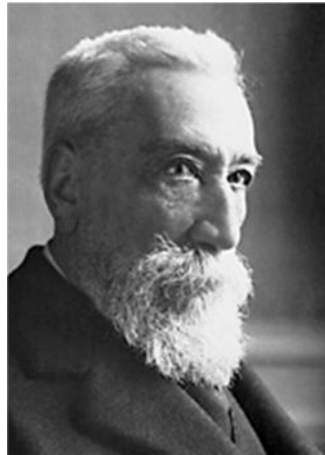


## **Nobel Prize in Literature 1921**



**Anatole France**

**The Nobel Prize in Literature 1921 was awarded to Anatole France "in recognition of his brilliant literary achievements, characterized as they are by a nobility of style, a profound human sympathy, grace, and a true Gallic temperament".**

Anatole France was no longer a young man when, in 1881, he captured the attention of the literary public in France and subsequently in the civilized world with his curious novel, *Le Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard*. He had behind him a long stretch of years during which his development had been carried on without attracting wide attention. But if, during this period of slow growth, his literary efforts had been infrequent and not very energetic, the work to which he had subjected his intellect, his thought, and his taste had been proportionately wider and more vigorous. No immoderate desire for fame moved him. Ambition seems to have played a small role in his life. Indeed, he tells the story that at the age of seven he wanted to be famous. Excited by the legends of saints told to him by his good, pious mother, he wanted to settle in the desert and as a hermit match the glory of St. Anthony and St. Jerome. His desert was the *Jardin des Plantes* where the huge beasts lived in houses and cages, and where God the Father seemed to him to raise his arms to heaven blessing the antelope, the gazelle, and the dove. His mother was frightened by such vanity but her husband soothed her: «My dear, you will see that at twenty he will be disgusted with fame.» «My father was not mistaken», France says. «Like the King of Yvetot, I lived quite well without fame and no longer had the least desire to engrave my name on the memory of men. As for the dream of becoming a hermit, I refashioned it every time I believed I felt life was thoroughly bad; in other words, I refashioned it every day. But every day

nature took me by the ear and led me to the amusements in which our humble lives pass away.» At the age of fifteen the young Anatole France dedicated his first essay, «La Légende de Sainte Radegonde, Reine de France», to his father and his beloved mother. This work is now lost, but even much later, when his faith in saints had vanished, he was still able to write legends with a pen dipped in the gold of haloes.

The poet's star seems to have been illuminated first in that bright constellation bearing the name Anatole France. In the old library of his worthy father, he soon felt a thirst for knowledge, amidst the noble dust of old books. Into this shop, whose proud sign «Aux Armes de France» inspired father and son to take up the literary name, came collectors and bibliophiles to examine the recently acquired treasures and to discuss authors and editions. Thus the young Anatole, always a good listener, was initiated into the mysteries of erudition, a pursuit he considered the highest pleasure of a peaceful life. We need only look at the Abbé Coignard, all beaming as he leaves the grill room of the «Reine Pédaque» where he pays for the material pleasures of this world by giving some lessons to a young spit-turner and by dispensing the treasures of an eloquence full of wisdom, irony, and Christian faith; we see him turn toward the library to feast his spirit free of charge on the latest books arrived from Holland, the country of classical editions. And, bored with domestic tedium, here is Mr. Bergeret, who comes to pass the finest hours of his day in conversation with friends gathered around the library's display shelves. Anatole France is the poet of libraries and bookworms. His imagination revels in the visions of bibliophiles, as when he praises that marvellous *Astaracienne*, a giant collection of books and manuscripts in which a noble cabalist sought proofs to bolster his superstition. «More fervently than ever», says Coignard toward the end of his adventurous career, «I want to sit down behind a table, in some venerable gallery, where many choice books would be assembled in silence. I prefer their conversation to that of men. I have found diverse ways of life and I judge that the best way is to devote oneself to study, to support calmly one's part in the vicissitudes of life, and to prolong, by the spectacle of centuries and of empires, the brevity of our days.» Love of intellectual work is a fundamental characteristic of Anatole France's personal religion and just like his Abbé, he prefers, from the height of the ivory tower of knowledge and thought, to turn his gaze toward far-off times and countries. His irony lives in the present, his devotion in the past.

Yet though our existence is fragile, beauty lives everywhere, and for the writer it materializes in form and style. Anatole France's vast studies and great meditation have bestowed a rare solidity on his work, but no less serious is the labour he has devoted to the perfecting of his style. The language which he had to shape is one of the noblest; French is the most richly endowed daughter of the mother tongue Latin. It has served the greatest masters. Now grave, now merry, it possesses serenity and charm, strength and melody. In many places France calls it the most beautiful language on earth and lavishes the most tender epithets on it as to a beloved woman. But as a true son of the ancients, he wishes it *simplex munditiis*. He is an artist, certainly one of the greatest, but his art aspires to keep his language, through severe purification, as simple and, at the

same time, as expressive as possible. In contemporary Europe, where flourishes a superficial dilettantism, dangerous for the purity of languages, his work is a richly instructive example of what art can do with true resources. His language is the classical French, the French of Fénelon and Voltaire, and rather than contribute new ornaments to it, he gives it a slightly archaic stamp which admirably suits his subjects, often taken from antiquity. His French is so transparent that one would like to apply to it what he said of Leila, daughter of Lilith, one of the luminous and fragile beings sprung from his imagination: «If crystal could speak, it would speak in this fashion.»

Let us recall now, for our own pleasure, some of the works which have secured for the name of Anatole France the world-wide renown which he has so little desired but which nevertheless he cannot avoid. By so doing we will often encounter France himself, for he is less inclined than most writers to hide behind his characters and words.

He is recognized as a master of the tale, which he has made a wholly personal genre, in which erudition, imagination, serene charm of style, and depth of irony and passion combine to produce marvellous effects. Who can ever forget his Balthazar? The Negro King of Ethiopia comes to pay a visit to Balkis, the beautiful Queen of Sheba, and soon wins her love. But shortly the fickle queen forgets him to give herself to another. Wounded to death physically and emotionally, Balthazar returns to his country to devote himself to the highest wisdom of the seers, astrology. Suddenly an astonishing and sublime light spreads over the intense gloom of his passion. Balthazar discovers a new star and, high in the heavenly concourse, the star speaks to him, and in the light it sheds he joins with two neighbouring kings. No longer can Balkis hold him. His soul is detached from voluptuousness and he undertakes the pursuit of the star. The star which spoke was no other than the star which led the Three Wise Men to the manger at Jerusalem.

Another time France opens before our eyes a mother-of-pearl casket filled with priceless jewels, chased by the hand of a master of antiquity. We find in it the legend, slightly ironic but most seductive, of Célestin and d'Amyers, of the old hermit and the young faun singing together the Easter Alleluia, the one exalting in the return of Christ and the other in the return of the sun, worshippers communing in a single innocent piety, reunited at last - under the alarmed eye of the historian - in a single sacred tomb. This story shows us France in a realm in which he delights, the realm between paganism and Christianity, where twilight and dawn are mingled, where satyrs meet with apostles, where sacred and profane animals wander, where ample materials are found to exercise his fantasy, his contemplation, and his spiritual irony in all its nuances. One often does not know whether to call it fiction or reality.

Romantic chastity is celebrated in the legends of the saints Oliverie and Liberette, Euphrosine and Scolastica. These are pages taken from the chronicles of saints, literary pastiches perhaps, executed with talent and a sense for the miraculous.

Still another time France takes us to the pits outside of Sienna where, in the spring twilight, a sweet barefooted Carmelite narrates the story of St. Francis of Assisi and St. Claire, the daughter of his soul, and that of the holy satyr who served masters as different as Jupiter, Saturn, and the Galilean, a profound if hardly edifying legend, but recounted by France in the most exquisite style.

In his famous novel *Thaïs* (1890) he enthusiastically penetrates the Alexandrine world at the time when the scourging thorns of Christianity were ravaging among the last effeminate survivors of Hellenic civilization. Asceticism and voluptuousness are at their heights here, mysteries and aesthetic orgies flower side by side, angels and demons incarnate press around the Fathers of the Church and the neo-Hellenic philosophers, disputing over human souls. The story is steeped in the moral nihilism of that era, but it includes beautiful passages such as the magnificent descriptions of the desert solitude in which the anchorites preach from atop their columns or are subject to nightmares in the mummies' tombs.

However, one must put *La Rôtisserie de la Reine Pédauque* (1893) [*At the Sign of the Reine Pédauque*] in the first rank of Anatole France's novels. There he has sketched a group of true-to-life characters, legitimate or natural offspring of his mind in their own colourful world. The Abbé Coignard is so alive that one can study him as a real character who reveals all his complexity only when one has penetrated his privacy. Perhaps others have had the same experience I had. At first I had but little sympathy for this clumsy, loquacious priest and doctor of theology, who has so little concern for his dignity that sometimes he even steals or commits other equally heinous crimes, which he nevertheless defends with shameless casuistry. But he improves on better acquaintance, and I have learned to love him. He is not only a brilliant sophist, but an infinitely amusing character who exercises his irony not only on others but also on himself. There is profound humour in the contrast between his lofty views and his shabby life, and one must regard him with the smiling tolerance of his creator. Coignard is one of the most remarkable figures in contemporary literature. He is a new and vigorous plant in the Rabelaisian vineyard.

A type at once grotesque and lovable is the cabalist of Astarac. The crude mystic evidently must be included in a novel dealing with eighteenth-century manners. But the beings this magician evokes are of a singularly ethereal species; freed of earthly bonds, he enjoys the sweet and useful society of salamanders and sylphs. As proof of the talents of these beings, d'Astarac tells how once a sylph obliged a French scholar by arranging delivery of a message to Descartes, who was then living in Stockholm where he was teaching philosophy to Queen Christine. Sworn enemy of superstition that he may be, Anatole France should be grateful to that superstition for all the happy suggestions it has given him for his work.

Admirably rendered is the accent of pious simplicity with which the Abbé's student, the young spit-turner, recounts all these turbulent events. When his master, revered despite everything, after having suffered to his last moments the assault of the powers of darkness, finally dies a holy death in a Church he had never ceased to recognize openly, the student traces in Latin an ingenuous epithet praising the Abbé's

wisdom and virtues. The author himself, in a later work, delivers an obituary eulogy for his principal hero. Presenting him as a blend of an Epicurean with a St. Francis, one who scorned men tenderly, France speaks of his benevolent irony and his merciful scepticism. Aside from the religious aspect, this characterization applies equally well to Anatole France himself

Let us accompany him then without fear in his philosophical strolls in the garden of Epicurus. He will teach us humility. He will say to us: the world is infinitely large and man is infinitely small. What do you imagine? Our ideals are luminous shades but it is in following them that we find our only true happiness. He will say that human mediocrity is widespread, but he will not exclude himself from it. We may reproach him for the sensuality that occupies too large a place in some of his works and for the hedonistic sentiments, for example, which he describes under the sign of the red lily of Florence, and which are not made for serious minds. He will reply, according to the maxims of his spiritual father, that the pleasures of the mind surpass by far those of the flesh, and the serene calm of the soul is the port into which the wise man steers his boat in order to escape the tempests of sensual life. We shall hear him express the wish that time, which deprives us of so many things, may allow us compassion for our fellow man, so that in our old age we do not find ourselves shut up as in a tomb.

Following this inclination Anatole France left his aesthetic seclusion, his «ivory tower», to throw himself into the social fray of his time, to clamour like Voltaire for the restoration of the rights of persons unjustly condemned as well as of his own wounded patriotism; and he has gone into the workers' quarters to look for means of reconciling classes and nations. His old age has not become a walled tomb. The end has been good for him. After having been accorded many sunny years at the court of the Graces, he still throws the glint of gay learning into the idealistic struggle that, at an advanced age, he wages against the decadence of societies and against materialism and the power of money. His activity in this regard does not interest us directly, but we obtain from it the inestimable advantage of being able to fix his literary image against the background of a lofty nobility of sentiments. There is nothing of the careerist about him. His much discussed work on Joan of Arc, which has cost him enormous toil and which was intended to tear the veil of mysticism from the inspired heroine of France and to restore her to nature, to real life, was a thankless enterprise in an era prepared to canonize her.

The Gods are Athirst!» The great drama of the Revolution unfolds and, as with the battle of ideas, the trivial destinies of men are reflected in blood. Do not believe, however, that France would wish to present this squaring of accounts as being definitive. A century is far too short a period of time to permit delineating distinctly the march of men toward more tolerance and humanity. How have events fulfilled his predictions! Several years after the appearance of this book the great catastrophe occurred. What beautiful arenas have been prepared now for the games of salamanders! The smoke of battles still hangs over the earth. And out of the fog surge gnomes, sinister spirits of the earth. Are these the dead who return? Sombre prophets announce

a new revelation. A wave of superstition threatens to flood the ruins of civilization. Anatole France wields the subtle and corrosive weapon which puts to flight the ghosts and the false saints. For our times, faith is infinitely necessary - but a faith purified by healthy doubts, by the spirit of clarity, a new humanism, a new Renaissance, a new Reformation.

Sweden cannot forget the debt which, like the rest of the civilized world, she owes to French civilization. Formerly we received in abundance the gifts of French Classicism like the ripe and delicate fruits of antiquity. Without them, where would we be? This is what we must ask ourselves today. In our time Anatole France has been the most authoritative representative of that civilization; he is the last of the great classicists. He has even been called the last European. And indeed, in an era in which chauvinism, the most criminal and stupid of ideologies, wants to use the ruins of the great destruction for the building of new walls to prevent free intellectual exchange between peoples, his clear and beautiful voice is raised higher than that of others, exhorting people to understand that they need one another. Witty, brilliant, generous, this knight without fear is the best champion in the sublime and incessant war which civilization has declared against barbarism. He is a marshal of the France of the glorious era in which Corneille and Racine created their heroes.

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