

A GOOD FIGHT

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649273201

A good fight by Charles Reade

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
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THE ORIGINAL VERSION OF

THE CLOISTER AND THE HEARTH

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

ANDREW LANG

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LONDON
HENRY FROWDE

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INTRODUCTION

A Good Fight, by Charles Reade, is here for the first time published as a separate book, with the illustrations; though, with a few changes, *A Good Fight*, as far as chapter xxvii, is represented by the twenty-three first chapters of the author's long novel, *The Cloister and the Hearth*. It is not certain that Reade, when he planned *A Good Fight*, meant it to be a rather short, not a full-blown novel, though his own words convey that impression, as we shall see. In any case, the history of the tale is curious, and carries us back through fifty years, while the source of the outline of the narrative—accepted by Reade as historically true—raises interesting questions.

In 1859, Charles Dickens quarrelled with Messrs. Bradbury & Evans, the publishers of his cheap popular serial, *Household Words*. The feud arose out of Dickens's separation from his wife, and the refusal of Bradbury & Evans to publish, in *Punch*, something which the novelist wanted them to insert. After the rupture, Dickens founded a new popular weekly, *All the Year Round*, and Messrs. Bradbury & Evans brought out '*Once a Week, an Illustrated Miscellany of Literature, Art, Science, and Popular Information*'. As proprietors of *Punch* they were connected with

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the best artists in black and white. Their first number (July 2) opened with a charming vignette and two larger drawings, all full of pretty girls from the pencil of John Leech, in illustration of verses by the very clever Shirley Brooks. Then came popular science, with 'Man among the Mammoths'. It was revealed to the sceptical public that palaeolithic chipped flints really are of ancient human making, as M. Boucher de Perthes had scandalized science by averring, in 1847. But it was not yet admitted that palaeolithic man was what Mr. E. B. Tylor sweetly records of him in verse :

' But the mild anthropologist,—*he's*
 Not *recent* inclined to suppose
 Flints palaeolithic like these,
 Quaternary bones such as those !
 In Rhinoceros, Mammoth, and Co.'s
 First epoch, the Human began
 Theologians all to expose,
 'Tis the *mission* of Primitive Man !'

Once a Week did not think these facts 'absolutely proved' in 1859.

There was, next, in the first number, a snatch from a saga by Sir G. W. Dasent ; an illustration by Tenniel ; an essay on projectiles, from the arrow to the rifle—indicating, *déjà*, distrust in the bayonet ; a poem illustrated by Millais ; and finally *A Good Fight*, by Charles Reade, with the admirable designs of Charles Keene, reproduced in this edition.

The paper continued to be illustrated by the artists

named, and also by Frederick Walker, F. Sandys, M. J. Lawless, H. K. Browne (Phiz), and George du Maurier. But the paper was, in its art, too good for the public, while a novel by Mr. George Meredith (*Evan Harrington*) lowered its circulation, though illustrated by Charles Keene.

The truth is that the novels in *Once a Week* were not what the public liked. *A Good Fight* ended in October, and no long serial (by Mrs. Henry Wood, for example) was ready to follow. This looks as if the close of the story were premature and unexpected: no other novel was ready to take its place.

Reade made *A Good Fight* end happily; the hero and heroine are duly married. He later added, in the proportion of four-fifths, new matter to the tale, and published it as *The Cloister and the Hearth*, which Sir Walter Besant, Mr. Swinburne, and other people, thought a masterpiece in the way of an historical novel. Reade writes, 'I took wider views of the subject, and also felt uneasy at having deviated, *unnecessarily*, from the historical outline of a true story,' which, true or untrue, ended badly; Gerard becoming a priest when he hears, in Italy, a false report of Margaret's death. Their one child, Erasmus, is thus illegitimate.

Now is there any truth at all in this tale about the parents of Erasmus? What is the source of the tale? Reade says: 'There is a musty chronicle' (to the novelist a chronicle is necessarily 'musty'), 'written in tolerable Latin,' and *that* is his source.

Where is that 'chronicle' ; what is its date ; who is its author ? Reade does not tell us ; his public did not want to know ; nobody does know. ' Wanting to know, don't you know ! ' I turned to Mr. Froude, whose work on Erasmus was recommended to me, by a librarian, as ' the best '. Mr. Froude, in his lectures on Erasmus delivered from the Chair of History at Oxford, speaks as if the story were the result of a *Volksetymologie*, a myth invented to explain the name ' Erasmus ' (the right form of the word is ' Erasmius '): ' Legend says that Erasmus was what is called a love-child.' Mr. Froude then gives a summary of the tale as told by Charles Reade. ' It grew up out of tradition when Erasmus had become famous, and his enemies liked to throw a slur upon his parentage. It is perhaps a lie altogether, perhaps only partly a lie. The difficulty is that Erasmus says distinctly that he was a second child, and had a brother three years older than himself.' Where, in what part of his works, Erasmus tells us these facts, Mr. Froude does not say. Now I have a craving for exact references. ' There is no suggestion of any previous marriage ' (of either of Erasmus's parents) ' with another person. The connexion of his father and mother must therefore have been of long continuance. Erasmus's own letters are the only trustworthy authority for his early life.'

Thus Mr. Froude rejects an autobiography attributed to Erasmus, and said to have been entrusted by him to Conrad Goelenius, a friend and a scholar.

An autobiography may be as musty as you please, but an autobiography is not 'a musty chronicle', such as Reade declares to be his source.

I now turned to John Jortin's *Erasmus*, a book of 1758. An historian of 1758, I thought, will not be too high and mighty to give authorities for his statements. Jortin gave plenty, but not one of them, in this part of his book, was either a musty chronicle or an autobiography by Erasmus himself, or a document or MS. contemporary with Erasmus. Jortin *did* refer, but not for the story as told by Reade, to '*Compend. Vit. Erasmi*. He wrote this Compendium himself'.

If he did, Mr. Froude was manifestly unaware of, or was incredulous of the fact. For the story of the loves of Gerard and Margaret, which Jortin tells as Reade does, but with the unhappy *dénouement*, Jortin referred to Bayle,—and how did Bayle get at the deplorable facts ?

This bewildered inquirer, wearied out by the total absence of references in Reade, Froude, and Jortin, turned to Bayle. Now Bayle says that the story of Gerard and Margaret comes from 'a so-called' Life of Erasmus by Erasmus, a Life 'wretchedly written'. Erasmus did not write wretchedly, to do so was not his foible, and if he wrote in Latin, it was necessarily better than the 'tolerable Latin' of Reade's 'musty' (and anonymous) 'chronicle'. Moreover, Bayle names the mother of Erasmus 'Elizabeth', not Margaret (just as one document of Erasmus's time calls his father not Gerard but Roger!) The manuscript of

the Life, entrusted, says Bayle, to Conrad Goclenius, was not published till 1607. I took leave, with Mr. Froude, to doubt every word of the story in this *Compend. Vit. Erasmi*. I did not feel so sure as the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, that Erasmus was illegitimate. But the story, as given by Reade, and in the *Compend. Vit.*, does not seem to me to come, as Mr. Froude says, from the enemies of Erasmus; rather the reverse.

The story, on the other side, seems to be a palliation of a tale that Erasmus was 'a priest's geat'. Gerard became a priest, says the tale, on false information of Margaret's death, *after* he was the father of Erasmus.

There was nothing unusual (in Scotland at least) in priestly concubinage, and if Erasmus had, as he says, an elder brother, that does not necessarily prove that his father and mother were married people. It does disprove the romantic story, if it be true, but we have no evidence at all. Yet, surely, had the story of the illegitimacy of Erasmus—be his father priest or layman—been true, or even alleged to be true, it would appear in the writings of his enemies during his lifetime. They were—every polemist then was—capable of inventing the story, yet it is not quoted from any contemporary.

Thus Reade, as far as I see, need not have been uneasy about the deviation from historical truth in the happy ending of *A Good Fight*. There is no history to be deviated from; and a happy ending is worth much