

# THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

## THE COLLECTED WORKS OF ANATOLE FRANCE

By Burton Rascoc

**G**ABRIEL WELLS is a bibliophile and he has been true to his temperament in planning this edition of the work of the most celebrated bibliophile in contemporary literature. One characteristic that Sylvestre Bonnard, the Abbé Jérôme Coignard, Professor Bergeret, Doctor Trublet, and Brotteaux have in common besides the naïveté and gentleness of their souls is a love for rare and beautiful books. Mr. Wells has paid them a compliment in margins, printing, and binding that would please them. He has used the excellent translation on which the late Frederic Chapman expended so much care and which J. Lewis May is bringing to completion.

As I write, news comes from Paris that Anatole France is seriously ill and apprehensions are felt that he may not have the strength left to fight off the poisons which a rectal cancer is throwing into his blood stream. He is eighty years old. For forty years he has been a famous man, famous for the marvelous precision, clarity, and simplicity of his prose style, famous for his liberal and humane thought, famous for his ironic wit and earthy humor, famous for his deep human wisdom which is tinged with sadness. By universal suffrage he is the foremost literary man of his time.

More than any other writer, France is the culmination of the spirit of the nineteenth century. He did not like the century, which he considered barbarous, crude and cruel; he often

expressed a preference for the eighteenth century, or at least for that side of the eighteenth century which is represented by graceful manners, indulgent gallantry, and cultivated wit. But, no less, his spirit was that of the century in which he lived. Culturally, that spirit was at once materialistic, skeptical, and humanitarian. Bertrand Russell is perhaps right in saying that the great creative spirits of the nineteenth century were not the writers, artists, statesmen or soldiers, but the scientists. And the essence of the scientific temper is skepticism, a disposition to question any hypothesis, theory, dogma, or tradition in the sole interest of truth. It is a humanitarian skepticism, for it is practised by scientists of the finer sort toward the amelioration of human suffering. It is materialistic in that its aim and to a great extent its achievement has been the conquest of natural forces to the end that mankind should be blessed with more creature comforts, relieved of much of the burden of toil, and endowed with more leisure for the cultivation of the things of the mind and spirit.

All of France's work has been the expression of precisely that spirit. Like a scientist subjecting an accepted theory to scrutiny in order to test its validity, France has examined the concepts upon which the civilization of his time was built. He found to his shock and sorrow that the most salient characteristic of men was their cruelty

to one another; and to the lessening of this cruelty he has for forty years counseled kindness, pity and compassion. I once wrote that France was the most Christian spirit in Europe. This offended some of my religious friends because France is an avowed skeptic and agnostic and he professes discipleship to the lenient pagan philosopher, Epicurus. But if the evidence of the Four Gospels is reliable, the message of the Founder of Christianity was one of pity and compassion. He taught the Brotherhood of Man, which may be an illusion — professed Christians often reject it as if it were — but it is the one illusion that Anatole France has never relinquished. One after another he gave up the illusions that man could be wholly and perfectly heroic, that he could be just in all relationships, and that he could be free from the sins of the flesh; but under these negatives he was still able to gather men into a brotherhood of aim and purpose. He has chosen the method of comedy for his representation of life, and comedy, as Aristotle wrote, is the treatment of man as less noble than he is, whereas tragedy is the treatment of man as more noble than he is. All of France's characters, the most lovable and most likable, have something that is slightly ridiculous about them; they have their weaknesses and contradictions, their futile preoccupations and their sublime faith in trifles. And it is this combination of qualities which brings them close to the heart of humanity.

In France's temperament are blended the two great and divergent characteristics of the French genius; so it was appropriate that he should take "France" as a pseudonym. Those characteristics are represented by Rabelais and Montaigne and are found to exist side by side in French literature

from Rabelais and Montaigne down to the present. In Anatole France humor mates with wit; and his inheritance is as much from Pantagruel, Gil Blas, and Cyrano as from Montaigne, Voltaire, and Renan. It is not a surprise to the reader of Anatole France to discover that one of the authors France loves the most is Dickens, for there is much of Dickens's warm, human heart in him. And it does not come as a surprise to learn that he had a profound admiration for Heinrich Heine, for much of his salty and sometimes acid wit resembles that of the brilliant, troubled, and romantic German Jew who was not only one of the greatest lyricists of all time but also one of the most original and distinctive of prose writers.

When we read France's recollections of his childhood, "My Friend's Book", "Little Pierre", and "The Bloom of Life", which are to be counted among the tenderest and most sympathetic pictures of childhood ever written, we discover two things which may help us to explain the character and personality Anatole France has revealed to us in his writings. He was, as a boy, studious, frail, romantic, given over to day dreams prompted by the perusal of the books in his father's stalls on the Quai Malaquais. His slight physique and his shy, sensitive nature did not permit him to shine among his fellows as a leader, an athlete, or even as a pupil in class. He had, however, an admiration for the qualities he lacked — wilfulness, aggressiveness, physical courage, fluency of speech, and power to command. He had also a capacity for hero worship; and in one of his young friends he found all those qualities he admired without possessing. He idolized his friend who was so efficient and so readily capable of doing anything he wanted to do or getting

anything he set his heart on. He gave this boy that loyalty and high faith and profound respect which children are sometimes capable of giving. But, in time, he was disillusioned by his friend. He found that friend a bully, with a streak of wanton cruelty in him and with no delicate sense of loyalty, honesty, or justice. This discovery was crushing. It left the young Anatole without a hero and turned him in upon himself. From that episode, probably, dates France's hatred for brute force, cruelty and mean selfishness. The moral defection, too, of a beautiful mature woman whom as a child he worshiped with a reverence compounded of all that he had read in history and classic poetry, was a painful disillusion which affected him profoundly and inclined him toward moral skepticism and tolerance. Much of his work may be accounted a compensation for his early hurts and deficiencies.

France was slow to mature. He was nearly forty when he first began seriously to write. The other years had been preparation, study, experience. Therefore (unless we may count his poetry) there are no juvenilia in his

collected work. It is also true that there is no growth or development in it; there is mere elaboration and diffusion. There is also repetition, but no writer has ever been so charming in repetition; no one has ever given greater delight by showing the different facets of a crystallized point of view. That point of view — ironic skepticism — was integrated as early as "The Crime of Sylvestre Bonnard", and it was polished to its utmost brilliance in "Penguin Island" and "The Revolt of the Angels".

France's stories, satires, histories, and discussions of men and books have the pleasing qualities of a fluent, cultivated, and intimate, informal discourse spoken serenely by a tranquil man of the world who is rounded out and made complete by a broad scholarship in humane letters. He brought French prose style to perfection as an instrument of clear and subtle expression. So free is that style from mannerisms and tricks of syntax that in the hands of careful translators little of the flavor of the original is lost.

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The Works of Anatole France: Autograph Edition. Thirty volumes. Gabriel Wells.