

Blackfriars

THE SECRET OF THE CURE D'ARS. By Henri Ghéon. Translated by F. J. Sheed. (Sheed and Ward; 7/6.)

Henri Ghéon's book presents a portrait of the Curé that is vividly alive. St. Jean-Marie-Baptiste walks through the pages showing in every line his heroic submission, his perfect receptivity to the movements of grace, and the miracle of his courage and perseverance. Indeed, his life is itself a sustained miracle, more marvellous than the cures he wrought in body and soul, more astounding than the torrents of alms his personality evoked. And yet, in this sketch he never seems remote—one of a species other than our own. He moves before us superhuman—which he was; and yet, a man—which also he was. From the point of view of artistry this is a wonderful piece of work. It is the finest sketch we have ever read and it is very faithful to the recognised accounts of the Saint's life. The man of whom we read is as human to us as if we were meeting him in the flesh.

It would be interesting to know what may have been the effect on M. Ghéon himself of writing this book. Obviously the author was almost driven to undertake it by his devotion to the Saint; obviously his dramatic instinct longed to pay him the highest tribute he could.

Yet one must wonder whether his next work will contain those slight touches of scorn for the weaker souls of this world that jar the reader here and there in the earlier pages. Of course it is a peculiarly French trait to insert in the midst of a particularly fine piece of writing a couple of words that irritate ' . . . the Archbishop's satellites, canons and that sort of people,' or ' The last war showed that no one thought of avoiding [military service] except a few cowards and a few fools.' But this book, written not as a poet's conceit, but as an act of devotion to a master artist, did not need to have its drama heightened, nor its reality strengthened, by a spot or two of mud. Perhaps the humble Curé has already softened this slight trace of harshness; for as the book proceeds the jarring note disappears and gives place to a wider charity. The writer could not look long on the Curé and feel cross with other people—nor, for that matter, can the reader.

Has the writer got to the bottom of the mysterious ' flights ' ? Perhaps his explanation is true; but perhaps the Cure's courage was higher than has been suspected. Perhaps he deliberately decided to put his vocation to the test. He was a Saint, and not yet in Heaven, and therefore he would run no risks. Did he dread lest he should ever consider himself a necessity—

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that Almighty God could not perfectly easily fill his place—if so be He desired it filled? A Saint dreads nothing but illusions. His own success had been tremendous; his longing for solitude was not only natural but supernatural. His eye saw clearly the facts of Heaven and Hell; his continual personal contact with the Devil was not calculated to make him take chances. We can imagine him deciding on an infallible test—departure. It does not seem necessary to suggest any other reason. Perhaps this problem is insoluble; at any rate he was a Saint, and the Church proposes him as a model and an intercessor; and therefore we may well hesitate before we treat his flights as weakness. As the insight of a Saint passes that of an ordinary man, so perhaps some of his motives are beyond explaining except in terms so simple that they are almost too fine to seize.

Even this comment is a further tribute to a wonderful portrait; we find ourselves arguing with the writer as though the Curé were a mutual friend, living only a few miles away.

The translation is admirable.

N.H.

THE LETTERS OF PETER PLYMLEY, with other selected writings by Sydney Smith. Edited with an Introduction by G. C. Heseltine. (Dent; 6/- net.)

Sydney Smith wrote consistently on behalf of Ireland for over forty years and the Plymley Letters—published more than twenty years before Catholic Emancipation—are, in the main, an argument that England cannot afford, on military grounds, to deny justice to the Catholics of Ireland. The *Letters* are good reading; not, perhaps, quite such good reading as many of the articles in the *Edinburgh Review*, which unhappily are not included in this volume. The editor's choice in the matter of selections from Sydney Smith enables the reader to discern how strongly this whig Canon of St. Paul's disliked the opposition to the Reform Bill (the immortal Mrs. Partington speech at Taunton is given in full) and the conservative attitude to game laws and poor laws. There is also an essay of 1819 on the employment of boys as chimney sweepers—'boys are made chimney sweepers at the early age of five or six.' Sydney Smith pleads for greater consideration for the unhappy children sent up the chimneys—the evidence of the House of Lords Committee contains horrible stories of suffering and death—but declines regretfully to support the complete abolition of climbing boys, because this abolition involved 'great injury to property and great increased risk of fire.'