

Hans Frost and His World

HANS FROST. By HUGH WALPOLE. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co. 1929. \$2.50.

Reviewed by G. GRAHAM BATES

A NEW novel by Mr. Hugh Walpole has come to be something of an event in the world of fiction but an event which is highly incalculable. Will a new work follow the rather gentle, well-known lines of the Jeremy stories or will it, perhaps, have the sharp, externalized outlines of "The Portrait of a Gentleman with Red Hair?" Will there be in a next book the strong mystical undercurrent of "The Dark Forest" and "The Green Mirror" or must we know again that constant inbeating of strange, intensive emotions which makes "The Old Ladies" to Mr. Walpole's other work what "Ethan Frome" is in the list of Edith Wharton's novels? Will the background have the surface placidity and leisure of the author's Trollope manner or will it crackle and flare into the modern London of "Wintersmoon" and "The Duchess of Wrexhe?" The new novel in this case, "Hans Frost," proves that these are not necessarily exclusive qualities for it moves easily among them, taking something from this, something from that, and yet achieving in the end something that is very much itself.

There is no ambiguity about the title: the novel is the story of Hans Frost in every moment of its telling and it is, for all its involvements and complexities, never for a moment anything else. But Hans Frost is a man who confronts his world from many angles. His relations with his world are multiform and the currents of the world flow into his personality from many sources. He is the point, for his hour, where age must turn its back on youth, where the individual must do battle for its separate soul, where the artist faces disintegration at the hands of adulation, and where love must find new ways of life, new strengths to beat old weaknesses. This is Hans Frost,—a battle ground at seventy for all those forces we were accustomed to pre-date, as of human importance, by some thirty or forty years. By shifting the conflict to the proverbial end of life, the biblical three score and ten, Mr. Walpole has tremendously complicated his problem and greatly added to its interest.

Hans Frost is a writer, the Dean of English Letters, and it is a relief to find that he does not resemble either Thomas Hardy or George Bernard Shaw; he may have touches of several English authors and more than a touch of Anatole France but he is, at reassuring last, merely Hans Frost, whose long and successful career is being publicly recognized the day we meet him,—his seventieth birthday. A deputation has arrived at the Frost home to make the "Master" a formal presentation. And at this first meeting with Hans the reader catches at once the flavor of the man, his endearing inability to think the worst of things, and his bracing refusal to think the best. The presentation speech is in progress, painfully like all presentation speeches where and whenever, and between its periods Mr. Walpole presents his hero

"That's pretty awful," thought Hans Frost, and then immediately afterwards: "Very jolly of them to take all the trouble." Then a little later: "They like doing it, though. Gunter's been in the Seventh Heaven. . . . Follow in her train, that's bad. . . . Whole thing too flowery. . . . Nice of them to do it though. . . . Why does Osmaston always half shave himself? Better not do it at all."

After the speeches Hans receives the gift the committee has brought. "And it was a lovely thing! It was a very small painting and the artist was Manet." The little picture opens, somehow, for Hans the wall between him and the past, he goes into the library where he runs over in his mind the work he has done and the life he has lived. This chapter, "Temps Perdu," does that very difficult thing—gives the artist from the inside. It is a chapter that isolates itself so that it might be read alone for its own "very sweet kernel." And there are other chapters that so fall out of the story into separate philosophizing on literature or life and are quite complete in themselves and full of the gentleness of life, which is rather Mr. Walpole's province, that one stops with them in reading, content to let the story wait. A great deal of the charm of "Hans Frost" lies in these little essay-like units.

But there is a story and one that moves steadily from its slight beginnings to its unpredictable end, gathering to itself, with its momentum *en route*,

characters and incidents varied and numerous enough to give to the novel, for all its looking rather slender, a substantial Victorian girth. It is the story of Hans Frost battling out of his too comfortable home, away from his too considerate wife, and free of all the ease and luxury that are ministering to the man but destroying the artist. All of which might have been very obvious and content with surfaces, but Mr. Walpole has looked at human beings too long and steadily to see them only as means to an end of proving a thesis. Hans Frost moves among people who are likely to do one another harm with the best intentions in the world or bring about some good with only malice in their will.

On his pilgrimage to his spirit's haven there goes with Hans a new love, the fullest and freest of his life because it knows neither the check of possessiveness nor the urge of sex. And here again Mr. Walpole has neatly escaped the obvious in avoiding, in his precarious relationship between a man of seventy and a girl of nineteen, all suggestion of the



HUGH WALPOLE

A cartoon by Low, from "Lions and Lambs." (Harcourt, Brace.)

sentimentality that would make it unbearable. Tender, Mr. Walpole always is,—too tender for the tough minded who do not like his work, but in Hans Frost there is a keen ironical current that sweeps the book clear of that too soft oppressiveness for which we have only the one word, sentimentality.

"Vitéz János Háy has come to life!" says an English paper. "The performances of the story of the peasant Munchausen—dear to the heart of every Hungarian—by untaught peasants in a village inn has allowed audiences of artistes and intellectuals to see Háy and his friends as their prototypes certainly appeared to the poet Garay when he sat in a provincial inn in the 'thirties absorbing bizarre tales. János Garay, who, by the accident of his meeting with the old demobilized soldier, assured himself (and Háy) a place among the immortals which his more ambitious works might have failed to secure him, was born in Székszard in 1812. Garay began to show signs of literary versatility at an early age, and after turning his school exercises into poetry he proceeded to write novels, plays, tragedies, poems, newspaper *feuilletons*, historical and travel essays, and criticisms. He was one of the first Hungarians to take up writing as a profession, and soon became the favorite poet of the women of his time."

Christianity Interpreted

TRUTH AND THE FAITH. By HARTLEY BURR ALEXANDER. New York: Henry Holt & Company. 1929. \$3.

Reviewed by BERNARD I. BELL
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ALTHOUGH most American commentators on English literature seem curiously unaware of the fact, it is nevertheless true that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by far the best prose was composed by those who treated of religious subjects. For a long time now the connection between sound writing and theology has become a tenuous one. Most of our books on religion are written in a style of sentimental gush, or else as with a blare of meretricious trumpets, or else with a dulness flat and soporific. The current divorcement between competent prose and mysticism makes this book of Professor Alexander's the more remarkable and the more welcome. Even though one may deny the truth of his contentions—which this reviewer for the most part does not wish to do—there is no denying that the man is an artist with words. The book, uniformly of a style fitted for perusal by civilized people, has in it here and there some of the most competent pages of prose writing of this year, or of several years back.

Illustrative quotations are always dangerous in a review, because they must of necessity be lifted from the context; but nevertheless it is worth quoting a passage as a sample of writing colorful in a carefully achieved simplicity. For instance,

In our day we make us an idol. A scarf of nebula swept athwart the glass of space, miragelike through its æons winding into spiral and ball and disc, forming star-clusters and galaxies, flaming up into remote glories and dissolving back into the eternal night; black planetesimal flows like rivers in a shoreless ocean, stygian in darkness, atoms agglomerating and segregating, cellules of energies having light-years for their dimensions, self-procreant, and little whimpering planets where men crawl in their day, and are no more. As a God it is rather terrible, and in counterweight something might be said for an appeasable Moloch. Such is our idol, and we say of It, with John, that its names are Faithful and True, and on its thigh a name is written, King of Kings, and Lord of Lords!

But this book has a significance born not merely of manner but also of substance. Dr. Alexander says a number of things entirely untimely and therefore the better worth the saying. He is a believer in the validity of mysticism as a method of approaching truth. This will, of course, at once damn him in the eyes and ears of those smart people who insist on shouting aloud, as though lately discovered, the "advanced thought" of day-before-yesterday. It is quite the thing just now to pour unquestioned scorn upon anyone who rejects the Aristotelian theory of knowledge, that theory which would confine possible access to truth to scientific or sensory avenues, and who prefers the more widely held human theory of the validity of intuitions. Dr. Alexander insists, what most people suspect and many people are beginning to say, that science unaided gives us but a flat caricature of that which is. He demands that we stereoscopically regard our universe, perceiving that it is composed both of things visible and things invisible.

Of course to no one will every contention in this volume seem sound. That is too much to ask of any book. To this reviewer, for instance, the author seems unduly to sentimentalize the Middle Ages; unfortunately to fail to understand that theological speculation and mystical devotion to Christ may go together, and frequently have gone together, in the same men and women; to confuse occasionally objective fact with internal perception; and to give to the mystery religions a greater significance in the formation of Pauline Christianity than the best scholars seem to think justified. Nor has proof reading always been carefully done. Surely the author cannot have written that "the sacramental ritual is emblematic of the Church's temporalities." Also, perhaps, one may criticize a little Dr. Alexander's over emphasis of his own supposed heresies, which, like the sins of the younger generation or the premature report of Mark Twain's death, seem slightly exaggerated. But such faults are minor blemishes on a great book—one which is, to this reviewer's mind, among the really significant books of the year.

A new book by C. F. Ramuz, an author from the Canton of Vaud, Switzerland, has recently appeared in Paris. "Salutation Paysanne" is a collection of short stories with a Swiss background.

The BOWLING GREEN

John Mistletoe, V

A SWEET and dangerous opiate is Memory; it is well that we are rarely addicted to it. Even the briefest indulgence confuses the sense of present reality. That busy dream-life has no existence save by deliberate will, yet you can instantly create a whole world and ensphere it in empty nothing for a pause of brooding power. Yes, it can be done in the bliss of anxious thought, but to clench it in words is dreadful. I honor words and they come with difficulty. But memory is something subtler than words, of anterior substance; it lives behind the forehead and not in the lips. It floats an instant in the mind like a smoke-ring, then spreads and thins and sifts apart. If mood and moment could be found when people could just sit down, in mutual passiveness, and say "I remember . . ." what matter might come forth. How seldom it happens; what infinite instruction it might contain.

Mistletoe remembers Lake Champlain. Sometimes he wonders if it is still there. It is twenty years since he last saw it; it must be a big lake by now, and very likely too busy to remember. But shame indeed to celebrate the Lake of Geneva or any other fluid—even Long Island Sound—and not ask forgiveness of Champlain. It is not just a body of water: it is an eternity of summer days. Does the old steamer *Vermont* still come past the stony cape of Split Rock, her paddles sounding across the still mirror of the afternoon? (You could hear them best by listening under water.) At least the blue profile of Camel's Hump must be unchanged. There are red lizards on the rocks, and harebells; and pickerel to be trolled for; thunderstorms, porcupines, and chattering red squirrels that dance on birch boughs after rain and shake down a crystal spatter as you pass beneath. Once he shot a red squirrel with a rifle. That, and a bullet through his own finger, cured him of any joy in firearms.

If you make the effort to lift that lake and all its woodland shore out of the abyss of irretrievable distance, poise it tenderly in balance, you can see that the whole scene moved in a charming sentimental rhythm; and below that emerged something also much more elementary. (We are concerned of course only with the pure egotism of memory.) Like the steady pound and sway of the old *Vermont's* pistons, lulling the watcher almost to a swoon in long passages on the lake, I think I discern the power of real meanings behind apparently casual recollections.

The superficial rhythms were pretty enough. The timely routine of the *Vermont* or her sister *Chataugay* was almost a clock. You saw the steamer's long diagonal across the wide gulf, with that air of living and working that a walking beam gives to a boat. Duly her swell came rolling over the wrinkled water, greeted by bathers and canoes. On clear northern days the road to the village was fringed along with crisping blue. It was still the Sheet Music Era; after supper canoes set out to follow the moon-path, and the primitive harmonies known as College Songs consoled the Large Pickerel who had Got Away. The shores of Champlain must still bandy in their rocky scarps some jaded echoes of "I've Been Working on the Railroad" a million times reiterated. It is pleasant to imagine, scattered Lord knows where and busied in the genteel treadmill of the middle classes, the innocent alumnae of Lake Champlain who once flung moondrops from wet paddles and carolled "I've Got Rings on My Fingers and Bells on My Toes." Keep up your hearts, sisters: the worst is yet to come.

Holding that green and blue microcosm for study I am aware of huckleberry pastures with a clank of cowbells; glades of underbrush violent with sun; and the feeling of hills. Perhaps more than any other thing physical, one whose childhood knew big hills misses them in a life too level. Men need mountains; those who have never associated with them have missed much of earth's suggestion. Also one could hear the wail of the wildcat on some of those Adirondack spurs; it was often a blow to those who imagined they liked solitude. There was poetry as well as picnic on those unspoiled shores. No one will have forgotten Grog Harbor, or the windings

of Otter Creek, where the wake of the launch sways and tosses the reeds as a strong personality draws softer creatures in its suction. There was a sandy jut, even whose name I have forgotten, surmounted by a steep plateau of pines. Quite deserted in those woods above the lake was a colony of mouldering log cabins, once the home of some utopia or other. When sunset kindled every chink of the forest those mournful old huts were as suggestive as the last line of a sonnet.

It is always agreeable to embarrass my friend Mistletoe by trying to pin him down to the essential. It's a favorite jest to ask him (in the phrase of reporters) to Make a Statement. Asked for a Statement about Lake Champlain he would prowl apprehensively about the room (an annoying habit). He knew very well the great difficulty of Statements, which usually conceal more than they convey. A serious critic (as distinguished from a mere romancer) is compelled to simulate some sort of balance sheet, cogitated in reasonable form; and, as every auditor knows, there are a hundred ways of pastrycooking an itemized report. Liars, we are all liars; and worse, timid and ineffectual liars. To deliver the meaning of anything, Mistletoe would mumble, you must remove yourself altogether from the social tissue; must renounce the innocent pleasure of having your intuitions shared, approved, or verified. In any man's memory there are areas so tender, so silly, so vital, they cannot easily be suggested.

There was a road, powdered thick with dust, that ran along the lake shore. At night it was a deep channel through pine trees where a dark ribbon of sky was granulated with stars. The water below it whispered to the stony beach with Tennysonian delicacy. Add to this the balsam savor of Adirondack woods, and all the endearing mischief of our human race. And in those days, or nights, there were no cars on such roads. It was silence.

There was a boy who, for reasons quite irrelevant, was supposed to be doing some studying. As a matter of fact he was reading Huxley, and I don't mean Aldous. It was Thomas Henry Huxley; "Science and Education," or something of that sort; good, solid, uplifting stuff, with occasional sortie (for relief) into the Oxford Book of English Verse, which was a new book in those days and highly favored by a Younger Generation that didn't know it was a Generation. There were other books too that he was reading, for instance A. C. Benson's "From a College Window," one of the quietest of sedatives.

He needed a sedative. Past the lakeside cabin which was the student's pensive citadel ran this same road—this road dust-powdered and soft to tread, now brilliant with noonday sun and upland air, this Road of Loving Hearts Stevenson's Samoans would have called it. As he sat, pretending to put his mind on Huxley's Idea of a University he was really alert for a very small and complicated sound. It only lasted an instant. It combined a faint hum, a flutter, and sometimes (in excess of provocation) a small tingling bell. It was a girl on a bicycle.

Perhaps a dozen times in the half hour preceding that hoped-for passage he would have peered out of the door to look along the road. For, if she happened to be in sight, what more natural than that he should have chanced to come outdoors: the road was free to all, wasn't it? And it would have been equally natural for her to dismount and exchange a few words. Or again, with the practical ingenuity of the young female, it might sometimes occur that the bicycle did not seem to run well, or she would weary of riding at just that bend in the road and walk a bit for a change; idly chirruping her bell in a noonday abstraction. But many, far too many, times (the child was a genius of coquetry) she spun briskly by. As he sat with eyes on Huxley but ears cocked toward the road, he would hear that faint and adorable flutter, the flickering rustle of tires and spokes, a tiny chink of the bell. He would rush to the door. Already the white dress and revolving ankles, the sunburned nape, the bronze curly hair, were far down the way. It was odd, undoubtedly, that she always chose to ride home with the mail just at the hour she knew he set apart for being there. Or perhaps it was he who arranged it so: who could remember now?

But to paraphrase the famous words, in Thomas Henry Huxley he read no more that day.

There were nights of stars on that road. Perhaps you have known roads something like it. (Strange to think it is still there; is that summer

dust yet so silent underfoot? does a white dress still shine so white in starlight, visible down the dark alley of the pines?) There were certain humorous obstacles to easy meeting, to lend sure enchantment. There was a barn dance once, a real one, when the erection of a new barn was celebrated, before the roof was put on, by open-air merriment in the hayloft; there were Chinese lanterns under warm sky, and a harp and a country fiddler. And early in the evening, as happened to be duty, he drove punctually away in the old rustic surrey; but raced secretly back, miles along that same road of dust and stars, for one more caper before the end.

Well indeed if so young and in such harmless subterfuge one may first divine something of woman's immortal power.

There was a porch that overhung the water, where one fell asleep hearing the small syllables of the beach; woke now and then, as one does in open air, to see always a different pattern of planets. Usually the beam from Split Rock lighthouse was the only company in that small bungalow, except Thomas Henry Huxley. Once in a while however a friend camping farther along the shore stopped in to sit late beside the fire, to discuss symptoms in their wounded bosoms. For both were stricken of the universal endemic, and loyally sought to repair their agitation with the Oxford Book and the bottle of rye reserved for snakebite. But mostly he was alone, and turned in on the camp-cot on the porch surrounded by stars and in a happy confusion of ideas, a mixture of T. H. Huxley and the flutter of bicycling skirts.

It is very long ago; perhaps it was only a dream; but one night he woke, and something nearer and dearer than stars or Huxley had been there on the porch. Dazed as he was, he was aware of some thrilling presence; there was a soft step in the brush below the steps, a whispering, a curious radiant sensitiveness on his cheek, a faint suggestion of a sweetness he knew. Does a boy ever forget his first breath of a woman's hair? Dazzled with celestial suspicion he crept out through the cabin into the open. Down the road was a distant laughter.

Only a dream, perhaps; worse, a joke, insisted his indignant cronies; but he himself preferred to believe otherwise. Surely it was not just coincidence that for several days Huxley was abandoned for the composition of an Ode on Lake Champlain; which was duly returned by the editor of the Atlantic Monthly with its delightful rejection slip. *The Editor of The Atlantic begs to be excused from the ungracious task of criticism.*

(To be continued)

CHRISTOPHER MORLEY.

Clean Hands

(Continued from page 227)

applied thoroughly and intelligently to modern plays that act easily and speedily. The implication in column after column is, that if a play runs smoothly and excites its audience there is no more to be said.

But this is a bankruptcy of real criticism. It may be that in the long series of hard-boiled murder plays which have accompanied the locust plague of detective fiction the dear public are getting what they want. This has not been proved, but proved or not, it is the duty of critics with a sense of responsibility to the ideals, to any ideals, of criticism, to distinguish between good food and bad stimulant, between tonics and aphrodisiacs. The stage's obsession at the moment with crime is certainly not an act of God through his all-wise managers. It may be inevitable and it may be an accident commercialized; but a critic who accepts apparent success as the only criterion, is not only a bad critic, he is likely to be a bad prophet also, who mistakes his own subservience for a standard or a principle.

When responsibility for the ideals of a good and sane life are so ruthlessly kicked overboard (and not only in the drama), is it strange that the opposition should take to fanaticism, and rouse its worst instincts and most ignorant emotions in revenge? A brave heart against priggishness and convention must not be stultified by dirty hands. The choice between Mr. Sumner and the author of a smut play is difficult to make. But do we have to make it?

According to recent reports from London the two outstanding books of the week in which the news appeared were Viola Meynell's memoirs of her mother, and Sir J. H. Jeans's "The Universe Around Us." Professor Karl Blossfeldt's "Art Forms in Nature" came in a good second.