FRANK HARRIS' GREAT BOOK

By Aleister Crowley.

IT is a little hard to be asked to review "Contemporary Portraits," since it has already been done by the "Philadelphia Evening Ledger," whose tame Master of English writes of England as Frank Harris' "once native land." One can hardly be expected to compete against that, however. The majority of books about great men have been written by little men, by men so little that though they "stand tiptoe upon a little hill," and strain, and strain, their vision never rises higher than the seat of the pants of their hero. The view afforded is apt to be inadequate. But Frank Harris is himself one of the circle which he describes. Frank Harris is no Arnold Bennett, who scribbles fragments of the conversation of the great men with whom he happens to be thrown, God knows how, upon his shirt-cuff, and makes what at first sight looks like a book about it. And here I must admit that I took up "Contemporary Portraits" with some fear. I have known Frank Harris well for some years; and I have often found his kindness of heart interfering with his critical judgment. He even published some of my poetry. And, with regard to this same Arnold Bennett, I have heard him speak of his laborious ant-heaps as if they were cathedrals. But, however intoxicated upon the good wine of friendship Mr. Harris may be in his leisure moments, when he comes to put his views on paper and to revise and polish them with that meticulous conscientiousness which is the despair of his publishers, the critical faculty, which, as Wilde says, is identical with the creative faculty, leaps forth unimpaired. If there be an exception to this rule, it is peculiarly excusable. I do think that the tragic deaths of Davidson and Middleton made it impossible for him to write what I feel sure that he must think. These men had a sort of genius, but in an extraordinarily limited degree. And I think that Frank Harris has done about all that he could do by the quotations from their works which he has picked out. There is nothing in either which could make their writings the companions of a life.

The whole style in which this book is written is amazingly vivid, one may say the best chiseled English that one has read for a long time. There is a great quality of reality and luminosity in the portraits. The men stand out as living. It is all the difference between a stereoscopic view and that of the single lens camera. The men walk and talk. Incidentally, too, they are singularly complete. Frank Harris has understood and expressed the curious inter-relation which exists between the man and his work. He explains Carlyle by his impotence, Renan by his sensuality, Whistler by his build, Wilde by his obesity. But he does not fall into the error of regarding the body as the sole fountain of the spirit; he understands equally that the spirit moulds the body. It is the dove-tailing of these elements which makes the man. Nor does he neglect what I may call the trimmings of environment. He points out the influence of poverty and neglect on Davidson, of disappointed ambition on Burton. And if there be an omission in this volume, I think it is that there is no reference to the ataxia of Meredith.

The view of Carlyle is extraordinarily fine. But here I think that the fact of Mr. Harris' own youth at the time of his friendship with the prophet, has made him take too high a view of Carlyle as a philosopher. The world cannot be run by mere intellectual clarity, especially when ill-temper and cynicism jaundice it. The world needs heart as well as head; and the heart of Carlyle was full of envy and bitterness. It is impossible to run a postoffice properly unless you sleep with Keats under your pillow!

The picture of Renan is singularly alive, but here again I think that the estimate is a little high. It is impossible for me to credit that Mr. Harris believes in the historicity of Jesus, and it appears an unworthy concession to that Anglo-Saxon cant and hypocrisy, which in other places he castigates, to pretend even for a moment to do so. If there were ever an imaginary portrait, it is that which Renan draws. If there were ever a sentimentalized phantom, it is the Christ of Renan.

The sketch of Whistler is in my judgment the best in the book. I think it is not saying too much to maintain that it is the finest portrait sketch ever executed.

The essay on Oscar Wilde bears marks of pain. It is evident that the tragedy of the friend to whom Frank Harris was so loyal has made the subject too intimate for perfect detachment. Human sympathy creeps in to the detriment of aesthetic and intellectual sympathy. And the result is a certain sadness which lends a tone of tragedy to the career of Wilde; this I regard as factitious.

Wilde was far too insincere to be a great artist. He hardly wrote a word which was not stolen deliberately from his immediate predecessors. Nor at any point did Wilde touch a genuine cosmic chord. "The Sphinx" is merely Gautier. "Salome" is a mixture of Moreau, Flaubert and Maeterlinck. And he did not even write French himself. He drafted it in school-boy French, and had it made over by Marcel Schwob. As for the "Ballad of Reading Gaol," it is only "Eugene Aram" spoilt; and De Profundis is really so bad that, as I could never read it, I am prepared to believe it original. The plays are the bright spots. They do really represent the manners of the English of the period. And the reason for this is that society with a capital S was the genuine spot in Wilde's huge mass of humbug. He was the incarnation of all snobbery. He was not more homosexual than Adam. He adopted his vices because they were "good form" at Oxford.

The portrait of Sir Richard Burton is magnificent, and the comparison of him to Sir Walter Raleigh peculiarly apt and striking. The political criticism is also vividly acute; and it reads especially well at this moment, when it is being justified by events. I could wish, however, that this essay were double the length. In my judgment Burton was the greatest man, as a man, of all the Victorians. Few people are aware that he wrote over a hundred volumes. And each of these volumes contains a wealth of knowledge and a depth of philosophy so great as to be almost beyond our belief. How a man of action, engaged without intermission in the most arduous explorations, could have found time to write even one-tenth of what he did, or to acquire one-thousandth part of the knowledge which enabled him to write what he did, is a miracle in real life which all religious fables cannot match. A little more, too, might have been made of his domestic relations, of the tragedy of that enormous soul spending itself in brainless sentimentality over the peevish doll who not only ruined his career, especially by her tactlessness at Damascus, but actually defiled his deathbed by