

INTRODUCTION

WHAT one first notes about *The Queen Pédauque* is the fact that in this ironic and subtle book is presented a story which, curiously enough, is remarkable for its entire innocence of subtlety and irony. Abridge the "plot" into a synopsis, and you will find your digest to be what is manifestly the outline of a straightforward, plumed romance by the elder Dumas.

Indeed, Dumas would have handled the "strange surprising adventures" of Jacques Tournebroche to a nicety, if only Dumas had ever thought to have his collaborators write this brisk tale, wherein d'Astarac and Tournebroche and Mosaïde display, even now, a noticeable something in common with the Balsamo and Gilbert and Althotas of the *Mémoires d'un Médecin*. One foresees, to be sure, that, with the twin-girthed Creole for guide, M. Jérôme Coignard would have waddled into immortality not quite as we know him, but with somewhat more of a fraternal resemblance to the Dom Gorenflot of *La Dame de Monsoreau*; and that the blood of the abbé's death-wound could never have bedewed the book's final pages, in the teeth of Dumas' economic unwillingness ever to despatch any character who was "good for" a sequel.

And one thinks rather kindly of *The Queen Pédauque* as Dumas would have equipped it. . . . Yes, in reading here, it is the most facile and least avoidable of mental exercises to prefigure how excellently Dumas would have contrived this book,—somewhat as in the reading of Mr. Joseph Conrad's novels a many of us are haunted by the sense that the Conrad "story" is, in its essential beams and

stanchions, the sort of thing which W. Clark Russell used to put together, in a rather different way, for our illicit perusal. Whereby I only mean that such seafaring was illicit in those aureate days when, Cleveland being consul for the second time, your geography figured as the screen of fictive reading-matter during school-hours.

One need not say that there is no question, in either case, of "imitation," far less of "plagiarism"; nor need one, surely, point out the impossibility of anybody's ever mistaking the present book for a novel by Alexandre Dumas. Ere Homer's eyesight began not to be what it had been, the fact was noted by the observant Chian, that very few sane architects commence an edifice by planting and rearing the oaks which are to compose its beams and stanchions. You take over all such supplies ready hewn, and choose by preference time-seasoned timber. Since Homer's prime a host of other great creative writers have recognised this axiom when they too began to build: and "originality" has by ordinary been, like chess and democracy, a Mecca for little minds.

Besides, there is the vast difference that M. Anatole France has introduced into the Dumas theatre some pre-eminently un-Dumas-like stage-business: the characters, between assignations and combats, toy amorously with ideas. That is the difference which at a stroke dissevers them from any helter-skelter character in Dumas as utterly as from any of our clearest thinkers in office.

It is this toying, this series of mental *amourettes*, which incommunicably "makes the difference" in almost all the volumes of M. France familiar to me, but our affair is with this one story. Now in this vivid book we have our fill of color and animation and gallant strangenesses, and a stir of characters who impress us as living with a poignancy unmastered as yet by anybody's associates in

flesh and blood. We have, in brief, all that Dumas could ever offer, here utilised not to make drama but background, all being woven into a bright undulating tapestry behind an erudite and battered figure,—a figure of odd medleys, in which the erudition is combined with much of Autolycus, and the unkemptness with something of à Kempis. For what one remembers of *The Queen Pédauque* is l'Abbé Jérôme Coignard; and what one remembers, ultimately, about Coignard is not his crowded career, however opulent in larcenous and lectual escapades and fisticuffs and broached wineflasks, but his religious meditations, wherein a merry heart does, quite actually, go all the way.

Coignard I take to be a peculiarly rare type of man (there is no female of this species), the type that is genuinely interested in religion. He stands apart. He halves little with the staid majority of us, who sociably contract our sacred tenets from our neighbors like a sort of theological measles. He halves nothing whatever with our more earnest-minded juniors who—perennially discovering that all religions thus far put to the test of nominal practice have, whatever their paradisial *entrée*, resulted in a deplorable earthly hash—perennially run yelping into the shrill agnosticism which believes only that one's neighbors should not be permitted to believe in anything.

The creed of Coignard is more urbane. "Always bear in mind that a sound intelligence rejects everything that is contrary to reason, except in matters of faith, where it is necessary to believe blindly." Your opinions are thus all-important, your physical conduct is largely a matter of taste, in a philosophy which ranks affairs of the mind immeasurably above the gross accidents of matter. Indeed, man can win to heaven only through repentance, and the initial step toward repentance is to do something to repent

of. There is no flaw in this logic, and in its clear lighting such abrogations of parochial and transitory human laws as may be suggested by reason and the consciousness that nobody is looking, take on the aspect of divinely appointed duties.

Some dullard may here object that M. France—at-
testedly, indeed, since he remains unjailed—cannot him-
self believe all this, and that it is with an ironic glitter
in his ink he has recorded these dicta. To which the ob-
vious answer would be that M. France (again like all
great creative writers) is an ephemeral and negligible
person beside his durable puppets; and that, moreover,
to reason thus is, it may be precipitately, to disparage the
plumage of birds on the ground that an egg has no
feathers. . . . Whatever M. France may believe, our concern
is here with the conviction of M. Coignard that his religion
is all-important and all-significant. And it is curious to
observe how unerringly the abbé's thoughts aspire, from
no matter what remote and low-lying starting-point, to the
loftiest niceties of religion and the high thin atmosphere
of ethics. Sauce spilt upon the good man's collar is but
a reminder of the influence of clothes upon our moral
being, and of how terrifyingly is the destiny of each
person's soul dependent upon such trifles; a glass of light
white wine leads not, as we are nowadays taught to believe,
to instant ruin, but to edifying considerations of the life
and glory of St. Peter; and a pack of cards suggests,
straightway, intransigent fine points of martyrology. Al-
ways this churchman's thoughts deflect to the most interest-
ing of themes, to the relationship between God and His
children, and what familiarly etiquette may be necessary to
preserve the relationship unstrained. These problems alone
engross Coignard unfailingly, even when the philosopher
has had the ill luck to fall simultaneously into drunken-

ness and a public fountain, and retains so notably his composure between the opposed assaults of fluidic unfriends.

What, though, is found the outcome of this philosophy, appears a question to be answered with wariness of empiricism. None can deny that Coignard says when he lies dying: "My son, reject, along with the example I gave you, the maxims which I may have proposed to you during my period of lifelong folly. Do not listen to those who, like myself, subtilise over good and evil." Yet this is just one low-spirited moment, as set against the preceding fifty-two high-hearted years. And the utterance wrung forth by this moment is, after all, merely that sentiment which seems the inevitable bedfellow of the moribund,—“Were I to have my life over again, I would live differently.” The sentiment is familiar and venerable, but its truthfulness has not yet been attested.

To the considerate, therefore, it may appear expedient to dismiss Coignard's trite winding-up of a half-century of splendid talking, as just the infelicitous outcropping, in the dying man's enfeebled condition, of an hereditary foible. And when moralising would approach an admonitory forefinger to the point that Coignard's manner of living brought him to die haphazardly, among preoccupied strangers at a casual wayside inn, you do, there is no questioning it, recall that a more generally applauded manner of living has been known to result in a more competently arranged-for demise, under the best churchly and legal auspices, through the rigors of crucifixion.

So it becomes the part of wisdom to waive these mundane riddles, and to consider instead the justice of Coignard's fine epitaph, wherein we read that “living without worldly honors, he earned for himself eternal glory.” The statement may (with St. Peter keeping the gate) have been challenged in para-

dise, but in literature at all events the unhonored life of Jérôme Coignard has clothed him with glory of tolerably longeval looking texture. It is true that this might also be said of Iago and Tartuffe, but then we have Balzac's word for it that merely to be celebrated is not enough. Rather is the highest human desideratum twofold,—*D'être célèbre et d'être aimé*. And that much Coignard promises to be for a long while.

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