# SIGRID UNDSET

*By* NEVILLE BRAYBROOKE

> "South of the river stood Saint Olav's Church. . . and thither they must go to mass tomorrow. . . In former days, when the Norwegians sailed their own merchandise to London town, this had been their church.—from *The Master of Hestviken.*

TWO YEARS after Sigrid Undset was born in 1882 her parents left Kallundborg in Denmark. They moved to Christiania (now Oslo) and there, as she records in her autobiographical volume, *The Longest Years* (1934), she spent a comparatively happy youth. Her father, a renowned archeologist, died when she was eleven, but because she was a girl endowed with a wisdom much beyond her years she was able later to present with sympathetic understanding, if not agreement, the ideas of her father's colleagues. For those colleagues were amongst the leading Norwegians of the day and the climate of their conversation was philosophical Liberalism. Ibsen, Strindberg, Björnson and Georg Brandes, the Danish literary critic, were for them the great emancipators, and the century on whose threshold they stood they believed would be the nonpareil in the history of the world. So it was that Sigrid Undset's youth was spent among those who saw faith as a destroyer of man's reason, an obstacle in the way of scientific discovery. Yet if the general climate was philosophical Liberalism, and this its hey-day, it was of a special Scandinavian dye: it was different from that prevailing in Europe because less extreme, more moderate—in fact Liberal. The Marxist intellectual or Latin Catholic of Europe had definite answers, definite philosophies to propound: the Scandinavian—be he Norwegian, Swedish, or Finnish—had none. Nominally if he was a Neo-Protestant he did not recognize sin and if, which was more likely, he was a rationalist he hoped for the greater spread of education, seeing sin largely as a myth fostered by an illiterate peasantry. This two-way approach of stating a problem perhaps reached its most cramping when Strindberg declared: "Have we not brought up our problems for discussion, only to confess ourselves unknowing?" For this is a cry into the darkness—a cry on a two-way principle which asks one question simply to pose another. Maybe it can solely be complemented, not answered, by Ibsen's cry in his last play: "When we dead awaken we realize that we have never lived."

The dilemmas inherent in these cries were also inherent in Sigrid Undset's early books. Her father's death had forced her

family into tight economic circumstances and when she was sixteen she was compelled to work in an office along with a number of girls of her own age. But the experience was rewarding: the problems she had heard discussed second-hand by her father's colleagues she now encountered first-hand; but, unlike her father's colleagues, because she was a woman her approach was different. *Jenny* (1911) and *Springtime* (1914) are studies of girls at the turn of the century placed in predicaments similar to her own, living in lodgings in reduced circumstances, eking out an existence, frustrated and pent-up: they long for affairs, free-love associations, and idly day-dream of being rich courtesans. Yet in their dreams, as in fact, such relationships they cannot take lightly because they are too moral and, when they do, they pay the penalty of disillusionment.

Jenny is an artist. With Gunnar Heiberg and others (the book reflects the Scandinavian artistic scene indirectly) she accepts art and love as anti-social concepts that have nothing to do with the hearth and home. Instead, trying to make the best of two worlds, Jenny attempts to remain both an artist by not marrying and to satisfy her femininity by taking a lover. She conceives a child, and, a little while after the child's birth, commits suicide; but the novel is not quite straightforward pagan tragedy. There are Christian implications in it, because her own death is prompted by her child's death: in Jenny there are hints of Kristin, although when one makes this kind of critical comment one must be wary of falling a victim to the criticism of literary predestination. *Kristin Lavransdatter* (1920-22) shows the working-out of sin; *Jenny* the working-out of a pagan outlook to its logical conclusion, so that in retrospect if one places the two novels together it is because time allows the critic such backward glances. In 1911 a reader would have been nearest the mark who saw Jenny's failure as the tragedy of a girl who half-consciously experiments with love and, remaining inwardly an essentially moral woman, when it is too late fails to meet love's obligations as a mother and protector of a home. True, taking a backward glance, one might from another context make another judgment, quoting an extract from Sigrid Undset's *Saga of Saints* (1934), and add:

> We easily forget that real pagan joy in life was almost always strongly tinged with pessimism in one form or another. The refusal of Christianity to admire Lucifer is, to devout pagan minds, one of its most repellent traits. Christianity will make no concessions to man's longing for the rapture of death and the frenzy

> of ruin. Its anti-pessimism may have irritated those who naturally simple or naive and incited them to opposition: for optimism does not come easily to one who has delved deeply into human nature, unless he can put his trust in something beyond the life he knows.

Yet such truths as these cannot be made explicitly [redacted] but must remain implicit since it is this trapfall, [redacted] Undset does not entirely avoid in her later novels [redacted] *Wild Orchid* (1929) and its sequel, *The Burning Bu[redacted]* But in *Jenny* she was stating problems, not resolving [redacted] women won their emancipation to work on equal terms [redacted] men would they still continue to be wives and mothers [redacted] had been in the past? That was the question. Or wou[redacted] fail as Jenny or, like Nora in *The Doll's House*, would th[redacted] the doors on their homes? History might provide the [redacted] Sigrid Undset as well as being a contemporary novelist [redacted] to become (in the best sense of that abused phrase) [redacted] novelist. Two years prior to *Jenny* she had already [redacted] excursion into that field.

*Gunnar's Daughter* (1909) is a long short story [redacted] saga style: it is somewhat experimental in tone and sh[redacted] one contrasts it with her subsequent historical novels, [redacted] fashioning language for her own purposes. The follow[redacted] sage is a fair example of her first attempt.

> I know not what to make of it, said Ljot, and I sc[redacted] he can do much. But it so chanced that there was a [redacted] man south in Denmark who helped me and healed an[redacted] putrid wound I had got in the leg: he would take no oth[redacted] and so I let him baptize me rather than offend him.

There is a certain rough quality here, but read at long [redacted] it tends to be monotonous: there is a lack of pliability [redacted] feels that it is a prose intended for the storyteller wh[redacted] day's game hunting, returns with his companions to [redacted] night out in his log cabin, the fire blazing and t[redacted] water lapping without cease against the banks of his [redacted]

During the first World War Sigrid Undset cov[redacted] fresh ground. She wrote two volumes of modern tal[redacted] told the story of King Arthur's romances: she also p[redacted] critical study of the Brontes and a collection of ess[redacted] men's emancipation. If there is one factor which [redacted] to this phase in her career, then it may be said to li[redacted] ligious approach to ethical problems because the[redacted] it were, acted as a time of preparation. Philosoph[redacted]

ght still be the prevailing climate, but Europe seen
ntry which was neutral presented a battlefield in
gh outwardly the issues involved might seem terri-
wardly the issues were spiritual. Never in Europe's
as the spirit of two decades vanished away so quickly
irst twenty years of the Twentieth Century. For a
therefore, nourished on Liberal allegiances it was not
to find the very principal tenets of Liberalism being
d being found wanting. Again, if as I suggested at
inning of this study, Liberalism was more Liberal
orthern Countries than in Europe where in the first
ad to break down the centuries old tradition of Latin
sm and in the second place the new rising ideas of
then to such a spectator, led to believe that she lived
ury which would be the nonpareil in history, it is not
strange to find that she might have doubts about the
At her father's house often enough she had heard dis-
rlier societies and previous ages and in a girl of such
n it must have struck her forcibly that, though men
m the past, human nature does not change: the same
keep on recurring: the first World War, then waging,
of that; and her approach was always through people
, thus casting back in her mind, she came more and
nink of the mediaeval world, it was primarily of its
hey seemed to her a comparatively happy people and
elist, having conjured those people in her mind and
king as those people would have thought, she arrived
rocess at an acute examination of the faith that lay
ought. She saw in their lives reasonable con-
(not at all the same thing as perfection) and where
contentment she realized that Liberalism, with its
cent on progress, can make no strides. As Mr. W.
an has succinctly put it: "I do not think that it is
se after the event to ascribe this original his-
nquiry to a revolt against Liberalism—a revolt whose
lications Sigrid Undset could not have foreseen at the
n."

## II

*Kristin Lavransdatter*, like its successor the *Master at Hestviken*, (1925-27), is a study of the
sin: in the first book, of fornication, in the second

book, of murder. Yet in the life of Kristin, as in the life of Olav, God writes straight with crooked lines—even with their sins. But there is this difference between these books and other historical novels covering the same period. Sigrid Undset does not write of famous men or famous events of either the twelfth or fourteenth century: instead she is prepared to present families and their friends and into such a background project the stories of their souls and the effects of grace. She is a novelist much closer to Manzoni than Tolstoi for as in *The Betrothed* everywhere the presence of grace is pervasive, but nowhere emphatic. Everything is executed under the shadow of the Cross and this, because she has approached her subject through her characters, she has been able to achieve without making a reader think he is being indoctrinated by Catholic apologetic. Between the natural and supernatural the transitions are easy—as these two quotations may show. First, Kristin in love; second, Kristin pregnant.

> Once, while she was looking at the dark head that lay in her lap, between her hands, something bygone flashed on her mind. It stood out, clear yet distant, as a homestead far away on a mountain slope may start to sight of a sudden, from out dark clouds, when a sunbeam strikes it on a stormy day. And it was as though there welled up in her heart all the tenderness Arne Gyrdson had once begged for, while, as yet, she did not understand his words. With timid passion, she drew the man up to her and laid his head upon her breast, kissing him as if afraid he should be taken from her. And when she saw his head upon her arm, she felt as though she clasped a child—she hid his eyes with one of her hands, and showered little kisses upon his mouth and cheek.

> She was heavy at heart with unrest and fear, but she tried to forget it in work. One thing was that she understood not Erlend (her husband)—even now he seemed to suspect nothing. But another and a worse trouble was that she should feel no life in the child she bore within her. At twenty weeks it should quicken, she knew—and now more than three weeks over the twenty had gone by. She lay awake at night and felt the burden within her that grew greater and heavier, but it was still as dull and lifeless as ever. And there floated through her mind all she had heard of children that were born crippled, with sinews stiff as stone, of births that had come to light without limbs—with scarce a semblance of human shape. Before her tight-shut eyes would pass pictures of little infants, dreadfully misshapen; one shape of horror melting into another still worse. Southward in the dale at home, at Lidstad, the folks had a child—nay, it must be grown up now. Her father had seen it, but would never speak of it; she had marked that he grew ill at ease if anyone but named

> aught of it. What did it look like?—Oh, no! Holy Saint Olav, pray for me!—She needs must trust firmly on the holy King's tender mercy; had she not placed her child under his ward? She would suffer for her sins in meekness, and with her whole heart have faith that there would be help and mercy for the child. It must be the Enemy himself that tempted her with these ugly visions, to drive her to despair. But her nights were evil. . . If a child had no limbs, if it were palsied, like enough the mother would feel no sign of life within her. . . Erlend, half waking, marked that his wife was restless, drew her closer into his arms, and laid his face against the hollow of her throat.

In each extract there is a steady stateliness which in the second suddenly blazes with an intensity of feeling and then dies away. For if Kristin has sinned it is not against some impersonal deity, but against a God whom she knows and has worshipped as a child at the manger. She is a writer of the Incarnation as Mr. W. Gore Allen has also pointed out which means that so closely allied are the spirit and flesh in her characters that she cannot describe them physically without describing them spiritually, and *vice versa*—and there ensues conflict the resolving of which can only be explained by the Incarnation. In such explanations there is no hint of forced arguments because they are the arguments which Kristin and Olav would give and, when they stumble or turn to others for help, the replies given by their friends are such as to be practical with the kind of person they are: they explain their temptations, even though they do not take them away so that the reader, like the characters in question, has a sharper understanding of the conflict and to this extent, knowing the fallability of these particular characters, is able to speculate on the impression and to what degree the advice and help given will have a direct effect. Here is a scene with the priest, Gunnulf Nikulaussön, speaking to Kristin.

> "For He loved mankind. And therefore did he die, as the bridegroom who hath gone forth to save his bride from the hands of robbers. And they bind him and torment him unto death, while he sees his dearest love sit feasting with his slayers, jesting with them and mocking his torments and his faithful love—"
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> Gunnulf Nikulaussön buried his face in his hands:
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> "Then did I understand that this mighty love upholdeth all things in the world—even the fires of hell. For if God would, He could take the soul by force—we should be strengthless motes in His hand. But He loves us as the bridegroom loves his bride, who will not force her, but if she yield not to him willingly, must suffer that she flee him and shun him. But I have thought, too, that mayhap no soul can yet be lost to all eternity. For every soul

> must desire this love, methinks, but it seems so dear a purchase to give up all other delights for its sake. But when the fire hâth burnt away all stiff-necked and rebellious will, then at last shall the will to God, were it no greater in a man than a single nail in a whole house, remain in the soul unconsumed, as the iron nail in the ashes of a house burned down—"
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> "Gunnulf"—Kristin half rose—"I am afraid."
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> Gunnulf looked up, with white face and flaming eyes:
>
> "I too was afraid. For I understood that this torment of God's love can have no end so long as man and maid are born upon this earth and He must be fearful that He may lose their souls—so long as He daily and hourly giveth His body and blood on a thousand altars. . ."

This conversation is the core of the book because Sigrid Undset in such a mediaeval setting is able to make spiritual experience the most exalted of life's adventures—but only when, as it were, it has been through the fire and, like an iron nail, remains unconsumed by the flames: that is what gives her trilogy and tetralogy their lasting place in her canon.

It was, however, probably inevitable that sooner or later she should return to the contemporary scene. If she had turned away from the contemporary scene, disillusioned by Liberalism, it was because she hoped to find the answers to the problems of her own society in the peace of what seemed a contented world: it was not that she had any romantic conception of the Middle Ages (such, for instance, as Belloc or Chesterton had), but that driven back to study its men and women she found in them a harmony and sense of values: there might be abuses—ecclesiastical and secular—and there might be much that savoured of superstition, but there was code of right and wrong. When out of envy Olav kills a man and knows that public penance can only bring dishonour to his next of kin and closest friends, he decides to retain his honour and forgo the sacrament of penance. When Kristin sees her life at a crossroads where she must either be obedient to a husband who is too weak to counsel her or, act on her own initiative and so protect her own honour, she chooses the latter way. In each case there is more than a measure of pride in their decisions; but the fact that there is this pride is admitted freely by both Olav and Kristin. The difference between their world and that of Jenny and other characters in the modern Oslo novels is that morality has been replaced by amorality and so the question which Sigrid Undset came to ask after her conversion to Catholicism during the Twenties was—to take but one instance—whether the Church's

sexual ethic was based on an immutable principle. As a girl working in an Oslo office and later as a grown woman she had come to see that it was "getting more and more difficult for young people to marry or to afford to have children before they (were) well on in years" and it was precisely this problem which she stated and attempted to answer in *The Wild Orchid*, replying thus in the person of Paul Selmer.

> ". . .No more than a year ago I couldn't see any reason why Lucy and I should give up more than we jolly well had to. Of course we knew it would be many years before we could have a home and child, but what was the use of imposing unnecessary restrictions on ourselves? But now I at any rate have come to feel that perhaps there may be reasons—which exist independently of whether current morality at a given time may cry shame on corrupted youth, or whether it may treat young people in an easy-going fashion, saying they can't be expected to exercise self-denial until they're old and grey and can afford to marry. . ."

Allowing for the conventional change in tone the answer, one suspects, is along the lines which Kristin would have given had she lived in the twentieth, not the fourteenth, century: there is a continuity about it. Yet it is exactly here that I would submit that there is a certain failure to tackle the problem wholly. Since the fourteenth century economic conditions have changed and although a case is often made that women do not wish "to have the labour of having children" (the wording is significant) it seems to me that it is only fair to add the other half of the case which is that, say, having already two children women do not wish to give men whom they have married in middle-age yet another ten year's economic labour by having a third child. For one cannot isolate sexual morality from morality in general: good wages and decent living-conditions means that there can be a cleanliness in the home which will often be reflected in souls of those that inhabit it. This is not to suggest, as Liberalism held, that a perfect society can be achieved, since at the best in a fallen world all that can be achieved is a healthy society.

Of this Sigrid Undset was fully aware and it underlies all her later contemporary novels including *Ida Elizabeth* (1932)—incidentally her only real fiasco as a novelist—*The Faithful Wife* (1936) and *Madame Dorothea* (1939). Yet though such is her underlying theme and sexual morality the predominant one—a problem after all intimately connected with women's emancipation—there is in these later books a somewhat strained

atmosphere of apologetic. Admittedly, unlike her fellow European novelists, she was writing for a people to whom the truths of Catholicism were not only alien, but unknown, so that it was perhaps inescapable to some degree that in her later books her mantle should become that of the preacher. At least this explanation may provide a clue to the atmosphere of apologetic which surrounds the lives of Lucie Arneses, Paul and Julie Selmer, Ida Elizabeth, and Madame Dorothea. Again, as in her specifically religious essays on Scandinavian saints and reflections such as on "Christmas and Twelfth Night", it was her declared aim to convert her countrymen so perhaps that note of apologetic peeps through more directly when she writes of the present. In her mediaeval books in contrast her method could afford to be more indirect: "South of the river stood Saint Olav's Church. . . and thither they must go to mass tomorrow", since in the Middle Ages when Norwegians sailed their merchandise to London "this had been their church". For herein lies the clue which explains the link between mediaeval Hestviken and modern Oslo in Sigrid Undset's work. If writing of the modern city she turned to the past it was so that she might find a link and having found that link, which was that contrary to the opinion of philosophical Liberalism faith was not man's destroyer, but rather his preserver, she attempted to forge it. But the tools in her smithy were mediaeval rather than modern; her work rough, sturdy and strongly-wrought rather than smooth polished and mass-produced. Like the craftsmen of old, defying the neat one-sentence summing-up or the slick newspaper slogan, she was, take her for all in all, a major artist with ragged edges; and that is something, D. H. Lawrence excepted, which can be said of no other novelist of this half century.