

THE GILDED DEPUTY*

MONSIEUR Fernand Gastebois, Mayor of St. Anonyme, was a Catholic and a Liberal. This feat may cause no flutter in the Nordic hearts of those for whom this story is intended, no quandaries in Nordic minds accustomed to distinguish between the claims of Peter and Caesar with untroubled equability. But in Lower Normandy in the years before the Great War, it took some doing to strike the balance between religion and politics of this particular shade; and the Mayor of St. Anonyme undoubtedly did it, with one unfortunate lapse which it is my business to relate.

A historian versed in the internecine bickers of France would doubtless be able to acquaint you with the springs of the situation. I, a mere looker-on, am not so fortunate and can only guess at the source of my hero's difficulties. On the political side a Liberal is undoubtedly a fiercer beast in France than elsewhere. Horrid implications of Revolution hang about him. The rustle of innumerable Trees of Liberty is ever in his ears. In other lands such symptoms are tactfully given a Catholic turn and in the Liberty of the Sons of God your Nordic Liberal finds refreshment, light and peace. In France he is merely relegated to the left and kept there in the name of consistency, a false Latin god who did one of his worst pieces of work when he established as an anti-clerical the kindly, pious and lovable Monsieur Gastebois.

For Fernand Gastebois, wine-merchant, Mayor of St. Anonyme, did not dislike priests—far from it. In the pleasant domestic quarters of his big granite shop

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in the Grande-Rue, he entertained the holiest and wisest. His daughter Pascaline was *dévoté*—and he was proud of her. His wife was dead; but his house-keeper, Léa Bidel, was the oldest *Enfant de Marie* in the parish. At home all was serenity; and when the Angelus boomed out across the garden from the truncated spire of the parish church, Léa knelt in her kitchen, Pascaline in her parlour and Monsieur (if there was no one about) in his office. But he did not kneel at the *Mairie* for at the *Mairie* he was an official. Even when he was alone, his entourage and state prevailed.

It was all wrong, of course, and I am not here to defend Monsieur Gastebois. He was not the only sinner; nor did the other side remember any better than he did that Faith comes first and that the heavenly *patria* transcends the earthly, still less that bruised reeds are not to be broken nor smoking flax quenched. But their story is not my story; and whatever provocation Monsieur Gastebois may have received at the hands of the local Clericals, there is no excuse for him here. In the matter of the Gilded Deputy, he was astray from start to finish.

In the summer of 1913 Monsieur Gastebois, sitting alone in his cool, grey quarters at the *Mairie*, in an ample blouse of black cotton a little greenish with age, received a letter from the Prefect. He was not, you must know, exactly avid of communications from this superior; for the Prefect was an extreme party man, full of the tiresome plans incidental to extremist enthusiasm, and the incautious Gastebois had already been made to grasp too many prefectorial nettles to desire to sting his fingers further. He opened the letter, therefore, gingerly; and having perused it with snorts of impatience, flicked it from him with a disgusted 'paf!' For a morose ten minutes he sat with his heels thrust far under the table, his hands in his blouse

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pockets and an expression of hang-dog misery on his usually chubby and contented face. But poor human nature has its alleviations. It was almost the hour of *déjeuner*, and doffing his blouse and donning a light overcoat, Monsieur Gastebois turned the key on his troubles and betook himself to the Grande-Rue.

I say 'turned the key on his troubles,' but this is not strictly the fact. The letter remained behind on the official table. Its sting persisted. Between the Mayor and his favourite *hors d'œuvres* the prefect's mandate loomed like an interdict.

'*Pas d'andouille, Papa?*' queried Pascaline with raised eyebrows as the Mayor waved aside the wafer-thin slices of sausage with a truculent nod. 'What then has taken place at the *Mairie* this morning?'

She was a good child, this Pascaline, sympathetic; more like her sainted mother every day. She would be of his part in this difficult affair. He would break a rule—never, it must be owned, perfectly observed—he would confide in Pascaline.

'My child,' he said heavily, 'it is like this. I have received a communication from the Prefect, a communication about a statue. He wants to erect a monument to the Deputy Aristide Blin, here in St. Anonyme; and I, the Mayor, am to put the matter in train. I think myself he has been got over by a scoundrel of an artist-sculptor who wants the job—the son of old Mère Legrand down by the market. You would not remember Domitien Legrand because he was kicked out of St. Anonyme while you were still in pinafores. But he is now, says Monsieur the Prefect, a great man in Paris—where, as you know, they eat our leavings—and will honour his native town by undertaking the work. But that is not all. I am to put up their fine Aristide—a devil who denied his God and collected the souls of little children like an egg-pedlar for Hell—in the *place* opposite the Seminary

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in full view of the Fathers. It is a refinement of Monsieur Domitien that. I doubt if the Prefect knows one *place* of St. Anonyme from the other. Yet undoubtedly the *place* lacks a statue and if it were not this *sacré* Deputy I would be the first to put my hand in my pocket. Blin was a big man in his way—as Lucifer is big and his legions, and as bad. Moreover, unlike Lucifer, who is a cosmopolitan, he worked here in St. Anonyme most of his life, turning out year after year wicked little text-books for the Ministry to strew about the schools. You have never met them, my child. I promised your mother you should be bred by Religious and I've kept my word. So the Deputy is for you a tablet on a mansion in the *basse-ville*; and alas that my tenure of office in this town should see him anything more!

The Mayor of St. Anonyme dug a random fork into the sausage, broke off a fragment of his excellent crusty roll savagely, and began his dinner in silence. But as Pascaline, still by no means wholly enlightened, continued to elicit further information during the meal, I will sum up what she gathered concerning Aristide Blin in a fashion somewhat more concise than that in which she received it.

Blin, it appears, was an educationist first and a Deputy afterwards, a withered descendant of the Encyclopædists, a sort of sapless, humourless free-thinker of enormous industry and erudition. To him children were 'The Child,' a mind agape for Pure Knowledge, which he, Blin, was to administer tabloid by tabloid. But his pharmacy was behind the times, his Parliamentary career brief and unimpressive, and finally the soured pedagogue and politician was fain to satisfy his lust for social service by editing the classics of the ages of faith with a special eye to the susceptibilities of infidelity. This task suited him to admiration and he died full of years and honours, having, he

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boasted, eliminated the name of God from more masterpieces of literature and history than any other censor of his day.

Such, in two words, was Aristide Blin, ex-Deputy of St. Anonyme, to whom his native town in general and its Mayor in particular were debited by the authority of their prefect with the duty of supplying a statue.

To cut a long story short, the statue was commissioned. Monsieur Domitien Legrand swaggered down from Paris in side-whiskers and a brigandish hat to survey the site. In vain Monsieur Gastebois endeavoured to divert the sculptor to a more commanding situation in the market, 'in face,' as he somewhat untactfully added, 'of the abode of your excellent mother.' Monsieur Domitien had very little use for his excellent mother, a discreditable old lady from many points of view, and still less for the market-place. No, the *Place du Séminaire*, so befittingly suggested by his patron the Prefect, was the ideal position. Would his good friend the Mayor charge himself with obtaining a plinth of local granite which could be erected on the spot while the figure, in bronze, took shape in Paris?

The unhappy Gastebois agreed. Committees met and parted, bulletins to and from the sculptor's studio came and went, the year 1913 drew to a close and a plinth of local granite appeared like a monolithic relic in the *Place du Séminaire*. Up and down the leafless lime avenue of their terraced garden the Fathers and their pupils paced as usual. Apparently oblivious of the first instalment of the Prefect's insult, the Religious looked as light-hearted as ever. St. Anonyme, now the matter was settled, concerned itself very little about it. Only the Mayor's chubby face lost its cherubic benignity. Night and day he dreamt of the hour when the statue would arrive and be hoisted—he

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assisting, speech-making—into its place. Never had he recognised until now the anguish of his double allegiance to Church and State. It was as if he had lain all his life without knowing it on the bed of Procrustes—of two Procrusteses, in fact, both wholly dissatisfied with his stature. Hitherto his rival hosts had slept, or perhaps they had merely diverted themselves elsewhere; but now, without doubt, the racking of the victim was to commence.

In all his misery, but one consolation remained to him. The Deputy was not to confront the world as he had lived and moved in it. He would not, the Mayor pathetically hoped, look so very much like a deputy—a free-thinking, scientific deputy of the nineteenth century—after all. It had been discovered with some heartburning in committee, that the figure of the late Aristide, as commemorated by photography, was not of the type you associate with plinths of druidic granite and casts of immemorial bronze. A mean little frog of a man, with a pelican throat, bald head and more lateral creases over a dejected paunch than is becoming even in a savant—these were the outer manifestations of that heaven-defying soul. The artist-sculptor, having perused the photographs as a player might contemplate a bad hand at cards, put them face downward on the table. ‘I think,’ he said firmly, ‘an ideal presentment would be most suitable. Say a toga and laurels.’

On the sixth of July, 1914, precisely eight days before the date fixed for its unveiling, the statue of the Deputy in a suitably impressive crate was delivered at the business entrance of the Mayor’s premises. Here were more facilities for unpacking than at the *Mairie*, moreover the Grande-Rue was nearer the predestined site. So the sculptor’s immense packing-case, looking unpleasantly angular and funereal, was deposited among the cider-tuns and wine-barrels of a huge, aro-

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matic shed. Here, like the relics of Tut-ankh-amen, though with fewer concessions to publicity, all that was destined to be, humanly speaking, immortal of Aristide Blin was gradually unswathed. The work was carried out by the firm's two burliest porters in the presence of their chief, Mademoiselle Pascaline and old Léa so far forgetting their prejudices—though these were naturally vivid—as to look on.

'It is in bronze, then, Papa?' queried the former as, cerement after cerement having been unwound, a faint shape of deputy was discernible under the wrappings. 'You will have to re-cover it carefully against the day of installation or it will tarnish.'

'My child, is it likely I need reminding of a precaution so obvious?' returned her sire testily. 'As far as I am concerned your *sacré* Aristide can lie here unpacked until the Day of Judgment—or at least until the Fourteenth of July. But I have been charged by the Prefect to see he is in order now—and *ma foi!* (he exclaimed as the last wrappings fell away from the statue) it was just as well!'

What a moment! There lay the Deputy newly unpacked—laurels, toga and all—on his back among his disordered shrouds. Not a scar, not a scratch marred the integrity of his form. He was wholly and faultlessly intact. But the Mayor stepped back as though a *crevasse* had opened at his feet, his women-folk huddled for support against each other and a cider-cask, even the porters grasped that something was amiss and sheepishly eyeing the statue and the Mayor by turns referred the tragedy to superior wisdom. For tragedy it was! The bright bronze statue they had ordered and paid for, the statue that was to gleam like the *pensée libre* itself against the obscurantist lime-trees of the Seminary, the statue of Aristide Blin, Deputy of St. Anonyme, was tarnished from head to foot. A miserable greyish green, green

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as the grass of carnations or the bloom of a mouldy cheese, covered him beyond repair!

But was he beyond repair? With a start the Mayor came to life—official life—and took the situation in hand. It was delicate work (here he waved aside the overtures of his porters) women's work, in fact. His daughter and his housekeeper, the one so deft with a leather and the family silver, the other with sand and a copper saucepan, should restore Aristide to brilliancy. It was doubtless some trick of the artist-sculptor to discredit him, the Mayor. Obviously Legrand had hoped the damage would remain undetected till it was too late to repair it. For you could see Monsieur Domitien had let the statue leave his studio covered with verdigris. It was no use to tell him, Gastebois, who had seen verdigris all his life in connection with cider, careless customers and metal taps, that verdigris like that came on in a few days—a few days in a goods train from Paris. No, Legrand had done it deliberately. His little game should not succeed and Aristide Blin should be as bright as gold by the Fourteenth of July. But the fact remained: Domitien Legrand, artist-sculptor, had made the statue green on purpose.

And so, of course, he had; for the reproduction of antique effects brought about on his masterpieces by the up-to-date alchemy of acids, was one of the favourite resources of that somewhat limited master.

Such artistic subterfuges were, however, wholly unknown to simple Monsieur Gastebois. They were equally remote from the aesthetic conceptions of St. Anonyme. A new statue was a new statue—just as a new bed was a new bed or a new coffee-pot a new coffee-pot. No civic or domestic appendage, if of metal and fresh from the hands of its maker, could be too bright and brassy. With this article of material faith to set off against their religious qualms, Pascaline

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and old Léa embarked on the scouring of the Deputy. Both had been sorely tempted to refuse the job. There had even been rumours of mutiny in the kitchen. But Pascaline's Good Angel prevailed: a father's and master's prejudices, unless wholly and obviously sinful, must be respected. And as Pascaline said this, I fancy her Good Angel smiled a triumphant smile; and the patron saint of St. Anonyme—who, for some reason only known to themselves and Heaven, had been backing the angel up—exchanged nods of celestial complacency.

Yet there seemed to poor human vision little enough cause for celestial approval. To all intents and purposes Blin and the powers of darkness had won hands down. Day by day their mutual business prospered. A hoarding went up round the monolith in the *Place du Séminaire*, the translation of the Gilded Deputy to his plinth took place in thrilling privacy, and on the Fourteenth of July all was ready for the unveiling. The Prefect had arrived the night before; the Mayor's speech—a desperately non-committal affair—had been composed and conned by heart; St. Anonyme had been be-tricoloured beyond all precedent, the sun was out in the sky, the lime-flowers in the seminary garden—Heaven itself, it seemed, burnt incense to the Gilded Deputy. Never was such gala weather known.

Yet one completing touch was absent. The artist-sculptor, though his name was on every man's lips, was missing in the flesh. A common and not in the least aesthetic malady kept him on *tisane* and dry toast in Paris. Old Mother Legrand, cleaned up and kept sober for the great occasion, was, however, duly in evidence; and the kind-hearted Mayor as he collected a sheaf of next morning's press-cuttings to send to her absent son, was careful to include such illustrations as featured the mother of the artist. He also

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added a full-page supplement of the *St. Anonyme Echo*, in which the *effet éclatant* of the golden Aristide against the sombre trees of the seminary was stressed in picture and print. And having licked down the envelope, addressed and stamped it, he leant back in his chair with a shamefaced sense of relief. The episode of the Gilded Deputy was over.

But was it over? Did Heaven allow the matter to rest there? Does Aristide Blin still gleam defiance at the faith of his native town? Have the Fathers of the Seminary, abashed by his bright presentment of a Higher Way, fled their lime-groves for obscurer haunts? Surely the trend of fifteen years, prognosticated according to the immutable law of progress, guarantees us at least this much?

Alas! not even this. The tide comes in and the tide goes out. The only mortal thing that does not change is change.

This very July I was in St. Anonyme. I stood in the *Place du Séminaire* on the very anniversary of the unveiling—and the Gilded Deputy was gone. On his plinth, the same druidic slab of local granite, stood a War Memorial in grey marble. '*La Ville de St. Anonyme : aux Enfants Morts pour La France.*' A light breeze rustled the dead laurels at its base. Up in the seminary garden the Fathers were lopping their trees. An odd time to prune lime-trees, I thought, till I saw the old women about the town stripping the flowers for *tisane*.

Where then was Aristide? Sacrificed to a vulgar war-boom in religion, that violent delight whose violent ends are so sadly obvious to the historically-minded?—I hoped not. But what could the future hold for an unfashionable sceptic portrayed by an unfashionable sculptor? Cautious enquiries as to the fate of Legrand and his masterpiece brought me at last to the end of the story.

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There had been a terrible outburst from Legrand when he heard of the fate of his Deputy. Michael Angelo and Leonardo went a long way to please their patrons, and your mere pot-boiler, of course, goes even further; but no one is so determined not to give his paymasters what they think they like as your mediocre artist. Legrand had appealed to the highest powers to end the sacrilege, to have his desecrated masterpiece restored to its original refinement by the scoundrel who had ruined it. The mandate went forth; the bewildered Mayor engaged at his own expense the crane that had raised the statue into position, and reversed the process. Faced with the problem of rendering back the Deputy's original green bloom, he took the only course available; and a specially constructed vat, filled with strong and unusually mordant cider, received the deposed protagonist of the *pensée libre*. He was beginning to tarnish nicely by the end of July. In August came the War. St. Anonyme rushed to arms. Legrand sought seclusion, for the first time in his life, in a munition factory. The Deputy was entirely forgotten. Forgotten while the War lasted, forgotten when it ended; for Legrand and his factory had succumbed to a Zeppelin and Monsieur Gastebois, Mayor no longer, had grown oblivious of public affairs. The latter, I hear, is still alive, but spends most of his time in the country, where Pascaline has married a *propriétaire* and has a growing family. The ex-Mayor is absolutely at the mercy of his grandchildren, to whom Léa, still active and dependable, is a sort of backstairs grandmother. Why should any of these happy people remember Aristide Blin growing greener and greener under his cider?

And yet, for Heaven is kinder to its opponents than earth, I sometimes fancy there is a future in store for him. A grandchild, grown manly and enterprising, will take over the shop and discover Aristide, pickled

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out of all recognition, in the dregs of his vat. Acclaimed as an interesting antique of undoubtedly Renaissance origin, Aristide will be taken to the country seat and set up as a garden god among the heliotropes and myrtles. It may even come to pass that Monsieur Gastebois, for ever emancipated from the cares and trammels of office, may sit and say his rosary on a summer afternoon in the shade of what was once the Gilded Deputy.

HELEN PARRY EDEN.

THE BEGGAR AT THE DOOR

L ORD, if Thou be the door, I do not care
To enter in ; but grant me of Thy grace
Ever to keep the beggar's rightful place,
Though nought have I to ask, if I be there.

SISTER MARY BENVENUTA, O.P.