

THE TRAGIC LIFE-HISTORY OF THE MAN WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE. By FRANK HARRIS. 7s. 6d.

It has always been a source of harmless amusement, in our leisure hours, to watch our learned men grappling with Shakespeare. To study him, the Knower of man's heart, they have withered their own; to interpret the Witness of Life, they have refused to live, and, surrounded by a thousand foolish folios, have sat gloomily in the mouldering colleges of Oxford, or walked the horrid marshes of Cambridge, and produced uncouth pages of most learned drivel.

Frank Harris had another way than that. He took life in both hands and shook it; he made his own study of the heart of man, enlarging, not restricting, his own; and many a night has he lain under the stars on the savannah or the sierra, with Shakespeare for his pillow.

His result is accordingly different. His knowledge of Shakespeare is a living, bleeding, Truth; there is no room in his great heart and brain for the lumber of the pedants.

More, Frank Harris is himself a creative artist, a Freeman of the City of God, and knows that as there is no smoke without fire, so is there no speech without thought.

Whenever a poet writes of something that he does not know, he makes a botch of it; whenever a poet gives detail, and gives it right, he has probably observed it directly. There is nothing in *Hamlet* which need make us think that Shakespeare was ever in Denmark; but from the description in *King Lear* it is likely that he knew Dover.

In the hands of an acute critic this method is perfectly reliable; and Mr. Harris's familiarity with the text, his power of concentration and his sense of proportion, have made it possible for him to see Shakespeare steadily and see him whole.

We are perfectly convinced of the truth of the main theory which Frank Harris presents, the enslaving of his gentle spirit by the bold black-eyed harlot Mary Fitton, and we are even shaken in that other hypothesis which attributes to Shakespeare the vice of Caesar, Goethe, Milton, Michael Angelo, and of so many other good and

great men that time and space would fail us to enumerate them.

Yet Mr. Harris only shakes the fabric of proof; he cannot the foundation—instinct.

And it is strange that he, the friend of Oscar Wilde through honour and dishonour, has not perceived the amazing strength of the theory propounded in "The portrait of Mr. W. H." Surely this theory should have been lashed and smashed, had it been possible. For where there is no definite evidence, we must accept the theory which contains least contradiction in itself.

Now, there is nothing monstrous in the supposition that Shakespeare was great enough to understand and feel all the overmastering passions which enrapture and torment, enslave and emancipate mankind; it would have been astonishing had he not done so. Oscar Wilde's theory does not explain Rosalind and Tamora and the dark lady of the Sonnets; but Frank Harris forgets the ambiguous Rosalind and Viola and Imogen, or at least fails to attach to them the immense importance which they are bound to possess for any one who is capable of emotional sympathy with such modern writers as Symonds, Pater, Whitman, FitzGerald, Burton, Wilde, Bloomfield, and a hundred others.

Everything is significant to sympathy, nothing to antipathy; and if sometimes sympathy o'erleaps itself and falls on the other, seeing a camel where there is only a cloud, the error is rarely so great as the opposite. We cannot help thinking that in this one instance Frank Harris has emulated Nelson at Copenhagen.

He will forgive us for dwelling on the one point of disagreement where the points of agreement are so many, where we gladly welcome his book as the sole real light that has ever been shed upon the life and thought of Shakespeare, the light of Frank Harris's soul split up by the prism of his mind into wit, style, insight, intelligence, pathos, history, comedy, tragedy, that adorn his book.

As for Staunton, Sidney Lee, Raleigh, Garrett, Bradley, Haliwell-Phillips, Fleay and the rest, their learning is lumber and their theories trash.

A. C.