

Carping through South China

A Review by J. R. Wallace

ROVING THROUGH SOUTHERN CHINA. By Harry C. Franck. New York: The Century Co. \$5.00.

IF, dear reader, you ever chance to live in Dar es Salaam, Samarkand, Paganago, Ixtacchuatli, or any other distant fold of the earth's surface, keep your eye peeled for a tall, dark stranger, handsome beneath his travel stains. Probably he will come on foot, but he will send in his card with all the assurance of a lord of creation. He is Harry C. Franck — America's greatest pedestrian, the embodiment of perpetual motion — who has sworn a mighty oath by Baedeker to leave no land or people out of his fat books.

Some day he'll be at your door, and if you are well advised, you will leave him there and go back to your siesta or back-sheesh or tiffin or sake or whatever your favorite native vice may be. For if H. C. F. ever gets inside, he will show you up to a curiosity-mad world. He will put you in a bright green Century book just as you are, which is not at all the same as what you think you are. For Harry believes his readers deserve the bald truth about your establishment. Gratitude for food and lodging may well in his bosom, but he sternly represses this emotion when he takes typewriter in hand to expand his notes to the standard length Franck volume of 126,000 words.

The unwritten law of hospitality runs but one way for this extraordinary being. Hospitality may give him a pleasant respite from toil of road and substitute clean sheets for the dirt floor of a flea-infested tavern; but the breaking of bread means no more to him than the breaking of mileage records. The bread may have come hard to its provider, and to a simple jungle or desert soul the breaking of it with a stranger may symbolize the union of all men in brotherhood. What's that to Harry? He's been around a bit; he knows this dirty, wicked world; and what happens in the house of his host is just so much more copy.

THERE was a priest in Peru — or somewhere along the line which Harry took while vagabonding down the Andes. A fat, jolly priest in a dismal village. This priest took Franck to his house, wine and dined him, warmed the traveler at his hearth, and gave him bed and breakfast. But the host made the error of not hiding his two housekeepers who were young and, after the style of the countryside, comely. Whereupon, Franck went away, and months later, after hiking across Bolivia and down to Buenos Aires,

he described this priest as a thoroughly bad egg, detailed the poor fellow's libations, and dwelt at some length upon certain signs of amorosness in the household. One seldom meets, either in life or letters, such a reversal of the parable of the good Samaritan. Which, now of these two, think ye, proved himself the better man?

Eventually, Franck reached Japan, and there some friendly Japanese did for him after their manner. They paid him the



HARRY C. FRANCK

"The embodiment of perpetual motion"

compliment of treating him as one of the family; that is to say, they stood ready to share their baths with him and were always popping in upon him at odd moments, unannounced. These attentions embarrassed our modest hero tremendously. He seemed to think that his hosts should suddenly acquire for his benefit a complete new set of Western household habits and Occidental shames. That the Japanese, from time immemorial, have been in the habit of bathing *en famille* and strolling more or less naked around their houses in hot weather appealed to his strait-jacketed mind as sure evidence of racial inferiority. Different, therefore inferior. Philosophers have pondered long over the sartorial contrast of West and East — the West clothing its humans and unclothing its statues, while the East is shocked by the nude in art and not shocked by the nude in life. But Harry Franck ponders nothing; he is in too much of a rush to see things and write them down. "A chiel's amang ye takin' notes."

In "Roving through Southern China," Franck continues his vice of host baiting. Walking into Ta-ku-t'ang, a dirty fishing town, he went all uninvited to the house of the Britisher who, as commissioner of the Chinese maritime customs, was the only white man in town. The master's servants made our weary traveler comfortable, gave him water raw for washing purposes and water boiled for drink, and brought him a reclining chair. Presently, the Britisher arrived posthaste from his office to tender such entertainment as seemed due from one white man to another in those outlandish parts. As Franck says, there was nothing personal in these attentions; no, indeed, they were an instinctive reaction to racial feeling and good breeding. Franck confesses that he fed well there, but in the same breath he complains of his bed, of the fact that he was not offered a "tub," and of the town night watchman who went around clashing plowshares together to affright devils. One gathers that the host, who hadn't invited Franck at all and who may have been somewhat bored, should have gone out in his pajamas and to quell the watch, even though the weird ways of that worthy had been followed without interruption for two thousand years. At any rate, Franck sneeringly describes the Britisher as "prancing in upon me with the face and greeting of a fairy godmother," after all these lapses. Fancy this literary tramp lunging about the world, meeting kindness with sneers and returning courtesies with criticism. The fact that he is the only American to have visited some of these out-of-the-way places probably makes it easy for a good many estimable foreigners to believe that America is the land of the bum and the home of the free boarder.

SO ingrained is the carping spirit in this traveler that he even mentions the dust in the American Episcopal Church at Kingtehchen; whose worthy native pastor put him up and showed him all about that ancient seat of China's china manufacture. Well, dust is not infrequent in American churches, and dust even helps cathedrals to attain that "dim religious light" which entrances Americans abroad. The dust in Pastor Tsen's little church does not convict Tsen of slovenliness, but it does convict Harry Franck of smallness and cantankerousness and sterility of soul.

Barring the evidences of this petty spirit, Mr. Franck's latest is a competent picture of the surface of China. If you want to know how the Chinese make china or fight (Continued on page 511)

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fire or till their fields or expose their girl babies, "Roving through South China" is an excellent book for you to read. But if you want to get at the meaning under all these things, read something else, perhaps Hovaleque's "China," translated several years ago by Mrs. Laurence Binyon. It is astonishing that as intelligent a man as Harry Franck should walk so far, see so much, yet understand and enjoy so little. Truly, here is one who goes around the world to find fault with it.

On the basis of quantity, Franck is our leading travel writer; on the basis of quality, he falls several notches below that level. "Love and hate are clairvoyant," said a sage, "but dislike is merely dense." There you have the key to Harry Franck's failure to reach the heights in spite of his tremendous efforts. He dislikes too many things and persons; and disliking them, does not trouble to seek their reasons for being as they are.

Nevertheless, I read each fat green Franck book as soon as it appears. He sees clearly and records truly. He can be trusted on facts, statistics, geography, visual impressions, scenery. It is a pity that a man of such industry, ability, and courage has so little taste. He fascinates as much as he infuriates; but the net result of reading him is a feeling of frustration. If there were no more to places and peoples than appears in Franck, then the world would be a sorry place not worth traveling. Thank Heaven, that's not true.