

*A book review by Aleister Crowley from the April 1916 edition of The International.*

***The Veils of Isis*** by Frank Harris. George H. Doran Company.

There is a certain quality in Mr. Harris' last book of stories which reminds me of the early crocus. One of the remarks which has most profoundly influenced my later work was made to me in a choug near Rangoon, where I was staying with my venerable teacher, the Sayadaw Bhikkhu Ananda Metteya, "Coleridge," he said, "has done the greatest thing in literature."

"And ice, mast-high, went floating by,  
As green as emerald."

When he wrote 'mast-high,' not 'mountain-high,' not 'cathedral-high,' he was actually on the ship. The mast was the natural object of comparison. This is true imagination, to be almost bodily in the place that you describe. And this is why the Seer is the Artist and the Artist the Seer. Now I have always hitherto found a certain lack of this quality in the stories of Frank Harris. They have ever been marvelously sculpted, with infinite pains; but they have been written, so to speak, by one outside them. The author has been an interested spectator, dowered with insight and imagination, but he has not been suffering with his characters. I found one fault with the Shakespeare book. It has always seemed to me that Shakespeare might have suffered at the hands of Mary Fitton indeed, but would yet have managed to get the laugh on his side. He would have let her trample on his heart, but have thought the while, amused: "What a fool she would feel if she knew about W. H.!" Some such retort must have been in his mind, or his pain would have killed him long before he got to fifty. I will admit that this may have been a drug, a

factitious anodyne; but we must all put up with such. We may not like the medicine; but it does us good.

If I am right, then, it would seem that Frank Harris has been too objective, like Meredith and Dickens, and indeed most of the great writers. But I could never wholly enjoy "most of the great writers" for this very reason. I seem to have Ananda Metteya on the brain this afternoon; here is another of his remarks "There are ultimately only two kinds of mind, the scientific and the artistic. The distinction is that the artistic mind visualizes every thought. Here is a great gulf fixed." Now Frank Harris' mind has always been of the scientific class; there has been little of the pictorial element in his work. He told us about everything; he did not show it to us. That is why he can speak of Stevenson as "a minor master." The more sober portion of his mind has always distrusted the – to me, at least – truly artistic part. (For I have ever been on the side of the painters.) Now, like the budding crocus, the true imagination is growing in him. He said to me the other day, "I find myself using more and more materials from real life; I suppose that my imagination is dying." I answered, "No; your imagination is reaching puberty."

The lyrical dreams of the young poet are very charming, but they are of nothing all compact; they have no substance and their color is but iris-bright. It is the actual fact of life that glows. Does my mistress fulfill my boyhood's dream? Not by a pailful! Thank God, she is herself, and nobody else; certainly not a ghost condensed from the smoke of my censor, as I conjured her from the pit of my ignorance by the spells of inarticulate longings. Have any of my readers ever taken hashish? One waits very expectantly for visions; one remembers all that one has read; having a little imagination, one begins to see all sorts of things. And then, with lightning speed and strength, the drug takes hold of one; the mind plunges into the Niagra of true vision; the unsubstantial things that one had fancied,

vanish: time, space, and all other conditions of thought are abolished in a second, and one is whirled forth like a mad comet, charioted upon eternity. The key of all is Unexpectedness. This is true of all true vision, whether you get it by nature, or by meditation, or by drugs, or by insanity, or by religion. Now that is why Stevenson is so supreme an artist that in every chapter you find a picture. Think of Jekyll, what pictorial quality is in the murder scene, in the scene where Jekyll wakes in the park to find himself Hyde, in the scene where Hyde tramples the child, in twenty others in the book. You can forget what the book is all about, but the pictures are with you "till death do us part." The same is true of nearly all the shorter books, *The Dynamiter*, *The Suicide Club*, and it is so in *Treasure Island* and *The Wrecker*. It is very clear too, in *The Ebb-Tide*. Where he tried to take himself more seriously he lost this, and the result is failure. I cannot remember anything at all about *Catriona*. Surely it is a supreme test of the merit of a thing that it should be unforgettable! Is it not the pictorial value of "The low dark hill, the storm, the star" that gives Calvary its literary value? Is it not the ox and the ass that make the nativity different from the billion others? Is it not for purely pictorial reasons that the Master Mason can never forget the Third Degree?

Now in this last volume Frank Harris, who has hitherto been diffident of letting loose this quality in him, allows it full play. The climax of the story which gives its title to the volume, the incident of the cigarette-holder in the Yellow Ticket, the superb end of *The Ugly Duckling*, the bathing girl and the wife's suicide in "A Daughter of Eve," a dozen blazing bits of color in "A French Artist," which is an amazing antiphone of "An English Saint" (the best of all the former stories, by my account), the laughing boy in "A Fool's Paradise," the scene in the pagoda, even that on the ship, and above all that of the martyrdom in "Within the Shadow." All these demonstrate the greater grip of life which the author is

gaining. The last sermon of the "Saint" is the best thing of the kind in the earlier work. Not even the introduction of the young Montes to the Duke is so clear-cut, though that too stands out in the memory.

I wonder whether I am right so persistently to desire this vivid color-work in literature. I know too well that my mind is not as other men's. It is no doubt only personal partiality, a kind of laziness, that I am bored by elaborate psychology, mostly wrong, such as I find in the Immortal Idiots acclaimed as famous by even duller critics. But I do really demand of a story-teller that he tell a story.

Now all these qualities of characterizations and the rest Mr. Harris has always had, though in due measure only. He never becomes prolix or tedious, and there is a peculiar flavor in his style which reminds me – I do not at all know why – of Latakia. But these things have always been there; with many more which it is needless to recount, since those who know anything at all should know them well. I have, therefore, thought it best to confine myself to noting the crocus-budding of this till now partially latent gift; for in the full flowering of that do I see the most extraordinary promise of future things most memorable.

I was once in the Hotel Meurice in Paris with the Master at dinner, and he was holding forth in the great salon on his early experience in America. He drew a picture of himself selling Bibles, an adventure of which I will not rob him by trying to tell it here. But it was a picture: I can see it now, the honest farmer's wife, the Bible-merchant, the angry farmer with the gun, the blaze of sunlight, the Bible itself thrown in a corner, and a yellow dog. The hotel ceased from its activities; the orchestra stopped; even the people who knew no English turned to hear Frank Harris tell his tale. The world will one day have the sense to follow their example.