Frank Harris: An Attempt at Appreciation

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For seven years past Frank Harris, the most conspicuous figure in English letters, has lived and toiled among us; he has given of his very life-blood to the American public, yet he is practically unknown here, save to a comparatively small group of admirers. Men of genius everywhere approach him hat in hand—it is only in this country that he is ignored and our critics have never even attempted to give us a true picture of the man.

This fine sketch by Crowley, the poet, comes at an opportune moment; it brings us nearer the real Frank Harris than anything that has yet been published about him in this country, and I am glad indeed to have the privilege of passing it on to the readers of Pearson's.

THE EDITOR.

I was going through old files the other day, and came across the letters Frank Harris wrote me when first I knew him. Strangely enough, I do not in the least remember how I met him; and, before I met him, I had not read any of his works, it having been a rule of mine from the time when I went up to Cambridge until I felt myself "un homme fait" never to read any book by a living author lest it should influence my style.

I was a youngster even more callow than by right of years, for I had been brought up in the sheltered life, and inquisition-tortured thereby, was cursed with almost pathological shyness, and had spent most of my adult years in climbing mountains in remote parts of the globe, like Mexico and India. I think I fail to remember my first meeting with Harris because he frightened me too much. I have not compared notes with Moses as to the voice he heard on Sinai, but if it was in the same class as the voice of Frank Harris, I wonder Moses did not break the tablets long before he got back to camp. I have heard many of the great orators of the world, but I have never heard a voice capable of such power and passion combined with perfect control and delicacy of expression.

I remember once in the Hotel Meurice—in the Great Hall—they actually stopped the band to let Frank Harris tell a story.

I remember the dinner at the Ritz in London given to Bobby Ross for having stuck to Oscar Wilde, with hardly any one in England but Frank Harris to back him. Ross had pulled Wilde's affairs out of bankruptcy, and made a fortune for his children. It was a distinguished party that had gathered to do Ross honor, a party of those disciples of the Master who had got wind of what the Pharisees were doing: "They all forsook him and fled." The danger was over; they were gathered together in the name of the Lord. But they were all secretly determined to hush up the matter which was a by-word from Yokohama to San Francisco. One by one the speakers got up and said the polite things. "Mr. chairman, Your Grace, My Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen," they began; and went on to piffle aimlessly about any harmless subject, no matter what, so long as it could not possibly be taken to refer to the very solemn and serious secret which everyone understood, with all the clarity of terror, to lurk in the occasion.

Last of the speakers came Frank Harris. He followed the routine of the others, "Mr. Chairman, Your Grace," and all the rest of it, but in a voice of such wrath and contempt that every syllable was an insult. He stopped and looked around the hall. There was one person whom everybody knew to be not there. It was the bosom friend of Oscar Wilde, the cherished ideal who had betrayed him to a two-years' crucifixion and a lingering death in life. The glance of Harris asked, so that every one present could understand it, "Where is Lord Alfred Douglas?" (An equally indiscreet juryman had put this identical question with his eyes on the dock where Wilde was standing.) Then he began to speak. His voice, that night, was Jove's, but not the Jove of thunder—it was the Jove of rain. It sobbed and trembled. I thought of tears, tears both divine and human, pure tears that spoke of Weltschmertz more than of simply personal grief, falling upon the rotten leaves that careless winds had strewed upon that grave in Paris. The murderers had not yet marked it with a monument.

In sad and thrilling tones, slowly, with tremulous touch, the speaker subtly moved his audience to his own human pity. They forgot that he was speaking to the point, the point they were all so anxious to avoid. Then suddenly Harris changed the subject with so swift ease that nobody knew exactly why he was startled. I myself lost a sentence. The swerve had thrown me out of my conscious self. I woke to hear Frank Harris, with a low and intense intonation like a king cobra striking, saying these words: "I have often thought that the story of Jesus

might have been yet more poignant, more true to nature. It should not have been Judas, the stranger, the man of Kerioth, who betrayed his Master; it should have been the man on whose bosom Jesus leaned, John, the beloved disciple. It is only those we love who can betray us and they do it—with a kiss!"

He ceased. There was a dreadful stillness in the hotel; Belshazzar's feast was not struck dumb as this was struck. Probably more than half of the guests were friends and acquaintances of Alfred Douglas; of the traitor whom Oscar Wilde had loved, and who was not there that night.

I do not know how long the silence lasted, but the banquet broke up amidst wild cheering. I was myself in Harris' party, though sitting at a distant table. I walked across to join him—he was pale and exhausted. In his passion of indignation he had not touched his dinner. But he had automatically sipped champagne, and the wine had produced a sort of nervous rigidity, like that of a mystic in trance. I helped him into his automobile. He leaned heavily on me. At that moment, by chance, Richard Middleton, a half-starved poet of promise, a big, soft, tame creature who always reminded me of a Newfoundland dog, passed on the pavement. Harris broke away from me, and caught Middleton with a leap like a leopard. Worn as he himself was, he knew that the boy was famished, and he carried him off with us to a supper at the Savoy.

I think that incident gives more of the real Frank Harris than any amount of psychological analysis.

When I met Frank Harris, I was very much afraid of what was going to happen to me. Imagine how I felt when he treated me like an old friend on the first word, put me at my ease with a courtesy which I can only describe as caressing, asked to see my poems, and made me sit with him at his desk as if we were partners in consultation. Something obscured his literary judgment so much that he stamped and thumped in his enthusiasm of my verses, some of which he declared first rate. I remember his swearing one passage worthy of Goethe.

Imagine how ashamed I was to own that I had not read any of his books. He gave me copies of several, inscribed briefly and charmingly. One of them reads, "In token of immediate sympathy." Since adjectives must be, what a miraculous choice! Could Flaubert have found such a "mot juste" in all the volumes of his dictionary? Another, simpler still, reads: "Friend & Poet." The two holiest words in the language, offered, as simply as a child brings one wild flowers, to meed

little me! His letters are all in the same spirit. Despite his fame, he never treated my insignificance with condescension.

Those letters of his have been locked away for many a year. I am ashamed to say that I did not realize at the time what wealth of heart was in that Doric style: simplex munditiis.

Just one more incident. Sick, almost friendless, misunderstood even by many of his friends, the envy of the literary jackals and the rancor of the social hyenas all let loose on him as he lay in his house in New York. He was past sixty. His constitution undermined by constant illness, he was now struck down by pleurisy so severe that none of us thought he could live through it. He asked me for a book of my poems which he had not yet seen, and the next thing I got was half a page written from his sick bed. It was a lyric of closely-pencilled praise, not fulsome, but discriminating. With that paper in my possession I seek no other patent of nobility; though, in truth, the greater honor goes to him who wrote it.

I was astounded at the quality of the books which Harris sent me; as for the quantity of them—that was the wrong way round. Each item was unique and individual, almost unrivalled in its particular kind. An astounding feature was that he never repeated himself. In our times, practically all successful writers are compelled by the pressure of their publishers and the exiguity of their invention to imitate the productions which have met with popular favor. The greatest hardly dare to get out of their groove. But Frank Harris, having done one thing surpassingly well, dismisses the subject, and looks for new worlds to conquer. That trait, by the way, is equally evident in his talking. I must have listened to him hundreds of times; my memory is excellent; and I have hardly ever heard him tell a story twice. (Physiologically amazing, this, in any man past middle age!)

"The Bomb" is a story of the Haymarket affair in Chicago in 1882, and Frank Harris makes the man who flung the bomb tell the story.

Every figure in the book is a masterpiece of portraiture; I think Holbein and the two great Dutchmen are the only rivals to Frank Harris in this art of making men live. He does this at the cost of what in a narrator is called suavity, and to some extent even of what is usually called style. His tales are unpleasant to read, taking "pleasant" in its usual sense as "congruous with curates and croquet." But even to really adult minds, the style seems too severely simple not to be shocking. The strokes are too swift and sharp for the ease of the reader. One is

constantly jerked into alertness; it is like being shelled. Other writers smooth down all this bold brushwork, glaze it with bitumen and varnish it heavily. But, if I must choose, let me gaze on rugged Truth till the film of my tears soften down my vision to Beauty, rather than on adorned Beauty till my critical eye dig out Truth from the rouge and the frou-frou. A living Courbet is better than a dead Lawrence. Harris, in his stories, reminds me much of Courbet and Manet; there is the same vitality and passion, bold brutality and tender delicacy allied to increase each other's value, the impatient lust of creation manifest in the heroic, even gigantic, mould of the design, and then the lingering caresses of the accessory details.

"The Bomb" is a miracle of realism in the true sense of the word; it is not the factitious realism which piles Pelion of "characteristic incident" on Ossa of "local color"; the story is told just as the supposed teller would have actually told it. He emphasized the things which would seem important to him, not those which a Model Author would judge important to the story. Most writers cannot be scholars without being pedants, and make the imaginary narrator absurd by using him as the phonograph for their own records. In "The Bomb," the hero is limited in exactly the natural way; and the book is not theatricalized by one single tawdry "showman's trick," such as we find in nearly all studies of character.

This brings us to consider the Biography of Wilde, written in the light of after knowledge, and with the aid of a host of documents. It was written, moreover, in perspective.

I consider this book unequalled in all the ant-heap of biographies.

There are, nigh all of them, such welter of patient pyramid-work. But the cry is not "bricks without straw"; it is "straw without bricks"! They print a man's washing bills and suppress his love-letters, give an inventory of his bed-room furniture, and omit to describe his dining-room, because he was too refined to eat! At best, they pile up details, and miss the main design. I could never read one through, not even Frederick the Great of Boswell.

Boswell makes Johnson live, no doubt; but it is the life of a demi-god, as faulty as any other Hagiography. Harris has the art of setting Wilde solidly down at one's fireside; every phrase is vital and necessary. There is nothing incredible in even the most startling incidents. The book rings "true" as books of fact do not; rare as they that do. Does one for obvious instance

find the substance of truth in the "plain facts" of a newspaper report?

It is to me the most fascinating of the works even of Harris. The fact is the supreme test of his art; for surely no subject would be more difficult. Anybody who is not an idiot or a college professor can produce something tolerable on Shakespeare. One can always drown discords of thought in dithyrambs of fulsomeness. Problems can be pigeon-holed, and posters of pompous platitude pasted over them. One can always fold one's paws on one's paunch after lunch, and yawn to one's stenographer to look up some nice passages and quote them during one's nap. Quite a lot of people can shovel together a presentable snow-man "historical novel"; the history part saves the trouble of invention, and the novel part excuses mistakes in history. Short stories are the devil, even to write what looks like one across a fair-sized river; but at least one is free to write what pleases oneself.

But to make dry bones live, to reconstruct Hercules from his footprints—hos opus, hic labor est!

The sword of Truth must be beaten with the gold of Love, and tempered in the water of Life, and ground on the whirled wheel of style, and hilted with that Cross by virtue of which the author, his subject and his reader are known for One in Three and Three in One. This is the Cross of our essential manhood, the symbol of our divine prerogative to suffer and die. For by that shedding of blood alone is there remission of sin, the sin of accepting the Knowledge of Good and Evil. For by that sacrament alone do we guard life and sanctify it; by that death only do we learn to live.

This Book has done all this; it is a treasure and a wonder, a mighty and majestic monument not only to Oscar Wilde, but to the loyal friend whom he acknowledged in his dedication of "An Ideal Husband" in these words:

"To Frank Harris,

"A slight tribute to his power and distinction as an artist, his chivalry and nobility as a friend."

I revise this essay after a second year in Cefalù, a year of savage solitude, anxiety, and weariness of soul. The effect has been to set Frank Harris higher than ever in my estimation. Today I can say, as I could not when I wrote this essay, that his sublimity has never been surpassed. There are passages in the "Oscar Wilde" more profound, more poignant, more passionate and more eloquent than in any other modern writer.

A year ago I should have ranked Wells and Kipling with Frank Harris in the matter of short stories. I should have put Arthur Morrison a length behind them. I should hardly include Conrad, for his are not short stories proper; nor are Alexander Harvey's exquisitely whimsical trifles. I know no other regular writers—outside the "growler" class, with a Pegasus only fit for the knacker, and a cabby who never wakes up till he thinks it is time for his tip. Bennett, Chesterton, Doyle—I forget any more of their meaningless names—have all written themselves down into this class.

On reading his stories again, I found Wells excellent in "The Time Machine" and "The Island of Dr. Moreau," written before he had tasted the whisky of Esteem doped with the knock-out drops of Profit; and these two books are not short stories. I was amazed to find that those which were technically so, are, with scarce one exception, the merest magazine stuff, slop poured on a plate—a sad mechanic exercise—like the men with those soggy flat round things in the window at Childs'.

The ideas are often good, Nature's wonders being always worth watching. But what of Nature's wonder that Wells should ever have fooled me into thinking him a stylist, even in the days when I blushed at the word "razor"? These stories are not stories of life at all. Wells never saw life; he was too busy trying to dovetail his teeth and his aitches with coronets and black silk stockings on real ladies, and to acquire the Grand Manner of the blasé but still naughty statesman with the blawsted career—and to adopt ad hoc the strangely naïve plan of assiduously aping the Fabians.

He has a bag of tricks, the Absent-minded Professor, the Earnest Enquirer, the Ingenious Engineer, the Fussy Female, the Mild Male, the Bloke, the Moke, the Toque and the Joke. They all work on wires. There is not one character in the whole weary series of wax-and whiskers.

As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, Wells without end, Amen!

Kipling, not quite so plastery, crumbled less completely. His stories—thanks to the sheer interest of the themes—are good enough, many of them. Sometimes there is a capital plot, once or twice a good sketch of a character, once at least, in "The Madness of Orthersis," a fine bit of psychology, evidently from observation. But the vulgarity of his Snob-in-the Smoke-Room pose, the fellow-that-knows-it-all-and-you-chaps-may-as-well-hear-it tone, is appalling. There are lands which accept the artistry of a goggle-eyed penny-patriot with a simian profile

who grins and leers and nudges you with an elbow and tells you a near-dirty story with the air of having heard it an hour ago from his dear old pal the Archbishop. But after a year in Cefalù, I cannot stand it.

Frank Harris is never easy to read; he has not the glib way that suits the deck-chair and the long glass with the ice in it. But he stands to the short story where Balzac stands to the long. He is interested primarily in men as men; for him their adventures are mere clues to their characters. He is above the story-teller of even the Smollett type as Rembrandt is above Court Painters and daubers of battles. We do not ask a Master, "Who sat for this picture; what happened to him?" The face, as a face, is all in all!

Frank Harris would probably deny it with an oath; but he knows the ultimate secret of existence, that everything soever is supremely interesting and sublime on the sole sufficient ground that it is itself. Any attempt to bring it into relation with anything else is to insult and soil it.

"An English Saint" is for me the finest short story of its kind in English. It gives us the most pitiful phase of England infinitely intense. Its form is more austere than that of Butler's masterpiece; and the presentation is quite adequate. Not one word is wasted. It is astonishing, moreover, considering the age of Frank Harris, that the spirit of the story, the intention of the irony, is as modern as that of Lytton Strachey in "Eminent Victorians." Frank Harris dwells in an eternity free of the fashions of temporal order.

The etching of Montes is superb; that of Rosetti is more real for being only a faint suggestion, the impression which his genius and personality made on a man whose shop he sometimes patronized, than if the narrator had been Mr. Know-All-And-Then-A-Bit, as a coarser artist might have tried to make him.

I must confess to a congenital incapacity to endure Epics. I could never enjoy Homer, Milton, Dante or Zola. Even Cervantes bores me, and the Viscomte de Bragelonne teases. I agree with Aristotle and Poe about the limits of enthusiasm. The vast compositions of the Renaissance fail to charm. I insist that Art shall be ultimate, simple and intense.

This is one of my reasons for regarding Frank Harris as among the greatest. He has never "shown off" with a set piece. The characters in his stories are never introduced for effect. Each one, however slightly sketched, is thoroughly understood, and presented with severe strong strokes. There is no waste,

there is no attempt to cover up weak draughtmanship, to conceal incapacity, or to compensate for lack of beauty by meretricious prettiness.

In the great majority of the stories of Frank Harris, however, there is no more yielding to the temptation to idealize or generalize than there is in a portrait by Holbein or Manet. It would be impossible to examine all these men and women. It may be said at once that these imaginary people possess precisely the same quality as the subjects of the Contemporary Portraits. They are real. They refuse to compromise with the exigencies of the artist. It is hard to think of any other writer who shows equal integrity. This is realism in the only right sense of the word. Robert Louis Stevenson, Wilkie Collins, Joseph Conrad and a few others occasionally reach this summit, but even they, too, often fail to be faithful.

The First Series of Contemporary Portraits is enthralling. The level of skill and interest is astonishingly well maintained. I am particularly struck with the judicial method. The arguments which assess the sitter's value to the world are imperceptibly adduced first on one side and then on the other. It is a very striking process of subtle adjustment.

The study of Ernest Dowson in the second series is one of the most beautiful things in the language. It is admirably just; noble enthusiastic; a worthy temple to a worthy god. Dowson is not mighty among the mighty, but he is pure and brilliant with an intensity to which history finds no parallel. Harris's appreciation is consummate. The scene at the Café Royal is one of the most lyric and tragic episodes ever written; the God discovering a brother God disguised and wounded, an insignificant, weak, stammering God; a God with a grip of death on his throat and the poisoned glass dagger of love broken off in his heart. And the great God cries through his tears for the fate of his little brother: "But you have gone higher and deeper than any of us!"

This sketch, were it the only document extant, would not only put Dowson in his place in the Pantheon, the bruised reed of life, the smoking flax of love, the Adonis of Bion's Lament, not wooed by Venus but spurned by a slut; it would also put Harris himself with the immortals, a God who could love greatly, pity passionately, adore lyrically, and, understanding the terrific tragedy of tears, could look clear-eyed upon the Universe; and, with the blood and water of his wound, stain hyacinths with purple poems.

I started this paper with the idea of reviewing the Second Series of "Contemporary Portraits"; I meant to make it the happiness of an hour, a dip in the surf! The undertow of my enthusiasm has swept me far out to sea. Judge, then, Frank Harris by his power to stir the soul.