

BOOK NOTICES.

DANTON.

Danton!—to most of us a mere name that rises in thought along with the guillotine and the Reign of Terror. How many of us have so much as heard his full name? Mirabeau, Marat, Robespierre, St. Just, Camille Desmoulins, Fabre d'Églantine—it was between the last two that Danton stood as they faced the guillotine together—Barere, Brissot, Delacroix, Danton—these are names forever associated with the five most thrilling years of the world's history. In this brief epoch their words and deeds followed in such swift succession that out of the confusion the world at large has caught only the mingled echoes of vengeance and blood. To make any one of these names stand out with distinctness, to show that he had a definite, consistent policy, is a difficult task for the historian and biographer.

This is the task which Mr. A. H. Beesly has successfully attempted in his life of Danton, published by Longmans. The book might better be entitled a Defense of Five Years of Danton's Life; for it consists almost entirely in sifting evidence, and in rebutting the charges that have blackened Danton's fame.

No name in history has been more loathsome reviled. His very features have been made the butt of scorn. Some have written of him as though he were a beast and hardly human. "I looked," wrote Madame Roland, "at this repulsive and horrible face. . . I have never seen anything so absolutely the incarnation of brutal passion and astounding audacity." Madame Roland liked handsome men in her salon, and Danton cared neither for her nor for her salon. But, in spite of Madame's opinion, he had true affections, as the following will show.

Arcis was Danton's birthplace and home-place. His father-in-law had a house at Sevres, which Danton liked to visit. Mme. Danton was probably on a visit to her father at Sevres when she received this brief note, which we translate freely, as follows: "The messenger who brought me your letter, my dear Gabrielle, is to start at once, and I have only a moment to tell you how glad I was to get news from you. Don't forget to see about sending my trees to Arcis, and about getting your father to hasten the preparation of my room in his house at Sevres. A thousand kisses to my dear little Danton." Not much, and yet it came out of Paris during the Reign of Terror. The foremost man in the midst of it all could still be thinking of trees! Danton loved trees, loved the country, loved his family, loved the quiet fireside of home.

Here is the tragedy of his life; he loved peace and even ease, and yet fate and his hatred of oppression led him into bloody turmoil; he loved order and system, and yet fate and his hatred of the old order led him into dire disorder. It was the effort to get some sort of peace and order out of the confusion of the Revolution, of which he himself was a large part, that brought his neck to the guillotine, a victim of the jealousy, spite and insanity that filled the air.

Georges Jacques Danton was born in 1759. His father was a country lawyer of moderate means. The boy was duly put to school, and was distinguished for originality and independence. He chose law as his profession, and in 1780, when he was about 21 years of age, we find him in Paris, doing clerical work in a law office. After a few years he was called to the bar, and soon began to make headway and reputation in his profession. So he might have continued, and in course of time might have prospered sufficiently to return to his country tastes and spend a happy old age planting trees at Arcis.

See! dis alter visum—the gods would have it otherwise. The young lawyer had seen beyond the limits of the courts of law, and had been impelled to turn his mind to thoughts of larger problems than lay within the routine of his profession. All that we now read of the injustice, the oppression, the degradation and the utter neglect, suffered by the masses of the French peasants and workmen during the reign of Louis XVI., Danton saw with his own eyes. There are hints that even as a schoolboy he had radical feelings of revolt against the haughty injustice that he saw around him; and from his earliest public utterances it is evident that he had a genuine hate for the system of government that fostered at once all the extravagances of luxury and all the direst privations of poverty. To see an ostentatious nobility reveling in the pride of exorbitant wealth, and the masses of the people, half-fed, half-clothed, cunningly robbed by every device of taxation, this so-called government Danton saw to be a thing of evil, and as such he hated it. And so in 1789, as president of a political club, the young lawyer stepped upon the revolutionary scene.

The details of his advancement, by which, with his giant intellect and indomitable will, he became within a year or two the central figure of the drama, we need not pause here to relate. We shall rather find instruction in inquiring what were his principles of action, and why it was that within five years, almost to the day, from the time of his election as president of the Cordeliers District, that is, in April, 1793, he bowed his head to the guillotine in April, 1794.

There are two keys to Danton's character, love of justice and love of order. Love of justice brought him into the Revolution; love of order brought him to the guillotine. Let us add one other characteristic: he was more of a practical man than a dreamer. He was willing to move step by step, and not to expect a political and social millennium over night.

First it must be understood that Danton saw and detested existing conditions. In no uncertain tones he thundered to the privileged classes that they must disgorge their unjust privileges of public plunder. "One party in France," he said, "hates all liberty, all equality, all constitutions, and deserves all the ills which would have crushed it as it would like to crush the nation. With it I hold no parley. My one wish is to fight it to the death." Furthermore he saw, by the time he came on the scene, that the Revolution was on its way; and he was even ready to say that "if a choice had to be made between one of two evils, the license of liberty was preferable to a recrudescence of slavery." At the same time all his words and acts showed that he regretted avoidable license, while he saw that many excesses were inevitable. "I will say," he said, "and every eyewitness of those dreadful events will say, too, that no human power was in condition to dam the tide of popular vengeance."

Next we must understand that, the king being killed and the revolutionary party being in power, Danton's great object was to restore order and get a constitutional government established on a basis of justice and equal rights and with as few extreme measures as his wild associates would permit. In questions that were not vital he seems always to have been tolerant. For instance, while he himself had no use for priests, and said "the reign of the priests is passed", yet he opposed the reduction of the salaries of the clergy, saying that the peasants should not be deprived of the spiritual sustenance to which they were accustomed. In a word, he wanted to do what good sense and the immediate welfare of the people demanded, and no more. In one of his great speeches he said, "To apply precipitately philosophical principles which personally I hold dear would be to turn France topsy-turvy.

The people, especially the country people, are not ready for them." He was persistent in urging every measure that would tend to peace and enlightenment. "The children of the poor," he said, "should be educated at the expense of the state. Next to bread education is the people's first necessity." He wanted a republic with equal laws, equal chances of education, and equal opportunities of earning bread. He wanted a general amnesty, and the establishment of a normal government that would foster trade and industry.

But here Danton stopped. He was not a state socialist; his ideal of justice did not lead him to that. He was not an anarchist; his love of order did not permit it. So here was his fall, and here the fall of the Revolution. Many of the leaders of the Revolution, while not knowing these exact terms, were either extreme socialists or anarchists. Others, in wiliness and blindness, did not know what they wanted. Few were practical and moderate enough to adopt simple measures of order and justice.

At last Danton saw that his efforts were in vain and that the extremists would brush him out of their way. He protested against the farce trial by which he was condemned, but he accepted the inevitable with the bravery that became the "athletes of the Revolution." Many of his remarks at the time of his imprisonment, trial and execution have been preserved:

"I leave," he said, "everything in a frightful welter. Not one of them has the smallest idea of governing."

"My life! I am weary of it. I long to be quit of it. Our work is done; let us take our rest."

"My assassins will not long survive me."

It is said that during the few days of imprisonment he talked constantly of trees and life in the country.

When he and his doomed friends were standing on the scaffold, as the first of the victims was being led forward by the executioner's men, he tried to kiss Danton, but was prevented. "Fools," said Danton, "you cannot hinder our heads from meeting in the basket presently!" Danton was the last. He stood there and saw his friends die one by one, saying to each, as he passed, some word of consolation. Narrators report that it was near sunset of "a lovely evening of a lovely Spring," and that "the lilacs on the terraces of the Tuileries were in full blossom." Danton was still young, not quite thirty-five.

Ninety-seven years later, in 1891, his statue was unveiled near his boyhood home in Arcis. "It stands there," says his biographer, "bold and commanding as the man was in life, with one hand raised and the lips seeming still to speak." Could they speak, we fancy they would be saying to each generation of those who profess to love freedom, equality and brotherhood some such words as these: Learn the lesson that we taught from the platform of the guillotine. Do not separate yourselves into hopeless factions. Do not follow after flickering will-o'-the-wisps. Be reasonable. Unite, and follow where sober judgment shows any firm foothold on the road to justice.

J. H. DILLARD.

PERIODICALS.

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