

ARTICLE

## THE STORY

*Of How I Came To Translate Eugene Sue's  
"The History of a Proletarian Family Across The Ages."*

*By Daniel De Leon.*

**N**OW that the English translation of the nineteenth and last of the series of historic novels, that Eugene Sue wrote under the collective name of *The History of a Proletarian Family Across the Ages*, is finally out, and the set is now complete, it is in order to answer the many questions that have been coming in to me since 1904, when the first of the stories which I translated was published. The answer to these questions is the story of how I came to translate that lengthy work. The story will I hope, not merely gratify curiosity. I hope it will also stimulate the desire to read, to study, and thereby to appropriate the majestic series of historic lessons which Sue presents in the majestic garb of history.

When, in 1897, I became acquainted with this great work of Sue's, the astonishment I experienced reminded me of my astonishment twenty-three years before, when I discovered that Robinson Crusoe was not the only, nor the most important of DeFoe's works. Down to 1897 I knew of Sue only the *Mysteries of Paris* and the *Wandering Jew*, also some choice extracts from his pen on the "Seven Capital Sins," which made part of the French anthology that we read at college.

After I read the *History of a Proletarian Family* I made no doubt that such a work—so free from the melodrama of the *Wandering Jew*; so well jointed, in contrast with the *Mysteries of Paris*; so graphic and compendious as a universal history, not in chronology only, but in philosophy as well, and yet so poetic in its conception—must surely have been put into English. Never having come across any such translation, the worst that I expected to find was that the work was out of print. That did not frighten me. Another great work, and that by an American,—Lewis H. Morgan's *Ancient Society*—had also been out of print; but the

Socialist Labor Party created such a demand for it, that its original publishers felt encouraged to republish it, and now it can be had easily. Why should not the S.L.P. create a demand also for this work of Sue's, and, if out of print, induce its republication?

With these purposes in mind I started to rummage the libraries. What I discovered was sickening. In the translator's preface to the first story of the series I have stated the facts in the case. To condense them—though translated into other languages, there was no English translation of the whole work; attempts to translate it were nipped in the bud; even the fragmentary translations that had appeared were hopelessly out of print. The conspiracy against the work was obvious.

My endeavors now took a new turn. I tried to find a publisher—clever enough to appreciate the value of such a work in the English language, and public spirited enough to undertake the work. I found one—but, his condition was that I be the translator, wherefor he offered a liberal pay. Busy as already then I was, and not yet having discovered the extreme elasticity of the 24 hours of the day, I declined the offer, but undertook to find a translator. I approached several; none dared tackle the proposition.

Not yet despairing, I suggested to the International Publishing Company that they reprint the 4th story of the series—*The Silver Cross*—from a dilapidated copy that I got somehow of the American fragmentary effort. The suggestion was accepted. I wrote the preface, for which I received \$10, which I turned over to the National Executive Committee of the Socialist Labor Party. This was early in 1899.

Then came the turbulent days of the rest of that year, and of the years of 1900, 1901 and 1902 when the New Yorker Volkszeitung Corporation—in the interest of the moneys which it received for advertisements and other purposes from corrupt and speedily-to-be Civic Federationized labor leaders—sought to destroy the Socialist Labor Party, after having found it could not debauch its press. During those years my plans about Sue's work were shelved. In the meantime daily experience was bringing home to me with such increasing force the urgent need of a compendium of historical experience, such as Sue's *History of a Proletarian Family*, that wholly shelved the plan was not, and could not be.

The occurrence was almost daily of people in the Movement being stumped by the term “feudalism.” The term occurs with frequency in Marx’s works. Without an understanding of its significance no clear conception of the evolution of capitalism is imaginable. What is more, the knowledge of what feudalism was is a mighty help to avoid many a reform pitfall offered to Discontent. For instance, many a Russian Jewish immigrant would be spared the sickening disappointment of failure in the endeavor to bring about a Socialist revolution in Russia, where none such is possible, and would turn his activity into correcter channels; the historic fact that religious movements speedily have their religious functions thrust aside by the hierarchies which they raise, and which thereupon, with “religion” as a mask, convert themselves, through alliance with the very temporal powers which they affect to have overthrown, into temporal and political powers of theocratic tyranny, as exemplified by Jews in Palestine, the Presbyterians in Scotland, the Huguenots in France, the Lutherans in Germany, etc., etc.,—this historic fact would be grasped by the light of the history of the Roman Catholic political machine delineated step by step in Sue’s series, and the folly of anti-religious propaganda would be avoided in our own days; the reason for the twin crudities of pure and simple physical force and pure and simple political ballotism, would be comprehended, and, once comprehended, would be avoided. I could enumerate indefinitely the historic lessons taught by Sue’s great work. Limiting myself to the few that I mentioned, and all of which cluster around feudalism, it was daily being brought home to me that the elements, working class and non-working class, in the country who were bound to carry and put through the Socialist Revolution, stood in need of instruction upon feudality and all that thereby hangs. Works strictly on history would be dry to most. The vehicle of instruction adopted by Sue—historic fiction in charming style—was the best adapted to the occasion. These were the circumstances that finally decided me, in 1903, to put into English that story of the series which covered the feudal era most completely—and these were the circumstances that determined the choice of the 12th story. Thus did *The Pilgrim’s Shell; or, Fergan the Quarryman* make its appearance.

I had not then a thought of undertaking the translation of any other story of the series. My mind presently changed. The success of *The Pilgrim’s Shell* induced me

to undertake a second story. Still having for my purpose the elucidation of feudalism, I skipped the 13th story, as taking up another phase of the Dark Ages, and picked, up the 14th, *The Iron Trevet; or, Jocelyn the Champion*, which covered important features of feudalism not yet ripened at the age covered by the 12th story. Thus the second book appeared in English. More and more encouraged, and still with the feudal system in mind, I then went back to the 11th story—*The Infant's Skull; or, The End of the World*. Finally, pursuing my original purpose of furnishing accessible information on the feudal system from which capitalism came, I went still further back. Skipping the 10th story, I translated in rapid succession the 8th and 9th—*The Abbatial Crosier; or, Bonaik and Septimine* and *The Carolingian Coins; or, The Daughters of Charlemagne*.

There were now in English five almost successive stories of the series, covering the feudal system, from the time of its formation down to the time when it started to go to pieces.

I thought I was through. However, the surpassing value of Sue's whole series having grown still more upon me in the course of my translation of five of the stories; further encouraged by the reception of what I had done so far; and urged from many sides to render the whole series into English, I then buckled down to the task, and, beginning with the first story of the series, went through the rest in chronological order.

To this statement two corrections must be made.

The 2nd story—*The Brass Bell; or, The Chariot of Death*—and the 18th—*The Sword of Honor; or, The Foundation, of the French Republic*—were not translated by me. As their title-pages state, the translation was the work of my son Solon, to whom I assigned the task. Though not mature enough in historic experience to have been able to do justice to most of the other stories, the handling of which demanded a broader reading and observation than was compatible with his years, nevertheless, being fresh from college, where the invasion of Gaul, the subject of the 2nd story, is pretty thoroughly gone through, and where the French Revolution, the subject of the 18th story, is an attractive episode that suggests outside reading to the earnest student, the two books could be safely entrusted to him. He made expectations good. The two translations were done well.

The second correction regards the 4th story of the series—*The Silver Cross; or, The Carpenter of Nazareth*. As will be remembered, I stated above that a publishing concern reprinted, in 1899, that story from one of the fragmentary translations, wholly out of print, that had been attempted many years before. For one thing, I was not hunting for work. My hands were full, as it was. For another, the publishing concern which had reprinted *The Silver Cross* was doing well with it. I cared not even remotely to place myself in the light—which some publishing concerns connected with the Socialist party do not seem to object to placing themselves in,—the discreditable light of petty competition on a field opened by another. I determined to leave *The Silver Cross* untranslated by myself. The reprint, then already in circulation, could be used in the set that I translated. I was compelled to change my mind. I had never read the English reprint of *The Silver Cross* then in circulation. I thought it passed muster. One day, and some time after I had finished translating the last story of the series, happening accidentally to open the English reprint, I came across a passage that was simply ununderstandable. Was it some typographical error? A consultation of the original French revealed to me that the translator of the reprint had not understood the French original of the passage. The question then arose, Is this the only passage so misunderstood, and so wrongly rendered in English? I then started to read the reprint from the beginning. The painful conviction was forced upon me, even before I had reached the last page, that I would have to translate that story also,—the errors were too numerous and too serious, the evidence of slap-dash work cropped up at every turn. Thus *The Silver Cross*, although the 4th story of the series, was the last that I translated.

This sketch answers all the questions concerning the reason for the skipping backward and forward in the order of the translations. There was no intent; it was the consequence of not having started with the intention of undertaking the whole work.

Intimately connected with the story of the appearance of Sue's series is another order of subjects.

The translations had all, or almost all, been made, but lay for some time in my desk—inaccessible to the printer. The mechanical facilities of the *Daily People*

plant, in other words, lack of funds, kept the books from coming out. For a time it looked as if the interval between the appearance of one volume and the next would be so long that the day when the full set would be out was hopelessly out of sight. At that juncture Frederick W. Ball of Section Passaic County, N.J., S.L.P., stepped in and public spiritedly solved that thorny problem. As announced by him in the *Daily People* January 4, 1908, an arrangement was made by him with the manager of the New York Labor News Co. whereby he assumed the responsibility of financing the publication of the remaining, which were more than two-thirds, of the stories. The path was now clear of a serious encumbrance. What with the removal of the initial financial difficulties, and the powerful aid given by John Kircher of Section Cleveland, S.L.P., and other Party members in disposing of large numbers of copies fast as they came from the bindery, from the time Frederick W. Ball "took hold" the successive publications followed speedily, until the set is now complete.

There is still another order of help that came to me, and which, in justice, should be acknowledged.

He who knows what reading of book proof means will realize the hugeness of the job that it was to read the proofs of the Sue books, especially when they began to follow closely upon one another's heels. It is not one or two readings, but half a dozen, or more. To him who has no knowledge of such matters, let me give the information that the work is tedious and irksome, under the most favorable conditions that regular book publishing concerns offer. When such a job is to be attended to by a Socialist concern, and one with a small personnel, at that, and has to be attended to in addition to the regulation work on the paper, it may be pronounced "well nigh killing."

Nor is that all. Numerous are the foot-notes in Sue's series. These could have been omitted in the translation only at the cost of greatly impairing its historic value. They had to go in. They could not be simply translated. They had to be verified. Even simple verification would be a serious time-consumer. The nature and importance of many of the foot-notes demanded something more than mere verification. Some of the authorities referred to by Sue in his foot-notes are not accessible to English readers. English translations had to be procured, the passages quoted had to be found, and the numbers of the pages either substituted for, or

added to the pagings given by Sue. In one instance at least, this meant the reading of the whole book referred to in the foot-note.

This double work of proof reading down to the stage of plating, and of verifying foot-notes, required conscientious work of literary quality. I don't know how I could have attended to all that. If done by myself, it would have greatly delayed the publication. Reserving to myself the work of reading the last proof, my son assumed the double task, and fulfilled it.

There is still another Party member, Alfred C. Kihn of Section Brooklyn, N.Y., whose collaboration deserves express recognition. As will have been noticed, each of the stories in the series has two names, the first one being derived from the particular relic which each supposed writer in successive Ages attached to his own manuscript. Kihn's was the idea of having a vignette of each relic accompany the respective volume, or story. A painstaking man, he ascertained from historic plates the probable appearance of each relic; himself an artist, he executed the cuts that are stamped on the covers of the stories, thereby adding to the attractiveness of the appearance, and carrying out the poetic conception of the series.

Finally, there is a set of questions that I might as well bunch together and dispose of collectively.

It being the mark of "regularity" in Civic Federationized Labor quarters, and also in some quarters of the Socialist party, to take my name "in vain," slanderously and backbitingly, I have been informed from several sides that in the quarters just mentioned all sorts of stories were afloat in connection with my translation of Sue's work. Summed up in lump, the stories were to the effect that I was making a pile of money with the translation and thereby milking the Party, from which, some had it, I received a stiff royalty; others, that I was subsidized by private individuals; and so forth and so on.

Neither directly, nor indirectly have I received, or would I have accepted, a copper from the Party, or any other source, for this work, or any other literary work, not strictly editorial. The practise, noticeable in several quarters, of officers in the Socialist and the Labor Movement dropping their private "lines in the water," and each doing some private fishing on his own hook, I have ever held as "graft"—and I have lived up to the principle. Since I was elected by the S.L.P. as Editor of its

English organ, whatever publication bears my name, whether original or a translation, this work of Sue's included, was a work of love—a free gift to the Labor and Socialist Movement of the land.

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Uploaded April 2012

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