

SIGRID UNDSET AND THE MODERN APOSTOLATE

ON the feast of Corpus Christi, 1854, a young man, an artist, stood in the streets of Düsseldorf waiting for the procession of the Blessed Sacrament to pass by. He was not there from any religious motive; indeed, he looked with a certain supercilious air upon the people around him, waiting so silently for their Lord to pass by. It was only inspiration for a painting that he sought, attracted by the pageantry, the rich colours, the myriad candles and flowers. Soon, the distant murmur of prayers was audible and the procession appeared round the bend of the road, a splash of colour and light against the sombre background. The men around him pulled off their hats and all fell upon their knees. The artist alone stood, tall and handsome, with his broad-brimmed hat planted firmly upon his fair curling hair. But it did not remain so for long! The next moment a blow from one of the men near him had sent it spinning across the street. . . . With a sudden realisation of his want of courtesy and good breeding the quick blood rushed to the young man's cheeks and he bowed his head in shame.

The name of this young artist was Karl Schilling. He was a Norwegian, nineteen years of age and an atheist, staying in Germany for the sake of his studies; but from that day of June when he had stood in the streets of Düsseldorf waiting for the procession, dated his change of heart. After his conversion (November 11th, 1854) he worked untiringly till the day of his death for the return of his beloved Norway to the true faith. Gradually he gave up his painting. More and more of his time was given to prayer and the exercise of charity. With the passage of the years the wish to become a priest was slowly formulating in his mind. On December 18th, 1875, he was ordained at Bourges in France. Thenceforward his work never allowed him to return to Norway. But his prayers and sufferings were offered for her conversion, and it cannot be that they beat unavailingly about the throne of God. He died on January 3rd, 1907, and the process for his beatification has been opened in Rome.

Father Karl Schilling is but one of many whose dearest wish and most frequent prayer is to see the country of their birth brought back to the true fold of Christ. The work which he so faithfully performed for Norway is carried on in our own day by a fervent body of Catholics, among whom are many writers of peculiar genius and power, of whom perhaps the greatest is Fru Sigrid Undset. Herself a convert, she sees with the clearness of one who has found peace and happiness in the Catholic Church, the need which those around her have of some firm criterion of truth, of some invincible moral standard.

Yet it is but slowly that the northern countries take up again the discarded beliefs and practices of Catholicism. The grim and negative doctrines of Luther and Calvin have burrowed so deeply into the national character that, as Catholicism has come to be identified with Poland and with Ireland, so has Lutheranism come to be identified with these lands of grey skies and long dreary winters. It is an interesting and revealing fact that the Catholic Church found its first home in those lands where life is most exuberant, and where its glad wine is poured out most joyously, being an affirmation, not a negation, of God and His love and care for mankind. But in those countries generally accredited as Protestant, the progress towards the Catholic Church goes on slowly though surely. As always with such conversion, an essential part is that endeavour of Catholic writers to strip the past of those veils with which centuries of disbelief have covered it, and to lay bare the true glory of that faith whose cathedrals aspire to heaven in the everlasting glory of Gothic.

It was with the publication of *Kristin Lavransdatter* that the literary world first realised the power which lay behind the pen of Sigrid Undset. One of the greatest qualities of this monumental work, a saga published in three parts, is the fact that of its very nature its appeal is universal. Merely from the artistic point of view the book is a triumph. At a period of literary history when the El Dorado of the majority of writers is the psychological novel, *Kristin Lavransdatter* stands supreme. As the story is told, it reaches at times to the supreme heights of human tragedy and suffering.

BLACKFRIARS

The main theme of the book is the love of Kristin for Erlend, the man whom she marries. This love seems to transmute itself with the years into a love for her children, but this in reality is but another form of her love for her husband. The whole story of the betrothal and marriage is one of human desires and sorrows, of the continual striving for a happiness which men cannot know on earth. At times, blacker and bitter with tragedy, as when Eline, to save herself from drinking the poisoned draught she had prepared for Kristin, snatches Erlend's dagger and stabs herself; elsewhere it rises to idyllic heights. In the third book, *The Cross*, after the death of Erlend, Kristin becomes an epic figure. With the years behind her, she leaves the home where life is no longer bearable and sets out in pilgrim's garb for the convent at Nidaros, purposing to leave the world as she had come into it, poor and entirely without possessions. Old and alone as she now is, a glimpse is vouchsafed her of the true meaning of life, as she rests beside a little stream. "Again there came upon her that strange feverish inner vision—the stream seemed to show her a picture of her own being; thus had she hurried restlessly through the waste of these earthly years, foamed up in turbulent chafing at every stone in her path—'twas but weakly and fitfully and palely that the everlasting light could mirror itself in her life. But it dawns upon the mother dimly, that in anguish, and care, and love—each time the fruit of sin ripened into sorrow—it had been granted to her earth-bound, wilful soul to catch a reflection of the heavenly light . . . Mary, the perfect in purity, in meekness, in obedience to the Father's will, had sorrowed the most of all mothers, and her mercy would see and understand the pale and weak reflection from a sinful woman's heart, that had burned with hot and ravaging fleshly love and with all the sins that fleshly love brings with it, untowardness and defiance, a stony, unforgiving spirit, stubbornness and pride—yet was a mother's heart in despite of all." It is in a last act of mercy and love that the soul of Kristin Lavransdatter passes into eternity.

On the appearance of *The Garland*, the first of the three books, in English, the critics had hailed it for the master-

piece it truly is. Yet, there were certain aspects of the book at which critics, especially in America, looked askance. It seemed that here was a writer who truly believed in sin and who was not afraid to call certain acts by their proper name. Yet, putting this down to the fact that the story was one of the fourteenth century, they tried to overlook these rather embarrassing statements by a praise of the book's only too evident excellence. But with the appearance of the second and third books, *The Mistress of Husbaby* and *The Cross*, it was no longer possible for them to avoid the fact that these beliefs were not merely properties with which the subtle scholarship of the writer had endowed her period for the sake of effect: it was becoming clear that they were beliefs, living and firmly grounded in the mind of the writer. Above all, there was the main belief in the sacredness of the marriage bond, the belief in its indissolubility and the fact that the man or woman who violates it, sins. It was rather disquieting to see these views expressed so bluntly and uncompromisingly by so able a writer.

The next book to be published in English was *The Master of Hestviken*. Shortly afterwards Sigrid Undset was awarded the Nobel prize for literature, previous recipients of which had been Rudyard Kipling, W. B. Yeats and George Bernard Shaw. In 1931 was published *The Wild Orchid*. Sigrid Undset was no longer writing of the Middle Ages but of our own day, and she was still as uncompromising. In the sequel to this book, *The Burning Bush*, Paul Selmer becomes a Catholic and freely accepts all the reactions consequent upon this step. He forgives his wife who had left him and receives her back into his house, renounces many cherished dreams and thereby forfeits the sympathy of his mother and family.

But the most striking defence which Sigrid Undset has made of the Christian idea of marriage is in a later book, *Ida Elisabeth*. This time there is no conversion to Catholicism. When still quite a girl, Ida Elisabeth had married a weak self-centred boy. Discovering that he has been unfaithful to her, she leaves him and bravely makes a home for herself and her children, obtaining a divorce from her

BLACKFRIARS

husband. For the first time she falls in love. Reckoned by the standards of those around her, there is no reason why she should not marry again, but, taught by her own experience, Ida Elisabeth senses the wrongness of such an action, and when later her divorced husband is dying, she goes at once to his side, honouring the marital promise which had once been given.

It is impossible nowadays to overlook the far-reaching influence which the novel has upon its multitude of readers. By the great increase of the reading public, a demand has been created which is too often answered by books which treat slightly of the sanctity of marriage. Of course, in countries which are not Catholic, this danger must remain; but in contrast to such writing the value of work such as that of Sigrid Undset, with its upholding of Catholic beliefs and practices as being, finally, the only course for a reasonable man to take, cannot be too highly extolled. The books of Fru Undset must give any serious-minded man "furiously to think."

It would seem that Sigrid Undset has found her true *métier* in the psychological novel. A more recent work has not been so successful. *Saga of Saints* is an attempt to weave into one coherent whole the account of the saints of Norway, from the earliest times down to our own day. To raise living men and women from the ashes of old legend and to extract the truth from the wealth of detail and exaggeration which mis-directed piety has added, is no easy task. One remembers the work of such writers as Miss Alice Curtayne with gratitude; yet undoubtedly there are redeeming features in the *Saga of Saints*. The account of Saint Sunniva has a freshness which the rest of the book lacks, and the study of Father Karl Schilling is most interesting. Yet it is in the novel that the true power of Sigrid Undset lies, and when an estimate is made by future generations of the literary output of this century, one feels confident that the work of Sigrid Undset will be set high above the writings of many who, acclaimed as a seven days' wonder at the time of publication, soon sink into the oblivion they justly deserve.

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