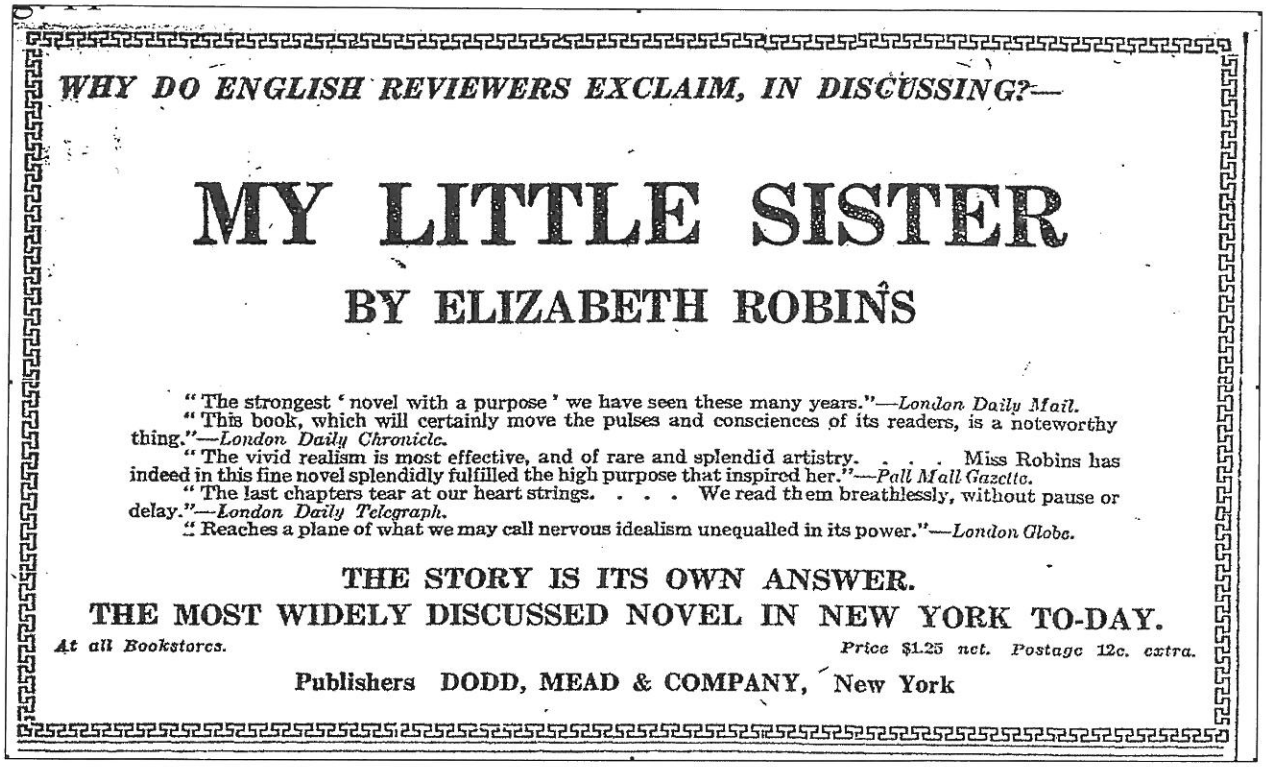

From the *New York Times*, Feb. 8, 1913, 11.

MY LITTLE SISTER

Miss Robins's Novel a Strong Plea for " Our Invisible Neighbor "

By HILDEGARDE HAWTHORNE

MY LITTLE SISTER. By Elizabeth Robins. Dodd, Mead & Co. $1.25 net.

THERE are many things we are perfectly capable of comprehending with no other assistance than that of the mind. We see, and we understand. But there are others we cannot grasp except by aid of the emotions; we must feel as well as see. Human joy and suffering cannot be explained to us in terms of logic. Either we must personally experience these things, or else our imagination must be so touched and aroused that we seem to experience them.

It is the great province of the artist to bring home to us concretely the general happiness or tragedy of human life. To reach beyond the mind into the heart, to open the mysterious door between cold understanding and passionate comprehension, and so to make us free of a sorrow or a joy that is not our own. A book or a picture that does this is unforgettable, since it leaves us changed in some degree from what we were before we read or saw it. We have received a permanent addition to our sum of living, because our emotional experience has been broadened and deepened.

There is a vast deal of discussion in progress concerning white slavery, statistics are published, papers are read, resolutions taken. We know about it, we consider it a sad and shocking state of affairs, often we form some sort of vague plan of action calculated to assist in checking the evil. But how many of us are really vitally touched or interested? The whole matter remains in the region of the understanding, with plenty of light upon it, but lacking the revivifying warmth that should make it live.

I heard a phrase the other day that struck me. It was to the effect that reforms could not be complete and personal until we learned to love "our invisible neighbor."

But we cannot love what is invisible. We must see it, we must touch it, or we must strongly imagine that we so see and touch.

No one who reads Elizabeth Robins's "My Little Sister" will thereafter consider the white slave traffic with the mind alone. Something at least of its indescribable horror will be personally real to him. The terror of its waste and loss, the individual tragedy, the human pity of it, will have "come home."

In Shaw's "Fanny's First Play," the girl who has just got back to her family after her prison experience replies to her father's outcry that it is impossible such a thing can have happened to his daughter, with the retort that every one there is some one's daughter.

This is the precise realization which Miss Robins has succeeded in creating in her reader's mind in this heart-breaking story of the little sister, whom we accompany through her watched and exquisite childhood, her wildflower maidenhood, willful, a little spoiled, but utterly lovable, and whom we leave dancing and laugaing on the edge of the ghastly pit into which she is so soon to be pushed. The whole thing is as incredible, as dazing, as though it had happened to us, and as unanswerably actual.

The dramatic power of this story is very great. Miss Robins has refrained from the merely sentimental without losing a shade of natural feeling. Bettina is drawn with the utmost art; she is a girl in whose character there is a hint of the unmanageable, who goes her own way with a certain playful insistence that bewitches while it opposes. There is a lovely gayety about her, and she flirts almost unconsciously. The doting affection of her mother and sister, the almost cloistered whiteness of her up-bringing, in which no whisper of the world's evil is allowed, all is carefully portrayed. A tragedy is hinted at in the mother's life, a shadow of the past that we feel, even as the two girls feel it, without any definite conception of its character. Within the garden walls, within the charming house, life is safe and love reigns. Outside a danger walks, not alluded to, but guarded against, and we, too, seek to hasten back with Bettina and her sister and her mother as they return from their walks or visits, and to shut and bar behind us the strong, comforting doors.

It is not alone the tragic end of Bettina's life that is forced on our attention. It is also the pitifully inadequate training that leads up to it: a training that, in only too many cases, is the same given most young girls who are beloved and sheltered, left ignorant and therefore helpless. It is a hot-house flower Miss Robins has grown for us to see and admire. But there are many of her sisters growing likewise, utterly unaware of the winds and storms without. We get a picture, intense, delicate, finished and isolated. And then something black, horrible, smears it out before our eyes.

So long as the story relates to Bettina it is extraordinarily good, but the rest of it drops considerably. To be sure, the other characters are alive and the sister love story pleasing. But there is too much of it. It seems what is padding is padding of the best, but not inevitably required. Particularly is this so after the catastrophe.

Occasionally, too, the artistry is too perfect and chafes a trifle. Miss Robins has been so careful that the care peeps out a bit once in a while. But, after all, there is no particular use in quibbling over the faults of this book. It is bigger than these, and its atmosphere is so restrained, its effect so vivid, that these fade, leaving the vital accomplishment behind.

When we close the book we have been made to love our "invisible neighbor." It is our little sister who has gone to her death in the black waters, she who was "white and golden, and always seemed to bring a shining where she went." The tragedy has been made individual, has been shown to us with a harrowing simplicity as our own. The book is a true work of art.