

A YOUNG AMERICAN'S FRIENDSHIP WITH ANATOLE FRANCE

By Edward Wassermann

WHEN I left America during the war I hoped, being a pacifistic young American, to meet Anatole France in preference to the Kaiser. Through a lucky chain of events I became attached to an organization that was transferred to Tours where Anatole France was residing. He had started to remodel his house in Paris, but at the outbreak of the war had found it impossible to have the work completed. Thereupon he had gone to his country seat. So one bleak March day, with an acquaintance who had a letter of introduction to France, I motored through the narrow streets of Tours over the Loire bridge and up the steep hill at Saint Cyr. The whole drive took about a quarter of an hour. We reached the iron grill gate of La Bechellerie. We rang a bell that clanked stridently though not altogether unmusically. The door opened and we came into a courtyard with a graceful Louis XIII manor house at its end. On entering the hall, dimly lighted by a lamp, we saw our host come shambling out in easy gait from the next room.

France was never ceremonious or pompous. He stretched out both his hands, and ushered us into the salon where several village notables were engaged in a discussion of the war — a subject, as I afterward found out, that continued to be foremost in France's mind. Joined with his tremendous absorption and curiosity concerning

everything pertaining to art, he had an unending interest in politics and in the war. He was rather worried about the outcome of it — thought that the end of the world was drawing near. He was disgusted that humanity, which he had always hoped might improve, was continuing on its old road of stupidity. "Indeed," he said, "war and love are the two things that men do best." From time to time he would pace the floor, his sharp eyes darting out glances in a most searching yet kindly way. He was dressed in his usual home garb of a suit minus the coat, an old colorless woolen dressing gown, and a red velvet skull cap whose color contrasted vividly with his white hair. When engaged in some discussion, he would move his cap at various angles. At this time I met Mlle. Laprévotte. France informed me that she was the only bright spot in his life and that I would find her a kindred soul since she also was an American. Not wishing to presume on France's good nature, I did not prolong this first visit, from which I carried away — in addition to the bewilderment of an accomplished ambition that had no regret at its accomplishment — a charming souvenir of his delightful hospitality. He had been kind enough to ask me to call again. I did so and then, gradually forgetting that I was in the presence of a genius and remembering only his simplicity and kindness, I formed a friendship with him which

grew until I saw him practically every day.

Mademoiselle had been born in St. Louis of fairly humble parentage and had spent most of her life in France. With Anatole France she occupied a peculiar position which was a blending of companion and housekeeper. She was very timid, very bashful, deeply appreciative of any attention. Though most people rather looked down on her and considered her bore-some and bothersome, I had the impression that her simplicity and good-heartedness really fitted her for the exalted position she was finally to attain. France adored her, treated her almost as a child, and took his moods from hers.

In May, 1917, I was ordered to Paris. Before I left Tours I went to pay my respects to France. Mademoiselle was ill and I feared that France would be in no mood to see me; but he did, and presented me with his photograph, an amicable kiss on my forehead, and his paternal blessing. In August of that year I returned to Tours and immediately went up to see France, who welcomed me as a long lost friend. From then on I went up every Sunday for lunch, and generally once a week in the afternoon, for luckily I was a tin soldier who was usually free at sundown. It was interesting to notice the various well known people who would go up to see France. Among them I met such celebrities as Michel Corday, Kermit Roosevelt, Steinlen, Moutet the deputy Socialist who defended Caillaux, Louis Barthou, Pierre Mille, and Mlle. Maille. At that time Mlle. Maille was in the Comédie Française, and I was fortunate enough to go with her and France to a celebration in memory of Paul Louis Courier. He had been born at Véretz, a tiny town near Tours. Mlle. Maille recited,

after which France made a speech in honor of the celebrated pamphletist. France never had been a good public speaker and he read his discourse somewhat haltingly; but for all that its beautiful language was obvious.

About this time I decided to try for a commission in the United States Army, and France, always interested in even the slightest details of the life of a fellow human being, was good enough to give me this letter of recommendation: "I can conscientiously affirm that having known Sergeant Edward Wassermann since his arrival in France I am able to appreciate his remarkable intelligence, his excellent mind, his exemplary morals, and his thorough knowledge of the French language which he speaks perfectly. Consequently I suppose that you will judge Sergeant Wassermann to be capable of rendering great service as an officer. Receive, gentlemen, the expression of my highest esteem. (Signed) Anatole France of the French Academy." France had always treated rather slightly the French Academy, and he told me that in order to be more helpful to me he had signed "of the French Academy" for the first time, since he never cared to use this title. I omit discussion of France's other eulogistic phrases — this article is no confession — but as to my "remarkable intelligence", unfortunately I was not to pass my examination. Whereupon France, as true philosopher and friend, said that he considered examinations the proof of the world's idiocy, since they were invented by idiots to fool wise men. In one of his books he relates his own failure to pass an examination because he was so intimidated that he said "yes" to everything, even when the examiner asked him if the River Seine were in Africa.

His geniality was truly remarkable.

When various friends of mine came to Tours he always received them as cordially as if they had been his own. I introduced him to one friend — a Red Cross worker — who prided herself on her French accent, which really was extremely good. After she had left I commented to France on her accent. "Yes," he said, "she speaks French too well."

These were the hard times of the war. Mademoiselle knew little of how to procure the necessities of life. Hampered by her illness, France was incapable of looking out for himself. He had no coal and his house was freezing. Half the time he had no flour or other essential provisions. Yet in the midst of complaints concerning the discomforts of war, he would branch out into cultural conversation. When, for instance, I brought him some white bread, which few in France had eaten in three years, tears came to his eyes. A minute afterward he was seeking to collate an edition of "Candide" that I had also brought to him. I suppose that a mind so steeped in the arts could not long be hampered by the events of life which to the ordinary individual seem so important. I met him in Tours one day, sobbing. He told me that his daughter had just died. They had been estranged for several years and France, with his customary negligence of the daily tasks, had let slip a possible reconciliation. He deplored this fact, then remarked that after all, even though one were sad, one forgot quickly. He corroborated this by adding that, grief stricken as he was, he had eaten a delightful lunch — he even remembered the pleasures of a savory cassoulet. Whereupon he discoursed on the excellencies of the cuisine in southern France.

When the false armistice was ru-

mored, I found France in Madame Tridon's bookshop in Tours. It was his custom to go into the back of this shop and discourse on almost every subject before a crowd of admiring villagers. On that day he was delighted that peace had been signed, though embittered, as usual, because he seemed to see his country's ruin as well. A few minutes afterward, with his great love of literature, he began talking to me about Racine and went into ecstasies over some batiks I showed him — he had never seen any before. When the real armistice came along the little town of Tours celebrated it with a nocturnal parade. I dined with France and Mademoiselle and later we watched the fireworks from the balcony of the hotel to which he had moved on account of the coal shortage. Tears came to his eyes at the thought that peace was at last imminent. For France was always a pacifist, though a Frenchman at heart. At the beginning of the war, in spite of advanced age, he had volunteered. Later he had written two books on the war which by their very shortness suggested that he loathed war. He finally came to believe that the war was being continued for the betterment of the profiteers and he wrote me the following dedication in "Sur la Voie Glorieuse":

WHAT OUR DEAD SAY

But in December 1916, hearing that Austria had made peace propositions that had been kept secret by the allied governments, from then on I kept silence, being unwilling to make myself an accomplice to men who were either cupidinous or fanatical and who were continuing a war the necessity of which no longer appeared to me.

I saw very little of France for a while after the armistice, since he went to take a cure at St. Cloud. But before leaving, with his thoroughgoing kindness and thoughtfulness, he gave

me some eighteenth century place cards to use at a Thanksgiving dinner. To find these he had taken me into what he called "Bluebeard's Room", a sort of storeroom for all the things he could not use elsewhere in his house. A few weeks afterward I was fortunate enough to be transferred from Tours to the Peace Commission in Paris. I was therefore able to see France quite often.

He was staying at St. Cloud with his great friends the Couchouds, trying to build up his strength which had been weakened by the war. He had become very much interested in a new phase of spiritualism, and showed me various pictures taken through mediums. At this time, a company had formed to produce moving pictures of some of his books. France rather marveled at the movies but put little faith in them. This is quite easy to understand. His books do not readily lend themselves to the screen, since so much in them depends on the style and the philosophy.

Presently France returned to Tours, and the fortunes of peace sent me back there as well. I readily gave up the gaieties of Paris for the pleasure of renewing my delightful visits to La Bechellerie. It was thoroughly stimulating to hear France discussing life, art, and literature, and making cynically apt remarks about everything. One day, when we were talking of women, he remarked that Pasiphae was less reprehensible than Lady Macbeth, for she at least had had physical pleasure in her sin, whereas Lady Macbeth had been prompted merely by the lust of ambition. As to death, he said, in effect: Life in itself is so wonderful that had we, before birth, the knowledge of life's beauty and death's inevitability, we would choose not to live, because of the pain of giving up life.

At this period my military career became irksome to me, and I began to think of how I might get my discharge in France. We discussed this matter frequently. Finally France, in his modest way, said that perhaps my commanding officer had heard of him, and might help me get my discharge were he to think that France needed me. Consequently he penned the following letter, with its obvious fiction:

DEAR EDWARD WASSERMANN: Having decided to write immediately the book on America about which I have spoken to you so often, I beg that you come to me as soon as possible to serve as my secretary as you have promised me.

I cannot do without you to accomplish this great task.

Unfortunately I have no right other than my favorable sentiments toward America to solicit your demobilization of your superiors, but as soon as you are free I count on you to take your position of secretary with me.

Dear E. W. I cordially shake your hand.

ANATOLE FRANCE,
Of the French Academy.

Needless to say, it was over two months before I regained my liberty. By this time spring had come and I had arranged a two day leave to Paris. France told me that he would be motor-ing up himself, and I delayed my departure for his. One morning he, Mademoiselle, and I started out bright and early, driving through the graceful hills of the Loire Valley. France commented on the beauty of nature and on the suavity of the landscape. But soon he was off quoting Racine, one of his favorite authors, whom he knew almost entirely by heart. At about noon we neared Chartres. We left Mademoiselle at the hotel and started, as was his wont, to hunt old books and antiques. We found a modest book-seller with a rather uninteresting line of musty wares. France kept darting from one pile to another, taking out book after book; just as a sparrow, with

Bonjour, bon an, mon filz.

Nous avons reçu joyeusement vos beaux
présents. Non! je n'avais pas cette
rare et précieuse édition de la Héniade,
ni cette pièce introuvable faite lors de
l'avènement de Louis XVI. Quant à
la boîte, mademoiselle Emma s'est
avisée qu'elle n'avait pas de boîte
à mouchoirs en ivoire pour la garniture
d'une de ses poudreries, et elle a
pris celle-là sans remords, après avoir
longtemps contemplé l'oiseau perché
sur une branche, qui orne le couvercle.

Nous vous embrassons.

Je me mets aux pieds de mademoiselle
Waghomann et mademoiselle Emma
me dit qu'elle est votre charmante sœur,
la personne la plus accomplie qu'elle
ait jamais connue

Anatole France

25 décembre.

Facsimile of the Letter Translated on Page 202.

his head inquisitively perched to one side, pecks at and leaps from crumb to crumb. Naturally we were late for lunch. Afterward, reluctantly (we had heard there were other shops that had escaped us), we continued on our route to Paris, for Mademoiselle insisted upon our arriving there before evening. Before leaving Chartres, however, we took a hurried view of the famous Cathedral. France described to me the beauties of the low reliefs depicting the stages of the Cross, and ended by admitting that Christianity must have been a great religion to inspire so many great artists.

During my stay in Paris my sister and I called on France, and he presented her with a most interesting *objet d'art*. It was a tile from the floor of the Borgia's apartment in the Vatican. France (old satyr that he was) told us that on these floors had taken place the famous incident in which the Pope, his family and friends, stood on a balcony and threw down some oranges to a host of naked girls. This fruit was then being grown in Italy for the first time and the novelty inspired the fair damsels to a wanton game of catch-as-catch-can.

At about this time there came to me the following letter:

GREETINGS, HAPPY NEW YEAR, MY SON.

We received joyously your beautiful presents. No! I did not have that rare and precious edition of "La Henriade" nor that unfindable article made at the time of the accession to the throne of Louis XVI. As to the box, Mademoiselle Emma remembered that she did not have a tortoise shell box for patches to go with the garniture of one of her *poudreuses* and she remorselessly took yours after contemplating for a long time the little bird perched on a bough which ornaments the cover.

We embrace you.

I lay myself at the feet of Miss Wassermann, and Mademoiselle Emma tells me that your charming sister is the most accomplished person she has ever known.

ANATOLE FRANCE.

After my discharge I spent some time in traveling, but would frequently take a trip to Tours, where I found France most pessimistic because Mademoiselle was very ill. He would weep and tell me that if anything happened to her he would undoubtedly commit suicide, that life without her was impossible. But then again his love of literature would burst forth, and he would lead me enthusiastically to his library to collate my first editions of Voltaire or to show me a new design of Prud'hon, one of his favorite artists.

In August I spent a weekend at La Bechellerie. Mademoiselle was still ill and France was not too cheerful, but he talked about many things — love, art, de Musset, or Rodin. I had noticed that Rodin's collection of Greek art was rather ugly. France declared that Rodin had ugly antiques intentionally, in order to show that his own statues were more beautiful.

It was a delightful weekend. France was revising "Le Lys Rouge" but was only too glad to find an excuse to wander around his place, either fixing a twig of ivy or admiring a bush, and then breaking off into some classical quotation. I was reluctant to take my departure. The morning I left, France came down to awaken me and we chatted for a while almost as father and son. Then, after breakfast, he motored me to the station and waved a friendly farewell, for I was leaving for America.

I went abroad again in 1920, and was delighted to learn that France had returned to Paris and was living once more at the Villa Said. I rushed to see him. He was gradually fixing up the house, and I found him engaged in hanging pictures and placing furniture. He despaired of ever getting his home livable again and bewailed the fact that his books had been mixed with those of

Mademoiselle Laprévotte. From then on I used to see him every morning, when we would hang pictures and discuss prints and events in my life — for his, he said, was over. His friend Prouté, who owned a shop on the Rive Gauche, would come over from time to time with various drawings. France was particularly fond of early Italian drawings and French eighteenth century prints, including those of the little known Vivant Denon about whom he even wrote an opusculé. Steinlen would frequently saunter in, always with pencil and paper in hand, and as we chatted he would draw innumerable sketches of France.

France's life was very simple. He would get up late, rummage around the house in the morning, and after lunch and a nap would go out for a drive to Versailles, where he once owned a house, to St. Cloud to visit his friends the Couchouds, or even across the Seine to his beloved print shops and bookshops. Occasionally, he would enter the social world, but very rarely — he was too old for such frivolity, he announced. However, he came to me for tea to meet Claude Farrère, because Farrère was on good terms with the naval authorities. France was at the moment engaged in helping out some youngster whose liberal views had got him into trouble in the navy. Then again, we drove out into the Bois for tea. And once I took him to an all night restaurant to show him the modern dances, which enchanted him, and to the Casino de Paris where the gorgeous revue also pleased him tremendously. He was equally impressed by the behavior of an American woman in our party whose intolerance made her condemn a beautiful Negress in the revue. Such bigotry clashed with France's democratic and æsthetic views.

His character, as I knew it, had as many sides as his great genius. He was above all the personification of kindness, with a tremendous sense of the brotherhood of man. For instance, even when he was feeble he would not allow his servant to put on his shoes, because he said that was debasing a brother of his. He was keen to the utmost degree; from some slight conversation he could reach a person's fundamental character. He was apt to be rather moody and suffer fits of great depression, for instance if Mademoiselle were ill; yet so changeable was his nature that he would immediately forget his troubles in a discussion of art. He very seldom lost his temper; when he did, he quickly regained control and laughed at the stupid thing that had aroused his anger. He was ever ready to help anyone in need, and his greatest interest besides intellectual pursuits was in trying to shape humanity toward better results. He was a pacifist during the war because he hated to see men suffer, as may be shown by speeches he made from time to time.

France had no use for Clemenceau, whom he reproached for having so frequently changed parties. He was very friendly to Caillaux, the minister who has recently been allowed to return to Paris after being absolved by the Herriot government of the wartime charge of having carried on communications with Germany to establish peace. France always declared that Caillaux was the cleverest politician in France and that he, for one, would prefer the rule of a clever rascal to that of some upright fool. When some woman, knowing his friendship for the imprisoned minister, said that she pitied Caillaux because he must be suffering, France remarked that suffering was only relative, and corroborated this statement by adding that a small boy,

when he saw a couple locked in amorous embrace, also said, "How they must be suffering." His humor was really delightful though, to say the least, as broad as might be expected of one with his infinite tolerance.

France was averse to discussing his own work. He always stated that he hated to write and that it was a terrible effort for him, since he had to work over each phrase until it became almost perfect. He was very partial to "L'Histoire Comique", which never enjoyed as much popularity as most of his other books. It was more or less suggested by a love affair which France had with an actress during his South American trip, and I think he liked it for that reason. He was also very fond of "Le Révolte des Anges", but rather looked down on his earlier "Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard" which had gained him admission to the French Academy. Academy days were things of the past, because of Madame de Caillavet's death and even more because his free political ideas were viewed askance by this ultra conservative body. He cared for his more personal books and often talked to me of "Le Petit Pierre" which appeared while I was seeing him. His second published book, an essay on Alfred de Vigny, seemed negligible to him and he was surprised when I showed him a copy I had unearthed. He was never very much impressed by his prefaces to various of the classics republished in a collected form as "Le Génie Latin", but this was probably due to the fact that Lemerre, the editor, forced him to write them at such a starvation fee that finally France sued him. He was very fond of all his philosophical books such as "Le Jardin d'Epicure", "Sur la Pierre Blanche", and "Crainquebille". He was inclined rather to underrate his most popular book, "La Rôtisserie de la Reine

Pédaque". He liked "Le Lys Rouge" and was very partial to "Clio", which, as well as many of his short stories, he wrote to prove how different history seems in the process of formation from what it appears later on.

France always found interest in talking about other writers. "Proust", said he to me, "is too long and life is too short and I feel that I have no time to waste in reading him." He considered Abel Hermant the best of the living novelists and was fond also of Daudet. He admired the beautiful style of Villiers and of Barbey d'Aurévilly, and said that when Farrère published "L'Homme qui Assassina" anonymously it was so well written that many people thought he had written it himself. He was not blind to his friends' faults, and never overpraised Pierre Mille, Ségur, Louis Barthou, or Michel Corday, even though the last named was one of his most intimate friends. He liked Corday, he said, for his character, not for his work, and was loath to understand how the latter could be so inferior to the former. He considered Flaubert a truly great author. Mallarmé with his Impressionism remained incomprehensible to him, and Coppée he thought absolutely bereft of talent. He admired Zola as a psychologist but not as a writer. Hugo he considered somewhat old fashioned, though he admired his beautiful verse. De Musset he found delightful. But, after all, it was the ancients that France loved best.

In the spring of 1920 the first signs of his illness began. One morning I found him in a semi-delirious condition. Mademoiselle did not know what to do so I went out for a doctor, who said that France was overtired. A rest was prescribed which in a few days restored him to health. One day I took him to one of my favorite restaurants, run by

a woman called Madame Coconnier. She came up to our table to greet me, and when I introduced France to her she very politely said, "I am delighted to make your acquaintance. It seems to me I've heard about you." France accepted this eulogy with his customary simplicity. Another day we lunched at the top of the Butte with Steinlen and a group of journalists from the Midi. France was charmed to be with this band of young men and was the life of the party, joking with everyone and drinking several glasses with us — a rather rare happening, for he claimed to be no longer able to stand much wine. Of course, when he refrained it was not for ethical reasons. Indeed, he used to tell me that it was a good idea to go out and get drunk once a month and then rejoice in a hangover until the next month.

About the middle of the summer I went on an extended trip through Italy and Spain, returning to Paris only in September. France was back in St. Cloud taking a rest cure. When I went out there he told me that he was going to be married. I was much surprised until I learned that he was taking this step because, according to French law, he could not leave Mademoiselle any of his property unless they were married; otherwise it would have to go to his first wife whom he had divorced years before. Soon afterward he went back to Tours, and I started to prepare for my return to America. On October eleventh I followed him down there to see him married. The eve of this event we spent together chatting about what was going to become of me, for I was reluctant to return to America. Then he told me of his youth, how he had been loath to do any work whatsoever, and how finally, driven to it by necessity, he had

started out on the career which was, he said, to culminate in his present marriage. Whereupon we drank several bumpers to the coming event. He told me that it was so long since he had signed his real name (Thibault) that he was really unable to spell it and at the Mairie had been forced to ask whether it had an "lt" or a "d" at the end.

The wedding morn, as wedding morns should be, was sunny and bright. At about eleven o'clock we motored up to La Bechellerie. The wedding party formed there and the guests went halfway down the hill to the Mairie of Saint Cyr. The Mayor made a speech, the contract was signed, a delegation of women Socialists wished the couple all sorts of happiness. France thanked them in a few words broken by emotion, and we returned to his house for the wedding breakfast. There were seventeen people at the marriage — the Baronne Dubreton whom I had presented to France and whose love of Racine as much as her charming personality had completely won him over, her daughter, the Dubiaux who kept a department store in Tours, the Mignons, a country doctor and his wife, the Couchouds, the Calmann-Lévys (his publishers), the Kahns (Mr. Kahn looked after France's business details), the Cordays, the bride and groom, and myself. After a lunch of delicacies which Mademoiselle in her pride as housekeeper and wife had had sent down from Paris, washed down by many delightful glasses of Vouvray and champagne, we wandered around the garden and had our pictures taken. Finally, with tears in my eyes I took my departure, hoping against expectation to return soon to my beloved friend. This was the last time we met.

THE NEW YORKER

Yogi Night at the Provincetown Playhouse — The Drama Finds a New Level in "The Depths" — A Wife Who Had to Know — The "Ring" Returns to the Metropolitan — A French Modern Competes with Zuloaga's Posters — "Enkindled Driftwood" — Hot Afternoons There Have Been in Urbana.

DURING the past month, in the course of reading some of the vast number of periodicals and newspapers which plague our nation, the New Yorker stumbled upon an extraordinary sentence in a review by Stark Young, one of our most intelligent critics, which read: "People who take the theatre as mere pastime will not find the piece at the Provincetown Playhouse to their liking."

On the face of the matter, the sentence appears to be a simple statement, yet on considering it one finds there the kernel of a philosophy which largely dominates the spirit of experiment in the world of contemporary art and letters. The obvious query to such a statement is, "Well, if the theatre does not exist for the sole purpose of providing pastime, why does it exist at all?" Are we to make of the theatre a sort of mental gymnasium whither we turn our steps regularly to exercise our brains? Are we to consider it a sort of higher mathematics? Are we to work at our theatregoing? One might have slipped past that opening sentence without noticing it save for the inclusion of the word "mere". There is about the nice placing of that word, about the inflection it demands, something which indicates a certain polite condescension. It says, "The theatre is all very well but it is not the place for one to go in

search of diversion. Or, at least, it should not be such a place."

It would appear that these newcomers in the history of the theatre would change the whole basis of its existence. They would make it something to be taken painfully. Fortunately there is no danger of such a revolution. Once the theatre becomes painful the public will desert it, and so there will be no theatre at all.

The play which Mr. Young was engaged in reviewing at the moment of his self betrayal was an extraordinarily painful exercise translated from the German of Walter Hasenclever, called vaguely "Beyond", and produced on the stage of the Provincetown Theatre. Save for the Theatre Guild, the public owes a greater debt of pleasure to the Provincetown group than to any management in New York during the present dull season. "Beyond" came as a blow. At the dress rehearsal the little theatre was crowded by spectators who could be divided roughly into three classes: (a) the "arty" ones who gasped with awe at hidden wonders of the piece, (b) those who received it in a mildly dazed condition, and (c) those who, in defiance of the hostile glares of the "arty" ones, laughed through three acts and then, abandoning the final two, went home to listen to the radio.

The evening might well have been