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A SMALL BOY IN THE SIXTIES

BY
GEORGE STURT

Author of
The Bettesworth Book, Change in the Village,
The Wheelwright's Shop, etc.

WITH
AN INTRODUCTION
BY
ARNOLD BENNETT



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INTRODUCTION

You can see from the frontispiece, which is a very good portrait, what George Sturt looked like. A dark man with regular features, fine benevolent eyes, and an old-fashioned dark beard. He was perhaps ever so slightly under the average height. His voice was low and effective; his demeanour modest, not shy, and not retiring—at any rate he only retired before what bored him or what he disdained. He was a bachelor, and lived during most of his life with his two maiden sisters in a small house with a small garden in a small village called The Lower Bourne, near Farnham, which is a good Surrey country town.

He travelled little, and never extensively. In a long series of his letters—1895 to 1922—which I possess, there is only one that is not dated from his house; the unique exception came from Edinburgh, whither I believe he had gone by sea. Even his visits to London were infrequent.

By trade he was a wheelwright (see his book *The Wheelwright's Shop*). He had a business in Farnham which he directed with the help of a partner. He once took me to his yard; it was quite a small yard, very similar to other yards; but George could make a wheel interesting. Wheels and the receptacles swung between them were to him exciting objects, and he could communicate the excitement which they aroused in himself. For the more tedious aspects of his business, such as making out bills and engaging office boys, George had but a moderate

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enthusiasm. He counted the day happy when he could avoid going into Farnham.

By profession he was an author. All his letters to me—and they are numerous—are mainly about the craft of putting things into words, for print. He had a pretty wide range, too. It is a common mistake to assume that because his best known work is concerned with the observation of rural manners, therefore his literary interests were limited to the same. He wrote at least two novels, *A Year's Exile* and *The Extinction of the Keens* (the latter was never published), and began one or two others. He was attracted by the drama, and began more than one farce. Also he dealt much in theories of aesthetic with a sociological trend (see for instance his book *The Ascending Effort*, in the value of which he deeply believed). He did reviews for *The Academy* under Lewis Hind.

As a rule he wrote slowly and with difficulty, and he got his work published slowly and with difficulty. But he did finish books, and he did get them published, and in the result the lettered public came to join in the very high appreciation in which he had for many years been held by the friends who intimately knew him and who could recognise authentic literature when they saw it.

But neither the public nor his friends have yet seen his chief work, which was his Journal. The origin of this work is obscure. On June 25th, 1896, George wrote to me: "I once kept a journal—a sickly, analytic thing containing some good stuff amidst much rubbish. And today... I hauled the old book out and wrote in it for those two hours I spoke of: a criticism of Stevenson."

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So that there must have been a considerable hiatus in the keeping of the Journal. In those days, when I was myself beginning to keep a journal, I used to make and stitch and bind the virgin volumes with my own hands. George happened to see a volume, and he said that if he had a book like that to write in he would keep a journal regularly. I said: "I will make you a volume." I made him two volumes.

The Journal (new series) had not been commenced in December 1896, but in December 1906 it had reached its seventh volume. On February 22nd, 1908, it was still in the seventh volume. Under that date he wrote me of it: "It goes by fits and starts, and is not often narrative, but impressionist or analytic. It will be the most vividly interesting work I shall ever write; but it will not be published, probably, until I'm dead—excepting in bits which will be incorporated into schemed-out books."

In that last clause is the point—namely, that probably the Journal was, directly or indirectly, the basis of nearly all that George wrote after the commencement of the second series. I have never seen the Journal, but I am sure that it is very comprehensive in scope. He wrote to me on December 23rd, 1898: "Damme, I'm beastly interested in all sorts of things." Some of his letters give light on the way in which he kept the Journal. Thus, dated June 26th, 1898:

But, by Jingo! if one could get down to understand village life! I have reached that initiatory stage in which one is convinced of ignorance... It were almost as easy to write of the Chinese. Yet if one only could! I was counting up last night the elemental tragedy stuff that

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has occurred in the cottages within 100 yards from here, since I came here seven years ago. Here's the bald catalogue:

- 4 deaths of old men
- 2 „ young men, leaving families
- 1 death of a mother
- 1 „ an infant
- 1 case of sunstroke, with delirium
- 1 „ haemorrhage: fits (man still lying
between life and death)
- 1 girl home "in trouble."

The ingenious—almost devilish—torture of poverty is going [on] more or less all the time. All these affairs were more or less dramatic...."

And in the same letter:

It was not until yesterday evening—7.30—that I had any chance at writing, and in the interim yet another matter had come, for my journal—a bad accident in the village, with a side-light on village life. I wrote until dark. Then got my supper...and after it, intending to continue writing—looked out first at the night. Low voices in the lane could be heard. I stole down close to the hedge....A man and a girl—tentatively philandering, I suppose....That had to be entered in my journal forthwith—and it took me until 12.30 to get it down. Not until this morning were the notes on the Fair finished: and now the total addition to the journal, for the last 24 hours, is about 21 pages—say about 3000 words. Not much "literature" in it. But documentary stuff.

George Sturt was always thus fervently in pursuit of knowledge about the English labouring class. The man whom he called Bettesworth in *The Bettesworth Book*, who worked in his garden and whom I was once asked to

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meet, was a hero for him—and I consider justifiably. And perhaps his chief heroine in life was Mrs Bettesworth. He never condescended to these people, either in intercourse or in thought. Nor did he regard them as “quaint.” Nothing was more likely to anger him than a condescending attitude towards them, with a gently “tickled” appreciation of their alleged quaintness. In September 1900 a clergyman aroused his resentment by some written remarks and suggestions about the material in *The Bettesworth Book*, and George wrote me, after admitting the fairness of certain criticisms:

But when he talks about “the old fellow’s quaint narratives” then I behold the country parson in whose sight a man like Bettesworth has next to no virtues and is either coarse or “quaint.” If my book has enough of the real man in it to grate on a parson’s nerves, then perhaps it should not be altered. When one thinks of it, the mere notion of submitting such a man as Bettesworth (even in a report of him) to the judgment of a parson is absurd. . . . You twig his idea of reconstruction: it’s to be *my* notes and appreciation of the “country life.” He wants *me* to come and entertain him in his study with anecdotes of the quaint old fellows in the village, so that we may smile over ’em together, and then sigh, and be struck perhaps by “a thought” for tomorrow’s sermon. . . . The pity is that the parson and his set have to be considered, so that a man can’t try to publish sundry things about labouring people which are by no means “quaint.”

The real, inmost George Sturt shows in those lines. He had a steely and everlasting hatred of all sentimentality. He said what he thought, or he said nothing. To his friends he said everything, even about his friends. His

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external mildness, his unshakable politeness, were misleading. You might not altogether like knowing where you were with him, but you did know where you were with him. "This is unworthy of you," he would write, of a piece of your work. Consequently he inspired passionate loyalties in his friends.

In 1916 he broke a blood-vessel at the base of his brain and was almost helpless for a time. But in a few months he was on the way to recovery, and had resumed correspondence. The handwriting, however, showed a mortal change from the wonderfully neat and legible script of former days. In January 1917 he had even formed a hope of coming to London. Then the handwriting improved again. But on March 23rd, 1920, he wrote: "And further, about a fortnight ago, blowed or blest (you know what I mean!) if I didn't have another slight stroke, which has left me all but helpless." On May 7th, 1922, he wrote: "I can scarcely move across the room now...and an hour's chatter reduces me to mumbling. But I giggle a good deal; keep cheerful; and am enjoying life intensely. ...I see quite a number of people too—local people... those undistinguished nobodies who are displaying to me (though they don't suspect it) what normal English have got in 'em."

This was the last time I heard from him direct. He died on February 4th, 1927.

ARNOLD BENNETT

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AUTHOR'S PREFACE

THIS book was hardly finished when around the memories it deals with grew an idea which may as well be set down here in the following prefatory notes as it has no proper place elsewhere, yet may help the whole. Briefly, the memories are of two sorts, besides the reflections commenting on them, which in fact are not memories at all. The reflections are left, in the hope that they may kindle light on the little things remembered. For instance, the cantankerous geniality—kindly, though pig-headed—of the mid-Victorian town-life, considered now, restores many of the details remembered and is itself lit up by them, until an air almost of the eighteenth century seems to have lingered in the Farnham of the eighteen-sixties. Again, I think that the meadows and hop-grounds, the ancient streets, and the countrified traffic and affairs, are better to be appreciated, if the quiet that used to rest over them is noticed now. Yet the eighteenth century doggedness and the still more ancient quiet ought not to be classed exactly as memories. I give them now, at any rate, rather as reflections of after years, illustrating and illustrated by things recalled.

Of actual memories there are, as already said, two distinct kinds to be noted. The first kind is made up of the minutest sensations or perceptions, repeated so often that the sort of child I was could hardly miss noticing them in time, until at last their appeal grew familiar, and can be more exactly considered to-day. Thus there was the limpid

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caress everywhere of the daylight. I realise now how excellent it was, and how it pervaded my childhood, though I hardly noticed it then, but took it for granted. Likewise I took for granted the procession of expected changes, from Sunday round to Sunday again, or from May-day to Squib-night; or the coming of the Fairs, and so on, through those vanished years. These items yield a similar delight to the daylight and recur now to my mind in much the same way. Or, once more, in the category of pleasing sensations experienced over and over again until I began to “know what I liked,” are certain attributes now singled-out and identified—the colours of meadow or woodland or heath, of cloud or distance; the shapes of fossils or fruit, or of animals or of limbs, of Greek casts, of gentle valleys. The quality of sounds, wind, rain, horses trotting; the lines traced by things in motion—balls, birds’ flights, “ducks and drakes” and so on. All these things left their momentary impression, to be more consciously noted at last and to be enjoyed now.

But, while these enjoyments were too frequent to be long ignored and books and pictures drew additional attention to them, there were other experiences in quite a separate class—incidents not repeated at all. And a very noteworthy circumstance is connected with my memories of these unexpected incidents. The notable point is this. Occasions when I was alone, though they cannot have been infrequent, are not plentifully recalled. I infer therefore that in solitude my attention was but sluggish. On the other hand, I do recall many occasions when other people were with me and were presumably directing their

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senses the same way as mine. Was I, then, using their perceptions rather than my own? Reading our environment through their eyes? Interpreting what was happening by other people's behaviour? Were signs of amusement enough to amuse me? or of fear to alarm me? Individual animals gathered together depend on one another's understanding—sheep on the Downs, birds on the ploughed land, tiny fish in the brook. Grown-up people do it too—in the street, when they stop to see what somebody else is staring at; in a 'bus, when a fellow-passenger's laugh with the conductor sets them happily smiling, although they have themselves missed the joke. Your very dog or cat may get reassurance from your eyes or your behaviour, though the circumstances that caused timidity are not changed. And it seems likely that a child, too, being a little animal, has a wary eye on his fellows and is swayed by their apparent understanding—an understanding which he may or may not verify for himself afterwards, even as the sheep, the starlings, the sudden minnows; or as the people in the street, the passengers in the 'bus, the dog or cat. Such understanding in fact seems to be a part of human nature that is not too often guessed yet is as important to the individual as the swarm is to any ant or bee. This at least, I fancy, indicates how a number of the sensations now recalled grew intense enough to survive at all in my memory. They are a child's readings, through other people's eyes, of what was going on around him in old days.

Whether, as is not impossible, memories of this kind, largely independent of individuals, make up the half

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impersonal life of local and national tradition, of folk-lore, of craftsmanship, is hardly to be considered here; still less is this the place for opening up the questions that occur, as to a new valuation of the importance of individuals if they could be shown-up against the undying life of the little communities they belong to; or the importance of holidays, travel, and cognate questions. None of that need intrude here. Here rather is at best only a picture of such a little bit of undying life, obscure though hardly dull, as it looked to a child in Victorian days. It is at least truthful.

G. S.