

# Anatole France

*—Jamais esprit ne se montra tout ensemble si hardi et si pacifique et ne trempa ses dédains de plus de douceur. Il méprisa les hommes avec tendresse.*

IN these words, spoken of the Abbé Jérôme Coignard, Anatole France has described himself. They are to be found in the introduction to the Abbé's Opinions, that book of charmingly destructive doubts and tolerances, and if we would know something of what Anatole France thought of himself, and of his world, and of himself as spectator of that world, no pages of his are more illuminating. Here, more than anywhere else, may be found what, since Anatole France would have smiled to hear it called his philosophy, we might call the expression of his frame of mind; and here are the materials from which others will reconstruct the system of a man whose system, if any, was the lack of it; and the creed of one whose strongest beliefs were always doubts. There will be many, of course, whose admiration for him excels their understanding, to forge themselves a weapon of his peaceful scepticism, to erect a frail symmetry of order from his chosen, solid disorder, to crucify him, after death, as a leader of the thought of mankind. They will make a philosopher out of him, forgetting that, in pretending to blame the Abbé Coignard, Anatole France was paying him the highest compliment: "L'esprit de système lui fit défaut. . ."

"Il méprisa les hommes avec tendresse"—unless we take the whole of what he wrote, this little phrase will describe him as well as any. It is true; it is far too brief to be all the truth. He did not think too well of mankind and he is not the first to have had that feeling, but to leave the matter there would be inaccurate, unjust. "Du mépris universel que lui inspiraient les hommes, il ne s'exceptait pas." He held men to be of slight value, himself among them; he did not think them better than they were—a great error; he did not think them worse—an even greater error, but just themselves, pathetically noble, solemn, miserable, happy, trivial, ridiculous, and himself no worse, no better. This judgment, which can be and has been arrived at by the cool exercise of reason, was in Anatole France inseparably mixed with amused affection. He despised them, he was tender toward them—these two can be felt separately, but he felt them at once, and continually, and so his feeling about men and women cannot be given a defining word, nor indeed any words which do not fall far short of the books he wrote about them. He was affectionate, but not too indulgent; merciless, without cruelty; merciful, without sentimentalism; an amused, painless executioner, if need be; a critical, generous creator; letting fall, as if casually, and without emphasis, unanswerable, unforgettable things; sympathetic alike

when his disdain was uppermost or his tenderness. And even his sympathy was witty.

One can imagine him, always so smilingly, so reasonably, so diabolically detached, looking at his own life and his own work as if they were those of another man. Would he not laugh out loud at the baptism of the Penguins, and fall under the spell of the beauty, clear and slow-running like a river at early morning, of Paphnuce's journey along the Nile, and be infinitely touched and amused by M. Bergeret alone with the dog Riquet, and wonder at the profound and various and ancient learning so richly, so carelessly interwoven in the adventures of Jacques Tournebroke, and find charm even in longest, slowest pages, and a gentle, limpid excellence even in the scholarly minutiae of Jeanne d'Arc, where he has forgotten, or chosen to forget his own principle that "tout montrer est ne rien faire voir"?

Somebody not long ago said that Anatole France could not be a great writer because he was so easy to understand. Which proved that whoever made the remark did not understand him and that, ergo, Anatole France is a great writer after all. What he says, to be sure, is lucid beyond equal, there is no phrase the meaning of which is not clear as purest water. But since this limpidity is so often in the service of his doubt, of his gay certainty that the little we know is so small a fraction of the universe veiled from us, since his well-ruddered, adventurous craft skirts, by design, such dark shores of prejudice, such vast cliffs of dogma, such continents of ignorance, in what he writes the overtones of everything that is not known, not understood, perhaps never to be understood, are there to be heard by all who have ears. By the luminous pilgrimage of his private sun through darkness we can learn what light is, and what darkness, and how gay and laughing and unconquerable a light it is beside that darkness.

Speculations vain and discouraging may tempt us, asking what fruit the seeds sown by this tender, sceptical, mocking mind may bear in our time. A sweetly acid fruit, subtly filled with a celestial disillusion which may be the food most needed by those who, "hot for certainties in this our world," reject it as poison. But there is little use in hoping that everyone will love Anatole France, and understand and wish their hearts—as much one could not hope from their minds—to be like his. One's final estimate of him must be purely personal, based on affection, on gratitude, on the memory of enchanted hours with M. Bergeret, with Riquet, with Paphnuce, Tournebroke and Jérôme Coignard, hours of effortless magic, of a rippling stream of contented discontent, of infinitely sharp, unmurderous irony, of silver prose flowing with candid certainty. . .

ROBERT LITTELL.

## C O M M U N I C A T I O N

Why One Woman Supports  
La Follette

THE reasons for voting for any candidate are always difficult enough to formulate. But when one is a bird of no particular feather, as I am, shaping an answer to the voter's dilemma becomes a painful process of searching around in one's mind, to find the fragments of mental processes lying there, in order to set them up and make them look like orderly, self-conscious reasons. Some of this *ex post facto* reasoning even a particular bird may do and no doubt does. But if he be a professional "radical," a Leaguer à outrance, a "wet" or a "dry"—to say nothing of party Republicans and Democrats—he has at least some criteria ready to hand around which all his peripheral vagueness may sooner or later collect.

None of these helps have I. And being also a woman, I am without a single political habit or tradition, not even the pull of historical perspective, to fall back on. I know men whose considered judgment tells them to refrain from voting this year because there are no issues at stake of sufficient importance. There's also my friend who after giving the matter careful thought has planned to go hunting over election day. I know women, to be sure, who are loyal working Republicans or Democrats or self-styled Progressives. But I am what a woman voter may logically be expected to be, from her background and training and too-recent education, as shorn of pre-election ties as a new-born lamb.

And yet I have a vote.

One of the first things which brings me to La Follette is that I find I cannot vote for either Coolidge or Davis. Because I am a free-will voter, the reasons why are more relevant to my final choice than if I had a *parti pris*. What I call "personal" reasons figure rather prominently in these—a fact for which I have no apology, holding that they form some part of every voter's response to a candidate, legitimately enough, provided they are not carried to an extreme. We all know the woman who objects to a particular candidate's face, and I know one who thinks no lady could vote for a man named "Al" who is known to be a "wet."

If anything had been needed to strengthen an instinctive reluctance to follow Mr. Coolidge, the gradual revelation which the investigations last spring afforded of him would have been enough. For it was then borne in upon me slowly that the disclosures aroused no shock or surprise or burning moral indignation in the President. It was evident that he meant to dissociate himself from them as effectively as possible, as he and his spokesman did by constant reminders that he was not responsible for the appointments of the previous administration and by blanket announcement that no evil-doer should go unpunished—but that he would act so as to aid the speedy fading out of public memory, in pursuance of his policy of "getting by" by saying nothing. He was one of the first to minimize the scandals and so, instead of sharpening the public sense of what constitutes high character in public office, actually increased public indifference to it. This willingness to stifle moral sensitiveness for ends

shrewdly calculated in advance filled me with cumulative distrust. Unless my interpretation is wrong—and every voter is entitled to his own interpretation of the public acts of public men—I cannot see how I am to feel any other way. As for Mr. Coolidge's general outlook on life, his constant harping on "economy at home and abroad," and the dreary predominance of the small thrifty, New England virtues make me feel, though a Puritan off-shoot myself, spiritually alien to the movement which surrounds and is determined to admire and extol the President.

Mr. Davis meant nothing to me when nominated but an agreeable public figure with no salient features to attract or annoy. His speeches have left me in this initial apathy. None of his campaign views sound like his own warm familiar convictions. Even the indignation with which in his acceptance speech he clothed his comments on Republican corruption, sounded to me like heat generated for the occasion. In the fight which is being waged in certain quarters over the question whether or not Mr. Davis is a liberal, I find myself heartily with the sceptics. Mr. Davis's psychology seems to me a good deal like that of the small boy as Christmas approaches. The reasons which my friends give for voting for him—that he will "take us into the League," that he is a gentleman at last, that he uses such good English, that he is a very distinguished lawyer, that they cannot vote for La Follette—none of these moves me out of the direction into which I am settling with more and more ease as time progresses. Mr. Davis by his speeches reveals himself a person with a singularly "private" point of view, considering his rather many years in public life—a man who does not like to do his thinking in terms of the many rather than of the few, but would prefer to return to the comfortable narrowness of a private life, where he may indulge his likes and prejudices without stopping to care what anybody thinks.

In contrast to the stultification of one candidate and the unconvincing tepidity of the other, the concreteness of Mr. La Follette makes a clear appeal. He stands for definite ideas and practical applications of ideas to institutions. I may not "like" all of them. Some of them I do not understand and if they were explained to me would understand only as much as I were told—not enough to make my judgment worth anything. But I can understand what he has done in Wisconsin, and how. And I can grasp the implications behind the fact that so many of the legislative proposals presented to Republican conventions by La Follette and his followers in years past, and rejected by them, have since become law.

All this definiteness reveals an outlook that I like. *This* candidate has spent his life for causes in which he has believed. *There* is the record for anyone to read. Moreover, I believe the impetus behind his life has been devotion to causes and not ambition for selfish ends. If pressed, I could give reasons for thinking so, but the explanation is probably deeper than reasons. I have so often seen the same set of facts produce fundamentally opposite judgments in men that I have come to believe opinion is in the last analysis as inexplicable as instinct.

I like Mr. La Follette's "pacifism." It seems to me, a pacifist myself since the last war, a brave and clear-