

T. F. Powys's Mystic Tale of English Village Life

KINDNESS IN A CORNER. By Theodore Francis Powys. 293 pp. New York: The Viking Press. \$2.50.

ANOTHER one of those strange, and strangely beautiful, books which none but Theodore Francis Powys can write is "Kindness in a Corner." As with all of "T. F.'s" books—they are not to be classified as novels—the scene is his native Dorsetshire, the Hardy country of moors and pagan tradition and inarticulate farming folk. Mr. Powys is not a Thomas Hardy. In his stories the heath seldom, if ever, takes on hideous aspects; tragedy does not go so deep, philosophy is less insistent. Yet all the ingredients which Hardy drew from his Dorset soil go also into Powys's work. Powys is a gentler, a more tolerant, and a vastly more whimsical Thomas Hardy.

The story of "Kindness in a Corner" cannot be retold—another point at which the author differs from his great predecessor. Powys does not make use of "plot," at least, not in the older sense in which the word was applicable. Nevertheless, "Kindness in a Corner" is not lacking in form. It is photographic, but spiritually rather than physically photographic, of a village group. There is a slender thread binding all the parts together. And there is a central character, that of Silas Dottery, the rector of the parish. There is something of romance, also, in the rector's love for Lottie, daughter of the sexton and the clergyman's serving maid. Yet as soon as one uses these stock words of the literary craft they are seen only partially to apply. Theodore Powys works with symbols and with the shadows of things rather than with realities. Nevertheless, what he writes is very real in its effect. And this is the paradox of T. F. Powys that makes him so utterly

impossible to write about in any clearly understandable way.

There is, however, far less of symbolism in the present book than in "Mr. Weston's Good Wine," its immediate predecessor. In that remarkable literary tour de force Mr. Weston is none other than God Himself, who has come down to earth accompanied by the Archangel Michael to consort with men and to give them of his good wines of love and death. In "Kindness in a Corner" God will not be found in person, but in the contrasted men of God, Dottery the rector and Dibben the canon, there is as much that is symbolic as literal. The very title of the book is symbolic. In his little corner of the world the gentle, human Dottery is a chalice of kindness. And Truggin's grave-

yard, which he tends with every care, is, in the sexton's homely rustic philosophy, the kind corner to which all must come. Yet if the idea of death is one of the several animating ideas in Powys's story, it is, like the idea of love, adumbrated rather than pursued. Love and death float through his pages as thistledown on the wind. The reader may not touch Powys at many points, but he will find that Powys has touched him—again, one of the many several paradoxes in the work of this genius who, in his way, is surely more like William Blake than any one else who has ever written in English.

To the reader who has not accustomed himself to the work of T. F. Powys—and it is necessary to accustom oneself, a single book

will not suffice—there is an occasional frankness of speech or scene which would seem to consort ill with what has just been said of the author's preoccupation with God and His works. But there is no contradiction; the opposite, rather. For Powys, evil is as natural as goodness; hence no more to be condemned than goodness is to be singled out for extravagant praise. Lottie, desirous of the clergyman, and the clergyman desirous of Lottie (although only dumbly aware of the fact), are not sinful. In the pantheism of Powys there is neither good nor evil—there is only naturalness. There are odd things in the village of Tadnol. If Mr. Dottery

waited all day in a hollow tree he might hear whispers. If he stood upon the green for an hour something strange might happen to him. So many things of importance are hidden and wrapped up; no good thing is likely to be discovered at once and easily. Often that which is clear enough to be seen is never seen until a man cares not whether it is seen or no.

This is the key to Theodore Powys, who has seen more than most men. And if to the reader there should be something in his telling that verges on the mystic, it is because the vision of Powys, as is common with visions, defies language, even a language handled by so great a master as is this author. For Theodore Powys is that—a master of English, and for this, for the exquisite texture of expression, he should be read, if for nothing else. But the reading will disclose much else, and especially a genius so rare it seems not of this earth, a humaneness of spirit not frequently to be encountered, and a wit so exotic it will seem at times little other than perverse. And "Kindness in a Corner" displays all the Powys characteristics in their fullness and at their best.

PERCY HUTCHISON.



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