

The Windbags of Provence

It is well known that there appeared in France, during the reign of Louis XIV, an Ambassador from Persia.* The French King delighted in welcoming to his court strangers from every nation who would admire his greatness and carry home with them a few stray beams of that radiant glory which he made to shine on the furthest-flung corners of the earth. Travelling by way of Marseilles, the Ambassador was received magnificently by its inhabitants. On learning of this, the honourable magistrates of the Parlement at Aix* resolved that when he came to them, they should not be outdone by a city above which, though for no very good reason, they rated their own much more highly. Accordingly, the principal plank in their planning was a ceremonial eulogy of the Persian. It would have been a small matter to deliver an oration in Provençal, but the Ambassador would not have understood it: this problem gave them considerable pause. The Council sat and deliberated. It has never required much for it to sit and deliberate—a peasant wrangle, some fuss or other at the theatre, and especially any case involving whores: matters of this sort have been subjects of great moment for these indolent magistrates ever since the days when they lost the right, fully exercised under François I,* to put the province to fire and sword, and water it with the gushing blood of the unfortunate people who live there.

And so they met and deliberated. But how were they to have the address translated? They deliberated in vain, for they could not see how it was to be done. Was there perhaps in the Worshipful Company of Fishmongers, whose livery conveniently happened to be black, was there perhaps a member of the guild who could speak Persian (though there was not a man among them who was much of a hand at even French)? For the address was written: three celebrated lawyers had laboured over it for six weeks. In the end, either in the ranks of the

corporation or somewhere in the town, they ran to earth a sailor who had lived for many years in the Levant and who spoke Persian almost as well as his own vernacular. He was told what was required and agreed to be their man. He learned the address and translated it without difficulty. When the great day came, he was dressed in a First President's ancient black gown and was loaned the fullest wig owned by any of those appointed to the bench. Then, followed by the full complement of magistrates, he advanced to meet the Ambassador. It had been agreed between them what he should do and the orator had particularly recommended those who walked behind him not to take their eyes off him for an instant and to imitate to the very last detail his each and every action. The Ambassador halted in the middle of the mall where it had been arranged that he would be met. The sailor bowed and, unused to having such a splendid wig perched upon his head, his peruke fell off as he made his obeisance and landed at His Excellency's feet. Their honours of the bench, who had sworn to imitate everything he did, promptly shed their perukes and cringingly presented their bald (and here and there somewhat mangy) pates to the Persian. Undismayed, the sailor picked up his wig, put it back on his head, and intoned the eulogy. He spoke so well that the Ambassador was convinced that here was one of his own countrymen. This thought made him extremely angry.

'You miserable wretch!' he exclaimed, reaching for his sabre, 'there can be only one reason why you speak my tongue so well: you are an infidel renegade who has turned your coat against the Prophet. I must punish you for your faithlessness. You must pay at once with your head.'

The poor sailor made vain efforts to defend himself: his words went unheeded. He waved his arms about and swore. Yet none of his gestures was wasted. Each was repeated instantly and energetically by his areopagitic following. In the end, not knowing quite how to extricate himself, he hit upon an unanswerable stratagem, which

was to undo his trouser buttons and brandish, for the benefit of the Ambassador, patent proof that he had never been circumcised in his life. This latest action was promptly imitated, and forty or fifty Provençal magistrates made bold, with buttons undone and foreskin in hand, to prove, in the manner of the sailor, that there was not a man among them who was less good a Christian man than St Christopher. It may easily be imagined that the ladies watching the ceremony from their windows were highly diverted by these antics. In the end, the ambassadorial envoy, fully persuaded by such an unambiguous argument and requiring no further convincing that the orator was not guilty and that, moreover, he was come unto a City of Trousers, went on his way with a shrug, probably saying to himself: 'It comes as no surprise to me that these people keep a gibbet in a permanent state of readiness, for a rush to harsh judgement, which is the other face of stupidity, must surely be the natural temper of these barely human creatures.'

It was felt that a painting should be made of this novel manner of professing the faith. It had already been drawn from the life by a young artist. But the Parlement banished the artist from the province and ordered his canvas to be burnt—probably not realizing that in so doing they were ordering themselves to be burnt since they were portrayed in the sketches.

'It does not bother us to be cretins,' said the grave magistrates. 'And even if it did, we have spent too long demonstrating to the whole of France just what cretins we are. But we simply cannot allow a painting to preserve our stupidity for future generations. Posterity will forget this trivial episode and will remember it no more than it remembers Mérimond and Cabrières.* For the honour of the bench, it is much, much better to be assassins than asses.'

The Husband Who Said Mass: A Provençal Tale

BETWEEN the town of Menerbe in the county of Avignon and Apt in Provence,* there stands a small, isolated Carmelite monastery, called Saint-Hilaire, perched on the flank of a hill where even grazing goats venture with difficulty. This modest place acts more or less as a dumping-ground for all the Carmelite communities in the area, for to it each consigns those Brothers who have brought dishonour to their calling. It may easily be deduced that the company in such a house is far from wholesome. Drunkards, womanizers, sodomites, and gamblers, such broadly speaking are the noble elements of which it is composed: so many recluses foregathered in scandalous retreat to offer up to God as best they can hearts which the rest of the world does not want. One or two châteaux close by and the town of Menerbe, no more than a league from Saint-Hilaire, form the entire social purview of these goodly monks who, their cassocks and calling notwithstanding, do not find all doors open to them in the surrounding district.

For some considerable time now, Father Gabriel, one of the saints of this holy place, had coveted a certain woman of Menerbe whose husband—one of life's natural cuckolds—was called Monsieur Rodin. Madame Rodin was a black-haired little thing of 28, with a pert eye, a round bottom, and everything required of a dish to set before a monk. As for Monsieur Rodin, he was a decent sort who went calmly about his business. He had sold cloth for a living and served as Provost† and was therefore what is called an honest burgher. Not altogether certain of the virtue of his better half, he was enough of a philosopher to realize that the best way of keeping the horns that sprout on a husband's forehead

† A municipal appointment equivalent to the office of local magistrate. [*Author's note*]

to reasonable proportions is to appear unaware that any have sprouted at all. He had studied for the ministry, spoke Latin as well as Cicero, and regularly played draughts with Father Gabriel who, sly and attentive wooer that he was, knew that it is always important to decoy the husband if you want to hook the wife. Among the sons of Elijah,* Father Gabriel was a stallion. The mere sight of him was enough to give anyone every confidence that the business of propagating the whole human race could safely be left to him, for if ever there was a begetter of children, it was he. With a solid pair of shoulders, a back a yard wide, swarthy, tanned features and the brow of Jove, he stood six feet tall and was, people said, as well endowed as the province's finest mules (always a distinctive feature of Carmelite friars). What woman would not be irresistibly attracted to such a lusty brute? And he did indeed most marvellously appeal to Madame Rodin who was anything but accustomed to encountering appurtenances quite so sublime in the lord and master her parents had picked out as a husband for her. Outwardly, as we have said, Monsieur Rodin appeared to notice nothing. But this does not mean he was not jealous. He never said anything but he was always there, and he was often there at times when he might have been wished elsewhere. But the apple was ripe for plucking. The naïve Madame Rodin had brazenly told her lover that all she was waiting for was an opportunity to respond to desires which seemed to her much too ardent to be resisted any longer, while on his side Father Gabriel had given Madame Rodin to understand that he was quite ready to accommodate her. In a brief instant snatched when Rodin had been obliged to go out, Gabriel had even shown his delicious mistress credentials calculated to make up the mind of any woman who might still be inclined to hesitate. All that was needed now was an opportunity.

One day Rodin called on his friend from Saint-Hilaire to invite him to lunch, with a notion of suggesting they might go hunting together. The two of them having

emptied a few bottles of Lanerte wine,* it struck Gabriel that circumstances had conspired to favour his desires.

'By God, Provost!' said the friar to his friend, 'I am very glad you're here. You couldn't have come at a better moment for my purposes. There's something I must attend to, most urgent, and you could be a great help to me.'

'What is it, Father?'

'Do you know a man in town called Renoult?'

'Renoult the hat-maker?'

'That's him.'

'What about him?'

'Well, the rogue owes me a hundred écus and I have just heard that his business is about to go to the wall: even as I speak he might be clean away and across the county boundary. I must get away and see him, but I can't.'

'What's stopping you?'

'My mass, for God's sake, I have to say mass. If I had my hundred écus in my pocket, mass could go to blazes!'

'Isn't there any way you could be excused?'

'Excused! Out of the question! There are three of us here and if we don't spout out three masses between us every day, the Superior who never manages to say any at all would report us to Rome. But there is a way you could help. Do you want to know what it is so you can think about it? It's entirely up to you, of course.'

'I'd be glad to help. What do you have in mind?'

'There's just myself here and the sexton. The first two masses have been said and all the friars have gone out and about. No one would know. The congregation won't be very big, just a handful of peasants and that nice woman, very devout, who lives in the château of — just half a league from here, an angelic creature who believes that by strict observance she can make up for all the wild oats her husband keeps sowing. I believe you once told me you studied for the priesthood?'

'That's right.'

'So you must have learned how to say mass?'

'I can say mass like an archbishop!'

'Then, my dear old friend,' Gabriel went on, throwing his arms around Rodin's neck, 'for God's sake, slip my habit on, wait until it strikes eleven—it is ten now—and when it does would you say my mass for me? Please? The Brother who is the sexton is a good sort. He won't give us away. If anyone says they did not think it was me, we'll say it was a new Brother just arrived, and the rest needn't be told anything. I'll get to Renoult's house, the rogue, as quick as I can, kill him or have my money, and I'll be back here inside two hours. Wait for me. Put the sole on the grill and the eggs in the pan and draw the wine. When I return we shall sit down and eat, and then we'll go and hunt. O yes, we'll go hunting and I have a feeling that this time we might just bag something. I'm told that a pair of antlers was spotted near here only just the other day. By God! I'd love us to pot it, even if it meant saddling ourselves with twenty law-suits from the lord of the manor!*

'The plan is excellent,' said Rodin, 'and I'd do absolutely anything I could to help out. But wouldn't it be sinful?'

'Sin doesn't come into it. Perhaps it might if mass were said and said badly. But if someone who is not qualified celebrates it, then whatever is said would be the same as if nothing was said at all. Take it from me: I am a trained casuist and in this matter there is nothing which might be described as a venial sin.'

'Would I have to say the words?'

'And why ever not? The words mean something only when they are said by us: the power is in us, not in them. Look here, I'd only have to say those words over your wife's belly for the tabernacle of your conjugal devotions to be immediately transformed into the body of Christ. No, only we have the power of transubstantiation. You could say the words twenty thousand times and you would never persuade the Holy Spirit to descend on anybody. And even with us it doesn't always work. It's entirely a matter of faith. With an ounce of faith a man

can move mountains, you know, Jesus Christ Himself said so. But a man who has no faith cannot move anything. Take me, for instance. Sometimes when I'm giving mass, my mind is more on the girls and the women in the congregation than on that damned bit of wafer I wave about in my hand. How do you think I could manage to get anything to descend then? I'd be better off believing in the Koran than filling my head with that sort of thing. Which means that your mass will be to all intents and purposes just as valid as the ones I give. So don't give it another thought. Go to it! Brace yourself!

'By God!' said Rodin. 'But haven't I an appetite on me! And lunch isn't for another two hours yet!'

'But what's to prevent you having a bite to eat? Here, we've plenty.'

'But what about the mass I'm supposed to say?'

'God in heaven! What difference does it make? Do you think God is more defiled if He fetches up in a full stomach than in an empty belly, or if there's food under Him or on top of Him? I'm damned if I can see it makes the slightest difference! Listen, if I had to go to Rome and make a clean breast of things every time I broke my fast before saying mass, I'd spend all my time on the road. Anyway, you aren't a priest and the rules don't apply to you. All you'll be doing is making it look like mass, not actually saying it. So you can do whatever you want before or after. You could even pleasure your wife if she was there. Just do what I do, that's all. You won't be celebrating mass or consummating the sacrifice.'

'In that case,' said Rodin, 'I'll do it. Don't give it another thought.'

'Good,' said Gabriel, making off and leaving his friend well recommended to the sacristan. 'You can depend on me. I'll be back inside two hours and then I'm your man.'

Overjoyed, the friar hurried on his way.

With an expeditiousness which is only too easily imagined, he rushed round to the house of the Provost's wife. Surprised to see him there when she believed he

was with her husband, she asked what the reason was for this unexpected visit.

'Let's be quick, my sweet,' said the breathless friar. 'Hurry! We have only a few moments to ourselves. First a glass of wine and then to work!'

'But my husband?'

'He's saying mass.'

'Saying what?'

'Yes, by God, saying mass, my pretty,' replied the Carmelite as he tumbled Madame Rodin on to her bed. 'It's true, light of my soul. I've turned your husband into a priest and while the booby is celebrating a mystery divine, let's be quick and consummate a passion profane.'

The friar was strong and there were few arguments that could be put up against him once he had come to grips with a woman. Anyway, the case he made out being so conclusive, he quite won over Madame Rodin. Since he did not find the business of convincing a pert little thing of 28 summers and a combustible Provençal disposition in any way irksome, he put his case more than once.

'Oooh, you angel man,' said she at last, now perfectly convinced. 'But look at the time! We must part. If our revels are supposed to last as long as it takes to say mass, then he must have got to the *ite missa est* long ago.'

'Not at all, my sweet,' said the Carmelite, who still had one argument left to put to Madame Rodin. 'Come, dear heart, there's plenty of time. Just once more, my dear, my sweet, once more. Beginners like him don't rush it as we do. Believe me, just one more time. I'll wager that husband of yours still hasn't got to the part where God the Wafer has to be held aloft.'

But part they had to, though they did not separate without promising to see each other again and agreeing several new strategies for doing so. Then Gabriel went off to rejoin Rodin who had said mass as well as any archbishop.

'The only part I got slightly wrong,' he said, 'was the

quod aures. I started eating instead of drinking. But the sexton put me right. Now what about your hundred écus, Father?’

‘In the bag, my son. The rogue tried to put up a fight. But I got hold of a pitchfork and, by God, I gave it to him. On the head and all over.’

The meal came to an end and the two friends went hunting. When he got home, Rodin told his wife all about the good turn he had done Gabriel.

‘I said mass,’ the great booby announced gleefully. ‘Said it like a proper priest, by God, while our friend went off and took Renoult’s measure with a pitchfork. He browbeat him, light of my life, what do you say to that! Raised great bumps on his head! Ah! Dear heart, it’s so funny! Anyone who ends up with bumps on his head makes me laugh! Now what about you, my dear, what were you doing while I was saying mass?’

‘O my sweet!’ said the Provost’s wife. ‘Heaven must surely have inspired us both today! Don’t you see, we were both filled with the celestial spirit and never knew it! While you were saying mass, I was reciting the beautiful prayer which the Virgin offered up to the angel Gabriel when he appeared unto her and announced that she would be with child by the Holy Ghost. O my dear! we shall surely both remain on the road to salvation as long as each of us, in our separate ways, goes on performing such good works.’