

M. Anatole France

By Maurice Baring

I

“SOYONS des bibliophiles et lisons nos livres, mais ne les prenons point de toutes mains ; soyons délicats, choisissons, et comme le seigneur des comédies de Shakespeare, disons à notre libraire : ‘Je veux qu’ils soient bien reliés et qu’ils parlent d’amour.’”

This piece of advice occurs in the preface of the first volume of M. France’s collected work : *La vie littéraire*. We are afraid that it would be difficult to prove by statistics that the advice is very largely taken.

The works of certain lady novelists are those which seem to be mostly chosen by the reading public ; and they belong to that class of which Charles Lamb spoke, when he said that some books were not books, but wolves in books’ clothing. There is no reason why we should be disturbed by this. It has been pointed out that the reading public has got nothing whatever to do with books. “The reading public subscribes to Mudie, and gets its intellectual like its lacteal subsistence in carts.” Happily, there is a little clan of writers who enable us to act upon the advice quoted above. M. France’s books are not carried about

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in carts. They tempt us to choose—them all. They lead us into committing follies at the bookbinders'. And if we are bitterly thinking of the morrow when a bill will come in for the "creamiest Oxford vellum" and "redolent crushed Levant," we may console ourselves by reflecting that we have been fastidious and eclectic, that we have chosen.

M. France's books do not talk of love as much as do many other modern works, yet we think the Shakespearean nobleman would have chosen them to grace his library in preference to the *Heavenly Twins* or the *Yellow Aster*, which handle the theme more technically, perhaps, and certainly with greater exhaustiveness.

II

M. France has chosen a few charming themes, and played them in different keys with many variations. *Le Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard* is the contemplation of an old philosophical bachelor; *Le livre de mon ami* is a child's garden of prose. He has written stories about contemporaries of Solomon, of pre-Evites even (*La fille de Lilith*), and stories about Anglo-Florentines. He has charmed us with philosophy and with fairy-tales, and diverted us with the adventures of poets, politicians, and madmen of every description. His criticism he has defined in a famous phrase as "the adventures of his soul among masterpieces." And his creative works are not so much the observations of a mind among men as the subdued and delicate dreams of a soul that has fallen asleep, tired out by its enchanting adventures. He has himself confessed that he is not a keen observer.

"L'observateur conduit sa vue, le spectateur se laisse prendre
par

par les yeux." Thus it is that the phrase "adventures of the soul" is singularly suited to him. In his whole work we trace the phases and the development of a gentle admiration. In the *Livre de mon ami M. France* tells the story of his childhood—

"Tout dans l'immuable nature
Est miracle aux petits enfants
Ils naissent et leur âme obscure
Eclôt dans des enchantements.

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Leur tête légère et ravie
Songe tandis que nous pensons ;
Ils font de frissons en frissons
La découverte de la vie."

So he sings about children.

It is very rare that a man of letters can look back through the prison-bars of middle-age with eyes undimmed by the mists of his culture and philosophy, and see the ingenuous phases, the gradual progress from thrill to thrill of awakening, that take place in the soul of a child.

M. France has evoked these early "frissons" with a magic wand. And the penetrating psychology with which childish "états-d'âme" are revealed is no less striking than the charm and poetry which animate them.

The very pulse of the machine is laid bare ; at the same time, the book is as loveable and lovely as a child's poem by Victor Hugo or Robert Louis Stevenson. The hero of the book is Pierre Nosières, a dreamy little boy, fond of pictures and colours ; and the story is written entirely from the point of view of this child.

" Elle

“Elle était toute petite, ma vie ; mais c'était une vie, c'est-à-dire le centre des choses, le milieu du monde.”

The grown-up people who enter into Pierre's life are a child's grown-up people ; that is, incomprehensible beings who might play at soldiers all day, and yet do not do so. Strange creatures, who will not get up from their easy-chair to look at the moon when they are told she is to be seen.

Mr. Stevenson tells a story of how one day, when he was groaning aloud in physical agony, a little boy came up and asked him if he had seen his cross-bow, ignoring altogether his groans and his contortions. It is exactly what little Pierre would have done. The wall-paper of the drawing-room where Pierre lived had a pattern of dainty rose-buds which were all exactly alike. “Un jour, dans le petit salon, laissant sa broderie, ma mère me souleva dans ses bras ; puis, me montrant une des fleurs du papier, elle me dit : je te donne cette rose—et, pour la reconnaître elle la marqua d'une croix avec son poinçon à broder. Jamais présent ne me rendit plus heureux.”

Another time Pierre is fired with ambition ; he desires to leave the world brighter for his name. Finding that military glory is for the time being out of his reach, and inspired by the “Lives of the Saints,” which his mother is in the habit of reading aloud, he decides to go down to posterity as a saint. Reluctantly setting aside martyrdom and missionary work as impracticable, he confines himself to austerities, and commences by leaving his déjeuner untouched, which leads his mother to believe that he is unwell. Then, in emulation of St. Simon Stylites, he begins a life of self-denial on the top of the kitchen pump ; but his nurse puts an abrupt end to this mode of existence. St. Nicholas of Patras is the next holy man he tries to imitate. St. Nicholas gave all he had to the poor ; Pierre throws his toys

out

out of the window. Pierre's father, who is looking on, calls him a stupid little boy. Pierre is amazed and ashamed, but he soon consoles himself: "Je considèrai que mon père n'était pas un Saint comme moi et ne partagerait pas avec moi la gloire des bien-heureux."

The next thing he thinks of is a hair-shirt, which he makes by pulling out the horse-hair from an arm-chair. Here again he fails more signally than ever. His nurse, Julie, not apprehending the inward significance of the action, is conscious merely of the outward and visible arm-chair, which is quite spoilt. So she whips Pierre. This opens his eyes to the insurmountable difficulty of being a saint in the family circle, and he understands why St. Antony withdrew to a desert place. He resolves to seclude himself in the maze at the "Jardin des Plantes," and he tells his mother of his plan. She asks what put the idea into his head. He confesses to a desire to be famous and to have "Ermite et Saint du Calendrier" printed on his visiting-cards, just as his father had "Lauréat de l'académie de médecine, etc." on his.

Here his experiments in practical holiness cease. To the young stoic:

"Lust of fame was but a dream
That vanished with the morn,"

although he has often hankered since that day, he confesses, for a life of seclusion in the maze of the Jardin des Plantes.

Not unlike Shelley, who some one has said was perpetually in the frame of mind of saying: "Give me my cabbage and a glass of water, and *let me go into the next room.*"

Little Pierre passes through many phases and becomes very clever, very cultured, and very subtle; but the child in him endures and he keeps alive a flame of wistful wonder—wonder at

the varicoloured world and the white stars—which is perhaps the greatest charm of M. France's books.

It is true that he frequently laments the absence of the old simple faith which could discern

“The guardian sprites of wood and rill.”

We are no doubt a faithless and prosaic generation, yet if M. France told us that he had heard old Triton blow his wreathed horn, we should believe him: we should say, at any rate, borrowing one of his own phrases, that the statement was true precisely because it was imaginary.

Before altogether leaving M. France's writings about children, I must mention another supreme achievement in this province: his fairy tale *Abeille*, which is to be found in a collection of short stories called *Balthazar*. Mr. Lang hit the right nail on the head when he said that people do not write good fairy stories now, partly because they do not believe in their own stories, partly because they try to be wittier than it has pleased heaven to make them. M. France believes in *Abeille*; one has only to read the story to be convinced of the fact. As for being wittier than God has pleased to make him, M. France is far too sensible to attempt an almost impossible task.

There is no striving after modernity in *Abeille*; it is neither paradoxical nor elaborate, but a real fairy tale, where there are stately *grandes dames*, trusty squires, perfidious water-nymphs, industrious dwarfs, and disobedient children. It is a genuine fairy tale, told with the sorcery that baffles analysis, which only the elect who believe in fairies can feel and appreciate, whether they find it in *The Odyssey* or in Hans Andersen. Here is a little bit of description which I will quote, just to give an idea of the beauty of M. France's sentences. It is the description of the
magic

magic lake : " Le sentier descendait en pente douce jusqu'au bord du lac, qui apparut aux deux enfants dans sa languissante et silencieuse beauté. Des saules arrondissaient sur les bords leur feuillage tendre. Des roseaux balançaient sur les eaux leurs glaives souples et leurs délicats panaches ; ils formaient des îles frissonnantes autour desquelles les nénuphars étalaient leurs grandes feuilles en cœur et leurs fleurs à la chair blanche. Sur ces îles fleuries les demoiselles, au corsage d'émeraude ou de saphir et aux ailes de flammes, traçaient d'un vol strident des courbes brusquement brisées."

III

M. France began his career as a member of the Parnassian Cénacle, of which Paul Verlaine, François Coppée, and Catulle Mendès were members. In a delightful essay on Paul Verlaine (*La vie Littéraire*, vol. iii.) M. France recalls some memories of that irresponsible period. "Le bon temps," he calls it, "où nous n'avions pas le sens commun." It was at that time that M. France, in the first fine rapture of a Hellenic revival, wrote "Les Noces Corinthiennes," a fine and interesting poem, dealing with the melancholy sunset of Paganism and the troubled moonrise of Christianity. It is a period of which he is very fond ; and he has made it the subject of one of his most important books—*Thais*.

No one has written about that age with more understanding, for M. France has "une âme riche et complètement humaine . . . païenne et chrétienne à la fois." In a beautiful short story, *Læta Acilia* (*Balthazar*), he tells how Mary Magdalen tries to convert Læta Acilia, a patrician Roman lady. Læta Acilia promises to serve the new deity if he send her a son, for although she has been married for five years she is without children. Mary prays that
this

this may happen, and her prayer is granted. Six months afterwards, one day when Læta is lying languorous and happy on a couch in the court of her home, Mary comes to her and tells her the story of her own conversion. She tells Læta how the seven devils were cast out of her, and recounts all the ecstasy of her life of love and faith as a disciple, and the wonderful story of her Saviour's death and resurrection. Læta Acilia's serenity is profoundly disturbed by the tale; reviewing her own existence, she finds it monotonous indeed, compared with the life of this woman, who had loved a God. Her days were occupied with needlework, the quiet practice of her religion, and the companionship of her husband, Helvius, the knight. Her daily round was varied only by the days she went to the circus, or ate cakes with her friends. Bitter jealousy and dark regrets rise in her heart, and bursting into tears she calls on the Jewess to leave the house.

"Méchante femme," she cries, "tu voulais me donner le dégoût de la bonne vie que j'ai menée . . . Je ne veux pas connaître ton Dieu . . . il faut pour lui plaire se prosterner échevelée à ses pieds . . . Je ne veux pas d'une religion qui dérange les coiffures . . . Je n'ai pas été possédée de sept démons, je n'ai pas erré par les chemins; je suis une femme respectable. Va-t'-en!"

Thais also is the story of a conversion in the early Christian times. *Thais*, the beautiful convert, is less pious and serene than Læta Acilia, but the conversion is more serious.

The contrast between the end of Paganism and the beginning of Christianity, between the sceptical and brilliant world of Alexandria and the savage life of the Anchorites, is drawn with consummate art. It is a thoughtful story, exquisitely told, containing some of M. France's most brilliant pages and some of his finest touches of irony.

Books of this kind, *Thais*, *Balthazar*, *L'Etui de Nacre*, a collection of little masterpieces in a *genre* which M. France has made his own, and *Le Puits de Sainte Clarie* (his latest published book) is what M. France has done by the way, so to speak. In these we do not trace the growth of his mind so much as in his other books. But as far as perfection of form and delicacy of touch go, they are perhaps the most finished things he has done. Were he to republish the series under one name, we should recommend—

“Marguerites pour les pourceaux.”

IV

After the dreamy childhood of little Pierre comes the feverish period of youth; there is an agitated violence about M. France's work of that time which completely disappears later on.

Les Désirs de Jean Servian, a study of youthful, ineffectual passion, is rather crude and unsatisfactory; M. France has not yet found his medium. *Jocaste* is a violent piece of melodrama, set in an atmosphere of hard pessimism. *Le Chat Maigre* is merely an interlude, a caprice of fancy. Yet here M. France has a subject after his own heart, and he is completely successful. It is the story of a youth who comes from Haiti to pass his *baccalauréat*; he lives in a *cénacle* of madmen, and so vague and irresponsible is he himself, that it never occurs to him that they are mad. M. France's love of madmen, of the *fantoches* of humanity, is one of his most decided characteristics. He draws a distinction between madness and insanity. Madness, he says, is only a kind of intellectual originality. Insanity is the loss of the intellectual faculties

faculties. M. France leavens all his books with mad characters, introducing us like this to the most quaint and amusing types.

In these early books M. France was giving vent to the various phases of his youth. The restless preludes played on the tremulous reeds were soon to be merged into the broad music of the mellow diapasons. This is satisfactory; because although in the crisis of youth Moses often becomes Aaron, and expression wells from the hard rock, it less frequently happens that Hamlet becomes Prospero.

Again it often happens that Prospero is not only deserted by Ariel, but he is left, as Mr. Arthur Benson says,

“Pent in the circle of a rugged isle . . .

 Without his large philosophy, without
 Miranda, and alone with Caliban.”

In M. France's case the shifting restlessness of youth has only helped to make middle-age more tolerant, as we note in *Le Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard*.

Le Jardin d'Epicure, M. France's penultimate book, is a garden fit for Prospero, a Prospero who has not perhaps forgotten the

“Old agitations of myrtles and roses.”

A garden where there is a somewhat more voluptuous fragrance than

“A rosemary odour comingled with pansies,
 With rue and the beautiful Puritan pansies.”

Let us now examine M. France's riper works more closely.

Le Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard is M. France's masterpiece, or one of his masterpieces. It consists of two stories: *La Bûche*
 and

and *Le Crime* proper. The story of each is simplicity itself. In the one case M. Bonnard hankers after a rare MS., which is at last presented to him by a Russian princess whom he had once helped, when she was poor, by sending her a *bûche*. Another time, M. Bonnard rescues an orphan girl from a school where she is unhappy and contracts a happy marriage for her : that is his crime. M. Bonnard is a member of the Institute, a bachelor and a bibliophile, seventy years old, with a large nose that betrays his feelings. He is afraid of his housekeeper, and rather fond of dainty cooking and old wine. He overflows with bavardage and entertains his cat with suggestive philosophy, beautifully expressed. Kindness, tolerance, and irony are his chief characteristics ; his sole prejudice being the pretension of having no prejudices. "Cette prétention," says M. France (or does M. Bonnard say it about some one else ?), "était à elle seule un gros préjugé. Il détestait le fanatisme, mais il avait celui de la tolérance." It applies to M. Bonnard in any case. M. Bonnard is a child at heart, and his tenderness is exquisite. Delightful, too, is his pedantry, which leads him to handle romantic subjects and ideas with the most elegant precision and unflinching exactitude. As for his language, it is the purest and most distinguished French ; it is needless to say more. We will confine ourselves to quoting one sentence. "Etoiles qui avez lui sur la tête légère ou pesante de tous mes ancêtres oubliés, c'est à votre clarté que je sens s'éveiller en moi un regret douloureux. Je voudrais un fils qui vous voie encore quand je ne serai plus."

The complement of Sylvestre Bonnard is the Abbé Jérôme Coignard, the hero of *La Rôtisserie de la reine Pédauque*. M. Coignard, who lived and died in the last century, was a priest "abondant en rians propos et en belles manières." Erudite and scholar though he was, he sought for happiness in other places
besides

besides *in angello*. He culled other flowers besides the "bloomless buds" which grow in the garden of the goddess who is "crowned with calm leaves," which would certainly have been Sylvestre Bonnard's favourite garden. The difference is that L'Abbé Coignard is an eighteenth-century priest, and "behaves as such." The Abbé considers that the maxims of philosophers who seek to establish a natural morality are but "lubies et billevesées."

"La raison des bonnes mœurs ne se trouve point dans la nature qui est, par elle-même, indifférente, ignorant le mal comme le bien. Elle est dans la parole divine qu'il ne faut pas transgresser, à moins de s'en repentir ensuite convenablement."

The laws of men, he says, are founded on utility, a fallacious utility, since no one knows what in reality befits men and is useful to them. For this reason he breaks them, and is ready to do it again and again.

"Les plus grands saints sont des pénitents, et comme le repentir se proportionne à la faute, c'est dans les plus grands pécheurs que se trouve l'étoffe des plus grands saints." The Abbé Coignard's pupil, the simple-minded Jaques Tournebroche, expresses his fear lest this doctrine, in practice, should lead men into wild licence :

"Ce que vous appelez désordres," rejoins the Abbé, "n'est tel en effet que dans l'opinion des juges tant civils qu'écclésiastiques, et par rapport aux lois humaines, qui sont arbitraires et transitoires, et qu'en un mot *se conduire selon ces lois est le fait d'une âme moutonnière*."

"Un homme d'esprit ne se pique pas d'agir selon les règles en usage au châtelet et chez l'official. *Il s'inquiète de faire son salut et il ne se croit pas déshonoré pour aller au ciel par les voies détournées que suivirent les plus grands saints*."

It is, therefore, by the primrose path that M. l'Abbé seeks

his

his salvation, relying on the cleansing dews of repentance. He is the most subtle and entertaining arguer conceivable, but his voyage to salvation by a "voie détournée" is nevertheless brought to an abrupt end. In abetting the elopement of a lovely Jewess with a young marquis, he is pursued by the Jewess's angry father, who takes him to be his daughter's seducer, and murders him on the Lyons road. He died at the age of fifty-eight, after receiving the last sacraments, in an odour of repentance and sanctity, and earnestly urging his young pupil to disregard his old advice and forget his philosophy :

"N'écoute point ceux, qui comme moi, subtilesent sur le bien et le mal . . . Le royaume de Dieu ne consiste pas dans les paroles mais dans la vertu."

These were his last words, and in dying he made it possible for his pupil to obey him. Fortunately we are still able to be led astray by the subtlety of his discourses. They almost make us doubt whether the Kingdom of Heaven does not sometimes consist in words. We may add that "Les opinions de Jérôme Coignard" is perhaps a more edifying book than "La Rôtisserie de la Reine Pédauque," where his discourses are blent with a record of his deeds.

We have now considered almost all M. France's works, with the exception of *Le Lys Rouge*, which stands apart as his sole effort in the province of the modern analytic novel. The book is not very characteristic of M. France, although it contains some brilliant writing, notably a dialogue, near the beginning, on Napoleon, and a fine study of an artist's jealousy ; the Florentine atmosphere also is successfully rendered ; but we would willingly give up the romantic part of the book for one of the Abbé Coignard's discourses or Sylvestre Bonnard's reveries.

V

“L'artiste doit aimer la vie et nous montrer qu'elle est belle. Sans lui nous en douterions.”

M. France has accomplished the task beautifully. Nevertheless, the shadows of irony which temper the colour of his dream let us more than suspect that “even while singing the song of the Sirens, he still hearkens to the barking of the Sphinx.” Like Mr. Stevenson, he has struck sombre and eloquent chords on the theme of *pulvis et umbra*. He loves to remind us that a time will come when our descendants, diminishing fast on an icy and barren earth, will be as brutal and brainless as our cave-dwelling ancestors.

Mr. Andrew Lang thinks that the last man will read the poems of Shelley in his cavern by the light of a little oil, in order to see once more the glory of sunset and sunrise, and the “hues of earthquake and eclipse.” This is hopeful; but we are afraid M. France's theory is the more probable. The last man will be too stupid and too cold to read Shelley in a cave.

At the same time, although M. France is fond of telling us that man can save nothing—

“On the sands of life, in the straits of time,
Who swims in front of a great third wave,
That never a swimmer may cross or climb”—

he is yet of opinion that the pastimes of the beach are pleasant, and can be peacefully enjoyed, in spite of the billows that may be looming in the distance. He defends the follies of the book-collector with warmth and elegance on that score :

“ Il

“ Il faudrait plutôt les envier puisqu'ils ont orné leur vie d'une longue et paisible volupté . . . Que peut-on faire de plus honnête que de mettre des livres dans une armoire ? Cela rappelle beaucoup à la vérité la tâche que se donne les enfants, quand ils font des tas de sable au bord de la mer. . . . La mer emporte les tas de sable, le commissaire-priseur disperse les collections. Et pourtant on n'a rien de mieux à faire que des tas de sable à dix ans et des collection à soixante.”

M. France is neither a pessimist nor an optimist, but both ; since he feels that the world is neither good nor bad, but good *and* bad.

“ Le mal,” he says “ est l'unique raison du bien. Que serait le courage loin du péril et la pitié sans la douleur ? ”

Had he made the world, he tells us, he would have made man in the image of an insect :

“ J'aurais voulu que l'homme . . . accomplit d'abord, à l'état de larve, les travaux dégoûtants par lesquels il se nourrit. En cette phase, il n'y aurait point eu de sens, et la faim n'aurait point avili l'amour. Puis j'aurais fait de sorte que, dans une transformation dernière, l'homme et la femme, déployant des ailes étincelantes, vécussent de rosée et de désir et mourussent dans un baiser.” As, however, we are made on a somewhat different plan, M. France puts his faith in two goddesses—Irony and Pity :

“ L'une en souriant nous rend la vie aimable, l'autre qui pleure nous la rend sacrée. L'ironie que j'invoque n'est point cruelle. Elle ne raille ni l'amour ni la beauté . . . son rire calme la colère et c'est elle qui nous enseigne à nous moquer des méchants et des sots, que nous pourrions, sans elle, avoir la faiblesse de haïr.”

The burden and keynote of M. France's works may be found in the most blessed words of the blessed saint : “ Everywhere I have sought

sought for happiness and found it nowhere, save in a corner with a book."

VI

To sum up, we have in M. Anatole France a fastidious and distinguished artist in prose; an inventor of fantastic and delightful characters; a thinker whose ingenious and suggestive philosophy is based on the solid foundations of thorough scholarship. His stories are as delicate as thin shells, and their subtle echo evokes the music of the wide seas. On the other hand, his critical essays are so graceful that they read like fairy tales. The lightness and grace of his work have made serious people shake their heads. They forget that a graceful use of the snaffle is more masterly than an ostentatious control of the curb.

"A good style," M. France says, "is like a ray of sunlight, which owes its luminous purity to the combination of the seven colours of which it is composed."

M. France's style has precisely this luminous and complicated simplicity. But a reader unacquainted as yet with M. France's work must not expect too much. M. France's talent is subdued and limited. He is not an inventor of wonderful romance; he has never peered into the depths of the human soul; neither has his work the concise and masculine strength of a writer like Guy de Maupassant. He contemplates life from the Garden of Epicurus, smiling in plaintive tranquillity at the grotesque and tragic masks of the human comedy.

*"L'ambition, l'amour, égaux en leur délire,
Et l'inutile encens brûlé sur les autels."*

What the reader must expect to find in his books is an exquisite
puppet-show,

puppet-show, where fanciful comedies and fairy interludes are interpreted by adorable marionnettes. M. France is not a player of the thunderous organ or the divine violin ; his instrument is rather a pensive pianoforte, on which with an incomparable touch he plays delicate preludes and wistful nocturnes.