

Working for an Empress

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IN the spring of 1874 I was living in the pretty English town of Leamington, a place that will be remembered by most Americans who have visited the grave of Shakespeare at Stratford-on-Avon, or by personal inspection of the ruins of Kenilworth Castle have verified their knowledge of English history derived from Scott's incomparable romance. I was at that time connected with several London newspapers, among them the *Figaro*, a small weekly publication, semi-humorous, semi-theatrical, with a remarkable aptitude for managing the political affairs of France in the interest of the Imperialists. This last peculiarity it owed to the personal sympathies of its editor and proprietor, Mr. James Mortimer, a gentleman who for some twenty years before the overthrow of the Empire had lived in Paris. Mr. Mortimer had been a personal friend of the Emperor and Empress, and on the flight of the latter to England had rendered her important service; and after the release of the Emperor from captivity among the Germans Mr. Mortimer was a frequent visitor to the imperial exiles at Chiselhurst.

One day at Leamington my London mail brought a letter from Mr. Mortimer, informing me that he intended to publish a new satirical journal, which he wished me to write. I was to do all the writing, he the editing; and it would not be necessary for me to come up to London; I could send manuscript by mail. The new journal was not to appear at stated periods, but "occasionally." Would I submit to him a list of suitable titles for it, from which he could make a selection?

With some surprise at what seemed to me the singularly whimsical and unbusiness-like features of the enterprise I wrote him earnestly advising him either to abandon it or materially to modify his plan. I represented to him that such a journal, so conducted, could not in my judgment succeed; but he was obdurate and after a good deal of correspondence I consented to do all the writing if he was willing to do all the losing money. I submitted a number of names which I thought suitable for the paper, but all were rejected, and he finally wrote that he had decided to call the new journal *The Lantern*. This decision

elicited from me another energetic protest. The title was not original, but obviously borrowed from M. Rochefort's famous journal, *La Lanterne*. True, that publication was dead, and its audacious editor deported to New Caledonia with his Communistic following; but the name could hardly be agreeable to Mr. Mortimer's Imperialist friends, particularly the Empress—the Emperor was then dead. To my surprise Mr. Mortimer not only adhered to his resolution but suggested the propriety of my taking M. Rochefort's late lamented journal as a model for our own. This I flatly declined to do and carried my point; I was delighted to promise, however, that the new paper should resemble the old in one particular: it should be irritatingly disrespectful of existing institutions and exalted personages.

On the 18th of May, 1874, there was published at the corner of St. Bride Street and Shoe Lane, E.C., London, the first number of "*The Lantern*—Appearing Occasionally. Illuminated by Faustin. Price, sixpence." It was a twelve-page paper with four pages of superb illustrations in six colors. I winced when I contemplated its artistic and mechanical excellence, for I knew at what a price that quality had been obtained. A gold mine would be required to maintain that journal, and that journal could by no means ever be itself a gold mine. A copy lies before me as I write and noting it critically I cannot help thinking that the illuminated title-page of this pioneer in the field of chromatic journalism is the finest thing of the kind that ever came from a press.

Of the literary contents I am less qualified for judgment, inasmuch as I wrote every line in the paper. It may perhaps be said without immodesty that the new "candidate for popular favor" was not distinguished by servile flattery of the British character and meek subservience to the British Government, as might perhaps be inferred from the following extract from an article on General Sir Garnet Wolseley, who had just received the thanks of his Sovereign and a munificent reward from Parliament for his successful plundering expedition through Ashantee:

"We feel a comfortable sense of satisfaction in the thought that *The Lantern* will never fail to shed the light of its loyal approval upon any unworthy act by which our country shall

secure an adequate and permanent advantage. When the great heart of England is stirred by quick cupidity to profitable crime, far be it from us to lift our palms in deprecation. In the wrangle for existence nations, equally with individuals, work by diverse means to a common end—the spoiling of the weak; and when by whatever of outrage we have pushed a feeble competitor to the wall, in Heaven’s name let us pin him fast and relieve his pockets of the material good to which, in bestowing it upon him, the bountiful Lord has invited our thieving hand. But these Ashantee women were not worth garroting. Their fallals, precious to them, are worthless to us; the entire loot fetched only £11,000—of which sum the man who brought home the trinkets took a little more than four halves. We submit that with practiced agents in every corner of the world and a watchful government at home this great commercial nation might dispose of its honor to better advantage.”

With the candor of repentance it may now be confessed that, however unscrupulous it may be abroad, a government which tolerates this kind of criticism cannot rightly be charged with tyranny at home.

By way (as I supposed) of gratitude to M. Rochefort for the use of the title of his defunct journal it had been suggested by Mr. Mortimer that he be given a little wholesome admonition here and there in the paper and I had cheerfully complied. M. Rochefort had escaped from New Caledonia some months before. A disagreeable cartoon was devised for his discomfort and he received a number of such delicate attentions as that following, which in the issue of July 15th greeted him on his arrival in England along with his distinguished compatriot, M. Pascal Grousset:

“M. Rochefort is a gentleman who has lost his standing. There have been greater falls than his. Kings before now have become servitors, honest men bandits, thieves communists. Insignificant in his fortunes as in his abilities, M. Rochefort, who was never very high, is not now very low—he has avoided the falsehood of extremes: never quite a count, he is now but half a convict. Having missed the eminence that would have given him calumnation, he is also denied the obscurity that would

bring misconstruction. He is not even a *miserable*; he is a person. It is curious to note how persistently this man has perverted his gifts. With talents that might have corrupted panegyric, he preferred to refine detraction; fitted to disgrace the *salon*, he has elected to adorn the cell; the qualities that would have endeared him to a blackguard he has wasted upon Pascal Grousset.

“As we write, it is reported that this person is in England. It is further affirmed that it is his intention to proceed to Belgium or Switzerland to fight certain journalists who have not had the courtesy to suppress the truth about him, though he never told it of them. We presume, however, this rumor is false; M. Rochefort must retain enough of the knowledge he acquired when he was esteemed a gentleman to be aware that a meeting between him and a journalist is now impossible. This is the more to be regretted, because M. Paul de Cassagnac would have much pleasure in taking M. Rochefort’s life and we in lamenting his fall.

“M. Rochefort, we believe, is already suffering from an unhealed wound. It is his mouth.”

There was a good deal of such “scurril jesting” in the paper, especially in a department called “Prattle.” There were verses on all manner of subjects—mostly the nobility and their works and ways, from the viewpoint of disapproval—and epigrams, generally ill-humorous, like the following, headed “*Novum Organum*”:

“In Bacon see the culminating prime
Of British intellect and British crime.
He died, and Nature, settling his affairs,
Parted his powers among us, his heirs:
To each a pinch of common-sense, for seed,
And, to develop it, a pinch of greed.
Each frugal heir, to make the gift suffice,
Buries the talent to manure the vice.”

When the first issue of *The Lantern* appeared I wrote to Mr. Mortimer, again urging him to modify his plans and alter the character of the journal. He replied that it suited him as it was and he would let me know when to prepare “copy” for the

second number. That eventually appeared on July 15th. I never was instructed to prepare any more copy, and there has been, I believe, no further issue of that interesting sheet as yet.

Taking a retrospective view of this singular venture in journalism, one day, the explanation of the whole matter came to my understanding in the light of a revelation, and was confirmed later by Mr. Mortimer.

In the days when Napoleon III was at the zenith of his glory and power there was a thorn in his side. It was the pen of M. Henri Rochefort, le Comte de Luçay, journalist and communard. Despite fines, "suppressions," and imprisonments, this gifted writer and unscrupulous blackguard had, as every one knows, made incessant war upon the Empire and all its *personnel*. The bitter and unfair attacks of his paper, *La Lanterne*, made life at the Tuilleries exceedingly uncomfortable. His rancor against the Empress was something horrible, and went to the length of denying the legitimacy of the Prince Imperial. His existence was a menace and a terror to the illustrious lady, even when she was in exile at Chiselhurst and he in confinement on the distant island of New Caledonia. When the news of his escape from that penal colony arrived at Chiselhurst the widowed Empress was in despair; and when, on his way to England, he announced his intention of reviving *La Lanterne* in London (of course he dared not cross the borders of France) she was utterly prostrated by the fear of his pitiless animosity. But what could she do? Not prevent the revival of his dreadful newspaper, certainly, but—well, she could send for Mr. Mortimer. That ingenious gentleman was not long at a loss for an expedient that would accomplish what was possible. He shut Rochefort out of London by forestalling him. At the very time when Mortimer was asking me to suggest a suitable name for the new satirical journal he had already registered at Stationers' Hall—that is to say, copyrighted—the title of *The Lantern*, a precaution which M. Rochefort's French friends had neglected to take, although they had expended thousands of pounds in a plant for their venture. Mr. Mortimer cruelly permitted them to go on with their costly preparations, and the first intimation they had that the field was occupied came from the newsdealers selling *The Lantern*. After some futile attempts at relief and

redress, M. Rochefort took himself off and set up his paper in Belgium.

The expenses of *The Lantern*—including a generous *douceur* to myself—were all defrayed by the Empress. She was the sole owner of it and, I was gratified to learn, took so lively an interest in her venture that a special French edition was printed for her private reading. I was told that she especially enjoyed the articles on M. le Comte de Luçay, though I dare say some of the delicate subtleties of their literary style were lost in translation.

Being in London later in the year, I received through Mortimer an invitation to visit the poor lady, *en famille*, at Chiselhurst; but as the iron rules of imperial etiquette, even in exile, required that the hospitable request be made in the form of a “command,” my republican independence took alarm and I had the incivility to disobey; and I still think it a sufficient distinction to be probably the only American journalist who was ever employed by an Empress in so congenial a pursuit as the pursuit of another journalist.