



The Shadow of the Sword

Robert Buchanan

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Because a man writes good poetry it does not follow of necessity that he will write good prose; but it is only necessary to recall such names as Milton, Wordsworth, Scott, and Swinburne to remind us that a good poet is likely to be also a master of prose. To these names we may now add Robert Buchanan, who, having proved himself a poet of no mean order, has recently tempted fame in another sphere. Like Scott, Mr. Buchanan had earned a reputation as a poet before employing his pen in different uses, and, like Scott, he has chosen romance as the field of his new efforts. It may even be that, like Scott, his truest talent lies in this direction. But we have no intention of pressing the resemblance further, for nothing can be more unlike than the poetry and romance of Buchanan and those of Scott. Buchanan has a great deal more of the poetic gift than Scott, though his poems will never obtain the popularity of the latter's. We remember to have read some stanzas of Buchanan's on a Skylark which, though widely different in the phase of thought, approach in excellence the divine ode of Shelley's. But to the average reader Buchanan is generally unintelligible; his thoughts are of that introspective sort which pass the understanding of the superficial; and besides, his meaning, after the manner of the modern school of poets, is too often hidden in some obscure metaphor or conceit, or some quaint affectation in expression.

Quite as great is the contrast between a romance of Scott's, such as "The Talisman" or "Ivanhoe," and this story of Buchanan's. The romance of the former is a tribute to chivalry—a picture of war, with its horrors kept entirely in the background—the praise of physical strength and soldierly skill. The heroes of Scott's romances are, like Homer's heroes, knights renowned in war and glorying in the battlefield. "The Shadow of the Sword" is properly called a romance, but in many respects it is as little like what we usually look upon as a romance as can well be imagined. It is a romance, for it abounds in strange and romantic adventure; the incidents are improbable, marvelous; the hero is so idealized that we never expect to see any one like him in real life. But the scene of the story is not laid in camps and battlefields, but in a sequestered Breton village. The people whose fortunes we follow are not courtly knights and ladies, but simple and superstitious rustics. The hero is not a gallant and chivalrous soldier, but a peasant with such a passionate hatred of war that he submits to the imputation of being a coward and a *chouan*, and lives as an outcast, with a price on his head, rather than serve as a conscript under Bonaparte.

The story shows how the ambition of Napoleon influenced for infinite evil the life of a Breton peasant, of whom, or of whose quiet dwelling-place, the great Emperor had probably never heard. Rohan Gwenfern is a daring fowler, dwelling in a little hamlet in Brittany at the time when Bonaparte was spreading war and devastation over Europe. In depicting him the author indulges all the poetic passion for physical beauty; he is a lion in magnificence of form, as well as in strength and courage. But nature has given Rohan a mind above the minds of his fellows, and accident has developed his powers of reflection and the moral side of his character. The two things he most detests in the world are war and the usurper Napoleon. The former he regards with passionate and uncontrollable hatred, as the curse of civilization. He shudders at the thought of shedding human blood: when with a wild and powerful imagination he pictures to himself the horrors of a battlefield, he trembles, and is actually afraid. Bonaparte is to him a bloody tyrant whom no man is called upon to obey, a monster born into the world to fill it with desolation, a Cain whom any one would be justified in slaying....

—*The Canadian Monthly and National Review*, Vol. 11 [1877]

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