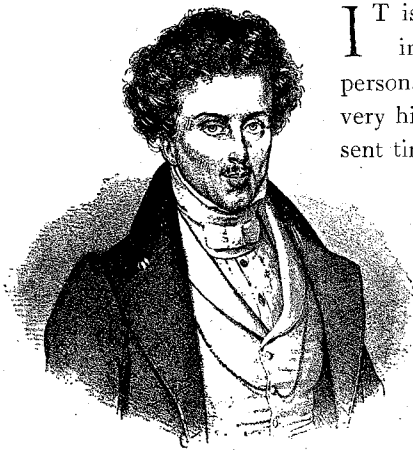


The Reader.

ALEXANDRE DUMAS.

By G. K. CHESTERTON.



ALEXANDRE DUMAS, AGED 29 YEARS.

Lithograph by Maurin, 1833.
(Reproduced from "The Black Tulip," by kind permission of Mr. William Heinemann.)

IT is in the nature of things impossible that Dumas' personal character should stand very high, especially at the present time. No one at any time could call him, by the greatest stretch of language, a good man, and it so happens that in the present period of artistic criticism those who might sympathise with him in the levity with which he regarded morals, are filled with horror at the levity with which he regarded literature. He at least was a consistent profligate. He was not in the strict sense an honest man, and he was not what is now so much more admired, "a conscientious artist." He held himself free for his own pleasure to do bad actions, and he held himself free for his own pleasure to write bad books. He had not, like so many of our younger aesthetes, merely exchanged the large bondage of ethics for the small bondage of aesthetics.

The whole of Dumas' work and character must remain quite unintelligible unless we grasp this fact of his indiffer-



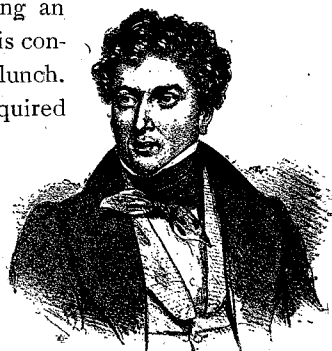
ALEXANDRE DUMAS.

"Again we see him, draped in a great cloak, tossed over his left shoulder haughtily; his mouth pouting a little under the soft moustache, bespeaks defiance and disdain. . . . It is one of the most lifelike of the portraits of the author of 'Les Trois Mousquetaires,' at the flood-tide of his success."—"Portrait Notes," by Octave Uzanne.

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ence to the literary virtues. For example, there is now, I believe, very little doubt that Dumas did really employ a whole staff of pupils or secretaries to write whole passages in his voluminous works. There is more to be said for the proceeding than appears at first sight. Undoubtedly, the same thing was done by the great masters of painting, who set their disciples to work upon their backgrounds; and is still done by sculptors, who employ workmen upon the details of a group of statuary. But the more cogent and essential point of the matter is that nothing could better illustrate the difference between the reckless professionalism of Dumas and the worried and careful craftsmanship which is demanded from all artists in our day, quite apart from morality in any other respect. It would be difficult to imagine Mr. Henry James leaving an intelligent clerk to finish one of his conversations while he went out to lunch. Reliable evidence would be required to persuade us that Mr. W. B. Yeats gives out his manuscripts for completion to needy young men in the British Museum. But if Alexandre Dumas did do this we may be perfectly certain that he did it with complete cheerfulness, and as the phrase goes, "without turning a hair." He might be called a great borrower, a borrower who had brought borrowing to a fine art. He was the kind of man who will borrow money from his valet, and ideas from his private secretary. But he would, in fact, borrow from anybody if he were driven to it, even from history or from Shakespeare. This indifference to indebtedness, this disdain of originality, cannot but appear contemptible to the current artistic spirit. But, paradoxical as it may appear, there is a great deal about it that is not at all contemptible, that is great, that is even classic, in a classic tradition.

The ethics of imitation in the arts are a matter which requires a great deal more clearing up than is commonly supposed. Plagiarism is with us the most abject of all literary attributes, an act which contrives to confess at the same moment stupidity and immorality. But marking plagiarism lowest in the scale of mean things, and kicking the plagiarist about like a football, leaves untouched one very strange and very solid historical fact—the fact that the great majority of the very greatest men in the history of the arts have been brazen and systematic plagiarists. What is the use of convicting some wretched youthful author before a horrified tribunal of having taken the idea for a novel from some comparatively obscure story by Flaubert or Pierre Loti, when he has it in his power to point out that Shakespeare was as ready to pick up old plots as a rag and bone mer-



ALEXANDRE DUMAS, ABOUT 1836.

"Biographie des hommes du jour" of Saru and Saint-Edme.

"In this picture, Alexandre Dumas has been fined down, sand-papered, rubbed up with chamois leather: a 'got-up' figure for the smart society folk."—"Portrait Notes," by Octave Uzanne.

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chant to pick up old clothes? What is the use of publicly insulting a painter, by telling him that he copied the posture of one of his figures from Poussin, when art critics are at that very moment engaged discussing whether Poussin copied it from Raphael, and whether Raphael copied it

The idea of originality like a good many other of the bold, wild, breezy ideas of which Mr. Henley and his School are so fond nowadays, would seem to be almost entirely a modern idea, an idea belonging to the age of silk hats and over-education. Homer was not original in the Aubrey



From Photo by]

ALEXANDRE DUMAS, 1802-1902.

[Nadar.

from Perugino? Why should the modern artist dread above all things a disposition to steal from a set of celebrities, who liked above all things the chance of something good to steal? Why should modern criticism be founded upon this overwhelming and stringent reverence for the private property left behind by a race of highwaymen?

Beardsley sense, Dante was not original, Raphael was not original, Spenser was not original; none of the great men were original. They lived in a great tradition of literature. They conceived that they had a claim upon all the wisdom of the world, an intellectual communism. A theme was with them something of what a song is to singers, or a piece



ALEXANDRE DUMAS IN 1840.
After a Lithograph by Maurin.

"The eyes look upward, the expression of the mouth is grave: this is Dumas the man of sentiment and poetry."—"Portrait Notes," by Octave Uzanne.
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and how great a difference it made. Imagine what the state of things would be if anyone, anywhere, might

write the story of "Diana of the Crossways" over again, not as a parody, not merely as an exercise, not with any change of style or concealment of origin, but simply because he thought he could do it better or as well. Conceive the situation if the first thing that a rising young poet published was almost invariably a reconstruction of "The Ring and the Book." The change is very great, and it is not quite so obviously for the good as most people have supposed. People are very fond of discussing what is the cause of the comparative dwindling of literary greatness in our time. It may be after all that literature is dying of originality and starving from lack of plagiarism. It may be that if we wish to build high we

must build more in concert. It may be that if we wish to retain the liberty of elves we must retain their stature.

And Dumas had undoubtedly about him this loose and

of music to pianists, a thing which anyone might have a try at; consequently, certain themes like the theme of the rescue of the lady by the knight; Andromeda, by Perseus; Angelica, by Rugiero; Serena, by Calapen, became living and traditional things, handed on from generation to generation, and continually reshaped and developed. It is very difficult for a modern person to understand what this situation was

dubious greatness. That he did regard the great material of romance as belonging to nobody in particular and everyone in general, just as it was regarded at many of the great crises of literary triumph. Boccaccio, in the splendid springtime of Europe, would no more have called Chaucer a plagiarist for retelling one of his stories, than one bishop would have called another bishop a plagiarist for wearing a mitre. Just as there was a common stock of religion, of heraldry, of military etiquette, so there was a common stock of literature. Again, in the Elizabethan era, we find the dramatists, the most remarkable minds of the age, living frankly, and almost grossly, the life of rag-pickers; borrowing plays, lending plays, abandoning their own plays, hacking about other people's plays, until so much confusion has arisen about which poet produced which masterpiece, that the less sane people of our own day have even been able to



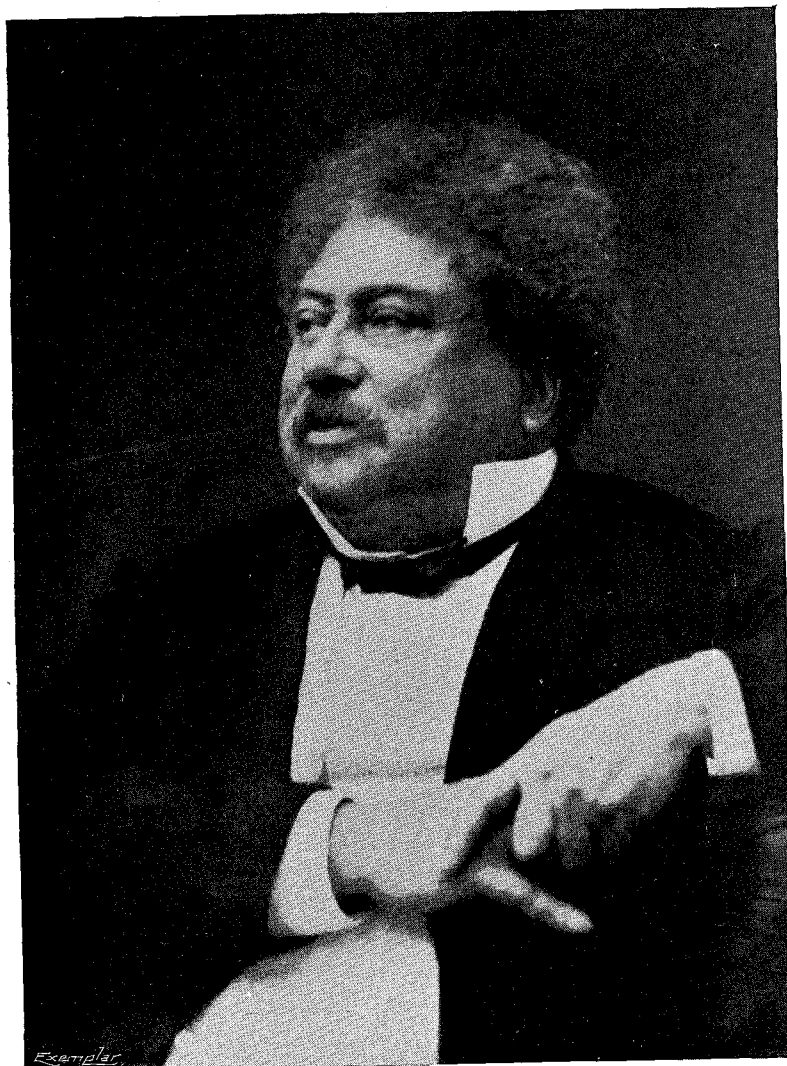
ALEXANDRE DUMAS
PERE, ABOUT 1870.

(Reproduced from "The Black Tulip," by kind permission of Mr. William Heinemann.)

maintain a theory that all the plays were written secretly by the Lord Chief Justice. That darkness, that confusion, that flinging away of a man's own work, that stealing of other men's work, that indifference at the same time to one's own honesty, and to one's own glory, is a life-like picture and prototype of the atmosphere in which Dumas lived. It was an atmosphere which would be perfectly impossible to the modern man of letters, who thinks literature the most important thing in the world. The greatest literary works that English history has seen were produced by people who, in their poverty, and exuberance, and will to live may be said to have despised literature.

Dumas' fame is

wrapped in similar clouds to those which wrap the fame of about half of the great Elizabethans. Nobody is quite certain that any idea that Dumas presented was



A PORTRAIT OF ALEXANDRE DUMAS.

"From 1868 onwards, the portraits of the elder Dumas literally swarm. Hundreds of them are to be found in the illustrated periodicals and magazines: a good-sized album would hardly suffice to hold a complete series of the pictures which this big, curly-headed, jovial, laughter-loving man inspired his contemporaries to produce."—"Portrait Notes," by Octave Uzanne.

Rischgitz Collection.

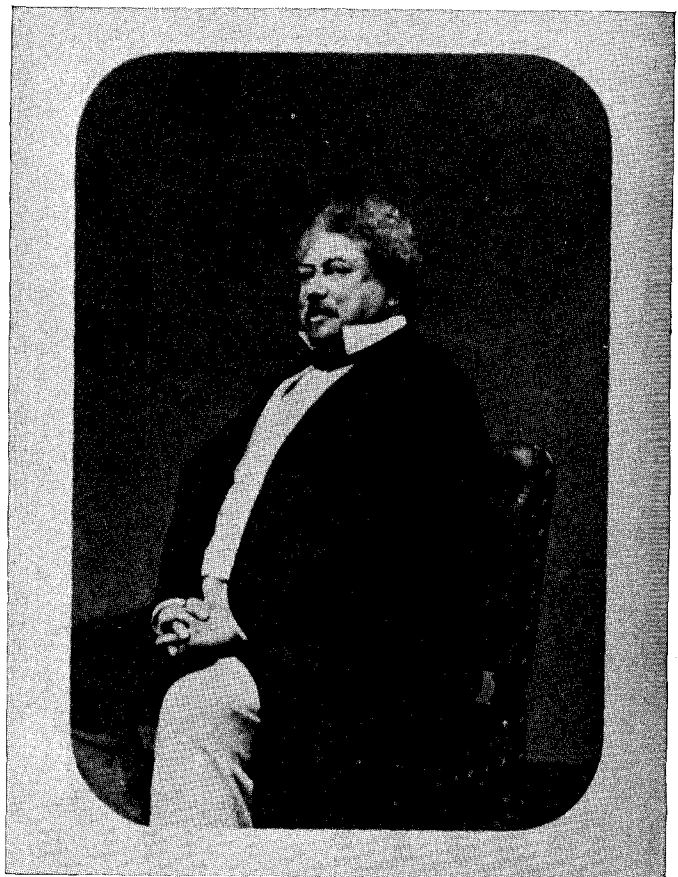


ALEXANDRE DUMAS ABOUT 1870.
Rischgitz Collection.

invented by him. Nobody is quite certain that any line that Dumas published was written by him. But for all that, we know that Dumas was, and must have been, a great man. There are some people who think this kind of doubt clinging to every specific detail does really invalidate the intellectual certainty of the whole. They think that when we are in the presence of a mass that is confessedly solid and inimitable, we must refrain from admiring that mass until we have decided what parts of it are authentic; where the fictitious begins and where the genuine leaves off. Thus, they say that because the books of the New Testament may have been tampered with, we know not to what extent, we must therefore surrender altogether a series of utterances which every rational person has admitted to strike the deepest note of the human spirit. They might as well say that because Vesuvius is surrounded by sloping meadows, and because no one can say exactly where the plain leaves off and the mountain begins, therefore there is no mountain of Vesuvius at all, but a beautiful uninterrupted plain on the spot where it is popularly supposed to stand. Most reasonable people agree that it is possible to see through whatever mists of misrepresentations, that an intellectual marvel has occurred. Most people agree that, whatever may be the interpolations, an intellectual marvel occurred which produced the Gospels. To descend to smaller things, most people agree, that whatever lending and stealing confused the Elizabethan age, an intellectual marvel occurred which produced the Elizabethan drama. And to descend to things yet smaller again, most people agree that whatever have been the sins, the evasions, the thefts, the plagiarism, the hackwork, the brazen idleness of the author, an intellectual miracle occurred which produced the novels of Dumas.

In novels of this kind, novels produced in such immeasurable quantities, of such prodigious length, and marked throughout with its haste of production and dubiety of authorship, it is, indeed, impossible that we should find that

particular order of literary merit which marks so much of the work that is now produced, and is so much demanded by modern critics; the merit of exact verbal finish and the precision of the *mot juste*. Stevenson would have lain awake at night wondering whether in describing the death of a marquis in a duel, he should describe a sword as glittering or gleaming, or speak of the stricken man staggering back or reeling back. Dumas could not, in the nature of things have troubled his head about such points as that, so long as somebody killed the marquis for him at a moderate figure. All technical gusto, the whole of that abstract lust for words which separates the literary man from the mere thinker, were certain, through the facts of the case, to fade more or less out of Dumas. The supreme element of greatness in him was what may be called *ἀρχιτεκτονική*—the power of massing a building. He was a great architect, and stands among his hired scribblers like Sir Christopher Wren among the masons at work upon St. Paul's. The idea that he did actually publish books written in detail by others is very much borne out by the fact that nothing is more noticeable in his work than that its talent is chiefly shown in the planning of an incident or a series of incidents. Without going into any of the actual examples, we can, ourselves, imagine the class of eventualities which are the glory of Dumas' romances; and we can imagine Dumas planning them out as a general plans a campaign. We can imagine him telling a secretary as he went out for the day that the two cavaliers were to go to six inns one after another, and find in each a huge banquet prepared for them by an unknown benefactor, or a man in a mask seeking to fix a quarrel upon them. We can imagine him scribbling on a loose piece of paper a list of six Royal Princes, each of whom in succession was to be summoned by the King to assist him against an assassin,



ALEXANDRE DUMAS PÈRE.
Rischgitz Collection.

and each of whom in turn was to turn his sword against the King. It was in this dramatic sequence that Dumas was greatest and most readable; he excelled in a kind of systematic disaster, and a kind of orderly crime. He was, after all, a Frenchman in more ways than one, and with all his violence, worldliness, and appetite, there remains in his work something fundamentally logical. The man who made the finest scenes in his romantic writings turn on tangles of relationship, like the triple duel which opens "The Three Musketeers," had almost the mind of a mathematician.

This structural, systematic, almost numerical method of Dumas is really important as throwing some light on the conditions which produce romance so popular and so great as his. There is a very general notion in existence that romance depends upon the unexpected. This is altogether an error: romance depends upon the expected. Unless the elements already existing in the story point to and hint at, more or less darkly, but more or less inevitably, the thing that is to follow, the mere brute occurrence of that thing, without rhyme or reason, does not either excite or entertain us. The theory that romance depends upon the unexpected could, of course, be easily refuted by a *reductio ad absurdum*. Nothing in the world is so difficult as to catch and put into printed words the true spirit of romance; but nothing in the world could be so easy as to introduce into a story something that was unexpected. Anybody could make a mad bull enter the drawing-room in the middle of one of Miss Fowler's epigrammatic conversations, or make one of Mr. W. W. Jacobs' stories end abruptly with the blowing of the

trump of the Resurrection. Nothing could be more unexpected than these things would be; but they would not excite us; they would bore us like the conversational rambling of an idiot in a cell. Romance depends, if not absolutely upon the expected, at least upon something that may

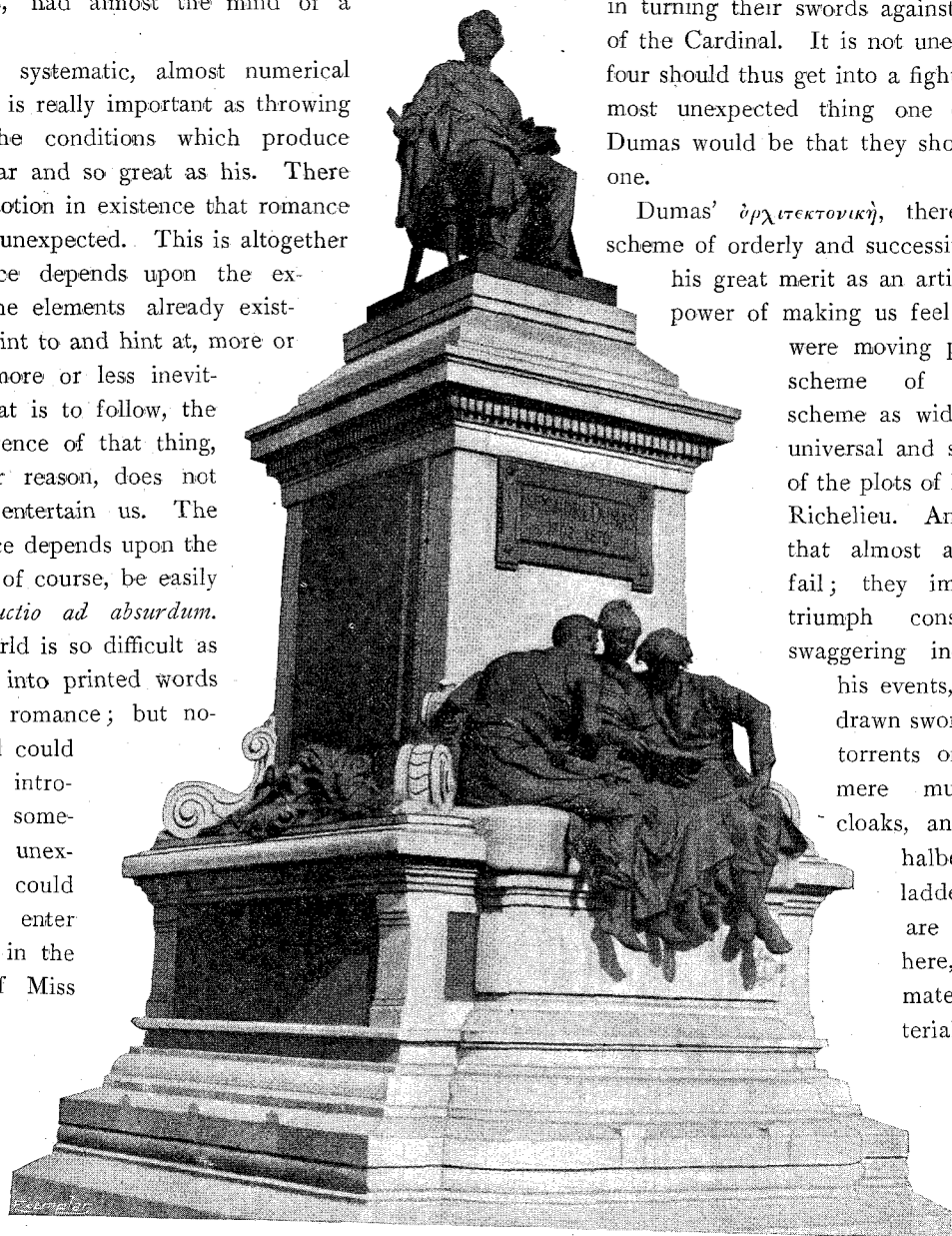
be called the half-expected. The true romantic ending is something that has been prophesied by our sub-consciousness. We feel the spirit of romance when Ulysses springs upon the table, his rags falling from him, and shoots Antinous in the throat. It would be much more unexpected, if that were all, if he turned three somersaults in the air and announced that he was only Ulysses' ship's carpenter, playing a practical joke. Similarly, we feel the spirit of romance when D'Artagnan joins his three adversaries in turning their swords against the musketeers of the Cardinal. It is not unexpected that the four should thus get into a fight together. The most unexpected thing one can imagine in Dumas would be that they should not get into one.

Dumas' *ὁρχηστρικὴ*, therefore, his large scheme of orderly and successive adventures, is his great merit as an artist. He had the power of making us feel that his heroes

were moving parts of a great scheme of adventures, a scheme as wide, as politic, as universal and sagacious as one of the plots of his own Cardinal Richelieu. And it is in this that almost all his imitators fail; they imagine that his triumph consisted in the swaggering inconsequence of his events, in innumerable drawn swords; in ceaseless torrents of blood, in the mere multiplication of cloaks, and feathers, and halberds, and rope ladders. These things are not romance; here, as everywhere, materials and materialism mislead us.

Dumas was a great romanticist because he had the sense of something solid and eternal in old

valour, in old manners, in old friends. But a mere drawn sword is no more poetical than a pocket-knife. A mere dead man is not in any sense so dramatic as a living one. Men that find no romance in life will certainly find none in death.



STATUE OF ALEXANDRE DUMAS.
By Gustave Doré.
Rischgitz Collection.

VERY FINE OLD PORT.*

By W. PETT RIDGE.

THE really humorous writers in England can be numbered on one hand without troubling the thumb. You mention the names of Mr. Anstey, Mr. Jerome K.

* "At Sunwich Port." By W. W. Jacobs. 6s. (Newnes.)

Jerome, Mr. Barry Pain, and when the name of the writer of the book before me has been given, there is an end of the list. Plenty of us can write in a light-hearted way when it does not rain, and we are feeling pretty well, but we have no