

The Story of Jonathan the Visionary

What should one think about magic and spells? The theory is obscure, the principles vague and uncertain, and which approach the visionary; but there are embarrassing facts, affirmed by serious men who have seen them; to admit them all or to deny them all appears equally inappropriate, and I dare say that therein, as in all extraordinary things that emerge from the common rules, there is a division to be found between credulous souls and strong minds.

(La Bruyère, *De quelques usages*.)¹

Several years ago, while traveling in Italy, I found myself in the company of a rather large number of Frenchmen and foreigners, men of intelligence and taste. We were going to Cosenza, the capital of nearer Calabria, and, after having passed Rossano, forced to abandon our carriages in order to cross the mountains, we were walking together in a small caravan, glad to be thus rendering one another mutual aid against the tedium of the journey or against the malefactors with which the region is filled, especially since the famous earthquake of 1783, which completely destroyed the town of Cosenza and plunged so many families into poverty.

From time to time we called a halt, and then, after a light meal, all grouped on some hillock, with our weapons at the ready, we loved to discuss the mores and modern costumes of the land through which we were traveling, the antiquities of Italy, and all the successive changes that the inhabitants and soil of that beautiful country had experienced. Several of us had traveled a great deal, and piquant comparisons drawn from the customs and habits of all the peoples of the world gave an infinite charm to our conversations.

We were in the middle of one of those interesting narrations when we suddenly perceived that a man clad in a woolen cloak, his hair retained in a net, surmounted by a large hat, was standing nearby and listening to us. At the movement we made in putting our hands to our weapons he smiled and reassured us with a gesture.

“I beg your pardon, Messieurs; like you I am a traveler; I am going to Cosenza, and, knowing from experience the danger of traveling alone in these mountains, I have come to beg you to receive me in your little troop. When I approached, a very interesting and, especially, very true story seemed to be claiming your entire attention; I feared distracting you, and abandoned myself, without thinking about it, to the pleasure of listening.”

The man had a mild and honest air; his exterior, although eccentric, was decent, and we accepted him as a companion.

On the road, interrogated by us about the region, which he seemed to know perfectly and the common goal of our journey, he replied: “I can only give you a few details about Cosenza, although I have lived in the town in three different epochs. The last time I left it, the earthquakes had still respected it, and I confess that I am only going there today in order to observe the effects of those cruel games of nature, the contrast between a populous and flourishing town and its debris dispersed in the solitude.”

“Monsieur,” I said to him, “how is it that, while you are still young”—for in spite of the deep wrinkles that traversed his forehead and gave him an air of austerity, he seemed to be aged forty at the most—“a town that ceased to exist in 1783 has left you memories of its splendor?”

He said nothing.

¹ The philosopher and moralist Jean de La Bruyère (1645-1696) published *Les Caractères*, of which “De quelques usages” is chapter XIV, in 1688. It was a highly controversial book, to which many of the contemporaries described therein took great exception.

One of our companions observed that the stranger had also claimed to have lived in Cosenza in three different epochs; he still remained silent.

We all looked at one another, darting incredulous glances, and stopped interrogating him.

Another halt, another conversation. This time, the stranger seemed at first only to take very scant notice of what was said, but from time to time, an ironic smile or a movement of impatience betrayed his thinking. Our discussion concerned the large number of religions that divide humans and impose on their minds different morals and duties, just as varied climates impose other forms and needs on their bodies.

Sir B***, an English colonel, recently returned from India, was entertaining us with curious observations that he had made of the religions of the Brahmins, and all the mysteries of science deposited in the Vedas and Sanskrit books. When Sir B***, with the arrogant confidence that one shows when, proud of a new discovery, one believes that one will only find disciples, and not judges, in one's audience, developing the ancient precepts of the Valouvrians and the Gymnosophists, after having caused all the artillery of his erudition to thunder in telling us about the six sciences of Nyayam, Vedantan, Sankiam, etc., the heresies of Agama Shastra and Buddhism, was detailing with the greatest fervor the mysterious rites that only he, among Europeans, had been able to know, he suddenly heard our new companion say, in an approving tone: "That's true!"—taking as his point of departure Sir B***'s observations on the religion and science of Hindu priests, revealing entirely to our eyes the ocean and wisdom of superstition of which he had only been able to glimpse the shores.

Dr. K***, so well-known in Germany for his voyages in North America, gave us in his turn some geographical and philosophical details regarding Florida and Louisiana. The stranger listened at first with attention, but soon corrected a few errors of locality with which the doctor agreed, astonished nevertheless that anyone could know more than him about places that he had traveled for thirty years of his life.

"You cannot judge from the beauty of those regions today," his antagonist said. "It would be necessary, like me, to have seen them when the Natchez, still faithful to their picturesque customs and usages in harmony with that primitive and sublime land, transplanted their huts from the banks of the Ohio to those of the Iberville."

"But you're putting me in a terrible embarrassment," replied the doctor, holding back a burst of laughter, "for the Natchez vanished from the region after 1730, and I am forced, either not to add faith to your discourse, or to believe that you are more than a hundred years old."

At this point the doctor's laughter was communicated to the entire caravan. The stranger stood up, and we continued on our way.

Each of the individuals making up our troop had his turn with the hundred-year-old man; to one he let slip that he had been at the battle of Marignano,² which seemed to date his birth to the beginning of the sixteenth century. To another, a knowledgeable antiquary, he gave formal denials regarding the antiquity of certain monuments, with no other evidence than the words: "I know! I'm sure of it!" We expected incessantly to hear him cry: "I saw them constructed!" but he doubtless restrained himself, for he seemed more annoyed than satisfied by the calculations that we might have made of his pretended age.

Finally, when we come to talk about the energetic speeches and sublime words that historians place in the mouths of dying heroes, and the last words of Epaminondas having been cited by one of us as model of the genre, he interrupted the narrator and said, in an emotional voice: "The death of Epaminondas was devoid of ostentation, like his life. "He had ceased to live when he was carried to his tent, and Plutarch and Diodorus lied about it! Oh, the most virtuous of men! After so many years...! Oh, my..." And tears seemed to flow from his eyes, as at a memory of amity.³

Immediately, we were unanimous in declaring him mad. "He's the elder brother of the Wandering Jew," said Dr. K***.

"Addled brain, but great learning," replied Sir B***.

² The Battle of Marignano was fought in September 1515.

³ The Theban statesman Epaminondas died circa 362 B.C.

Already we were no more than a few leagues from Cosenza when we heard a strange noise around us, and our little troop was suddenly surrounded by a large number of bandits. We were preparing for a vigorous defense when one of them advanced ahead of the others and approached us, shouting: "Ransom your lives!"

That honest negotiator was nearly sixty years old; he waited for our response for some time, but then, perceiving in our ranks the intimate of Brahmins, the contemporary of François I and the friend of Epaminondas, he fell to his knees, seized by terror.

"Jonathan!" he cried. "God save me! Yes, it's him...! I was very young when I saw you, but your features remain engraved here, and have not changed at all. Mercy! Mercy! You've come back again! Wasn't it enough that your presence in this place has already caused the earthquake that has ruined us all? My father told me that he had it from his grandfather that your arrival in Cosenza had caused a similar disaster a century before! Mercy, Jonathan!"

And at that terrible name, the entire band surrounding us fled, crying: "It's Jonathan the sorcerer!"

As for the latter, he covered his face with his hands, saying: "Superstitious beings! Haven't I enough to lament? They attribute to me a misfortune whose cruel consequences I tried to prevent; I warned them about the disaster, and they believe me to be the cause of it!"

This time, we no longer knew what to think of our singular traveling companion. There are things so simple that reason alone cannot explain them, and it is also necessary for reason to accept extraordinary things that it cannot comprehend. Doubt overtook us with regard to Jonathan, and doubt, in this case, was to take a step in favor of the bizarre man that we had initially take for a madman, and at whom we might have laughed unjustly.

We all drew nearer to him, with the exception of a Neapolitan who, until then, had shown himself to be a man of intelligence and common sense, but who, from that moment on, kept himself apart and continually made the sign of the cross throughout the remainder of the journey. Jonathan appeared to be plunged in profound meditation, and did not reply to our multiple questions.

Finally, we arrived within sight of Cosenza in the evening and arranged to stay the night in a small inn situated at the foot of the mountain. It was there, weary once again of our importunities, that he adopted a singular means to avoid them. When Dr. K*** spoke to him he replied in English; Sir B*** immediately presented himself as interpreter, but only received replies in Spanish. We had a Castilian among us, who entered the lists in his turn, only to beat an immediate retreat on hearing the Muscovite dialect assault his ears. Jonathan hoped to rid himself thus of our curious solicitations. But, perceiving that by clubbing together we could comprehend the various languages of Europe, he took refuge in those of Asia, in which Dr. K*** and Sir B*** followed him for a while but finally lost him in Malay and Siamese jargon.

The next day, when we awoke, we learned that Jonathan had disappeared, and I heard no more mention of him during my sojourn in Italy. A few months later, I returned to the capital of France.

"Paris has always been the rendezvous of those stupid fops, those effeminate men, veritable brutes of civilization who, in the midst of the prodigies of the human mind, live without seeing and without thinking, and who, endowed with the same faculties of which the development in the soul of the likes of Columbus, Newton, Voltaire and Lavoisier, produced the discovery of a world, enlightened humankind, explained and analyzed the universe, spend their life inspecting their wardrobe, attentive to the cut of their garments, picking their fingernails and showing themselves in public promenades in order to amuse children with their ridiculousness."

"What would you say, then," replied Madame ***, to whom I expressed myself thus in a moment of jest, "About a man who, already at a mature age and possessing great learning, is nevertheless infatuated to the ultimate degree with the fault that you have just identified?"

"I would think of him that his learning is only an effect of memory, and that reasoning plays no part therein."

“You might be mistaken. Monsieur Gernonval, of whom I’m speaking, thinks and reasons; his reason sometimes goes astray, but that is more the voice of his overabundant imagination than his judgment.”

“I don’t understand what you mean.”

“But here he comes now; listen to him and you’ll understand.”

And I did, indeed, see entering Madame ***’s home a man dressed in the most ridiculous and extravagant fashion. Everything that the art of attire has of refinement, and everything that fashion adopts in the way of luxurious baubles, served as his adornment.

Jonathan! I was about to exclaim—for it was him again—but his name expired on my lips, so stupefied was I to see the sorcerer of Calabria in a costume so different from the one he had been wearing on the day of his first appearance. Since then, I had formulated the project of penetrating what that inconceivable being was; that something supernatural presided over his destiny I had no doubt.

I affected not to recognize him, in the fear of inconveniencing him. I even listened to everything he recounted of the bizarre and the marvelous with an air of credulity that was not simulated. The man was beginning to take possession of my imagination powerfully. He perceived that, and seemed from then on, as he spoke, to be addressing himself more particularly to me than to the others; for several people had come into Madame ***’s home since his arrival.

When he withdrew, everyone interpreted what he had heard in his own way; only I remained silent.

“Well, what do you say about our visionary?” Madame *** said to me, finally.

“He confounds my mind,” I replied, “And it appears to me to be easier to believe him than refute him.”

“Are you going to think that he’s as old as the world,” added a newcomer, “or that the soul, after a thousand transmigrations, has rallied all the memories of his previous existences, as he would perhaps like to persuade us? For he seemed to me to have a great liking for Pythagoras, Cagliostro and all the illuminati of ancient and modern times.”

“I don’t know what to reply,” I said, “but I’d prefer to believe in a single miracle, a single deviation in the eternal laws of nature, than to think that all hazards have collaborated to sustain his impostures; that a thousand miracles have been made in order to prevent one; for it isn’t the first time that I’ve found myself in his presence, and what I have seen speaks as loudly in his favor as what I’ve heard.”

“His air of frankness seduces you,” replied my antagonist, “And it’s doubtless not from that side that he’s attackable; the name of visionary that we’ve given him suits him completely, for I’m convinced that he adds complete faith himself to what he advances. *Fortis imaginato generat casum.*⁴ His dreams and reveries soon become as many verities for him; he’s a lunatic, an inspired individual, a dreamer—in sum, a visionary—but he isn’t an impostor.”

Jonathan—for I shall conserve for him the name under which I saw him for the first time—knew that I had taken his defense ardently, and that my confidence in him was complete; that seemed to put me in favor in his mind, and I took advantage of it so fully that that after a while I became his disciple, his confidant and his friend.

“I noticed your surprise,” he said to me one day, “When you recognized me in a modern and bizarre costume; but, apart from the fact that I have long adopted the attire in usage in the country in which I am living, the numerous emotions experienced during my long existence have created within me, so to speak, a need for eccentricity and extravagance that I sometimes satisfy with a pleasure that you are fortunate enough not to be able to understand. Oh, how sagely the Eternal has marked the ordinary measure of human life! I have seen everything, felt everything, and my sensations today are no longer anything by themselves but reminiscences of my first century.

“A citizen of all lands, a contemporary of many ages, it seems that God has forgotten me on earth in order to leave an irremovable spectator there of all the changes that have occurred. I have seen Rome in its cradle; I have seen anthropophagous peoples devour their enemies in the same place where the queen

⁴ “A strong imagination begets the event”: a scholastic dictum quoted and discussed in one of Montaigne’s essays.

of the Arts, Athens, once stood; I have witnessed the noisy feasts of the Sicambres, the bloody games of the Bructeres. After having seen the torch of knowledge extinguished and reignited, I have followed step by step the new progress of the human mind, and I have repeated with Solomon: 'All is vanity!'

"What!" I said to him. "Do you not at least render justice to the scientists of our era, who, stripped of all the arguments of the schools, are marching with a firm and free step along the road traced by reason and experience?"

"All is vanity!" he repeated. "They can only see with the eyes of the body; their reason has killed their instinct; none of them is able to divine, and it is only by means of the imagination that one can grasp the ensemble of the creator's works. But no, each of them wants to engender his own universe. Buffon considers the earth as a fragment detached from the sun; Burnet sees it as a ball of water; Palissy as a mollusk. The atoms of Epicurus and Gassendi were succeeded by the subtle matter of Descartes or the material substance of Spinoza, over which the gravity of Newton has finally triumphed.

"Believe me, there is nothing but contradiction among the scientists; I have seen systems succeeded by other systems too often! In one of my ancient voyages in France, I was nearly imprisoned for having invoked the sentiment of Aristotle in a discussion with a professor at the University; thirty years later, I was threatened with being burned alive in the same country for having spoken irreverently about the same philosopher to the same professor. Innate ideas and the materiality or immateriality of the soul have caused me to run more risks to my life than the hundred battles that I have witnessed.

"Today, I no longer take sides either with scientists or with kings, and in this very century, which you call that of reason, I prefer to be known in France for the way I tie my cravat than for my fashion of thinking about the actions of the government. I have endured all forms of power, and I don't prefer any of them; I have studied and delved into all the sciences, and I only believe in astrology and alchemy."

"Is that possible?" I exclaimed. "It seems to me that of all the sciences, they are the most vain and the most false."

"Always basing thought on that of others, only seeing by means of the feeble eyes of those who surround us," he said, in a bitter tone, "do you only add faith to the things you understand? You do not believe in yourself, then, for the causes of your existence are a mystery to you, in spite of the reveries of the philosophy of Montbard.⁵ Is it possible to think, then, that for so many centuries, public credulity would not have been enlightened if those sciences had not presented some foundation? Would so many brave men have died on pyres, martyrs to intolerance, if they had not been convinced of verities, objects of their research?"

"The hermetic sciences disappeared, as well as the others, in the revolutions of the globe, but was not their power authentically proven in antiquity, even by those who had an interest in denying them? Did Moses not recognize, before Pharaoh, how far the power of the disciples of Zoroaster could extend? Did Saint Peter refuse to believe in the marvels of the art of Simon, the so-called Magus? Have not your historians, including the sage Rollin, proven the authenticity of the oracles of Rome and Greece? Whether that is white magic or black magic, aided or unaided by the demon, is not the point. But that sacred fire, conserved by a few initiates in India, still shines there in all its brilliance.

"Beware of deceiving yourself; Europe, discouraged too soon by fruitless trials, and which allows imposture to sit upon the tablets of Ptolemy, will soon recover from its errors; the discovery of the magnetic fluid will explain in due course the mysteries of the second life, of somnambulism and dreams, in which unknown objects present themselves in their real form, and will aid in revealing entirely in those countries the temple of Zoroaster and the emerald tablet of Hermes."

I did not understand him sufficiently to oppose him, and the movement of inspiration that seemed to have gripped him in pronouncing those last words imposed on his adversary the necessity of employing with him other weapons than reason.

After a moment's silence, I said: "Jonathan, is it to that marvelous art that you owe the prolongation of your existence?"

⁵ The reference is to Buffon, born in the commune of Montbard, who eventually acquired its château.

“I can reveal nothing! Perhaps I’ve ready said too much. But no,” he said, softening his voice, “I won’t repent of my confidence.”

He affected to change the subject, and we returned to his voyages.

“In less than a century,” he said to me, “France has changed its face considerably. When Louis XV was on the throne I lived in Paris under the name of Monsieur de Saint-Germain and frequented the society of philosophers.”

“Has not Grimm mentioned you in his correspondence?”⁶

“That’s possible.”

“What do you think of that time, compared with ours?”

“You have exchanged pleasure against reason. Then, however, I saw philosophy, a new religion, still on the defensive, conserving a proud and imposing attitude. Today, stronger than ever, I see it, after the victory, ready to renounce all its advantages.”

“With how many anecdotes and piquant facts your memory must be furnished!”

“Yes,” he replied. “In the dread of forgetting them, I have related a few of them, which I want to leave you as a pledge of memory. At first I had the intention of publishing them for the instruction of men; you will be my editor if you judge it necessary.” He went to fetch a little box, which he handed to me. “Here they are. I have been a witness to, sometimes even an actor in, all the stories that you will find here. Several, doubtless, will seem to you bizarre and incredible; come to find me, and I shall give you a clear and frank explanation.”

As soon as I had quit him, I had nothing more urgent than opening my box. I found it full of little scrolls of every form, color and material: paper, silk, birch-bark, papyrus, parchment, etc., etc. A large number of the stories were written in languages that I could not understand; I made every possible effort to have them translated; the best professors of the Collège de France assembled several times in my home in order to clarify the difficulties that vulgar translators could not vanquish. In the end, I read and devoured everything. Some of the narratives seemed to me very simple, respiring the tone of frankness and verity; a few others appeared to me to merit a title other than that of histories, and I immediately ran to Jonathan’s house in order to ask him for the “clear and frank explanation.” He had moved, and no one has heard mention of him since.

Not being able to wait for an interval of a century for him to condescend to come back to France in order to give me his explanation, I have made the decision to submit to the public the anecdotes collected by Jonathan. A few timorous individuals have seemed to doubt the entire veracity of these accounts. That is an insult to my friend. However, to free myself of all responsibility in that regard, I have consented, after many altercations, to entitle them “tales,” and to add to the name of Jonathan the title of “visionary,” in order not to alarm persons sufficiently superstitious not to believe in astrology and alchemy. Furthermore, by way of conclusion, I shall say with Montaigne: “The stories that I have borrowed I refer to the conscience of those from whom I have taken them.”

X. B. Saintine.

(In the course of this work, the notes of Jonathan’s editor are signed X.)

⁶ Author’s reference: “Vol. VII, p. 193.” The reference is to the journalist and diplomat Friedrich Melchior, Baron von Grimm (1723-1807); the first volume of his *Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique* was published in 1753, and later ones covered the entire period up to the Revolution.