

STORIES ABOUT MEN.

THE PART PLAYED BY ANECDOTES OF BIG MEN IN HISTORY.

Many Times an Incident Interesting in itself is Inharmonious because it may not be characteristic of the Man About Whom the Story is Told.

There is a story going the rounds of the newspapers to the effect that during the siege of Petersburg General Lee turned aside from his grave duties and dangers of his position to pick up and replace on the limb of a tree a nest full of young birds that had been knocked down by a Federal shell. A similar story has been told of Lincoln to illustrate his tenderness of heart, and the probability is that the fable originated away back in the early dawn of civilization. It is mostly so with the anecdotes which figure in the history of great men and events. When they are not borrowed from the ancients and handed down through successive generations they are manufactured by skillful writers to suit particular characters and occasions. We may be quite sure that General Lee never paused in the course of a battle to look after distressed birds. He was a man of fine feeling undoubtedly, but it does not follow that he was in the habit of making himself sentimentally absurd.

The story, in short, is not characteristic, and so it has no historical value. A distinguished man's fame is harmed rather than helped when he is thus represented as manifesting himself in an illogical and improbable manner. It would be easy to believe of Lee that he stooped to ease the pain of a wounded soldier or that he gave his rations to a hungry prisoner, but it is not reasonable to suppose that his instinct of sympathy betrayed him into the girlish act which this story attributes to him. And thus it is with hundreds of other anecdotes that are used to impart an enlivening favor to the dreariness of history.

The anecdote is a desirable thing in works which are intended to convey a vivid impression of historical occurrences or celebrated personalities, but it needs to be employed judiciously and with a rational sense of fitness. There is no advantage gained when such matter is introduced for the mere purpose of giving variety where there would otherwise be monotony. The anecdote's prosperity lies in its adaptability to the character that is being portrayed and its service as a striking illustration of an individual trait or tendency. We often get a better idea of a man from some simple story of his denoting tastes or caprices than from the labored accounts of his more important proceedings, but the story must be carefully adapted to the logic of the man's life and the salient facts of his career, or its intention will be defeated.

The best historians and biographers understand this and are accordingly as painstaking and solicitous in the case of an anecdote as in that of a problem of serious interest. They do not tell stories of that sort for superficial effect or to quicken the reader's flagging attention, but to emphasize a given characteristic and to fill a practical want in the way of description or analysis. The anecdote supplements and illuminates the heavier features of the narrative. It is used with discrimination and not in a light and promiscuous manner. The picture would not be complete without it. The character would be dim and distant in the absence of such aid to the appreciation of governing motives and peculiarities.

It is not really essential that anecdotes thus employed shall be literally true. Some of the best of them are pure inventions, which have the rare merit of being well imagined. A story that has a reasonable degree of probability and that can be credited consistently with what is known of the general qualities of a character is useful even when it is not positively accurate. There are some fictions of that kind which are worth more in their way than many ponderous and tiresome facts. All of the great figures in history owe something to these convenient fables. They are identified with certain anecdotes that keep them in easy remembrance and that enable us to make close acquaintance with them. But the anecdotes must have the virtue of plausibility, or they will not answer the purpose.

Unless they represent things which might have happened without contradiction of the character to which they relate there is no justification for them, and they are a reproach to the writer who uses them as well as a damage to himself. The philosophy of the matter is all contained in the statement that great men, like small ones, are expected to be true to the laws of their lives. Anecdotes which come within this rule are historically valuable, whether strictly true or only products of fancy, and those which fall outside of it are silly and mischievous, regardless of the reputation of the author or the purpose of the deception.—St. Louis Globe-Democrat.

Nature's Protection For Unripe Fruit.
For protection from the animal world immature fruits have developed a number of interesting devices. Almost universally "green" fruits so harmonize with surrounding color as to escape detection. In fact, the hazel nut is enveloped in a leafy coat which renders it inconspicuous. The nutritious albumen of the seed is often fortified by such impenetrable shells as those of the coconut and others. Perhaps there is a formidable armament of prickles, as in the chestnut, or stinging hairs, as in the case with some peels.

Characteristic of immature fruits are disagreeable taste and consistence. Compare an unripe peach, sour and stringy, with the same fruit in its luscious maturity. But all these contrivances fail to repel certain enemies of growing fruits. The apple's inconspicuousness, toughness and sourness are of little avail against the young progeny of the genus homo.—J. W. Folsom in Popular Science Monthly.

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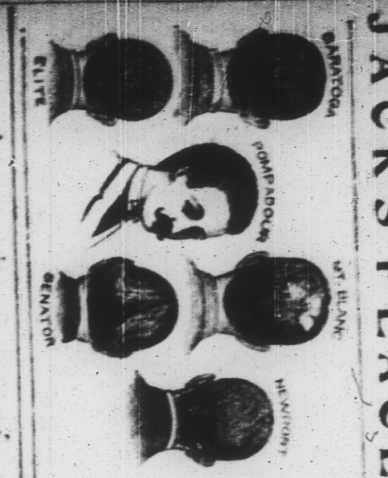
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