ANATOLE FRANCE THE BOY

By Thomas Moult

WITH the honors of greatness upon him, M. Anatole France came to his years of tranquillity. But his pen remained as busy as ever. In 1920 he completed "Le Petit Pierre", and two years later there appeared the delectably named "La Vie en Fleur". In these pages are continued the "souvenirs" which began with "Le Livre de mon Ami" and "Pierre Nozière".

Thus we have four books in which we are privileged to behold Europe's late genius turning to look back upon the far springtime of childhood, and finding himself at once the proudest and humblest of his kind. He seems to have resigned himself to his mood of retrospection with a child's humility, to the guidance of an unseen hand, the hand of one walking by his side. But although through the mist of distance he sees his own infancy being led, as once it was led, into the unfamiliar path of life, he watches as proudly as though he himself had not been simply the child, but the unseen guide also. No longer a child, he is able to recall the child's helpless wonder, and he has analyzed it exquisitely in his study of one whom we have come to know and adore as little Pierre. Although he has never in reality been the unseen guide, he now apprehends in the light of experience exactly why the hand whose fingers the child felt upon his wrist drew him this way along the spiritual and material labyrinths of the French capital rather than that way, or that way rather than this.

Thus, within M. France's venerable mind are fused the pride and humility of understanding. And, writing down that retrospective vision, recounting his young experiences, he has given such tender expression to his commingling of emotions, especially in the pages of "Le Petit Pierre" and "La Vie en Fleur", that his autobiographical pages will be worth a whole library of memorial tomes concerning his name and fame. Though a second pen may, ably enough, "mark the height achieved, the main result", none but Anatole France himself could have put on record the "golden instants and bright days" whose greater significance John Masefield has emphasized so beautifully in one of his noblest verses.

In another sense as well as in this, must M. France be regarded as his own best biographer, for the humane irony that colored his maturest outlook saved him from the pitfall which brings dismay to so many autobiographers, that of exaggerating the importance of one's early occasions. It would be hard to find a more delicious example than M. France's of how a man ought to memorialize "the day before yesterday", as the late Richard Middleton once entitled his own poetic fragment of autobiography. By means of a series of episodes the intellectual and emotional flowering of an eager and thoughtful boy is portrayed, and at the

close of "La Vie en Fleur" we leave him entering, more or less on equal terms, the society of grown ups. Actually in this narrative we are nowhere informed in so many words that the author himself is Pierre Nozière; but in the genial preface to "La Vie en Fleur" he confesses that he has written "faithful memoirs disguised"; his pen has pursued no particular method, he tells us, but he has preferred to adopt the plan of Madame de Caylus who, already old and overcome with worries, objected that her mind was not tranquil enough to dictate her memoirs. "O well," said her son readily, taking up his pen, "we will call them 'Souvenirs', and you need not bother about any order of dates nor sequence of events."

It matters little by what name, souvenirs or memoirs, we classify this fruit of M. France's retrospection. There is a chapter in the most recent volume wherein is related how, at twelve years of age, he remarked to his school chum, after much inward meditation, that "One doesn't give enough." Forthwith they formed a private charitable organization. Between them they possessed forty nine sous to bestow on the poor and lowly. Alas, the action made one of those two boys, as he admits, a "little Pharisee". But his readers have no cause to regret the fact, for they are gainers by at least one memorable passage:

> I was disposed at this time to take for mine the ideas of others. I have corrected that since, and I now know that I owe as much to strange people as to my countrymen, to the ancients as to the moderns, and notably to the Greeks, to whom I owe most of all, to whom I would like to owe more, for whatever we know of reasonableness, about the universe and man, comes to us from them.

The schooldays of the young Anatole, or Pierre, are always recalled lovingly, as are the people by whom he was surrounded and for whom he conceived an abiding admiration. He reports the eternal schoolboy discussions: "I joined a Peripatetic Society whose members, during their debates, walked up and down the court, arguing on everything known and unknown." He helped to form the "Académie Blaise Pascal", whose headquarters were to have been an attic in one boy's house; but unfortunately at the first meeting somebody smuggled in a bottle of rum and the paper they had arranged to discuss was entirely forgotten. A man servant eventually brought from the irate parent below the message that if his son did not expel his rowdy friends within five minutes there would be trouble! On another occasion young Pierre was rhapsodizing to a friend in his early teens over the ladies of history. "Take care, Nozière," warned the sage in knickerbockers, "woman is perfidious!" And once, at a school banquet, he was placed next to a boy named Mouron whom he and his class disdained and refused to speak to. During the meal he rejected most snobbishly all the poor boy's advances. Thereupon Mouron made a doll of his serviette, placed it before him on the table, and addressed it somewhat in this fashion: "How are you, my poor little Mouron? There is no one to speak to you. That is sad, but console yourself. We will have a chat together, and that will amuse us. I am going to tell you about an astonishing adventure that happened to my schoolfellow, Pierre Nozière. Pierre came to the banquet of Saint Charlemagne without his soul, because if he had come with it he would talk. But he says nothing, because his soul is not in his body. Where is it, in what country? On the earth, or in the moon? I do not know. Anyway, while it is traveling about, you are having a very sad meal,

my poor little Mouron, by the side of a body without a soul, of a statue which neither speaks nor laughs; it is only a statue." Is it to be wondered at that the disdain of Pierre was broken down completely by the sweetness and grace of this unexpected speech? A friendship began there and then that lasted all their lives.

Who will forget M. France's portrait of the peasant Justine, a serving maid in the Nozière household whom her master had facetiously christened "Catastrophe" because she was always to be found in a state of panic in her kitchen, her hands and face black, her hair untidy — a hopeless slattern throughout her humble career, yet in her "servile intelligence" as charming and lovable as any of the bourgeois heroines in his fiction? In these souvenirs we are introduced to every type of Parisian character, maiden aunts and mentors, parents and public dignitaries, schoolboys, artists, and "sweethearts" of undeniably high degree: and yet that portrait of Justine is never overfaced. "Justine," the earnest boy of twelve impetuously exclaims, "do you realize that Spartacus, the head of a horde of slaves, defied the four Prætorian armies and three consular armies, and that he forced the Senate to send against him the legions of Crassus and Pompey . . . " But at that point Justine will interrupt him. "I must remove the lentils which are on the fire, for there is nothing that sticks to the bottom of the pan so much as lentils."

Here is revealed, deftly and with exceeding modesty, not so much the peasant Justine as the author of "Sylvestre Bonnard" himself. Out of that blossoming boyhood, that zestful period of observation, as all the cultured world knows, a career emerged which was as rich and full flowered as any in modern Europe. And the score of classic volumes which have crowned it are always of life just as eager, always a treasury of the humble, of the universal schoolboy, the universal Justine.