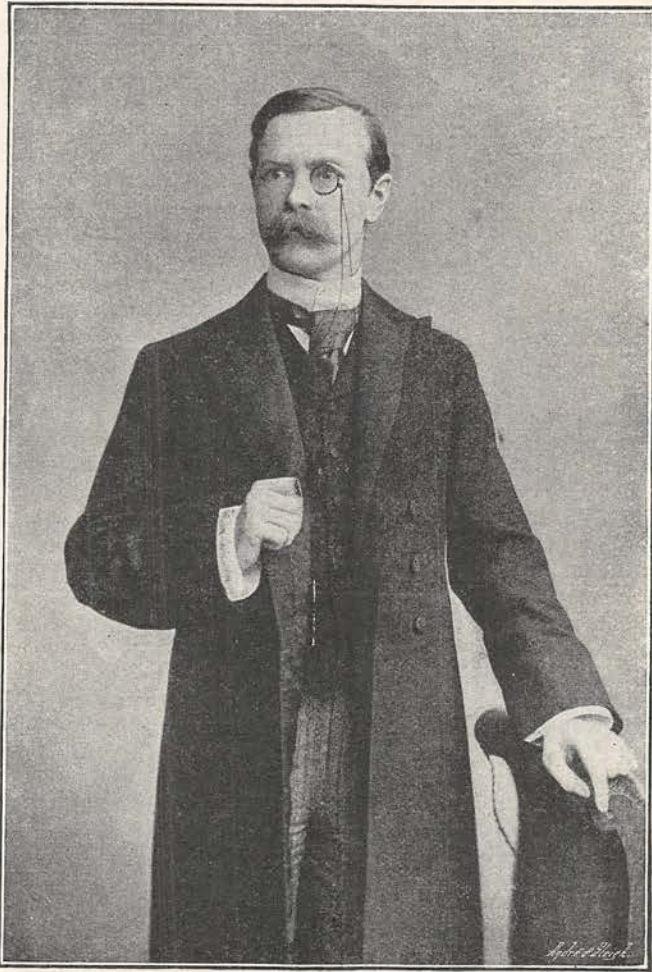


HISTORY AND FICTION.

A CHAT WITH MR. STANLEY J. WEYMAN.



MR. STANLEY WEYMAN.

(From a photograph by the London Stereoscopic Company.)

LT must be conceded that the author of "A Gentleman of France" has been singularly favoured by the place of his birth and upbringing. For so small a town, Ludlow, in Shropshire, is rich in historical associations.

As our readers will remember, it was at one time of importance as the chief town on the borders of England and Wales. The castle, whose decayed battlements and broken walls form so picturesque a picture of the Ludlow

of to-day, was the head-quarters of the Lord President of the Council formed for the purpose of protecting the country-side from the incursions of the barbarous Welsh. It was while his father occupied this position that Sir Philip Sidney wrote there a considerable part of his "Arcadia."

It was there, too, that Milton's *Comus* was first performed, the masque being written by the desire of the Earl of Bridgwater, who was then occupying the Castle as President of the Council, and there that the two young princes lived before they were taken to the Tower. In the great Civil War, Ludlow was robbed of the renown of a battle by the

dilatory tactics of the opposing armies; but Mr. Weyman is able to point out to you, on passing through an old arched gateway—a survival of the town's ancient fortification—the exact spot where the two commanders declined the fight. These and other interesting facts are vouched for, of course, by all historians. In the moss-covered walls of the town, in its many venerable houses, in its fine old church, and in the romantic beauty of the surrounding country, Mr. Weyman's rich fancy might be expected to find constant inspiration.

As far as his actual work has gone, however, Mr. Weyman tells me, over a cup of tea in his study, all this has counted for nothing.

"I have never been able to bring myself," he says, "to make a book out of this place, although I know it so well: too well, probably, for the purpose of fiction—I should not be able to give sufficiently free play to my fancy. A novelist is at a disadvantage, I think, if he is burdened with an exact knowledge of every detail of scenes and circumstances to which he is trying to give romantic form and colour. But any of my novelist friends coming here for the first time would, I am sure, find in Ludlow and its neighbourhood a fine harvest of excellent 'copy.'"

Notwithstanding this disclaimer—if it can be so called—the novelist makes it clear to me that his *métier* in literature owes much to his early environment. A love for the study of history, naturally engendered in such a place, was carried by him from Ludlow Grammar School to Shrewsbury School and Christ Church, Oxford, where he took honours in this subject in 1877.

"It was after reading a book on the Huguenots that the idea of writing an historical novel first actually took possession of my mind. At that time any literary expert would have regarded the enterprise as a hopeless one—would have advised me that above all things an historical novel by an unknown author was the least likely to succeed. Still, I fancied the taste for historical novels might be revived if one was careful not to overload the book with a mass of details of interest only to the antiquarian. So I set to work on 'The House of the Wolf.' It was published, as you know, in the *English Illustrated Magazine*; but Macmillans declined to publish it in book form, and it was eventually brought out by Longmans—on Mr. Andrew Lang's advice, I believe."

"This was your first book, Mr. Weyman?"

"The first published, not the first written. Four years before I had written, on the strong advice of Mr. James Payn, a novel of modern life, but it was so unsatisfactory both to Mr.

Payn and myself that I put the MS. in the fire. Mr. Payn had given me a good deal of encouragement by the acceptance of a number of short stories for the *Cornhill*. The first thing I had in print, I remember, was written when I was at college, in the hope of getting enough money to pay a small debt I had incurred, and for the moment had no other means of paying. It was a little sketch—'My Scouts,' and was published in *Chambers' Journal*. In the enthusiasm of the moment, when the cheque arrived I recollect making a calculation as to the things I could write and the money I could earn in the course of a week—a month—a year. What a foolish enthusiasm! Of course I suffered the common lot for several years. When I was practising at the Bar I wrote a great deal, chiefly short stories, only to have my MSS. returned to me again and again."

"The Bar was your first choice of a profession?"

"No; for a year after leaving Oxford, in 1877, I was one of the masters at the King's School, Chester. Then I kept my terms at the Inner Temple, and got called in 1881. I practised with fair success for ten years, but never really liked the work. For one thing, I am a poor speaker; and you know how important a thing good speaking is at the Common Law Bar. So I gave up my practice three years ago with great pleasure, although the life on circuit is still very pleasant; and I don't consider that even for my present vocation the ten years I spent at the Bar were altogether wasted."

By calling upon Mr. Weyman this sunny Saturday afternoon I have interrupted him in the middle of a chapter of his new novel—a novel of the French Revolution. The large rather closely-written sheets lie on his writing-table by the window.

"I rather want to finish the chapter before Sunday," he says to me candidly. "No, I don't write with anything like feverish haste. In fact, I consider 1,000 words a fair day's work. But when I have begun a new book, I like to concentrate my attention on it till it is finished. I allow myself a day 'off' once a week during the hunting season—I am as fond of hunting as my father was, although I am far from as skilful, and have been rather unfortunate in the matter of 'spills.' A good part of last summer I spent on a house-boat, and I am going to join some friends on one at Oxford next week. I find a house-boat an excellent place for literary work—especially in the early mornings."

We are rambling over a hill when Mr. Weyman says this, admiring a wide stretch of charmingly pretty country, rich with



LUDLOW.

(From a photograph by T. Jones & Son, Ludlow.)

foliage and freshened by the clear waters of the good fishing rivers, the Teme and the Corve; a fine country for the hounds, too, Mr. Weyman assured me. We retrace our steps and turn into the castle grounds, passing on our way a mansion of last century, where, in the early years of this, Prince Lucien Bonaparte resided for some months. As we walk over the soft turfs in what were once the noble halls of the Lord President of the Council's residence, and climb the well-worn steps to the one surviving tower, Mr. Weyman briefly, but graphically, summarises for me the history of the edifice.

"It's a great pity," he exclaims, in conclusion, "that the governing powers some time in the early part of the last century allowed the roof to be taken off and the place despoiled of its furniture. The lead was coveted, perhaps, for use in war, and various people in the town are said to have carried off the furniture. Some of the furniture is to be seen to this day in the old inns."

From the castle, we proceeded to the church—a stately building, about four centuries old, in which there is a memorial to one

of Sir Philip Sidney's sisters who was buried there. In pointing out its most interesting features, Mr. Weyman provokes a compliment to his antiquarian as well as architectural knowledge, but he replies that what he knows has been learned from his brother.

The size of the church leads me to inquire whether at one time Ludlow was a place of larger population than it is now.

"No," Mr. Weyman replied; "but it was more devout. On the other hand, the Recorder has generally only one prisoner to try when he pays his annual visit to the town. The grand jury are called together, the petty jury summoned, the proclamation against vice and immorality is read—in short, all the 'pomp and circumstance' of judicial proceedings is provided for the sake of this one prisoner, and he is honoured, I can assure you, with a long and careful trial. When I went circuit I was frequently appointed to defend or to prosecute this highly-favoured individual; and at one time, to tell you the truth, I cherished the ambition of one day being recorder myself."

"Speaking of our Mayor and Corporation,"

continued Mr. Weyman, "which we have had ever since the time of Edward the Fourth, I am reminded that until a few years ago their annual election was celebrated in rather a remarkable way. The men in the different wards used to take part in a tug-of-war, and the successful ward received the rope as a prize. The Mayor had then to give so much beer money as ransom for the rope."

When we returned to the house which, being unmarried, Mr. Weyman occupies in company with his mother and sister, he explained how it was that his French subjects appealed to him.

"About 1886 I was suffering from weakness of the lungs, and the doctors advised a visit to the South of France. So my brother and I spent some months wandering about

the departments near the Pyrenees. We even crossed the frontier and had a ramble in Spain, going there in the expectation of seeing some fighting brought about by Carlist risings. The risings did not come off, but the disturbance was sufficient to cause us to be more than once arrested by the police on suspicion."

"Indeed!"

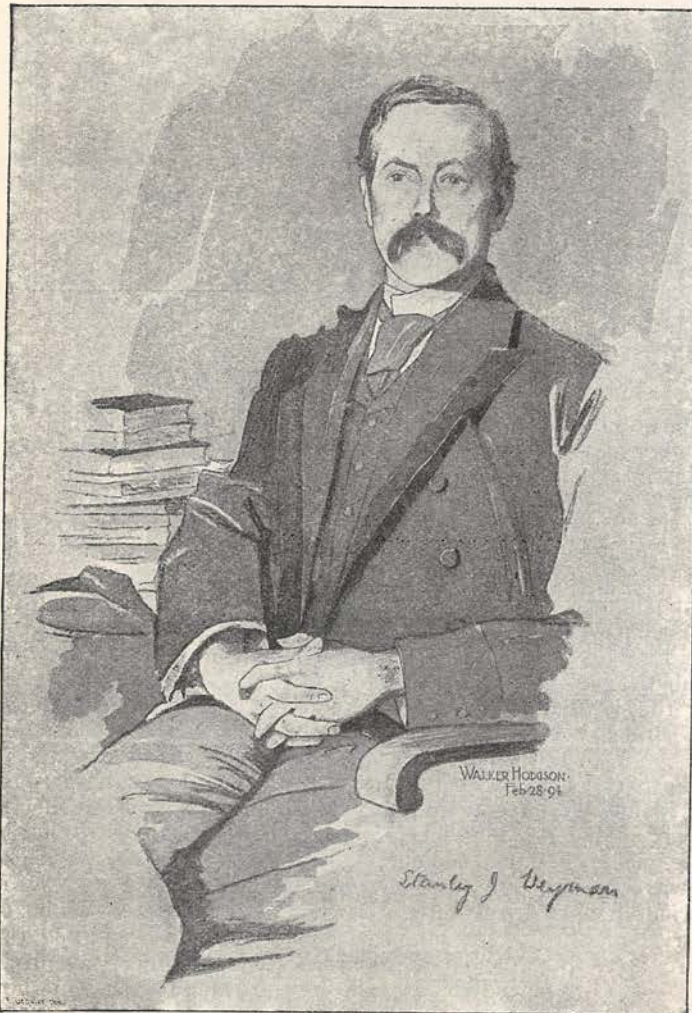
"Oh; but we had a more serious adventure of this kind in France, when we were imprisoned for twenty-four hours in a miserable cell. There were several degrees of frost in the night, and a dirty blanket was the only means of warmth with which we were provided. It was said that we had been 'sketching,' although I assured the officials that I had never sketched in my life. There was no English consul in the place, and we had

to walk nine miles for our case to be heard. I believe we were mistaken for two Swiss who were known to be crossing the frontier for the purpose of taking part in a Carlist conspiracy."

Mr. Weyman now smiles at this experience in his foreign travel, but it is evident, from further particulars he gives me, that at the time, in his then state of health, it was no laughing matter. The readers of "The Gentleman of France" will not less appreciate its delightful sketches of life in bygone times across the Channel when they know that in obtaining his material for them Mr. Weyman really endangered his life.

"In writing 'A Gentleman of France' and 'Under the Red Robe,'" the novelist tells me, "I have derived great assistance, of course, from old memoirs—especially Sully's. I have always been very fond of this class of literature, and have made a fair collection of it for the purposes of my work—getting a good translation, however, whenever possible.

"I consider he has been one of my best friends"—Mr. Weyman points to an old engraved portrait of Henry the Fourth of France, which hangs above the mantel-piece. "Do you



MR. STANLEY WEYMAN.
(A sketch from life by Walker Hodgson.)

notice the strong resemblance it bears to this portrait of Charles the Second, who, as you may remember, was his grandson?"

Among various other interesting things Mr. Weyman has in his room is an old print of Hopton Castle, near Ludlow, the scene of a famous siege in the Civil War.

"My people," says the novelist, in showing it to me, "farmed land in the neighbourhood for generations."

Then Mr. Weyman told me something further about the novel on which he is now engaged.

"It is a story of the Revolution in the rural districts of France—an aspect of the great event which has been comparatively neglected, I think: certainly by novelists. I may write a sequel, however, in which I should bring my hero and heroine as husband and wife to Paris. The difficulty—and it is a considerable one—in writing a novel involving such comparatively recent history is to avoid too much detail. You have to be exact and very accurate; the history of the period has been so fully written that one is obliged to adhere strictly to the actual facts—one is trammelled, indeed, by the facts. On the other hand, if one puts very much historical detail into the book—if one writes fully, say, of the States-General and the National

Convention—it will be cast aside as a history rather than a novel. So, as you may imagine, I have to steer my way very carefully.

"Is this taste for the historical novel going to last, think you? I would very much like to know whether it is ephemeral or enduring. Taste in reading is rather a strange thing, I think. My own has changed very much with the passing of the years. I was always a keen devourer of fiction, but at one time I remember I couldn't read Dickens; now I always find delight in 'Nicholas Nickleby' or the 'Pickwick Papers.' Of living writers, I am fondest of Stevenson and Rudyard Kipling. No, I have been no great student of Dumas—indeed, I have read only five of his books. But Stevenson I call my master—I consider I owe much to him. 'Treasure Island' and 'Kidnapped' I have read half-a-dozen times, and I have no doubt I shall read them again and again. By the way, Mrs. Stevenson has just sent me a charming letter about 'A Gentleman of France.'"

Before leaving Ludlow, I was privileged to read this much-stamped missive from Samoa, in which were quoted a couple of very pretty verses, written by the author of "Treasure Island," and dedicated to the heroine in Mr. Weyman's novel.

FREDERICK DOLMAN.



THE VOICE OF THE CHARMER.

By L. T. MEADE, Author of "The Medicine Lady," &c. &c.

CHAPTER V.—A MASTERFUL MAN.



ERING and his friend were expected in the evening, and Mrs. Fletcher and Margot were busy making preparations. Margot filled the vases with fresh flowers. Mrs. Fletcher moved about from room to room,

putting finishing touches here and there.

Neither Mrs. Fletcher nor Margot was yet sufficiently accustomed to wealth to relegate these little offices to servants. They liked best to give the beautiful rooms their final and finishing touches with their own hands. Patty, as a rule, helped them in these small matters; but Patty was restless to-day, inattentive, dreamy—in short, unlike herself.

Margot felt inclined to quiz her friend about her too apparent excitement. Margot

had never yet been in love with anyone, she did not understand the passion, with its selfish absorption, its power of shutting out from the horizon all other objects except the loved one. As a rule, Patty took chaff very well, but she was in no mood for it to-day.

"Don't," she said, when Margot laughed. She flung down her basket of flowers on the grass, and ran off.

"Almost as if she were cross with me," murmured poor Margot to herself. "I am sure I'd do anything for Patty. The state of being in love is evidently a terrible state. I hope it may never be my fate to love anyone as Patty loves Mr. Ward."

Margot went into the house to talk matters over with her mother. Patty struggled with her emotions as she walked up one of the avenues. She had spent a night of restless misery. The position of affairs was quite enough to distract and confuse a much stronger brain than hers. She kept repeating