

ON IMMURING NUNS WHO HAD BROKEN THEIR VOWS.

By EDWARD PEACOCK, F.S.A., &c.

How much has romance contributed to history as it floats in the popular mind? This is a question easy to ask. To formulate a reply would call for long continued and most intricate investigation.

There are, we imagine, very few articles of historic belief more unhesitatingly accepted by those untrained in modern methods of investigation than the notion that, from some early time in the middle ages down to a period subsequent to the religious changes in the sixteenth century, it was the law, or at least the custom, for the authorities who bore rule in the religious houses of women to put to death nuns who had broken their vows, by enclosing them in cavities of the convent walls, where, deprived of food and air, they must shortly perish. So absolutely certain did this seem that historians, poets, and writers of romance, one and all, have thought that a simple statement of a "fact" so obvious did not require to be supported by evidence. We do not burden our pages, or pause in our rhetoric, to give proof of statements which have never been called in question. Writers seem to have thought it as needless to furnish evidence for immuring, as it would be to prove the Thames an English river, or that Henry VIII. entered into more than one matrimonial contract.

So far as we have been able to make out, the late Ven. Edward Churton, Archdeacon of Cleveland, an accomplished writer on historical and antiquarian subjects, was the first person who called in question that immuring had been in former days a recognised punishment. Somewhere about forty years ago he read a paper before the Yorkshire Architectural Society on the "Penitential Cells and Prisons connected with Monastic Houses." This

paper was printed in a local publication soon after its delivery. It must be evident to all who read it, and more especially to those who had the advantage of personal acquaintance with the author, that he had investigated the question of immuring with great care and the thoroughness which was habitual to him. His testimony is not the less valuable because he took a somewhat darker view than the present writer does of the monastic discipline of the middle ages. The conclusion he had arrived at he stated without reserve. "There never was a time" he said "when it could have been true." This learned clergyman had made a study of monastic statutes, he had probably no English contemporary who was so well versed in a kind of literature then almost universally despised by those who recognised its existence. His studies had produced such absolute conviction in his mind that he said if in a single one of these documents there can be found any indication of such a punishment, or from which such horrors can reasonably be inferred "I will throw up my brief."

It is unfortunate for the cause of historic truth that this learned paper was printed in a local journal, where it attracted little attention. So far as we have been able to ascertain, no single one of the literary organs of the day drew attention to it. In 1889 the present writer published in *The Dublin Review* an article entitled "Were Nuns ever Immured?" and in 1892 the Rev. Herbert Thurston contributed a very valuable paper to *The Month* on the same subject, which we believe has recently been issued in the form of a pamphlet. Beyond these things and a few articles in newspapers, no further attempts to relieve our ancestors from this gross calumny have ever been made.

It is impossible to prove a negative, and very difficult to disprove statements which have absolutely no contemporary evidence in their support. Monks and nuns in the mediæval time, as now, were subject to the same temptations as other people. That they may have sometimes committed murders of this peculiarly atrocious kind is conceivable, though before admitting that they ever did so, we should require a reasonable amount of evidence against them. It must however be borne in

mind that burial alive was legal in some continental states for certain offences, and there is some reason for thinking that in our own land this barbarity was not quite unknown. It is to be feared that at one time thieves were buried alive on the "Thief-downs" near Sandwich.¹ During the last quarter of a century the religious history of the middle ages has been investigated with most praiseworthy ardour by students of very various theological and political proclivities. Had any-one of these zealous workers come on evidence of the practice of immuring in religious houses, we may be quite sure that he would have given his discovery to the world. Putting private murder on one side, for which we have not a shadow of proof, it would be extremely surprising should evidence ever be forthcoming that the authorities of any religious house ever took upon themselves to perpetrate an act of revolting wickedness, which the men of the twelfth century would have shuddered at as much as we do ourselves.

The question may very reasonably be asked, If these stories be not true how has it come to pass that they have been so very widely accepted? It is a natural question, and one which we feel demands an answer. We believe it to be a piece of old-time folk-lore which in the days of fierce politico-religious controversy has been utilized, perhaps unconsciously, for the sake of attack on the religious orders. We know that the Roman vestals who were unfaithful were compelled to descend alive into the tomb. We think, however, that it is more likely that it is a distorted memory of certain hideous customs of our own heathen Teutonic ancestors. It is, we apprehend, quite certain that when an important structure, such as a bridge or a fort, was built human sacrifices were offered.² There is a story that when the castle of Liebenstein was built, a child who had been bought for the purpose from its unnatural mother was built up alive in the foundations³ and there is a similar legend as to the fortifications of Copenhagen.⁴ It is even said that in

¹ G. L. Gomme, *Primitive Folk-Moots*, p. 147.

² Hehn, *Wanderings of Plants and Animals*, Ed. Stallybrass, p. 420.

³ *Academy*, 31 July, 1886, p. 73.

⁴ Andrew Hamilton, *Sixteen months in the Danish Isles*, vol. i, p. 106.

Lincolnshire in the middle ages (a very elastic term) it was the practice to build up in the sea-wall culprits who had caused breaches in the banks.¹ The only witnesses we have met with for this strange statement do not give their authority. It is a thing far too extraordinary to receive without a considerable body of proof.

In the mediæval romances, burial alive for unchastity is sometimes mentioned.² Horrible tales of this character might if needful be greatly multiplied. We have given the foregoing for the purpose of showing, that before the time of the period known as the Reformation, the human mind had been prepared for horrors of this kind. We may further remark that crusaders, pilgrims, and travellers coming back from the East would add to the stock of these grim narratives by importing those of Asiatic and African growth. There seems to be no doubt that from an early period immuring and burial alive have been among the brutalities perpetrated by Oriental tyrants. Mr. C. J. Ellis in his *Land of the Lion and Sun*, tells of robbers who were walled up alive at Shiraz when he was there³ and Abd-er-Raman, the conqueror of Isly is reported, we fear too truly, to have built up living conspirators in the walls of Fez.⁴

Here it must be evident that there was prepared ample ground-work for any amount of fable. In a time of violent religious excitement the transference was easy from fabledom, Teutonic barbarism, and Eastern devilry, to Christian convents. A people who had come to give unlimited credence to writers such as Bale, Becon, and Foxe, were not likely to be critical as to historical evidence.

There can be no doubt that the extreme popularity of this gruesome superstition is due to Sir Walter Scott. He was almost always fair to the men of the past, standing in this respect in most amiable contrast with some so-called historians of our own time, but the most ardent of the admirers of the great creator of modern romance will hardly say that the power of

¹ Miller and Skerchley's *Fenland*, p. 146.

² Ellis's *Metrical Romances*, ed. Bohn, pp. 84-86.

³ pp. 269, 203, 204.

⁴ *Morocco, its People and Places*, by Edmondo de Amicis. Trans. by C. Rolin-Tilton, p. 237. See also Card. Manning's *Pictures of Christian Heroism*, 1855, pp. 181-190.

weighing evidence was a marked characteristic of his genius. The picturesque, alike in the past and the present, appealed so strongly to his vivid imagination that it is unreasonable to blame him for having used for poetic purposes any of those floating wrecks of old traditional lore which he felt would serve him. His mind was far less preoccupied by theological and political prejudices than that of most of his contemporaries, but we may feel sure that on a subject such as this he was not in advance of the educated opinion of his time.

Marmion is probably even now the best known of Sir Walter Scott's romantic poems. If we may accept the testimony of those whose memories stretched back to 1808, when "Marmion, a Tale of Flodden Field" burst upon the world, nearly every one who had learnt to read was to be found poring over its pages, and the dullest of the dull folk, who had never in their lives committed any verse to memory, except a chapel hymn or a hunting song, might be constantly heard even on the most inopportune occasions, quoting long "screeds" of his ballad-like descriptions. Racehorses, lapdogs, and barges were named after the characters, and in violation of the most certain testimony of historians it became an article of faith among the men and women of Lincolnshire, (a superstition by no means extinct even now) that the hero, whose last words were—

"Charge, Chester, charge! On, Stanley, on!"

was a native of the county, who made his home at Scrivelsby, and in the popular mind it seemed a gross assumption for the Dymokes, who had held the manor for ages ere Flodden Field was won, to dispossess the hero of the hour of his local claim on their regard.

Fashions change, the poetry of Sir Walter Scott is, we fear, now suffering a temporary eclipse, but Marmion still holds its own. There are very few educated people of England or America who are not familiar with the plot. As a work of art it is far above any criticism of ours; we are however constrained to say that as a picture of what might have happened, there are certain portions of it as wildly impossible as anything to be found in those dear old romances which first stimulated its creator's muse. The

poet found the story of immuring nuns a vague tradition—a survival, it may well be from heathen times—after the appearance of *Marmion* it became, what it is now, the serious historical conviction of the English-speaking world, a thing no more to be called in question than the manner of death of the Regent Murray, or the execution of the regicides.

Constance de Beverley, the nun, who is a

“Sister profess’d of Fontevraud,”

breaks her vows and follows Lord *Marmion* about the country, dressed in male attire,

“A horse-boy in his train to ride.”

After a time her seducer tires of her. Clara has a fairer face and is moreover the heiress of broad lands, so poor Constance is cast off and handed over to the superiors of her order. So far the story is in harmony with the habits of the time, but after this point we are transported to realms of mythological dreaming. What, in such a case would have been the punishment of the culprit we cannot exactly tell, nothing very severe we imagine, for it must be borne in mind that we are in the year 1513, a period when monastic discipline, according to the testimony of friends as well as foes, did not err on the side of undue severity. The probability is that the extreme punishment that would have been meted out to Constance for her breach of monastic vows would have been a term of imprisonment of a mild character. This interesting young lady had however done something else beyond running away with her lover. She had committed an act which the secular authorities of the Victorian age are in the habit of treating sternly. She tells her judges on her trial, if trial it can be called, that she had employed an ecclesiastic, an apostate like herself, who had undertaken that

“He would to Whitby’s shrine repair,
And by his drugs my rival fair
A saint in heaven should be.”

To determine the fate of these two murderers in intent, though not in act, a Benedictine chapter was held on Holy Island, at which were present the Abbot of Saint

Cuthbert, the Abbess of Whitby, and the Abbess of Tynemouth. The ignorance of monastic life shown in imagining these abbesses judges in a cause involving issues of life and death should be noted as we pass along. They held their chapter in a dim underground vault, built for a penitential abode by an Anglo-Saxon king, but which was then used as a burial-place

“ for such dead,
As having died in mortal sin
Might not be laid the church within.”

Before the judges there stood an iron table, on which there lay a copy of the “statutes” of Saint Benedict. The author does not tell us so, but the uninstructed reader cannot fail to arrive at the conclusion that the Benedictine rule contains some sort of provision, direct or by implication, for the tragedy that followed. Of course we need not say that nothing of the kind is to be found therein. Sir Walter Scott must have known of the rule by name only, yet it is very strange that one so deeply interested in all things mediæval should never have read, or at least turned over the pages of a document which it is hardly an exaggeration to call the text book of western monasticism. Numerous essays and commentaries on the Benedictine rule existed in his day; of these he seems to have been also ignorant. We are spared the trial, but the sentence was that Constance and the “caitiff monk” were to be immured in niches within the vault.

When the great poet drew this terrible picture we are quite sure that he had no notion that he was guilty of grotesque misrepresentation. The note he appended to the passage shows how dense was the fog of ignorance which eighty-five years ago enshrouded all things relating to the middle ages, when the greatest authority on such matters in Britain, if not in Europe, could permit himself to write in the following simple fashion.

“It is well known that the religious who broke their vows of chastity were subjected to the same penalty as the Roman vestals in a similar case. A small niche, sufficient to enclose their bodies, was made in the massive wall of the convent; a slender pittance of food and water was deposited in it, and the awful words *Vade in pace*, were the signal for immuring the criminal. It is not

likely that in latter times this punishment was often resorted to, but among the ruins of Coldingham were some years ago discovered the remains of a female skeleton which, from the shape of the niche and position of the figure, seemed to be that of an immured nun."

No ancient authority is quoted. No law book, conciliar decree, monastic rule, or episcopal injunction is referred to. We have not even a shred of evidence culled from some gossiping chronicler who hated the religious orders. The whole of this terrible indictment on mediæval society rests, for anything we are told to the contrary, on vague rumour, confirmed by the alleged discovery of a skeleton in a wall of one of the religious houses on the Scottish Border. Yet the testimony furnished by Sir Walter's poem and its accompanying note has been reproduced in countless romances, review articles, and essays, from his days to our own. And so the work of making history goes on. One example of this interesting kind of manufacture must suffice. The anonymous author of *The Camp of Refuge*, a book justly popular with the boys and girls of forty years ago, improves on his original, for he makes one of his characters—an abbot—threaten this dire punishment, not for vow-breaking, but for political misdemeanour, and Mr Miller, the author of *Fenland*, who edited a new edition of this work in 1830, so far from entertaining a doubt on the matter, informs his readers in a note

"That the religious (like the Roman vestals) who broke their vows, were immured in a niche." p. 77.

We have not ourselves examined the history of the discovery of the skeleton at Coldingham to which Sir Walter Scott made reference in his note. That task has been however faithfully discharged by the Rev. Herbert Thurston, S. J. From the information that has come down to us it is very doubtful what was the sex of the human being, and the only suggestion that the person was committed alive to the tomb is the fact that sandals of leather furnished with silken lachets were found in proximity to the skeleton. We need not draw the attention of an assembly like the present to the fact that there have been many instances wherein the dead when their graves have been opened have been found to have shoes on their feet.

The difficulties which surround those would-be interpreters of our poets who try to explain what trains of thought have produced this or that series of impressions on the author's mind, which have in time resulted in a finished picture for the delight of succeeding generations, are so great that we should shrink from attempting the task in any case. There is no author except perhaps Shakespeare with whom such a course would be more rash than Sir Walter Scott. His reading was so vast that there are very few of us, we hope, vain enough to think that we can trace his footsteps. It may however be not uninteresting to draw attention to the fact that the *Military Memoirs of Captain George Carleton*, a work the first edition of which appeared in 1738, was familiar to Scott. It has been attributed to De Foe and also to Dean Swift. In our opinion, if by either, the internal evidence is in favour of De Foe. According to Lowndes' *Bibliographer's Manual* (ed. Bohn) Scott edited an edition of this work the year after the publication of *Marmion*. We have read it in Hazlitt's edition of De Foe's works 1841, vol. II. There occurs in this book (p. 36) an account how during the war of the Spanish succession two officers, under the command of the Earl of Peterborough, eloped with two nuns from a convent. The young women, we are told, were captured and "condemned directly to the punishment of immuring," but after great exertions on Lord Peterborough's part, the punishment was first suspended, then withdrawn, as in the end the young women were restored to their places in the convent. A noticeable fact about this Spanish immuring is that it differs in important points from what we hear of in this country. Carleton, or whoever wrote the book, describes the sufferers in such cases as "confined between four narrow walls, only open at the top, and thence to be half supported with bread and water till the offenders gradually starve to death."

Whether this story be true or only one of those romantic touches which the writer has in some other places added for the sake of enlivening what would otherwise have been but a dull narrative of military adventures we are unable to say. If there be even a foundation of truth therein we should imagine that there is some further record of it.

The late Mr. J. R. Planché, in an early work, tells his readers that Heinrich Tuschl, knight of Saldenau, condemned his wife to be immured for unchastity.¹ And Mr. Horace Marryat gives an account of the burying alive of two little beggar children at Gudhem, in Sweden, for the purpose of stopping the ravages of the Black Death.² If this latter atrocity really occurred, we cannot doubt that it was, as the author suggests, a survival of heathenism.

A Provençal ballad referred to by the Countess Evelyn Martinengo-Cesaresco, in her *Essays in the Study of Folk-Songs*, tells of the cruelty of the mother of Guilhem de Beauvoire, who, while her son was engaged in adventures far away from his home, degraded his child-wife into a swine-girl. On the husband's return he discovers the wrong that has been done, and exclaims, "If you were not my mother, I would have you hung; as you are my mother I will wall you up between two walls" (p. 199). The immuring here threatened cannot have been of the kind imagined by Scott, for in that case the punishment would have been greater than hanging, an extreme of violence from which the enraged son shrank; what is no doubt meant is that form of close confinement which has been commented on by Rev. Herbert Thurston in *The Month*.

It is improbable that the story of the immuring of nuns was known of in this country at the time of the religious changes which took place during the sixteenth century. We have carefully examined the exhaustive index to Seeley's edition of *The Acts and Monuments*, of John Foxe, and the late Mr. Henry Gough's *General Index to the Publications of the Parker Society*, and in neither of these carefully executed works of reference have we been able to trace it. A similar remark holds good as to the index to the first fifty volumes of the *Archæologia*, and that of the first twenty-five volumes of the *Journal* of our own body.

¹ *Descent of the Danube* (1828), p. 71.

² *One Year in Sweden* (1862), vol. I., p. 273.