

FANTASY COMMENTATOR

...covering the field of imaginative literature...

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An Appreciation of William Hope Hodgson

by

A. St. John Adcock

I first met Hope Hodgson in 1909. At that date, his three best novels had been written; two of them, The Boats of the "Glen Carrig" and The House on the Borderland, had been published, and the third, The Ghost Pirates, was in the press. In those three stories he showed himself a writer of quite exceptional imaginative gifts, a master of the weird, the eerie, the terrible, whose strange and grim imaginings were not unworthy of comparison with the bizarre creations of Poe. He had already given himself so entirely and enthusiastically to a literary career that the talk at our first meeting was wholly of books and of his hopes as an author. He aimed high, and, taking his art very seriously, had a frank, unaffected confidence in his powers which was partly the splendid arrogance of youth and partly the heritage of experience, for he had tested and proved them.

There was something curiously attractive in his breezy, forceful, eager personality; his dark eyes were wonderfully alert and alive; he was wonderfully and restlessly alive and alert in all his mind and body. He was emphatic and unrestrained in his talk, but would take the sting out of an extravagant denunciation of some inartistic popular author, or of some pestilent critic, and the egotism out of some headlong confession of his own belief in himself with the most pleasant boyish laugh that brushed it all aside as the mere spray and froth of a passing thought. His dark, handsome features were extraordinarily expressive; they betrayed his emotions as readily as his lips gave away whatever happened to rise in his mind. Always he had the courage of his opinions and no false modesty; it never seemed to occur to him to practise politic subterfuges; and it was this absolute candor and naturalness that compelled you to like him and before long strengthened your liking into a friendly affection.

Only once, and then casually, he mentioned to me that he had been a sailor, but, though there was nothing in his manner or his trim, sturdy figure that suggested the seafarer, one might have guessed as much from his books and from the fact that the abost of them wore all of sailors and the sea. He was the son of an Essex clergyman, and left home to serve for eight years a board ship, roughing it at the ends of the earth in all manner of picturesque places and voyaging three times around the world. His record as a sailor includes the story of a daring plunge overboard and the saving of a life at sea, for which he received the Royal Humane Society's medal; and much of the rest of his recollections of those eight years have gone to make the characters and incidents and scenery of his stories.

One novel of his, The Night Land, which appeared in 1912, turns altogether aside from the sea and might almost seem to have presaged, in some dim fashion, the coming of the first World War. He ranked it as his greatest achievement and owned he was disappointed that it was not generally regarded as such. The story is told in quaint, archaic language; is by turns grim, idyllic and touched with supernatural horror; it unfolds a romance of the far future when, in the last days of the world, the powers of evil are grown so assertive, so almost all-conquering that the last civilized remnant of the human race seeks refuge in an enormous and impregnable pyramid, building their city tier above tier within it, while all around this Last Redoubt stretches immeasurably the menacing Night Land, peopled with primeval and loathsome material monsters and dreadful immaterial things of the spirit world banded together to destroy the soul of mankind. It is a strikingly original piece of work, giving full scope to Hope Hodgson's sombre imaginative power and his peculiar flair for the weirdly horrible and the hauntingly mysterious. But it does not grip and hold one as do those

three earlier novels that, for all their uncanniness, wear an air of everyday realism and never lose touch with the normal elements of actual earthly life.

He introduced some of his verse into his last book of short stories, Captain Gault, which came out a few months before his death; but most of what he wrote in this kind is published for the first time in his posthumous Calling of the Sea. And in his poems, as in his prose, it is the mystery, the strength, the cruelty, the grimness and sadness of the sea that most potently appeal to him. He visions it as a House of Storms, a Hall of Thunders; calm at times, but with such a calm as one sees

When some fierce beast veils anger in his breast,

or raging and heaving and roaring tumultuously as though through its tortured waves

Some frightful Thing climbed growling from cold depths.

For him the voices of the sea are the sighing or calling of its multitudinous dead, and there are lines in which he hints that one day he, too, will be called down to them; but that was not the death he was to die.

When the war came, he and his wife had for some while been living in the South of France, but he could not remain there in safety, with the folk at home arming for battle, and, though he was then near forty, he returned to England at once and obtained a commission, in 1915, in the 171st Brigade of the Royal Field Artillery. He put aside all literary work and threw himself heart and soul into his new duties. With characteristic simple frankness, he said his only fear was lest he should feel any shrinking when his time came---a fear that nobody who knew him could ever have had for him. In October, 1917, he went to France with his battery, and was soon in the thick of the fighting. Early in April of 1918 he and a brother officer with a few N.C.O.'s successfully stemmed the rush of an overwhelming number of the enemy who had broken through their line right up to the guns; they fought a gallantly stubborn rear-guard action, under a hail of rifle and machine-gun fire, for three miles across country. A week or two later, on April 17, 1918, Hope Hodgson was killed in action, whilst acting as an observation officer.

It is hard to think of him as dead---he was so vigorously and intensely alive. That vigor and intensity of life pulses and burns in everything he has written; and I think he will still be living in, at least, those three of his novels when we who knew and loved him are passed from remembrance. In the world of letters he had only half fulfilled his promise, but in the larger world of men he left no promise unfulfilled and has an abiding place for ever among the heroic company that the seventeenth century seaman Thomas James commemorated when he wrote:

We that survive perchance may end our days
In some employment meriting no praise,
And lie, forgotten dust, when no man names
The memory of us but to our shames,
They have outlived this fear, and their brave ends
Will ever be an honour to their friends.

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