

Gilbert K. Chesterton's London Letter

The Hidden Romance of History

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I HAVE recently had the pleasure of looking again at a very spirited and picturesque *History of France*, recently written by Madame Duclaux, once Miss A. Mary F. Robinson, and published by Mr. Fisher Unwin (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons. \$2.50). There is no poorer talk in all criticism than the talk against picturesque history. History is picturesque; and there is inaccuracy as well as incompetence in turning it from a picture into a pattern.

There are men who write learned histories, in a style both precise and prosaic, which are laborious both to write and read. But they do not do it because they cannot find picturesque incidents; but simply because they cannot draw pictures. They take refuge in the easier exercise of drawing diagrams.

There is a sort of nursery game or joke of drawing the figure of Henry VIII. entirely in straight lines; and the doctrinaires of the diagram school of history seemed quite proud of proceeding by this infantile method. But the real figure of Henry VIII. did not consist entirely of straight lines. Far from it; he consisted mostly of curves. And Holbein's version of him is superior to the nursery diagram; for it contains not only more humanity but more history.

History Is Not an Eden Musee.

Nevertheless, there is a grain of truth in the prejudice; and the truth in it is merely this: that a man shut up for a month in a room with nothing but Holbein's picture might at last grow a little tired of the magnificent personality of Henry VIII. In other words, the real mistake that is sometimes made by romantic history is not in exaggerating the romance, but rather in limiting it.

It suggests that there are fewer romances than there really are. By always staging the same wax-work groups, it contrives to imply that nothing ever happened except King John signing Magna Charta or Charles I. having his head cut off.

Doubtless, from time to time, many a simple and long suffering householder has suddenly thrown the ink pot at the picture of *The Meeting of Wellington and Blucher*, with no subtlety of historical criticism, but in a simple exasperation with it for hanging for such a long time on the same wall. But here is precisely the exception that proves the rule, and the argument that proves the point.

Who Threw the Ink-Pot?

Suppose there were suddenly substituted for it another and more genuine picture of the meeting of Wellington and Blucher, in which Wellington was represented as telling Blucher what he really thought of him. I will not say, represented as

flinging a similar ink-pot at him; for Wellington's social manners were generally less expansive. But if, in some such private interview, Wellington said what we know he thought about the bestiality of the Prussian troops in France, it seems not altogether improbable that it might have been Blucher who threw the ink-pot. Prussian self-control is somewhat skin deep, as we know now better than we did then.

But the point for those who dislike history to be dramatic, and think it is unreal, is very plain in this case. The private meeting would be *more dramatic*, because it would be *more real*. It is more of a solid fact; but it is also more of a "scene." That is exactly the neglected truth; the nearer we come to the realities of history, the more we find of its romance.

Some Merits of Mme. Duclaux's History.

There are many merits in Madame Duclaux's sketch of French history; but the one which concerns me here is the fact that she does succeed in revealing to English readers many facts which are picturesque, but which are also unfamiliar.

She does not shrink from being rhetorical about Joan of Arc or Napoleon; for how could any imaginative or even intelligent person be anything but rhetorical about either of them?

But she does not fill her book with nothing but Joan of Arc and Napoleon, or with romances as fully recognized as those of Joan of Arc and Napoleon. She reveals the interest of the other side, of what we may call the under side of history. She does what corresponds to giving the private conversation of Wellington and Blucher. I could give many instances of what I mean; I will take only two: the neglected topic of mediæval democracy and the real nature of certain mediæval philosophies.

Some Centuries Ago, Also, Men Were Eager to Make the World Safe for Democracy.

The brief sketch of the Communes, in this book, will really be news to many educated English people, who probably imagine that the very word Commune is a modern term invented in 1871. But what is true of the Commune is even more true of what is commonly called the French Revolution.

We talk of the great eighteenth century event as the French Revolution, rather on the same natural impulse that makes us talk of the great twentieth century event as the War. But it would be nearer the truth to say that, before as well as after, French history has been one long series of French Revolutions.

The author is careful to point out that, in the wars of religion, the Catholic party as well as the Protestant frequently insisted on a theory of royalty which was purely representative, and even re-

publican. In truth, of course, the democratic ideal is the oldest in the world; almost certainly older than the autocratic ideal or the aristocratic ideal. It was not *achieved* to any perfection in antiquity or in mediæval society. Some are so audacious as to suggest that it is not achieved with any very dazzling perfection now.

But the point which is worthy of consideration is this: that it would be much more interesting, as well as much more true, to imagine a guildsman of the fourteenth century, or a burgher of the sixteenth century, as interested in the human problem of democracy (as he was) than to conceive the former as a crawling serf or the latter as a brainless bigot.

A Hint to Romance Writers.

It would, for instance, be a new field for the novelist as well as the historian. What is the matter with the modern historical romance is that it is not sufficiently romantic because it is not sufficiently historical. It assumes men in the past to have had merely wooden ideas, and therefore makes them merely wooden characters. Somebody who understood how intelligent their differences really were would put fresh life into the historical novel. Not only would the history be more historic, but the novel would be very much more novel.

Fanatics or Apathetics?

The other example I should take is the fact that Madame Duclaux has had the heroic common sense to tell the truth about the Albigenses. Most people have been told about the persecution of the Albigenses, and the sufferings of the Albigenses. How many people know what *were* Albigenses, as distinct from albinos or albatrosses? Has any popular historian told us *what* was persecuted; or what was the faith for which these men suffered?

It was an intensely interesting faith, but one rather likely to be persecuted. It was stark, suicidal, murderous pessimism; the view that life itself is vile, and that working or bearing children is vile because it perpetuates life.

It is not a religion I rush to embrace; but it has much more meaning, and even more modern meaning, than the vapid self-righteousness of most heretics in most historical novels.

And surely modern men would be more interested in some tale about a Provençal troubadour tormented by that very modern though very morbid philosophy, than they are in the stiff figure of the Conscientious Objector in the conventional historical novel, something between an Early Christian and a very late Congregationalist.

For the old theologians were not fighting about a word, but about a world. It is the only thing to fight about.

G. K. CHESTERTON.

The Road and the Book

By Edward N. Teall.

When I, wayfaring, care no more to learn
What lies beyond the path's next turn—

And vision takes with no responsive thrill
The valley view beyond the hill:

It will be time for me to quit the road,
The jostling crowd, the joyous din;
And I shall calmly doff the pilgrim's load
And seek the restful wayside inn.

When I can say "to-morrow" carelessly,
With no deep sense of mystery—

Upon that day when I without regret
Can see the sun of its hope set,

The book of life will reach its logic's end,
With "finis" all that's left to write.
I'll dedicate it to some faithful friend
And find oblivion in the night.

In December

By Roy Helton.

A ragged, wistful boy breathing hard on a window,
Holding his father's hand as they stared in the toy shop:
Wide eyes edging along the breath fogged glass pane,
Staring in at a show of spinning engines:
Swift rocking bars, wheels geared and cogged and belted.
Gravely comported in their small grave business—
Grave as the two dark eyes that stared so wistfully
On that December night, into the toy shop;
Grave as the lips that whispered up to the father,
Bent, gray and grimly poor, who stood beside him
With eyes as grave as the boy's eyes, and heart no less
wistful.

"Dad!" "Yes, boy." "I don't want that old engine—
do I?"

From *Outcasts in Beulah Land*. Henry Holt & Co.

The Lost Lightship

By Seabury Lawrence.

They say of' Cross Rip's cruisin'
In the Sarragossa Sea,
Where ev'ry jolly sailor man's
As happy as can be.

An' her rails are decked with flow'rs
Hung by mermaids over side,
And the winds are always blowing fair
And the seas are blue and wide.

It were a white and freezin' day
She drifted from the Sound,
When she tore adrift from he moorin's
In an ice field, seaward bound.

An' all around the crunehin' cakes
Made a frozen, frigid ring—
An' so they passed out by Great P'int,
Where the mack'el gulleys sing.

Fellers out on the Great Round Shoal,
They watched of' Cross Rip slide,
Movin' slow and helpless like
On the nor'west wind an' tide.

For she had no wireless signals,
And could get no help f'm land,
An' there wuz no power down below
An' no sail to set by hand.

So ther' wa'nt very much to do
Fer the skipper an' his men
But to let 'er drift to south'ard,
Out of human touch an' ken.

An' the war-lorn world's forgot 'em,
But some women on Cape Cod
Are still waitin' for their menfolks
An' a-prayin' to their God.

The Sunken Submarine

By Harold Willard Gleason.

Like some vast prehistoric reptile vile,
Black, slimy-sleek, beneath the sea it lies,
Motionless, silent, snout sunk deep in mud;
And seems to plot some monstrous villainy.
About the mass small brilliant fishes flash,
Scarlet and gold and opalescent streaks
Against the lifeless monster's sullen blot;
And feathery water plants of tender green
With graceful undulations sweep and sway,
Adding fresh charms to ocean's paradise.
Two ground glass ports, like glaring goggle eyes
Unblinking, at these beauties seem to stare;
While over the slippery hulk a slender tube,
Long, slim, and with a swollen upper end,
Seems like the feeler of an octopus,
A cunning snare, which, tempting, lures to death.

Who knows before all life became extinct
In that foul form, what evil deeds it wrought?
How many women, through its baleful sting,
Dank through the heartless waves? What noble men,
Unarmed and unsuspecting, met their fate,
Their gallant vessels, splintered by the barb
Of some great lurking wickedness like this,
Which, now forgotten, shares its victims' doom?

Beaux

By Jorge Godoy.

The beau of the rain is the rainbow
Whose colors illumine the sky;
The beau of the light is the lightning
That frightens the clouds passing by.

The beau of the storm is the thunder
That scares us wherever we are;
The beau of the moon is the moonbeam
And Son, you're the beau of a star.

The beau of a little star I know
That shines at night in a Broadway show.