

Hugh Walpole



Hans Frost

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CHAPTER I

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NATHALIE SWAN

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No one perhaps in the United Kingdom was quite so frightened as was Nathalie Swan on the third day of November 1924, sitting in a third-class carriage about quarter to five of a cold, windy, darkening afternoon. Her train was drawing her into Paddington Station, and how she wished that she were dead!

She sat in a corner on the hard, dusty seat, her hands clenched, her heart beating with hot, thick, hammering throbs. She wished that she were dead. She was an orphan. No one in the world needed her. The Proudies whom she was abandoning had been very, very good to her, but certainly did not need her. The famous Mrs. Frost to whom she was going would almost surely not be good to her--and as to needing her . . .

Open upon her lap was a number of that shiny geographically illustrated paper the *London News*, and among other portraits was one of Hans Frost, and under it was written:

Mr. Hans Frost, whose Seventieth Birthday occurs on November 3. His friends and admirers are marking the occasion with a suitable presentation.

Kind Samuel Proudie had not known that the photograph was there, when at Polchester Station he had bought illustrated papers and flung them on to her lap. She herself had, of course, not known it, and it had been with a kind of shock that she had recognised the well-known features, the square rugged face with the deep, penetrating eyes, the round head with its short, thick, black hair, the face austere like a priest's, the shoulders broad, the body rather squat, the short sturdy legs, standing there in the beautiful book-lined library--no man of seventy here surely. Not even a man of letters. Rather priest plus prize-fighter plus (in some implied kindly geniality) Father Christmas without the beard.

And then at the last something enigmatic. . . . Or did one imagine that because one knew how great he was?

Nathalie was nineteen years and no fool. She had had this face in front of her, framed in a neat black frame for the last six years, had carried it with her everywhere, had had it always in her bedroom wherever she might be. For was he not her uncle, her famous, marvellous uncle whom she had never seen, but had made her hero, her conception of God, indeed, ever since she could remember?

How tiny, but how defiant, she had been on that first morning at the Polchester High School, when, hemmed in by tormentors, she had boasted: 'You can do what you like, but I've got a grander uncle than you have!'

The name, Hans Frost, had meant nothing to them until they had inquired of fathers and mothers at home, but then, after those inquiries, she had received her coveted glory.

'Mother says he's the most wonderful writer. What's he like? Does he take you to theatres when you're in London?'

And then must come the sad confession that she had never seen him, that he had perhaps never heard of her, that he was her uncle only because he had married her aunt.

And yet some glory lingered. The time had come at last when she read his books. Always surreptitiously. They were forbidden. Mrs. Proudie thought them shocking. All except the fairy stories, and they might also be shocking, did one understand what they meant. . . .

Nathalie read some of the fairy stories first: *The Crystal Bell*, *The Duchess of Paradis*, *The Palace of Ice*. She did not at the time bother about inner meanings. She took the pictures for what they were. The Prince in *The Crystal Bell* crossing the Lake of Fire, the Duchess of Paradis opening the casket of jade, the Dwarfs in *Green Parrots* tying the tails of the monkeys together while they slept. Then (she was seventeen now) she came to the novels. She saved up her money and bought *The Praddons*, *The Silver Tree*, *Joy has Three Faces* and *The Chinese Miracle*.

Of these she liked *The Praddons* best. She could follow that easily with its crowds of people, its London scene and its definite story of Isabel Praddon and her unhappy marriage. She noticed that the later in his life the books appeared the more difficult they became.

She always cut pieces from the paper when they concerned him. The greatest time was when, in his fifty-ninth year, he was dangerously ill. The whole of London, the whole of England, even the whole of Europe and America, waited breathlessly.

She read how groups of people lingered outside his door, how the King and Queen sent inquiries, she remembered the newspaper headlines on the morning after the crisis of his illness was successfully passed.

He had never, perhaps, been quite so famous again. The war had immediately followed. Uncle Hans' mother--dead many years--had been a German. He had lived in retirement during the war, had said very little. After *The Chinese Miracle*, which came out in the autumn of 1914, he had published nothing in the war years save his volume of essays, *The War and the Artist*.

At school during those years she had been torn between her loyalties. She was patriotic, of course, but Uncle Hans was as much her God as ever. It wasn't her fault or his that his mother had been a German. But she had not mentioned him when she need not. She had not been a coward, but perhaps--a little of a diplomatist. . . .

She worshipped Uncle Hans, but she did not worship Aunt Ruth. For one thing she had never seen Uncle Hans and had seen Aunt Ruth. Aunt Ruth had, in 1919, spent two whole nights under the Proudie roof. She had been visiting friends in Cornwall, and, passing through Glebeshire, stopped for two nights in Polchester to 'see her little niece.' She had been all kindness and condescension, lovely to look at and lovely to smell. Very sweet to the Proudies, who were no relation and had looked after little Nathalie all these years simply because Mrs. Proudie and Nathalie's mother 'had been girl friends together.'

Nathalie had been only fourteen at the time. She had been given holiday from the High School, and Aunt Ruth had

taken her for a drive--and that drive had been for Nathalie the most terrifying of all her life's experiences.

Aunt Ruth had been determined to be kind, and was probably satisfied that she had been. As they sat on the broad back seat of the handsome motor-car Aunt Ruth had asked many questions in her melodious, but very deciding, voice. Was Nathalie happy at school? What was her favourite subject in lessons? Did she like games? and, at the last, was she a good little girl, because she would have to earn her living when she grew up?

There were certain things in Aunt Ruth that reminded Nathalie very oddly of her mother, who had been Aunt Ruth's sister. Oddly, because the same things that were adorable in Nathalie's mother were in some strange way terrifying in Aunt Ruth--a note in her voice, a smile, a gesture with her hand. These things brought back her mother to Nathalie so desperately, because in a way they seemed to attempt to betray her, as though now that she was gone and had no one to defend her they were attacking her, that Nathalie to her own surprise and chagrin burst into tears.

Here would have been an occasion for aunt and niece to come together, and had they done so the lives of many people might have been changed, but it happened that the motor-car was just re-entering Polchester, and Mrs. Frost had a keen sense of public absurdity and a wise consciousness of the necessity for self-control. And Nathalie hated herself for crying and hated her aunt for seeing her cry. So Mrs. Frost left Polchester thinking her niece 'a silly little girl,' and Nathalie thought her aunt 'simply terrifying.'

How astonishing then, all these years afterwards, to discover that Aunt Ruth wanted her to live with her 'for a time' in London. There could be no question about Nathalie's acceptance. The Proudies were keeping her only out of kindness; she was nearly grown up and must soon be 'looking after herself'--and her aunt's house in London would be a splendid place to jump off from!

And then there would be the famous, wonderful Uncle Hans, who must surely sometimes be visible when you were living under the same roof with him! If only she were not so terribly frightened of Aunt Ruth! But perhaps now she wouldn't be! It was, however, as Mrs. Proudie had so often told her, her worst fault to be frightened. She had never, possibly, recovered from that awful morning when, only eight years of age, she had been with her father and mother in a pony-cart in the lanes above Rafiel and the pony had run away, turning over the pony-cart, throwing them all out, killing her father at once. Her mother had died six months later.

She had never, possibly, recovered from that, but nevertheless she had a brave spirit. When she was frightened of something she strung herself up, summoning all her forces like the Princess about to meet the dragon. She had her aids on these occasions, superstitions for the most part, like counting fifty and allowing nothing to stop her, saying the Lord's Prayer, praying to her father and thinking of Uncle Hans.

And now, how odd, it was as though she were praying to Uncle Hans to defend her against Aunt Ruth! Odd and shocking too. How she wished that she was not trembling,

how she detested and despised her own cowardice. Nineteen years of age and near to tears, because she was going to stay with her aunt.

She could not think of London, through whose grimy and sordid side streets she was now entering. She did not see the rows of windows with flower-pots and undergarments and occasional human heads painted on to the swaying background of chequered brick. She did not look down on to the strips of long snaky street let into the sombre walls. She saw nothing. Only she longed for Mrs. Proudie with her large heaving bosom, her capacity for gasping amazement at quite ordinary things, her conviction that food and drink would solve every problem; for Canon Proudie, Precentor of the Cathedral in public and the husband of Mrs. Proudie in private, that meek mild man with the beautiful voice and passion for cricket; and for Edgar Proudie, eldest Proudie child, soon to take Holy Orders, vowed to celibacy and the Higher Anglicanism; the very thought of them made the tears hot behind her eyes. The train drew into a Paddington Station blurred and wobbly with smoke and noise and clatter, trying vainly to cover an inexhaustible loneliness.

CHAPTER II

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THE HOUSE

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She had been told that there would be someone to meet her, and at once after leaving her carriage she saw a plump, rosy-cheeked, young chauffeur coming toward her.

'Miss Swan?' he asked, touching his cap.

'Yes,' she said shyly. She was comforted a little, because he looked as though he were from the country. Smart, though, but strong and sturdy. She knew that he would not smile at her box for being shabby or turn up his nose at her timid air.

The box was found. The car, very large, dark blue, waited scornfully quite close to the platform, sniffing at the taxis that were quivering with anxiety lest they should miss their fares. The station glittered with glass, screamed with naughty impatience, choked in its own smoke and was gone. Nathalie slipped into London.

She found that her terror did not diminish. Argue with it, talk to it like a mother, scold it--nothing did it any good. It just sat there in its dark corner, refusing to be exorcised. It did not make things better to observe that London was indifferent, that the lights flashing now about the streets displayed the world with its head up, and that what the world was wise enough to disregard Nathalie might disregard also. The world had not seen Aunt Ruth as

Nathalie had seen her; there was only one Aunt Ruth for one Nathalie, and to change her into a common denominator helped not at all.

Antagonisms are made up of personal furniture, and there is no pincushion in one's wardrobe that has not its share in one's hatred of Caesar.

They rolled into silence. The roar of London was checked as though a hand had been laid on its bawling mouth. Water gleamed beneath lamp-light. As the door opened, trees rustled into the car: autumn leaves lay underfoot.

Nathalie stood, alone and defenceless, on the steps of what seemed in the shadowed starlight a huge house. Yes, water was over the way and dark spaces. A shrill scream broke the shadows.

'Oh, what's that?' she cried.

'That's the Zoo, Miss,' said the chauffeur, waiting beside her for the opening door.

The bell of some clock struck five as the heavy door opened. A large, stout and flat-faced man received her. She disliked him at once, because he was so ugly. His face looked as though it had been trodden on in childhood. Afterwards she was to wonder whether he had ever known that savage and innocent state. His name was Bigges. Later on she would know him for the laziest man in England.

She waited, standing, as it seemed to her, in the middle of endless lighted space, while Bigges brought in her meagre luggage and very officially closed the door. The nice rosy-faced young man was shut out.

She didn't know that Bigges was saying to himself: 'Yes, you would be arriving just at the busiest time, when

everyone's got their 'ands full. You're going to be a nuisance, you are.'

Before they moved on, however, she was comforted by seeing a large, splendid portrait of Uncle Hans hanging over the big stone fireplace. Head and shoulders. Such a picture, so strong and so kindly and so humorous! It was as though, after all, he had been there to greet her and wish her well. . . .

'Mrs. Frost would like to see you at once, Miss.'

She followed.

The house in Polchester had been one of the small ones under the shadow of the Cathedral--bright small crooked rooms overcrowded with ancient treasure, garden in front and garden behind, all colour and comfort, but tiny beside the clang and echo of the Cathedral bells.

How vast and grand and empty, then, this House, the passages endless, the rooms stiff and splendid, one's feet silent on the thick carpets, no voices anywhere! Oh! had she no pride, no self-defence? There was nothing of which she need be ashamed. She was as good as another.

But, arriving at last in the drawing-room, so huge to her country eye, so rich in brown and gold, so stiff in its icy distance between sofas and chairs, Nathalie lost the last remnant of her pluck. She looked, as she went to meet Mrs. Frost and her two lady friends, like a beautiful, rather shabby and sulky child.

Mrs. Frost, clad in golden armour, introduced her to the two ladies--one sheathed in silver like a mermaid, Lady Thingumety, and the other in black silk like a bathing dress, Mrs. Whatyoumayplease.

Mrs. Frost was very kind. She kissed Nathalie twice. She seemed to be glad indeed to see her. Nathalie, gazing at her glorious bobbed amber-coloured hair, wondered how her aunt, who must be fifty at least, could be bobbed and have a figure so straight and not seem in any way absurd. Mrs. Proudie, who was not a day more than forty, if bobbed rather than bunned . . .!

Through her wonderment came Aunt Ruth's explanation: 'And so, darling, if you won't mind just for a night . . . I really should have wired and asked you to come on Wednesday, but I couldn't bear to put you off. . . . You see it's rather an occasion. It's going on at this very moment upstairs, and then there's the dinner-party. Besides I expect you're as tired as anything after your journey and would rather have something on a tray in your own room. And then you can go to bed as early as ever you like. Ask Elsie for anything you want. We'll have *such* a talk in the morning. Your kind friends quite well? That's good. I'm *so* glad. . . . So good-night and happy dreams.'

Nathalie found herself moving out just as she had moved in, as though under the command of some inexorable law. She didn't *want* to stay, but at the same time . . .

A thin starched woman was waiting for her in the passage.

'I'm Elsie, Miss. If there's anything . . .'

CHAPTER III

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PRESENTATION

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At this precise moment the Presentation was going on.

In the beautiful library Hans Frost was sitting and Mr. Frederick Osmaston, standing spiritually like a stork on one leg (he was tall and thin, untidy in odd places like a shaggy umbrella), was reading from his document:

'We, Your friends and admirers, feel that it is impossible to allow your Seventieth Birthday to pass without a sign from us of our affection and esteem.

'You have now for nearly forty years shown us all how Art may be nobly served. In an Age that offers continual evidence of the temptations to cheapness and hurry, you have with unswerving honesty and undoubting faith pursued the only honourable path. You have made it evident that the grand Art of Fiction is inexhaustible in her resources, is for ever opening new ways of adventure for those who follow in her train, and your wit, your gaiety of humour have proved again and again the generosity and wisdom of your known genius.

'But best of all, your knowledge of the human heart, your tolerance and generosity of spirit, have created for us a world of companions, enriching our lives with fresh and enduring characters. So long as the English tongue may last, the earth will claim for its noblest inhabitants the

Duchess of Paradis and Hunter Clive, Isabel Praddon, Clarissa French, the King of Wizards, Mont St. Leger and the Queen of the Crystal Sea, Berenice. Whether in the green woods and glassy lakes of your world of magic or in the everyday streets of your earth-bound cities, the human note is never absent and the tender love for your fellow-men makes life happier for every one of us.

'May destiny allow you many more years in which you may add masterpieces to the English language and splendid hours to the lives of your friends.'

'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.'

There was a pause. It was time for him to reply. He rose to his feet.

'I must say I think it's delightful of everybody. I don't feel like seventy, you know. But you make me realise that I've been an unconscionable time at the whole thing. It's all very well for you to say that you'd like me to go on for years and years, but we've got to make way for the young people, you know. . . .' (He looked across at the rather supercilious, thin young man in pince-nez, Maurice Follett, who represented in the deputation the Young Generation.) 'And yet it's hard to stop. I can't promise you that I will, and, as there are no reporters present, I may as well confess to you that I'd *hate* to stop. We're like that--eh, Gunter?--becomes a habit.' (He

looked down at Martha, the notorious dachshund, who, her head on her paws, was regarding young Follett's thick and ugly shoes with arrogant suspicion.) 'All the same, I'm immensely touched by your taking this trouble. I've done what I can, but you know as well as I do that the thing's a snare and a delusion. I can only say at seventy what I wouldn't have said at thirty, that it's damned difficult to write a decent sentence and that the best things come, after all, by accident. . . . But you don't want me to preach to you. I can only thank you and all the friends whom you represent and to whom I hope to reply, for your goodness, kindness, generosity.'

He sat down. Martha looked up at him sharply as though to say, 'Not so bad. Might have been better,' and settled down to the ironical study of Follett's shoes again. But now the real moment had arrived. Sir Giles Gunter, K.C.B., rose rather ponderously from his chair and approached with grave solemnity towards a paper parcel lying on the table close at hand. Osmaston also gravely approached.

Gunter, pushing up his gold-rimmed spectacles, spoke with an odd bark that resembled nothing so much as an elderly seal at feeding-time:

'We took much counsel together and decided at length, my dear old friend, that the enclosed would--ahem--yes--would be more gratifying to your artistic feelings than anything else we could find for you.'

Gunter was moved, his emotion was choking him. He put his large hand on the shoulder of Hans Frost, who had risen and was approaching the parcel with the eagerness of a child. He had, all his life, adored presents. He got that,

perhaps, from his German mother. Anything with paper round it.

His heart warmed to Giles Gunter, whom he had known for thirty years and with whom he had quarrelled a thousand times. Gunter's feminine nature adored quarrels, because of the reconciliations that followed them. And to-day Gunter really loved Hans Frost, a little because he loved him, a little because he was a great man and a good deal because he, Giles Gunter, was officiating at an important ceremony.

The other two members of the deputation stood modestly in the background, Peter Westcott because he *was* modest, and Follett because he was too arrogant and aloof to push himself vulgarly forward.

Osmaston produced a pair of large scissors. The string was cut. Gunter, his round, red face illuminated with a kind of sacred priestly fervour, lifted the object out of the paper and, with a bow and a triumphant smile as though he, and he alone, had just at great personal sacrifice given birth to this lovely thing, presented it to Frost.

And it *was* a lovely thing! It was a very small oil painting and the artist was Manet.

The picture had for its subject two ladies and a gentleman outside a print shop in Paris. One lady wore a blue crinoline and the other a white; there was a little fuzzy white dog; the glass windows shone in the afternoon light, and beyond the pearl-grey wall of the old house there was a sky of broken blue and swollen white cloud. It was a very lovely little Manet. . . .

'Oh!' cried Hans Frost, and Martha gave a sharp short bark, because she perceived that something exceptional was happening.

'We thought you would like it,' said Sir Giles, fingering the old gold frame with proud, possessive fingers. 'We were fortunate that it turned up in the market when it did. The very thing, I said when I saw it, the very thing for my old friend.'

Meanwhile Hans Frost was unconscious of Sir Giles and of everyone present. He saw only the picture. He had always adored Manet, a painter closer to his soul than any other. He entered into the heart of a Manet at once, as though it had been painted for himself alone. He could be critical about everything else in the world (and was so), but not about Manet. When he was depressed or troubled by his liver he went and looked at Manet. . . . And now he would have a Manet all of his own, his very own--that deep and tender beauty, that blue crinoline, that fuzzy little dog, that white cloud against the gentle blue; these were his for ever.

His eyes shone with happiness as he turned round to his friends. He held out his hands to Gunter and Osmaston. He smiled beyond them to the friendly Westcott and the superior Follett. 'What am I to say? What *can* I say? That you should have thought of me at all--and then thought of this! I'm seventy to-day, as you remind me, and perhaps I shouldn't be thinking any longer of possessions, but how can I help it when you thrust under my nose such a lovely thing? I'm an acquisitive creature, I fear. I have always been. I love beautiful things, and I have a fancy that they return the affection that one gives them! But this! I can't say any

more. . . . I'm overcome. . . . I truly am. I'm touched to the very heart.'

And he was. He had in his eyes the look of the child that knows, to the exclusion of everything and everyone else, that the immediate moment is supremely good. Generosity, ardour, unselfish delight, all the fine emotions were there, and there was nothing to cloud them.

Follett himself was touched. He rubbed his large shoes the one against the other.

'It's the least we can do--all of us--for what you have done for us.' And yet only the night before, to a chosen gathering, in his high falsetto voice, he had proclaimed:

'Frost! . . . The Dark Ages. . . . Fairy stories, I ask you.'

But Hans was not yet conscious of any of them. On his short, sturdy legs he went about the room, holding the picture at arm's length, propping it now against the Epstein bust on the mantelpiece, now against the blue Chinese clock, now against the marble lion--one of two book-rests--now against the drawing of his wife's head by Sargent.

Then, laying it down, he turned again to them, laughing:

'But after all, my friends, from whom is this lovely thing? Am I not to have their names?'

Osmaston, who by his right as secretary of the Authors' Society was the official head of the deputation, unrolled a large and handsome parchment.

'Here they are, Mr. Frost.'

And there they were, some three hundred and sixty of them, all neatly laid out in alphabetical order--ANKER, ALFRED L.; APPLEWARD, RICHARD; ARON, ARTHUR . . . yes,

many of the finest names, not only of Great Britain, but of Europe and America as well.

He took the two sheets and smiled upon them. He would look at them carefully in a while. He put his hand on Sir Giles' massive shoulder.

'This *has* been an occasion. . . . I shall only realise it slowly. I'm a little overcome, to tell you the truth. Yes, just a little. I'm seventy, you know. You've said it yourselves. Giles, my wife's waiting downstairs to give you all tea. Lady Gunter's with her, I believe. Will you go down? I'll join you shortly.'

He beamed upon them all. They passed him down into the hall, where Bigges was waiting.

He stopped Westcott for a moment. 'Mr. Westcott . . . I was greatly pleased to see you here. I'd like to tell you, if I may, how immensely I enjoyed an article of yours--somewhere. I read it at the Club the other evening--an article on Henry Galleon.'

'Yes,' said Westcott, smiling. 'It was in the *Westminster Monthly*.'

'You knew him evidently?'

'Only very slightly, I'm afraid. I was at school with a son of his, and when I was a young man in London I had an evening with him--an evening I shall never forget.'

'No, he was a very remarkable man--a great man. He was a close friend of mine, one of my closest. There's not a day that I don't miss him. I'm glad you knew him. You got him wonderfully well in that article.'

'Thank you, sir,' said Westcott.

'And I enjoyed that last book of yours, *Wandering House*. I've watched you for a long time. A good book.'

'Thank you,' said Westcott again.

'Will you come and see me some time? Come in bachelor fashion and smoke a pipe.'

'I'll be proud.'

'All right, then. I'll get hold of you.'

Westcott closed the door behind him. The library was left to Hans and Martha.

CHAPTER IV

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À LA RECHERCHE DU TEMPS PERDU

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It was a beautiful room. The long, high windows, veiled now with deep blue curtains, looked out across the strip of water and the green levels of the Park. The ceiling was dark blue; the length of the room on the side opposite the windows was lined with unbroken rows of bookshelves, pale ivory in colour. The fireplace was between the windows.

There was no room for pictures. One etching--Rembrandt's 'Three Crosses'--hung over the fireplace. Beneath it was an Epstein head of a woman. There was one long writing-table and two small ones, two arm-chairs of deep blue, a deep-backed chair that had once belonged to Dickens at the writing-table. On the table itself perfect neatness, a writing-pad, an old shabby ink-bottle shaped like an owl (this had belonged to Henry Galleon), a round crystal bowl edged with gold that held now dark amber chrysanthemums, on his right hand a photograph of his wife, on his left a photograph of Galleon, a small bronze (a copy of the Donatello David), a silver paper-knife, a red stick of sealing-wax, a heavy blue paper-weight.

His library was evidently a working one. In the centre there was a square of bookshelf protected with glass; here were such rare editions and association copies as he had: first editions of the *Essays of Elia* in their green backs and

pink paper labels, the copy of *Vanity Fair* that Thackeray gave to Dickens, some notebooks in manuscript kept by George Borrow while in Spain, a first edition of *Ballantrae* with 'To my friend Hans Frost from R. L. Stevenson' inscribed on the front page, Charlotte Brontë's Italian Grammar, some Kelmscott volumes, a number of Galleon's novels, with very affectionate greetings in that fine rich rolling hand, and three volumes of Proust's great and unending chronicle sent with the homages of the author. . . .

These were the principal treasures. For the rest, the working library divided meticulously into its proper sections. This labour from the devoted hands of Miss Caparis, the entirely excellent secretary.

Frost, holding the Manet in his hands, went over to the shelves. This for That! Tit for Tat! The Manet and the Roll of Friends in return for his own, how many volumes? He stood before his own collected 'Burshott' Edition. Here they were then.

Aware that some crisis--the nature of which he could only as yet dimly perceive, but its approach was heralded by a quiver in the spiritual air about him--was imminent, he stood, held, it seemed, by some dominating trance, and read their names.

It was as though he were saying to the Manet: 'Here! See at what you are valued. . . . Make yourself aware of the home to which you have come.'

He, who for many a day now had not glanced at their covers, read over their names. They had been published in Chronological Order. (Ah yes! the Grand Edition! How, five years ago, he had detested the bore of it with its neat little

prefaces, its photogravure frontispieces of places associated with the books . . . and then, after all, no one had bought the damned thing. A White Elephant if ever White Elephant blew its own trumpet.)

And they were:

1889. *The Crystal Bell*. 1891. *The Praddons*. 1892. *The Blissful Place*. 1893. *On the Road* (Poems). 1895. *The Duchess of Paradis*. 1896. *Queen Rosalind*. 1898. *The Miltonic Spirit* (Essays). 1899. *The Palace of Ice*. 1900. *Laura Merries*. 1903. *Green Parrots*. 1904. *Friendly Places* (Travel). 1905. *Goliath*. 1906. *The Philistines*. 1907. *In Israel*. 1909. *The Silver Tree*. 1910. *Troilus* (Poems). 1912. *Walter Savage Landor: Critical Study*. 1913. *Joy has Three Faces*. 1914. *The Chinese Miracle*. 1916. *The War and the Artist* (Essays). 1919. *Eumenides* (Poems). 1922. *The Scornful Sun*. 1924. *King Richard the Fourth*.

He looked at them with dispassionate eyes. Such a number and, for the most part, having so little to do with him! How many of them retained any life for him still? *The Praddons*, with a certain youthful freshness, *The Duchess of Paradis* for its poetry, the Trilogy for some of the people in it, *Joy has Three Faces* for its irony, *King Richard* because it was the last . . . but for the most part how thin, how touchingly shadowy, how, as they looked at him, they seemed to beseech him not to forget them, because if he did not remember them who in heaven's name would?

No, what they did stand for was--not their artistic beauties, poor withered things--but certain stages in his immortal life.

He went back to his chair, settled down in it; Martha, sighing luxuriously, rested her head on his shoe. What was the matter with him? The Manet lay on his lap, the whites and blues and pearly greys looking up at him already with familiarity. What was the matter? He was disturbed. He looked restlessly about him.

Something was going to happen.

That deputation had unsettled him, not because it had emphasised that he was seventy but--but what? Was it the deputation or was it the Manet? Was it, perchance, the Manet that in its perfect and rich beauty pointed so ironic a contrast with his own deformed children? He moved restlessly, Martha's head slipped from his shoe, and she murmured resentfully.

He was unhappy. He wouldn't go down to tea and listen to their silly chatter. He must stay there and face the thing that was troubling him.

The Crystal Bell. His first published work, 1889.

Thirty-five years of age.

Not an infant even then. Fifteen years of good experience behind him. A clerk at the Foreign Office, where, as it had seemed, he had been settled for life--settled with a pearl pin in his tie, a cup of tea and a despatch case. He wrote by accident. He had no fervour, no inspiration, no heated blood and certainly, at that time, no genius.

He saw one sunsetty evening Nelson climb down from his column and ride away on the back of one of the lions. So he wrote about it. For his own satisfaction. Those were days at the end of the 'Eighties when the New Realism and Romantic Fancy were walking arm-in-arm together. Not that

he had ever believed in those tea-caddy definitions. He detested them. But people liked the way he wrote and so he went on writing. That was the way of it. Once you began you couldn't stop, and, after the beginning, what happened to you was neither your fault nor your merit.

What happened to him was that he caught the eye of Stevenson and Henley, wrote for the *National Observer* and had the time of his life. He would never have such days again, of course--not *those* days of flaming, arrogant, abusive, triumphant, self-confident youth. Although he wasn't in reality young. Forty was less young in the 'Nineties than it is to-day perhaps.

With *The Praddons* his bell rang, and with *The Duchess of Paradis* he was lifted on to a little throne. Quite a small little throne, but raised so that you could look down upon other people. He didn't look down on other people--that had never been his habit--but for a while he was considered unique; no one else had ever written quite his thing; no one else could manage the Romantic Fantasy one minute and the Realistic the next. . . .

Oh well, it was all jargon, the kind of jargon that he detested. All he knew about it was that he had very pleasant rooms in St. James's Square and a cottage near Lewes, and that he wrote down what came to him.

Then with his Trilogy he was made--for ever and for ever and a day. *Goliath* in 1905, *The Philistines* in 1906, *In Israel* in 1907.

He knew that these books were good. He knew it then and he knew it now. They were his especial thing; the very sweet kernel of his very own nut. Every gift that he had was

in them, his fantasy and his realism, his poetry and all his philosophy. Moreover, in them he created crowds of people, real live breathing people, a whole world of his own, embracing town and country, the Dome of St. Paul's, and the smallest squirrel skipping up a tree in the darkest little wood. The three books together were a long affair, and there wasn't a page too many.

By then he was more than fifty years of age, and he married Ruth, who was only twenty-five. Too great a difference, but he was madly in love with her--yes, as he had never been in all his life before.

He had always liked women, and twice he had been in love. But some fastidiousness had always been in the way, not of passion, but of complete surrender.

But to Ruth Curnow he surrendered--yes utterly--surrendered to her, mother and all.

She had been married before--very happily married--to Francis Curnow, who was vastly rich, adored, oh, adored her, got pneumonia, died and left her every penny.

And he, Hans Frost, adored her too--adored so that he did what he had sworn to the jealous gods he would never do, married a woman with more money than he had himself.

With a great deal more money, because, although he was on his little throne, and had a body of work behind him, including his famous Trilogy, he did not make very much money. In America they liked him as a reputation rather than a buying proposition--and in England, of course, nobody buys books.

The question was--why did Ruth marry him? This was a question that he had never very honestly faced. He loved

her so desperately that he knew that it was wiser not to ask questions.

She did not love him desperately. She had no desperation in her, but she accepted him very readily, without a moment's hesitation. She was probably tired of being a widow.

She was extremely beautiful; she was like a fire at night, a sunrise at morning, a golden flower, a goddess in amber.

She had a great deal of the goddess about her, very tall, carrying herself superbly, her head high, looking down upon mankind. But she was very gracious and she was not stupid, and, if people behaved to her rightly, she liked them very much.

She was exceedingly good to Hans. There was nothing she wouldn't do for him, and she made it easy for him to accept her blessings, because it gave her so huge a pleasure to bestow them.

Oh! she was large, fine and generous! She was indeed!

If only she had not had her hideous old mother with her--but, then, nothing in this Jack-in-the-box world is perfect.

Mrs. Marriott was even then a dried-up old lady. She was, when Hans Frost first saw her, fifty-five years of age (she was only five years older than Hans) and fifty-five is no terrible age, but she wore lace caps and black silk dresses, carried in her hand a handkerchief with a thin black border, and read frequently in a large purple book of devotion.

Her one object in life, as she told everybody, was her daughter Ruth, the most marvellous woman in the world.

She was one of those old women who are for ever slapping the face of the present with the dead hand of the