and flung into orbit round his memory so many human moons—and even, in the case of Ada Levenson, one rare star. It is surely high time that as an artist she be rescued from this association most honourable to herself; and that it be realised, as I hope to demonstrate, that save for *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Ada Levenson was certainly Wilde’s equal and, I believe, ultimately a finer writer.

THE NEXT LEGEND that must be unravelled, or set in its fit proportion, is that woven round Ada Levenson’s name by Sir Osbert Sitwell in the fifth volume of his autobiographical *Left Hand, Right Hand*; and called, it will be remembered, *Noble Essences, or Courteous Recollections*. Of the four prior volumes I would say that their author has created (if that is the word to apply to an actual person) in his study of Sir George Sitwell, his father, one of the most extraordinary “characters” of English literature. The vast halls and ante-rooms of the book which conduct us, finally and superbly, to the revelations of Sir George’s private dwelling, resemble, by the encumbrance of accessory and often immensely tedious detail—and by the neo-baroque convolutions and ornate parodies of prose by which these are described—a sort of *Sagrada Familia* erected by a literary Gaudí; but all this cannot detract from the ultimate triumph of the portrait of Sir George; and does indeed serve, by the very con-

trast of the obsessive perambulations of the minor themes and of the polished peculiarities of language, to provide a complicated yet most effective décor in which the fine realism and deep imagination of the evocation of the writer’s father are eventually, and most marvellously, presented.

But when we come to read the *Noble Essences*—which are, of course, in a sense a book apart—the impression is often, to be frank, unpleasant. It is but damning with faint praise to say that one is grateful for the information the author gives about these splendid men and women; and in the case of Ada Levenson herself, I must own it was not until I read this book that I knew she was a writer. But the great defect is this: it is precisely *not* as a writer that, in the book, Ada Levenson is portrayed. It is as a sort of adjunct, or satellite, or mascot even of the author: loved and admired, certainly, and greatly esteemed, but condescended to; and not seemingly cherished for what ought to be the most important thing about her—that she was an artist also; and in her case, a great one. And although this was certainly not the intention of the volume—which clearly was to do high honour to the artists whom it celebrates—the unfortunate impression grows upon the reader that beyond all the noble essences therein described, there stands one nobler even than them all.

THE THIRD “LEGEND” shrouding Ada Levenson which one must also try to peel aside, is the one created unintentionally by herself. It is a regrettable reality of the “literary world”—yet one of which any writer concerned with his ultimate “reputation” must take some account—that writers, to a great extent, are valued in their day, and even by posterity, very much at the value which they seem to place upon themselves; or which they permit, by genuine indifference or neglect, their contemporaries to place upon them. Of course no reputation, be it nursed however ardently, can be sustained without the presence of a talent; and it is true that later reassessments of neglected or self-neglected artists, sometimes do take place. Yet because it is hard to learn and easy to forget, “the world,” if not reminded, will prefer to leave a talent in oblivion.

As an artist, no one could have been more careless of her “literary reputation” than was Ada Levenson (which is one of the many attractive things about her). Although in quantitative fact and, as I hope to show, by quality, she was in the most entire sense a professional writer, she never was, nor cared to be, a *femme de lettres*: the notion would have seemed to her preposterous, a bore. Throughout the 1890s, she

¹ *Letters to the Sphinx from Oscar Wilde* (Duckworth, 1930).

printed innumerable occasional pieces in topical magazines—many of which are only now being disinterred; and between 1907 and 1916 she published six novels of outstanding merit. But all this was made to seem “effortless” in two ways. The style itself, and the whole tone of these six volumes, convey—unless one is attentive—the impression that the thing is all too easy: as if it were set down, in random moments, by a beautiful and brilliant lover of life and art between outings on idle afternoons. So far as her own attitude to her work went, she was the kind of person—as wonderful as rare—whose sense of *chic* and inborn dislike of all pomposities (not least among “creative” people) would forbid her to make claims for herself that others would not spontaneously make for her. Her chief delight was in the victorious achievement of her friends; for friendship was as dear to her as love, and she was in both an artist. Thus, one can imagine her joy if on the publication of a novel, a friend told her he admired it (the more so if he could tell her, very exactly, why). But to imagine her pressing a volume into a friend’s hand, let alone undertaking that kind of artistic lobbying which helps to establish and preserve a literary “name,” is quite impossible. Of Edith Ottley, heroine in three of her novels, and whom one may with little doubt assume to be something of a self-portrait, Ada Leverson has this to say:

Such vanity as she had was not in an uneasy condition; she cared very little for general admiration, and had no feeling for competition. She was without ambition to be superior to others.

IT IS THUS that the notion has arisen—and it has been sustained in many a preposterous study of “the nineties” or of “the Edwardian era”—that as well as being a literary acolyte (albeit one greatly cherished) Ada Leverson was a gifted, casual non-professional. To this absurd impertinence, her writings now may make reply.

The Twelfth Hour, her first novel, was published when she was already reaching her middle years.² The competence of plot and structure, the swift, sharp establishment of character, and the easy, laconic urbanity of style, suggest—which was indeed the case—that although a “first novel,” this is the work of an experienced

writer. Subsequently to be developed in depth and range, the essential Ada Leverson themes and tone are already apparent. Her two chief themes are: first, the relations of men and women bound by marriage or—put less conventionally—the reconciliation of the eagerness for individual life and personal fulfilment, in each of the two partners, with the moral imperative of their promise to each other: for marriage, or love-in-marriage (rather than love before it, or outside it) is seen in terms of a bond of loyalty—the free promise—much more than of ties imposed by faith or law. And since she clearly approves of and delights in the life-loving individuality of the wife and husband, and yet as equally believes a promise *is* a promise and that full personal self-realisation can best be achieved through keeping this primal vow, the central conflict of her books is always the way in which their chief protagonists, the married man and woman, will confront and resolve this situation. Her secondary theme—though almost of equal weight—is friendship, to which it is clear she attached great human value. It is often believed that friendship is a masculine speciality. In the Ada Leverson world, at all events, it isn’t: for though there are competent descriptions of friendships between men, the most sensitive and complex are those she creates between women and men (and these *are* real friendships, not failed or potential love affairs) and just as effectively—if surprisingly—friendships between women themselves. As for the Ada Leverson tone or mood, it is one of amused, affectionate, and occasionally ironic or contemptuous acceptance of her characters’ behaviour: often presented in scenes of such deadpan absurdity that the reader must be alert indeed to catch, in so many throwaway lines, each double meaning. This is not to say that her attitude to her characters (and hence to life) is uncritical: indeed it is, and the “detached” urbanity of tone never entirely masks (unless the reader wishes to see no further) her underlying seriousness about life, and what matters most in it. But she never “judges:” never bullies her characters, or erects them to knock them down; and never forces her own views (while making them quite apparent) upon the reader, to whom she clearly feels her duty is to entertain and, if “instruct,” only to do so by providing all the clues by which the reader can do this for himself if he so wishes.

ADA LEVERSON BELONGS, in fact, to a category of writer rather unusual in England—and of which Congreve may be the great exemplar—the classic author of the comedy of manners. This sort of art reveals itself, in form, by a harmonious construction, parts deftly related to the whole, subsidiary themes neatly tucked away in echoing

² Ada Leverson was born in 1862 and died, aged seventy, in 1933. Her six novels, originally published by Grant Richards, and re-issued during 1950–51 by Chapman & Hall, are: *The Twelfth Hour* (1907); *Love’s Shadow* (1908); *The Limit* (1911); *Tenterhooks* (1912); *Bird of Paradise* (1914); *Love at Second Sight* (1916).

counterpoint; next, in language, by a studied but easy and relaxed precision, with flights of dialogue tossed to and fro like aery but well-directed shuttlecocks; and then in theme, by the perpetually underlying presence, amid all this apparent accident of episode, of an essential drama: sometimes hinted at with such obliqueness that the sudden glimpses of its dangerous deep turbulence can be, to the reader (if he does not miss them), quite alarming; and at last, after phrases and chapters have skimmed like butterflies or birds over a clear still pool, there is the abrupt, positive confrontation—often on the very brink of irredeemable disaster—with the conflict in its total, perilous reality. Once it is thus realised what the writer is about, the gay, flitting, entertaining and, apparently, “inconsequential” chapters soon assume their other as yet unstated, but already fully present, dramatic dimension. The “frivolity” becomes meaningful, the nonsense potentially sad. This is not farce, not “witty writing,” but true comedy: and of it, Ada Levenson is a master.

Though one mode of writing may not be more or less “difficult” than another (to whoever may be good at either), it would seem the classic writer must be technically more assured. To appear not to be saying what in fact you are, to achieve, save in rare “moments of truth,” effects of feeling (those both of characters and writer) by implication, demands a tight-rope dexterity, since to hit the wrong note is to tumble at once into sentiment or farce; and to develop all the themes, major and minor, hold them in a firm yet delicate grip, and conduct them at the correct pace in each episode—and as if by the wish of nature—with a swift final sweep to their “inevitable” resolution, requires enormous talent and self-discipline. It will escape no attentive reader of Ada Levenson’s books that she has surely been much influenced—or helped—in achieving some of these effects by her love for and knowledge of the theatre: indeed, many of her scenes in which the dialogue develops entirely without “author’s interjections,” seem almost borrowed from an unpublished play. More peculiar still (although admittedly, the

bioscope was well enough known by the turn of the century—but not yet the innovations of D. W. Griffith) is her frequent use of film scenario devices: “cutting” briskly from scene to scene, or situation to situation, without any “explanation” (of which indeed, so neatly is it done, there is no need); and even more strangely, “editing in” scenes and themes apparently unrelated to the one that, in realistic terms, she is just then evoking.

A FINAL BUT PERSISTENT ERROR about her art (one held, I suppose, by those who have not read her or with one eye open only) must be assailed before her novels are examined in more detail: and this is that Ada Levenson is an “Edwardian,” or “period” writer. Our custom, in thinking of the past (especially the recent English past), would seem to be to get into our heads some notion about an epoch (the “nineties,” the “twenties,” or whenever it may be), and then imperatively demand that any actual “figure” of that period should conform to the stereotype of our imaginings; and also, fail wilfully to remember (in our blindfold thirst for “period atmosphere”) that the past always was, at one time, its own present. The word “Edwardian,” for example, conjures up a host of clichés about which the chief point, so far as Ada Levenson is concerned, is that even were these all exact she could never have herself conformed to them, as a woman or a writer, because she was, in every page of everything she wrote, an acutely devastating critic of her own age. It is hopeless to look in her books for “Edwardian raw material” which we of to-day may then digest and comment on: for she herself, anticipating us by a half-century, has already performed this task. The key to “situating” her in this respect is to grasp (as on reading her, one so swiftly can) that she was not an “Edwardian natural” at all, but a most sharp (albeit most indulgent) observer of all things Edwardian. As a writer, in consequence, she is in no sense “period:” no one, in fact, could be of her own day more “modern:” which is precisely what gives to her books—except for their inevitable account of the accessory paraphernalia of Edwardian life—their timeless actuality.³

As a corollary to this, she has also dourly been reproached with a culpable unawareness of social and material factors of her period. This seems to me an amazingly blind charge, since how things work, and what things cost, and how it feels to be rich or poor (she had, in her own life, experience of both)—often, indeed, precisely demonstrated with figures spelled out in pounds shillings and pence—are constantly recurring preoccupations. As for the social structure of

³ Not only was she well “abreast of” her times, but so often proves herself to have been well ahead of them. Among countless instances of this (always introduced with characteristic aplomb and indifference to effect) are a reference, in *Tenterhooks* (published in 1912 and presumably written in 1911), to Cubist paintings (the first Cubist picture was painted in 1906) and to “primitive art:” both surely little known at that time in England, even in *avant-garde* circles. In *Love at Second Sight* (1916) there is an extremely astute analysis of Futurism, which begins, “Well, of course, they are already past. They always were...”

her day, the variety of social groups her characters are drawn from, and the fullness of her knowledge of them all, are equally apparent. (As one would expect, when the 1914 war comes, it also comes organically into her picture of the new Georgian society.) In short, although a classicist in form, she is most certainly a realist in content. Edwardian "society" evidently interested (and diverted) her, and she knew very much about it; but it is the social relations of human persons, and not "society" itself, that is her chief and most cherished raw material.

IN *The Twelfth Hour*, then, the central situation is that the young marriage between Felicity and her husband Chetwode is imperilled not because of dangers from without, but because he (who loves horses and antique furniture second only to herself) is taking her fidelity outrageously for granted, and she is too proud—or respects herself too much—to tell him so. The sub-plots are the love of Felicity's younger sister, Sylvia, for Woodville, who is "eligible" in every way except for the essential financial; and of the divided love of Felicity's younger brother Savile (who is sixteen) for Dolly (fourteen) and, at the same fatal time, for the celebrated *diva* Mme. Adelina Patti. Subsidiary characters are the brother and sisters' devotedly bullying Aunt William (so called because her late husband, Uncle Mary, seemed to them less a man than she); Sir James Crofton, their father, a pompous, self-contradictory, good-hearted parliamentarian; Mr. Ridokanaki, the Greek financier, initially (and vainly) in love with Sylvia, and ultimately to be the *deus ex machina*; the "artistic" ("in a continual state of vague enthusiasm") Vera Ogilvie; and such fleeting figures as Agatha, Mrs. Wilkinson, so named by the family because, although a commoner, her mien is decidedly aristocratic.

Let us first observe the swift economy with which Ada Leverson presents some of her characters:

"No hurry, no hurry," said Sir James, with that air of self-denial that conveys the urgent necessity of intense speed.

He pondered a few moments about nothing whatever. . . . (*Sir James again.*)

Sylvia had that curious gift, abstract beauty, the sort of beauty that recalls vaguely some ideal or antique memory.

And she would receive excuses from servants with a smile so sweet yet so incredulous that it disarmed deceit and made incompetence hide its head (or give notice). (*Sylvia once more.*)

Before he left, Aunt William pressed a sovereign into his hand guiltily, as if it were conscience money. He, on his side, took it as

though it were a doctor's fee, and both ignored the transaction. (*Aunt William tipping her nephew Savile.*)

He had a triangular face, the details of which were vague though the outline was clear, like a negative that has been left too long in the sun. (*Mr. Ridokanaki.*)

Ridokanaki looked at the clock. It immediately struck ten, tactfully, in a clear subdued tone.

Woodville met unflinchingly that terrible gaze of the inquisitorial innocent woman, before which men, guilty or guiltless equally, assume the same self-conscious air of shame. (*Woodville at odds with Sylvia.*)

One really rare possession she certainly had—a husband who, notwithstanding that he felt a mild dislike for her merely, bullied her and interfered with her quite as much as if he were wildly in love. (*Mr. and Mrs. Ogilvie.*)

He pressed her hand with a look that he hoped conveyed the highest respect, the tenderest sympathy, a deep, though carefully suppressed passion, and a longing to administer some refined and courteous consolation, and went away. (*Bertie Wilton, Felicity's ineffective—and unsuccessful—admirer.*)

"I didn't hear," he answered. "I was listening to your voice." (*Chetwode to his wife Felicity, after their final reconciliation.*)

Sir James was extremely annoyed with the weather. (*Opening sentence of the final chapter.*)

Let us also see how she establishes décor—always integral to the situation she is describing.

Sir James sat down slowly on a depressed leather uneasy chair, and said. . . .

A palm, on its last legs, draped in shabby green silk, was dying by the window.

Comparatively early, and quite suddenly, the rooms were crowded on the usual principle that no one will arrive till everyone is there. They were filled with that inaudible yet loud chatter and the uncomfortable throng which is the one certain sign that a party is a success. (*Reception at Sir James's.*)

The party met fairly punctually in the hideous hall, furnished with draughts and red velvet. The gloom was intensified by the sound of an emaciated orchestra playing "She was a Miller's Daughter," with a thin reckless airiness that was almost ghostly. (*Visit to Mme Tussaud's.*)

It was the end of a warm April day; they passed quickly, in the jingling cab, through the stale London streets, breathing the spring air that paradoxically suggested country walks, tender vows, sentiment and romance. . . .

Two short quotations that define the potential "drama" between Felicity and her loving, but too casual husband, Chetwode.

Men who indulge in inexpensive cynicism say that women are complex and difficult to understand. This may be true of an ambitious and hard woman, but nothing can be more simple and direct than a woman in love.

And he ought not always to be satisfied to leave her safe as the gem of the collection—and just come and look at it sometimes.

BUT TO ILLUSTRATE the development of her main themes, and particularly the harrowing skill with which the tragedy, as yet undeclared, can be suddenly and dangerously seen (although in fact, in this book, it is to be prevented at “the twelfth hour” by the husband and wife’s moment of self-realisation), only extended quotation would be effective. (Readers may be referred, for the chief instance of this, to Chapter 24—*The Explanation*.) Such moments of peril are made all the more telling by the counterpoint of comedy—particularly evident in the juxtapositions of the five final chapters. I cannot leave this book without pointing out two notable minor felicities: the art and understanding by which Ada Levenson makes so apparent that the sisters and brother, Felicity, Sylvia, and Savile, although so different, are most manifestly consanguineous; and the adorable portrait of young Savile himself—who by his immense assurance and his immense gaps of ignorance, seems a prototype for the contemporary teenager. Savile, in fact, almost steals the book, and captures its final sentence. The writer is describing, at the “happy ending” (happy, that is, once the tragedy of its two chief characters has been laid bare and avoided), the marriage of the sub-heroine, Sylvia, to Woodville.

Of course it was to be a long engagement and a quiet wedding; but entirely through the eager impetuosity of Sir James, they were married in six weeks, and every one said that in general splendour and gorgeousness it surpassed even the wedding of Sir James’s elder daughter. Savile’s attitude as best man was of such extraordinary correctness that it was the feature of the ceremony, and even distracted public attention from the bride and bridegroom.

I OMIT for the moment the next book (*Love’s Shadow*) since it is the first of three that have the same heroine, Edith Otley, and which I would therefore like to discuss together. The third book, then, *The Limit*, has essentially the same theme as *The Twelfth Hour* but with developments in depth and even harshness: since in this case the husband and wife, Romer and Valentia, are not such amiable persons as were Chetwode and Felicity; and the potential lover, Harry de Freyne, in addition to being an unworthy “charmer,” is clearly a more real danger to the marriage than was, in *The Twelfth Hour*,

the vacuously agreeable Bertie Wilton. Thus, of Romer the husband his creator says, “Apparently cool and matter of fact, he was in reality a reticent fanatic.” And as for Valentia his wife, she is the nearest thing in Ada Levenson’s books to an “immoral”—at any rate an unprincipled—woman: playing with two fires at once, and knowing it. This situation between the trio reaches danger points that are dramatic—almost melodramatic; and only at “the limit” (beyond, even, the “twelfth hour”) is the marriage saved from wreckage by three factors: that Romer, the husband, behaves though with violence, with nobility; that Harry the lover is revealed at last to Valentia as a creature lacking all profundity; and that Valentia herself, once her all too silent husband’s devotion is splendidly disclosed, has still sufficient love in her, and honour, to react passionately in his favour.

Decidedly, this book is more imperfect than some others: the “plot” creaks at times, with “coincidences” rather nonchalantly contrived; there is even, most unusually for Ada Levenson, some padding; and the final resolution, though effective and credible psychologically, seems hurried and “theatrical” (the last words of the book, one feels, should be not THE END but CURTAIN). Nor are the secondary characters so assured: there are a “funny” American and a “funny” Belgian who are not so very; though Mrs. Wyburn, Romer’s mother, is a splendidly-drawn monster (“Eagerness, impatience, love of teasing and sharp wit were visible in her face to one who could read between the lines”). What is happening in this book, one feels, is that the writer is stepping boldly outside her usual range (almost like her heroine, Valentia) to see just what will happen: thus attaining, as an artist, to her own “limit” of naturally manageable theme. So that though one may “fault” *The Limit*, there is little doubt that writing it enabled Ada Levenson, in the next books, to profit by the wider experience it gave her and develop, within her natural artistic boundaries, situations and characters of greater complexity and depth.

Yet it is only by the standard of other books that *The Limit* can be judged a failure. For I have left un-praised those scores, literally, of minor joys of commentary and description by which Ada Levenson constantly delights us. From among these I select two aphorisms, to illustrate in what way these rarely are, with her, mere paradoxes (mere inversions of the commonsensical obvious) as is so often, with writers considered “wittier,” most tediously the case:

It is an infallible sign of the second-rate in nature and intellect to make use of everything and everyone.

The marvellous instinct with which women are usually credited seems too often to desert

them on the only occasions when it would be of any real use. One would say it was there for trivialities only, since in a crisis they are usually dense, fatally doing the wrong thing. It is hardly too much to say that most domestic tragedies are caused by the feminine intuition of men and the want of it in women.

I ONLY PAUSE to recall the fifth book, *Bird of Paradise*, whose chief and terrible theme is the consequence of "marrying for money." I do so largely for reasons of space, and partly because the writer is marking time, so to speak, in this last novel but one, as she gathers strength before her final triumph; and I come now to the three Edith Ottley books, for which the writing of the others, each in turn, may seem in retrospect to be a preparation. These Edith Ottley novels (numbers two, four, and six in sequence) are *Love's Shadow*, *Tenterhooks*, and *Love at Second Sight*; and by their understanding and perfection they are the chief demonstration of the writer's art and vision.

To consider how much Edith really is (as I have suggested) a self-portrait of the writer, or a portrait of the kind of woman that she most admired. As to the second, this is certain; both because of Edith Ottley's central position in the canon, and because as a character she is more firmly and fully defined than any other. As to the first, we may safely assume that in describing Edith and her husband Bruce and their two children, Ada Leverson is drawing on experience that was closest and most personal to her. Though I should make clear that while Edith emerges finally as a woman the reader cannot but admire, she is presented as being fallible, however much endearing; nor is there any note whatever of that kind of auto-projection by which inferior writers manifestly seek, in their creation of a "heroine," to justify themselves in fancy to themselves in fact.

To understand the "problem" of Edith's marriage, and to assess the rightness of the way by which, in the last book of the three, she ultimately "solves" it, we must first understand her husband Bruce and their two children, Archie and Dilly. We have all met Bruce (though nowhere so accurately pinned down as in these volumes): he is the utterly selfish, utterly irresponsible, self-pitying and self-admiring bore who nevertheless does have the quality of attracting friends, and even the fidelity of his closest relatives, because of a bland, blind, total unawareness of how terrible he is. He is a "natural," an adult infant and—as everyone except himself observes—potentially a victim. The Bruces of this world may summon to their persons, as does sharp pins a magnet, emotions of exasperation and contempt: but they also

effortlessly contrive to win affection, devotion, protection, even pity. (Bruce was also—as such men often are—a beau.) As for the two children, it is clear from the outset that Edith undemandingly adores them; and that their young existence is a chief cement of a marriage otherwise bereft of love—not for the conventional reason that "having children" must mean "settling down," but because of the constant thought in Edith's watchful brain of what might be the consequence to them if her marriage were allowed to become publicly the failure it already is in fact. The force of this sentiment the writer in part makes manifest by the rare feat of creating, in the infant son and daughter—first as babies then as growing children—characters in their own right (not merely foils to their parents) that are entirely convincing and most lovable: a rare feat because to see children much as they see themselves—and even to describe babies as they may be supposed to do so too—is one, in adult writing, that is as frequently attempted as it is most uncommonly achieved without embarrassment.

In *Love's Shadow* the tone is light. The Bruce-Edith dialogues (delicious in print, but oh how dreadful they would be in fact!) are purest fun. Edith, a young wife as yet, is still at the stage of putting up with much too much and letting Bruce pontificate and get (apparently) his "way." These two key personages are also introduced most subtly to this first book in which the reader meets them, as subsidiary characters—the main "intrigue" being elsewhere: they are still so far—as everyone in the novel calls them—"the little Ottleys," at present acting as a comic foil to the major, but much more conventional "drama," of the apparent heroine Hyacinth Verney, of her adoringly jealous friend Anne Yeo, of her vapid lover Cecil Reeve, and of the (not unamiable) *femme fatale* of Cecil's vacillating predilection, Mrs. Eugenia Raymond (whose presence is, in Cecil's fresh love for Hyacinth, "love's shadow"—though we may come to feel it is over Edith that the darker shadow really looms). And since the courtship of Hyacinth by Cecil takes up much more of the book than does the brief description of their ensuing marriage, there is contrasted to the mere drama of marrying, the much more important drama (always, to Ada Leverson), in Edith and Bruce's case, of being married.

Of Bruce absurd, we have such episodes as his convenient proclivity, in moments of tiresome stress, for falling self-sorrowingly ill, and of his running the remarkable temperature—so he declares—of 119° Fahrenheit. We also hear much of Bruce's never-written (nor even begun) play, whose triumph will restore his fortunes (and buttress his immense self-satisfaction).

Bruce, who works (or rather, doesn't) at the Foreign Office, has of course no notion of what "writing a play" means; and this enables Ada Leverson to mount a pointed satire on the attitude to art of the non-artist dilettante. There are adequate hints, too, that Bruce's rich fund of egotism will eventually—as indeed it later does—become monstrously destructive, even wicked. A prescient sentence (though in fact referring to Hyacinth and Cecil) may herald the deep injury that Bruce, in later books, will do to Edith:

As a rule the person found out in a betrayal of love holds, all the same, the superior position of the two. It is the betrayed one who is humiliated.⁴

IN *Tenterhooks*, the second Edith Ottley book (and the reader will no longer need an explanation of the novels' titles), the drama is laid bare, though only provisionally resolved. It opens with a ludicrous—and faintly macabre—episode (that I long to see one day filmed) in which Bruce is conducting Edith to a dinner party given by a Foreign Office colleague, and gets the address wrong; taking her, in increasingly outraged frustration, and with mounting anxiety and hysteria (all Londoners will sympathise with Bruce a little), to 168 Hamilton Place, Park Lane (which turns out to be Lord Rosenberg's, with a butler and "four powdered footmen"), to 168 Hamilton Gardens (a deserted tenement in Marylebone), and to 168 Hamilton Terrace, St. John's Wood—where they arrive at a quarter-to-ten to find the party was the evening before. This comic first chapter shows three significant things, though: Edith is both more resigned, and yet more brusque, with Bruce; she still respects marriage, but no longer her husband simply because he is her partner in it; and that the Ottleys are this time presented, from the outset, with the authority of chief characters.

Vincy (in full, Vincy Wenham Vincy) is next introduced as Edith's confidant and friend: and the clear definition that he is no more than this (and that neither he nor she wish it to be otherwise) prepares us for the introduction of the third (apart from the children) essential charac-

ter in Edith's life—Aylmer Ross, who soon loves her and awakes her love. Aylmer enters the book—and Edith's existence—so decisively and powerfully that the reader is at once certain this is no Bertie, Harry, or Cecil, as before, but the essential man who will combine the qualities that Edith (and her creator) seek in their ideal figure of the husband-lover; and since Edith's devotion to her marriage is known to be so absolute, the question at once assails the reader's mind (as it was no doubt intended to) as to whether and how the writer will contrive, within her own now well-defined concept of what marriage is, and what its obligations, to unite Edith with Aylmer, or whether the conflict of love and honour (rather than "duty") will perhaps destroy her.

IN THIS BOOK, AT LAST, the central theme (because the protagonists are now worthy of it) is confronted boldly. And although, for quite logical reasons of the characters' psychology, no "affair" outside marriage does actually take place, the sexual dilemma of the heroine is now brought frankly into the open. It is not that the writer loses any of the reticence about this that is natural to her and which was, in earlier books, appropriate to their lighter or more superficial tone and characters: the fact of sex is not, I mean, unnecessarily projected—used merely to heighten "drama." But it is present now, and stated: both by what the characters are made to say, and by the injection of an element of physical violence that is directly related to the revealed realities of the chief characters' desires. Thus, for the first time in the novels, we have scenes of physical assault (though not reaching their "culmination") when Aylmer embraces Edith, and even Bruce "uses force." Edith herself is also driven by her feelings into coquetry, at moments "provoking" Aylmer almost as if she were an inferior person like Valentinia of *The Limit*; and in her rejoinders to her husband, speaking with undisguised tartness that barely veils (from the reader, if not from obtuse Bruce) a threat of infidelity. All three of them are now "on the brink:" wife, lover, and even husband: for Bruce, who of course supposes that any intrigue by a "devoted married man" (such as himself) is not one, and who, like so many "good sorts," is an inveterate flirt, involves himself first with his children's governess (which Edith, as much by style as by a consciousness of her own faithlessness of heart if not yet of fact, forgives), and then decisively deserts her in favour of one Mavis Argles. To Aylmer Ross the lover, this desertion seems (as it might well, initially, to the reader) the perfectly honourable (and socially acceptable) pretext for Edith to leave her husband, sue for divorce and marry him: for realising that Edith's love can only be

⁴ I must not leave this book without quotation of yet another instance of Ada Leverson's prophetically critical acumen: this time of a figure whom, one might suppose, a "cultivated Edwardian" would unreservedly admire. As will be seen, her estimate in fact is of the 1960s (*avant-garde*): "Then he remembered that it was an exhibition of Max Beerbohm's caricatures, and that people's spirits were naturally raised at the sight of cruel distortions, ridiculous situations, and fantastic misrepresentations of their friends and acquaintances on the walls."

fully given within a totally embracing vow, and being himself a man of such quality as despises, in the case of anyone he values and respects, a mere "affair," Aylmer longs now to marry her. But it was Bruce's all unconscious master-stroke to elope with somebody like Mavis Argles, and do so to, of all places, Australia. For Edith knows better than he does that the adventure will be a failure (Mavis in fact "gets off" with someone else while still on the high seas), that he will return, and that if she abandons him he will not just be the failure that he is, but shrink into a ruin. So she rejects her freedom—and her love.

Love's agony, and jealousy, and pain in joy are present in *Tenterhooks* to such effect that those who, being in love, may read it, had better not, and those who have been, but are not now, will sharply be reminded of what they may think they have forgotten. The temperature of emotion rises steadily in the book until it stands unbearably (somewhat like Bruce's) at its fever heat. To convey this accumulated tension by quotation is of course impossible: here, nevertheless, are two brief extracts that may induce a painful twinge of recollection:

Then there was an extraordinary pause, in which neither of them seemed able to think of anything to say. There was a curious sort of vibration in the air.

You don't know a woman until you have had a letter from her.

WITH THE FINAL book, *Love at Second Sight*, it is clear that the writer has committed herself to re-shaping Edith's life in terms satisfactory to Edith herself, to the writer's clearly enunciated code, and to the reader's heightened expectations. How, short of some sudden death or dire fatality—neither of which, the reader may rightly feel, would be appropriate—is she to accomplish this? The answer will be that with entire credibility and consummate art, she will transform Aylmer, the lover, into the "husband" whom, to win Edith, he must first become: not, I mean, "husband" merely in fact, but in psychological reality.

To achieve this, we see, first of all, how the two earlier Edith Ottley books (and more tangentially, the three others) will serve their purpose. Edith is now thirty-five, Aylmer forty-two, so it is "now or never." They have been entirely separated, since Edith's earlier rejection of him, by three years of time, during which their feeling has not waned but deepened. Bruce has learned nothing, is more dreadfully himself than ever—so much so that, to anyone who had not read of his earlier behaviour to her, it would seem from his attitude to Edith that she has

nothing to forgive him. The children are older, and are beginning to see through their father. The 1914 War (as I hinted earlier) is also pressed organically into service: for while Bruce has not joined the New Army (he suffers from a "neurotic heart"), Aylmer, disguising his age, has gone to the Front and—doubly subtle touch—his son by a first marriage, Teddy, also disguising his (he is under-age to fight), is in khaki too; and the social tensions of the war will favour any drastic personal re-adjustment:

When a woman knows that the man she loves has risked his life, and is only too anxious to risk it again—well, it's natural that she should feel she is also willing to risk something.

And yet:

She had a curious sense of responsibility towards Bruce, which came in the way.

The means to the final union of Edith and Aylmer (though not the essential reason), and the catalyst of the whole situation, is one of Ada Leverson's most original, appalling, and hilarious creations, Mme. Eglantine Frabelle. Mme. Frabelle (English, but the relict of a French wine merchant) is a woman who gets everything wrong, never stops saying so, but who is so affably and so predictably mistaken, and so unfeignedly interested in whoever, at that moment, is her interlocutor, that everybody (except, significantly, Aylmer and Edith's boy Archie) likes her.

People were not charmed with Eglantine because she herself was charming, but because she was charmed.

She has descended on the Ottleys with a letter of introduction from a friend who, it later transpires, knows nothing whatever about her—and indeed, once Mme. Frabelle has settled like a benevolent cuckoo in the Ottley's house, this friend asks *them* to tell her who this woman she introduced into their midst, may be. Bruce, flattered by her attention (despite her being older than he, and far from beautiful—or perhaps even because of this), is quite enchanted with her indefatigable solicitude. And so, in a different way, is Edith: for when in doubt—as she is often, now—a conversation with her guest will serve to resolve perplexities because of Edith's faith in Eglantine's sure instinct for giving to any question an answer unflinching and reliably incorrect. For example:

"Oh, men are all alike!" exclaimed Madame Frabelle cynically.

"Only some men," said Edith. "Besides, to a woman—I mean, a nice woman—there is no such thing as men. There is a man; and either she is so fond of him that she can talk of nothing else, however unfavourably, or so much in love with

him that she never mentions his name."

"Men often say women are all alike," said Madame Frabelle.

"When a man says that, he means there is only one woman in the world, and he's in love with her, and she is not in love with him."

"Men are not so faithful as women," remarked Madame Frabelle, with the air of a discovery.

So Mme. Frabelle provides, initially, the atmosphere of almost crazy unreality in which reality can best declare itself. Meanwhile, Edith's visits to Aylmer, who is wounded and on leave in London, become increasingly tense and desperate. The word love, and the fact of it, are now openly declared between them. And so are even—though in conversations not with Aylmer, but with one of Edith's confidants, Sir Tito Landi, the composer—the possible facts of infidelity, of divorce, of second marriage. Two sharp hints of what will happen are when Archie, Edith's son, says to her, "Mother, I wish Aylmer was my father." And obliquely, when Edith is leaving London on a visit, her husband bids her his farewell with

"Perhaps we shall never meet again," said Bruce pleasantly, as Edith, Dilly, and the nurse were starting; "either the Zeppelins may come while you're away, or they may set your hotel at Eastcliff on fire. Just the place for them."

The visit to Eastcliff is of course (and of course with Bruce's indifferent agreement) to see Aylmer, who is convalescing there; and during it, Edith at last commits herself. Aylmer is soon to return to the war in France; and Edith tells him she will leave Bruce—who, they both accurately assess, will not want to keep the children (too much bother)—and henceforth they are, in their own eyes and hearts, "engaged." In this almost final scene, the writer establishes two essential things: that Edith, sure of his love and hers, and sure as she can be of the children's future, is prepared to "desert" her husband and accept "social disgrace;" and that in spite of the urgencies of their feeling for each other, and of the overhanging war, neither he nor she wish for physical union until they can be pledged entirely to each other.

And now Mme. Frabelle plays from afar (in fact, from Liverpool) the unexpected and un hoped for final card that will give Edith not only the whole game, but game with honours. For Mme. Frabelle is waiting to cross the Atlantic, and Bruce is going to cross it with her: this time, we know, in a grasp far more irrevocable than Mavis Argles'. On his earlier flight with Mavis, Bruce had announced it to his wife by letter; but now her lingering doubt will not be satisfied with less than an avowal from her husband. This—as necessary psychologically to

both Bruce and Edith, as artistically to the writer—Bruce provides her with: and tells her face to face why it is "I can't endure married life any longer." The last link breaks finally when Edith, accepting this (not on this occasion as we know, without relief) asks Bruce if he would wish to see their child Dilly before he goes. He doesn't want to; and she no longer wants him in any way at all.

In this book, the chief themes of all her art are finally united and resolved: friendship, love, and honour become one. Technically, it is her most perfect: even the decorative chapter headings of the earlier five books have vanished in the assured pace with which she sets down her final testament. Two decades of Ada Leverson's life remained to her, but she never wrote another novel; and one may conjecture this was most because the meaning that life held for her had now been given, in her art, entire expression.

ON THE EVIDENCE of these books, we now see clearly defined what Ada Leverson most admired in men and women, and most disliked; and can so deduce, from the consistency with which she reveals these attitudes through her characters' sayings and behaviour, what is the nature of the essentially moral instinct on which her whole outlook as an artist was ultimately based. One may say first of all, on the positive side, that she loved those who loved life, who were spirited yet considerate and kind, and that she liked good manners (while caring nothing whatever for conventional "status"). She adored the young (including the special category of children), and she admired poised old age. She liked women as well as men (whom she liked even more), and to both she could give friendship, of which she well knew the boundaries, as well as she could give love (of which she knew all the rareness and the peril and the need for nourishing it with absolute devotion). She liked people who did things, but didn't mind when they did nothing if they did it with style. She respected most of all men and women who, involving themselves in a human situation, take their due share of responsibility, and try to preserve it and enrich it.

She disliked the mean, the self-important, the tale-bearers, and those lacking candour when to withhold it can do damage: though she disliked equally the indiscreet, and the superfluously "outspoken." She despised duplicity, but did not mind artifice. Most of all, I think—and this is perhaps the only cardinal sin in Ada Leverson's indulgent and forgiving code—she detested cruelty, especially when wanton and aware. Yet almost all these blemishes she was ready enough to pardon, or to make allowances for, if the

culprit—as culprits often are—was really unconscious of his fault.

In its simplest essence, one may say of her vision that it is—though this is an odd word to use—a healthy one: where life glowed, there her heart was, and her active sympathy. Although, as a writer, she is “worldly” (in the sense of knowing precisely what the rules are), she emerges from her pages as an artist who, however knowledgeable and difficult to deceive, is innocent and pure. To her readers—even to her characters...and even to the most dreadful among these—she is like a fairy godmother: eager to bestow gifts; courteous and considerate to her public, and too good-natured, often, even to hurt her own creations when they most deserve it. Really to know life, and to accept it—while always wishing it were better and striving, in one’s own human relations, to make it so—and once knowing it, to grow to love it more and more in spite of its conditions, is the indication in any human person of maturity and wisdom. Such a person Ada Levenson was, and of this kind of being all her writing is a celebration.

In *The Twelfth Hour*, Felicity, during a moment of doubt about her marriage and herself, consults a female Celtic soothsayer (called

Madame Zero) who thus reveals Felicity’s own character to her:

You have a curious temperament. You are easily impressed by the personality of other people. You are impulsive and emotional, and yet you have a remarkable amount of calm judgment, so that you can analyse, and watch your own feelings and those of the other persons as well as if it were a matter of indifference to you. *Your strong affections never blind you to the faults and weaknesses of their object, and those faults do not make you care for them less, but in some cases attach you even more strongly.* You are fond of gaiety; your moods vary easily, because you vibrate to music, bright surroundings, and sympathy. But you have depth, and in an emergency I should say you would be capable even of heroism.

Edith Ottley, three times a heroine, may best seem, as we now know, to personify—in so far as any character does, or can, its own creator—the woman Ada Levenson felt herself to be. Yet may not this short description—a fragment from the picture of the first heroine she invented and admired—be also her earliest self-portrait? Certainly, it evokes a woman who, after one has read her books and learned what she loved and didn’t, one may grow to believe was very like her indeed.

A Kind of Love

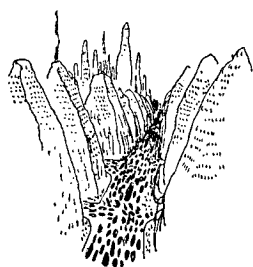
My father toiled at sleek machines,
his sweat mixing with their oil
so we boys would not grow thin.
At night, pained with need of sleep,
he smiled at the door and kneeled
to circle us with heavy arms
and rub his dark bristled cheek
against our faces while we yelled.
We, who had alleyways and streets
beneath the dark track of the el
on which to play our noisy games,
we thought it duty for this man
to love; in our innocence
we did not know his pain of sleep,
In our tireless play we did not think
he worked in hate to earn our keep.

Wally Kaufman

NOTES & TOPICS

Letter from New York

Explaining Ourselves



ALL of a sudden, some of my best friends are “socialists.” (I’ll explain those inverted commas very shortly.) This is a new phenomenon among New York “intellectuals.” (I’ll *not* explain those inverted commas—after all, I have to live with these people.) At three successive cocktail parties I have heard various men of letters roundly proclaim that they have lapsed into socialism, and that so far from experiencing an “end of ideology” they were conscious of a new beginning. No one fainted at these announcements; to tell the truth no one paid much heed. But I call this development to your attention so that you’ll know what is *chic* with us, and also because aberrations may sometimes tell us more about the norm than can the norm itself.

I use the word “aberration” advisedly, but with no desire to be unusually malicious. I am myself not a socialist, and can’t honestly begin to understand what it might mean to be a socialist in the United States, *anno* 1961, where the Government Post Office is a daily scandal while the privately-owned (though publicly-regulated) telephone system is a model for all the world. Nor are my friends of much help in enlightening me. For at least some of the more middle-aged among them (to put the matter delicately), socialism seems to be a moral equivalent for adultery—a last desperate flight from the respectability that comes with rising incomes and falling hair. Most of these people are profoundly a-political; they have visited Paris far more frequently than Washington; their ignorance of economics, or public administration, or foreign affairs is vast. Their socialism is little more than a nostalgic posture, and my own feeling is that, if this is the price one must pay for preserving the sanctity of their families, it is reasonably cheap.

But such people are not the whole story. For among the young in body, as well as in heart, there are scattered symptoms of a radical revival.

It is evident in the rash of little Left-wing magazines that have broken out in the colleges. It is perceptible, too, in the pages of such a magazine as *Commentary*, which under its new editor (aged 31) has encouraged younger contributors with a dissenting cast of mind. It was in *Commentary* that a young professor recently wrote an article calling (favourable) attention to the “rebellious young scholars” who are now openly challenging the conventional wisdom (liberal or neo-liberal, usually) of their teachers. This article certainly exaggerates the proportions of its subject—the overwhelming majority of American students still have only one thing on their minds. But it is not entirely fanciful. There may be no thunder on the Left; but there are some barely audible rumblings.

I HAVE BEEN READING some of these new student publications—*New University Thought*, *Studies on the Left*, etc.—and I do not recommend that you rush to enter your subscriptions. None of them comes close to the level of your own *New Left Review*, which does after all have a genuine socialist tradition to work within. True, when an issue is nice and simple, such as supporting Negro students in the South in their campaign of civil disobedience against segregated schools, movie houses, and restaurants, these young radicals speak decisively as well as fervently. But the struggle against racial discrimination in this country is not a Left-wing property; the affluent foundations, the political machines in the Northern cities, the educated class as a whole, are all on the same side. And when these young people stray into other, and more deeply troubled waters, they flounder wildly. They are against the arms race, but are not for unilateral disarmament either; they object to “Yankee imperialism” but can’t seriously admire Dr. Castro; they are pro-Israel (many of them are Jewish) and also pro-Nasser (all of them are “anti-colonialist”); they are for friendly relations with the Soviet Union but cannot really bring themselves to admire a régime that is so patently illiberal. So, more often than not, they exhaust their spleen by constructing vague and grand demonologies in which “the ruling élite” is denounced for so mucking up the world that a decent radical has the greatest difficulty in making sense of it.

Basically, these young people are trapped in a peculiarly American dilemma: how to be a radical without becoming a crank. This is not a uniquely Left-wing problem; it holds for Right-wing radicalism as well. Concurrent with the “socialist” ripples on the campus there has also been a “conservative” revival of sorts. (Once again, those inverted commas are indispensable.)