THE OPINIONS OF JÉRÔME COIGNARD

BY ANATOLE FRANCE

A TRANSLATION BY
MRS. WILFRID JACKSON

JOHN LANE THE BODLEY HEAD LIMITED
LONDON

THE OPINIONS OF JÉRÔME COIGNARD

THE ABBÉ JÉRÔME COIGNARD

Demy 8vo Edition, First Published 1913
Reprinted 1922
Crown 8vo Edition . . . 1923
Reprinted . . . 1924

Made and Printed in Great Britain. Richard Clay & Sons, Ltd., Printers, Bungay.

CONTENTS

		PAGE
	THE ABBÉ JÉRÔME COIGNARD	1
	THE OPINIONS OF JÉRÔME COIGNARD	29
I.	MINISTERS OF STATE	31
II.	SAINT ABRAHAM	39
III.	MINISTERS OF STATE (*concluded*)	53
IV.	THE AFFAIR OF THE MISSISSIPPI	61
V.	EASTER EGGS	69
VI.	THE NEW MINISTRY	81
VII.	THE NEW MINISTRY (*concluded*)	88
VIII.	THE CITY MAGISTRATES	98
IX.	SCIENCE	107
X.	THE ARMY	115
XI.	THE ARMY (*continued*)	124
XII.	THE ARMY (*concluded*)	130
XIII.	ACADEMIES	137
XIV.	SEDITION-MONGERS	148
XV.	REVOLUTIONARY MEASURES	156
XVI.	HISTORY	166
XVII.	MONSIEUR NICODÈME	174

		PAGE
XVIII.	JUSTICE	183
XIX.	THE BEADLE'S STORY	187
XX.	JUSTICE (*continued*)	195
XXI.	JUSTICE (*continued*)	208
XXII.	JUSTICE (*concluded*)	213

THE ABBÉ JÉRÔME COIGNARD

TO OCTAVE MIRBEAU

THERE is no need for me to tell over again here the life of Monsieur l'Abbé Jérôme Coignard, professor of oratory at the college of Beauvais, librarian to Monseigneur de Séez, *Sagiensis episcopi bibliothecarius solertissimus*, as his epitaph has it, later on secretary at the Cemetery of the Holy Innocents, and finally curator of that queen of libraries (the Astaracian), whose loss is for ever to be deplored. He perished, assassinated, on the Lyons road, by a Jew cabalist of the name of Mosaïde (*Judæa manu nefandissima*), leaving several incomplete works, and the memory of his admirable familiar conversation. All the circumstances of his odd existence and tragic end have been reported by his disciple Jacques Menétrier, called Tournebroche,

or Turnspit, because he was the son of a cook in the Rue St. Jacques. This Tournebroche professed for him whom it was his habit to speak of as his good master, a lively and tender admiration. "His was the kindliest soul," said he, "that ever blossomed on this earth." Modestly and faithfully he edited the memoirs of the Abbé, who lives again in the work as Socrates does in the Memorabilia of Xenophon.

Observant, exact, and charitable, he drew a portrait full of life and instinct with a loving faithfulness. It is a work that makes one think of those portraits of Erasmus by Holbein that one sees in the Louvre, at Bâle, or at Hampton Court, the delicacy of which never wearies the sense of appreciation. In short, he left us a masterpiece. It will cause surprise no doubt, that he was not careful to have it printed. Moreover, he could have published it himself, for he set up as a book-seller in the Rue St. Jacques at the sign of the *Image de Sainte Catherine*, where he succeeded Blaizot.

Perhaps, living as he did among books, he feared to add, if it were but a few leaves, to the horrible hoard of blackened paper that mildews unseen on the book-stalls. We may share his disgust when we pass the twopenny box on the quays, where the sun

and the rain slowly consume pages written for immortality. Like those pathetic death's-heads that Bossuet sent to the Abbot of la Trappe to divert his solitude, here are subjects for reflection fitted to make the man of letters conceive the vanity of writing. I may say, for my part, that between the Pont Royal and the Pont Neuf, I have felt that vanity to the full. I should incline to believe that Abbé Coignard's pupil never printed his work because, formed by so good a master, he judged sanely of literary glory, and esteemed it at its worth, and that is exactly nothing. He knew it for uncertain, capricious, subject to every vicissitude, and dependent on circumstances themselves petty and wretched. Seeing his contemporaries, ignorant, abusive, and mediocre, he saw no reason to hope that their posterity would suddenly become learned, balanced, and reliable. He merely divined that the Future, a stranger to our quarrels, would accord indifference in default of justice. We are well-nigh assured that, great and small, the Future will unite us in oblivion and cover us in a peaceful uniformity of silence. But if, by some extraordinary chance, that hope deceives us, if future generations keep some memory of our name and writings, we can foresee that they will only make acquaintance with

our thoughts by the ingenious labour of gloss and super-gloss which alone perpetuates works of genius through the ages. The long life of a masterpiece is assured only at the price of quite pitiable intellectual hazards, in which the gabble of pedants reinforces the ingenious word-twisting of æsthetic souls. I am not afraid to say that, at the present day, we do not understand a single line of the Iliad, of the Divine Comedy, in the sense primitively attaching to it. To live is to change, and the posthumous life of our written-down thoughts is not free from the rule: they only continue to exist on condition that they become more and more different from what they were when they issued from our minds. Whatsoever in future may be admired in us, will have become altogether alien from us.

Possibly Jacques Tournebroche, whose simplicity we know, did not put himself all these questions in reference to the little book under his hand. It would be an insult to think that he had an exaggerated opinion of himself.

I think I know him. I have meditated over his book. Everything he says, and everything he doesn't say, betrays an exquisite modesty of soul. If, however, he was not without knowledge of his talent, he knew also that it is precisely talent that is least

pardonable. In people of note we tolerate easily baseness of soul and falseheartedness. We are quite content that they should be bad or cowardly, and their good-luck even does not raise over much envy so long as it is not merited. Mediocrities are at once raised up, and carried along, by the surrounding nobodies who are honoured in them. The success of a commonplace person disturbs nobody. Rather, it secretly flatters the mob. But there is an insolence of talent which is expiated by dumb hatred, and calumnies not loud but deep. If Jacques Tournebroche consciously renounced the painful honour of irritating the foolish and the wicked by eloquent writing, one can only admire his good sense, and hold him the worthy scholar of a master who knew mankind. However it may be, the manuscript of Jacques Tournebroche, being left unpublished, was lost for more than a century.

I had the extraordinary good luck to find it again at a general broker's on the Boulevard Montparnasse, who spreads behind the dirtied panes of his shop, *croix du Lis*, *médailles de Sainte-Hélène*, and *decorations de Juillet*, without a suspicion that he is furnishing the generations a melancholy lesson on peacemaking. This manuscript was published under my care in 1893, under the title: *La Rotisserie de la Reine*

Pédauque. I refer the reader to it. He will find there more novelties than he looks for ordinarily in an old book. But it is not with that book that we have to do here.

Jacques Tournebroche was not content to make known the doings and sayings of his master in a connected recital. He was careful to collect much discourse and conversation of Monsieur l'Abbé Coignard that had not found place in the memoirs (for that is the name we must give to *La Rotisserie de la Reine Pédauque*) and he made a little note-book of it, which has fallen into my hands along with his other papers.

It is the note-book that I print now under the title: *The Opinions of The Abbé Jérôme Coignard.* The kind and gracious welcome the public gave the preceding work by Jacques Tournebroche, encourages me to commence forthwith these dialogues, in which we meet once more the former librarian of Monseigneur de Séez with his indulgent wisdom, and that kind of generous scepticism to which his considerations tend, so mingled with contempt and kindliness for man. I have no notion of taking responsibility for the ideas expressed by this philosopher on divers questions of politics and morality. My duties, as editor, merely bind me to present my author's thought in the most

favourable light. His unfettered understanding trampled vulgar beliefs underfoot, and did not side uncritically with popular opinion, except in matters touching the Catholic faith, wherein he was immovable. In anything else he did not fear to oppose his age. Were it only for that he would merit esteem. We owe him the gratitude due to minds that have fought against prejudices. But it is easier to praise than to imitate them. Prejudices melt away and grow unceasingly with the eternal mobility of the clouds. They are by nature most imposing, until they become hateful, and men are rare who are free from the superstition of their period, and look squarely at what the crowd dares not face. Monsieur l'Abbé Coignard was independent in a humble walk of life; enough, I think to put him far above a Bossuet, and above all the great people that glitter, according to their degree, in the traditional pomp of custom and belief.

But while we hold that Monsieur l'Abbé Coignard lived as a free man, enfranchised from common errors, and that the spectre of common passions and fears had no empire over him, we must further observe that his surpassing intelligence had originality of outlook on nature and society, and only wanted, in order to astonish and delight mankind by some

vast and beautiful mental engineering feat, the skill or the will to scatter sophisms, like cement, in the interstices between truth and truth. It is only in that way that great systems of philosophy are built up and held together by the mortar of sophistry.

The synthetic faculty was wanting in him, or, (if you like), the art and law of symmetry. Without it, he was bound to appear, as in fact he did, a kind of wonderful compound of Epicurus and St. Francis of Assisi.

Those two, it seems to me, were the best friends that suffering humanity has yet met on its confused progress through life.

Epicurus freed the soul from empty fears and taught it to proportion its idea of happiness to its miserable nature and feeble powers. Good St. Francis, tenderer and more material, led the way to happiness by interior vision, and would have had souls expand like his, in joy, in the depths of an enchanted solitude. Both were helpful, one, to destroy illusions that deceive, the other, to create illusions from which one does not wake.

But it does not do to exaggerate. Monsieur l'Abbé Coignard was certainly not the equal, in action or in thought, of the boldest of the sages, nor of the most ardent of the saints. The truths that he

discovered he could not fling himself upon headlong. In his hardiest exploration he maintained the pose of a peaceful pedestrian. He did not sufficiently except himself from the contempt other men inspired in him. He lacked that valuable illusion that sustained Descartes and Bacon, who believed in themselves when they believed in no one else. He had doubts of the witness he bore, and scattered heedlessly the treasures of his mind. That confidence, however common in thinkers, was withheld from him, the confidence in himself as the superior of the greatest wits. It is an unpardonable fault, for glory is only given to those who importune it. In Monsieur l'Abbé Coignard it was, moreover, a weakness, and an illogicality. Since he pushed philosophical audacity to its farthest limits, he should not have scrupled to proclaim himself the first of men. But his heart remained simple and his soul pure, and his poorness of spirit that knew not how to rear itself above the world, did him an irreparable wrong. But need I say that I love him better as he was? I am not afraid to affirm that Monsieur l'Abbé Coignard, philosopher and Christian, mingled in an incomparable union the epicurism that wards off grief, and the holy simplicity that conducts to joy.

It is to be remarked that not only did he accept

the idea of God as furnished him by the Catholic faith, but further, that he tried to uphold it against argument of the rationalistic kind. He never imitated that practical address of professed Deists, who make a moral, philanthropical and prudish God for their own use, with whom they enjoy the satisfaction of a perfect understanding. The strict relations they establish with Him give much authority to their writings, and much consideration to their persons, before the public. And this God, akin to the government, temperate, weighty, exempt from fanaticism, and who has His following, is a recommendation to them in salons, academies, and public meetings. Monsieur l'Abbé Coignard did not figure the Eternal to himself in so profitable a light. But considering the impossibility of conceiving of the world otherwise than under the category of intelligent beings, and that the cosmos must be held to be intelligible, even if but to demonstrate its absurdity, he referred the cause to an intelligence he called God, leaving the term in its infinite vagueness, relying for the rest on theology, which as we know, treats of the unknowable with minutest accuracy.

This reserve, which marks the limits of his understanding, was fortunate if, as I believe, it