

Concerning A Provost Who Did Not Recognise Things

Honore de Balzac

In the good town of Bourges, at the time when that lord the king disported himself there, who afterwards abandoned his search after pleasure to conquer the kingdom, and did indeed conquer it, lived there a provost, entrusted by him with the maintenance of order, and called the provost-royal. From which came, under the glorious son of the said king, the office of provost of the hotel, in which behaved rather harshly my lord Tristan of Mere, of whom these tales oft make mention, although he was by no means a merry fellow. I give this information to the friends who pilfer from old manuscripts to manufacture new ones, and I show thereby how learned these Tales really are, without appearing to be so. Very well, then, this provost was named Picot or Picault, of which some made picotin, picoter, and picoree; by some Pitot or Pitaut, from which comes /pitance/; by others in Languedoc, Pichot from which comes nothing comes worth knowing; by these Petiot or Petiet; by those Petitot and Petinault, or Petiniaud, which was the masonic appellation; but at Bourges he was called Petit, a name which was eventually adopted by the family, which has multiplied exceedingly, for everywhere you find "/des Petits/," and so he will be called Petit in this narrative. I have given this etymology in order to throw a light on our language, and show how our citizens have finished by acquiring names. But enough of science.

This said provost, who had as many names as there were provinces into which the court went, was in reality a little bit of a man, whose mother had given him so strange a hide, that when he wanted to laugh he used to stretch his cheeks like a cow making water, and this smile at court was called the provost's smile. One day the king, hearing this proverbial expression used by certain lords, said jokingly--

"You are in error, gentlemen, Petit does not laugh, he's short of skin below the mouth."

But with his forced laugh Petit was all the more suited to his occupation of watching and catching evil-doers. In fact, he was worth what he cost. For all malice, he was a bit of a cuckold, for all vice, he went to vespers, for all wisdom he obeyed God, when it was convenient; for all joy he had a wife in his house; and for all change in his joy he looked for a man to hang, and when he was asked to find one he never failed to meet him; but when he was between the sheets he never troubled himself about thieves. Can you find in all Christendom a more virtuous provost? No! All provosts hang too little, or too much, while this one just hanged as much as was necessary to be a provost.

This good fellow had for his wife in legitimate marriage, and much to the astonishment of everyone, the prettiest little woman in Bourges. So it was that often, while on his road to the execution, he would ask God the same question as several others in the town did--namely, why he, Petit, he the sheriff, he the provost royal, had to himself, Petit, provost royal and sheriff, a wife so exquisitely shapely, said dowered with charms, that a donkey seeing her pass by would bray with delight. To this God vouchsafed no reply, and doubtless had his reasons. But the slanderous tongues of the town replied for him, that the young lady was by no means a maiden when she became the wife of Petit. Others said she did not keep her affections solely for him. The wags answered, that donkeys often get into fine stables. Everyone had taunts ready which would have made a nice little collection had anyone

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gathered them together. From them, however, it is necessary to take nearly four-fourths, seeing that Petit's wife was a virtuous woman, who had a lover for pleasure and a husband for duty. How many were there in the town as careful of their hearts and mouths? If you can point out one to me, I'll give you a kick or a half-penny, whichever you like. You will find some who have neither husband nor lover. Certain females have a lover and no husband. Ugly women have a husband and no lover. But to meet with a woman who, having one husband and one lover, keeps to the deuce without trying for the trey, there is the miracle, you see, you greenhorns, blockheads, and dolts! Now then, put the true character of this virtuous woman on the tablets of your memory, go your ways, and let me go mine.

The good Madame Petit was not one of those ladies who are always on the move, running hither and thither, can't keep still a moment, but trot about, worrying, hurrying, chattering, and clattering, and had nothing in them to keep them steady, but are so light that they run after a gastric zephyr as after their quintessence. No; on the contrary, she was a good housewife, always sitting in her chair or sleeping in her bed, ready as a candlestick, waiting for her lover when her husband went out, receiving the husband when the lover had gone. This dear woman never thought of dressing herself only to annoy and make other wives jealous. Pish! She had found a better use for the merry time of youth, and put life into her joints in order to make the best use of it. Now you know the provost and his good wife.

The provost's lieutenant in duties matrimonial, duties which are so heavy that it takes two men to execute them, was a noble lord, a landowner, who disliked the king exceedingly. You must bear this in mind, because it is one of the principal points of the story. The Constable, who was a thorough Scotch gentleman, had seen by chance Petit's wife, and wished to have a little conversation with her comfortably, towards the morning, just the time to tell his beads, which was Christianly honest, or honestly Christian, in order to argue with her concerning the things of science or the science of things. Thinking herself quite learned enough, Madame Petit, who was, as has been stated, a virtuous, wise, and honest wife, refused to listen to the said constable. After certain arguments, reasonings, tricks and messages, which were of no avail, he swore by his great black /coquedouille/ that he would rip up the gallant although he was a man of mark. But he swore nothing about the lady. This denotes a good Frenchman, for in such a dilemma there are certain offended persons who would upset the whole business of three persons by killing four. The constable wagered his big black /coquedouille/ before the king and the lady of Sorel, who were playing cards before supper; and his majesty was well pleased, because he would be relieved of this noble, that displeased him, and that without costing him a Thank You.

"And how will you manage the affair?" said Madame de Sorel to him, with a smile.

"Oh, oh!" replied the constable. "You may be sure, madame, I do not wish to lose my big black coquedouille."

"What was, then, this great coquedouille?"

"Ha, ha! This point is shrouded in darkness to a degree that would make you ruin your eyes in ancient books; but it was certainly something of great importance. Nevertheless, let us put on our spectacles, and search it out. /Douille/ signifies in Brittany, a girl, and /coque/ means a cook's frying pan. From this word has come into France that of /coquin/--a knave who eats, licks, laps, sucks, and fritters his money away, and gets into stews; is always in

hot water, and eats up everything, leads an idle life, and doing this, becomes wicked, becomes poor, and that incites him to steal or beg. From this it may be concluded by the learned that the great coquedouille was a household utensil in the shape of a kettle used for cooking things."

"Well," continued the constable, who was the Sieur of Richmond, "I will have the husband ordered to go into the country for a day and a night, to arrest certain peasants suspected of plotting treacherously with the English. Thereupon my two pigeons, believing their man absent, will be as merry as soldiers off duty; and, if a certain thing takes place, I will let loose the provost, sending him, in the king's name, to search the house where the couple will be, in order that he may slay our friend, who pretends to have this good cordelier all to himself."

"What does this mean?" said the Lady of Beaute.

"Friar . . . fryer . . . an /equivoque/," answered the king, smiling.

"Come to supper," said Madame Agnes. "You are bad men, who with one word insult both the citizens' wives and a holy order."

Now, for a long time, Madame Petit had longed to have a night of liberty, during which she might visit the house of the said noble, where she could make as much noise as she liked, without waking the neighbours, because at the provost's house she was afraid of being overheard, and had to content herself well with the pilferings of love, little tastes, and nibbles, daring at the most only to trot, while what she desired was a smart gallop. On the morrow, therefore, the lady's-maid went off about midday to the young lord's house, and told the lover--from whom she received many presents, and therefore in no way disliked him--that he might make his preparations for pleasure, and for supper, for that he might rely upon the provost's better half being with him in the evening both hungry and thirsty.

"Good!" said he. "Tell your mistress I will not stint her in anything she desires."

The pages of the cunning constable, who were watching the house, seeing the gallant prepare for his gallantries, and set out the flagons and the meats, went and informed their master that everything had happened as he wished. Hearing this, the good constable rubbed his hands thinking how nicely the provost would catch the pair. He instantly sent word to him, that by the king's express commands he was to return to town, in order that he might seize at the said lord's house an English nobleman, with whom he was vehemently suspected to be arranging a plot of diabolical darkness. But before he put this order into execution, he was to come to the king's hotel, in order that he might understand the courtesy to be exercised in this case. The provost, joyous at the chance of speaking to the king, used such diligence that he was in town just at that time when the two lovers were singing the first note of their evening hymn. The lord of cuckoldom and its surrounding lands, who is a strange lord, managed things so well, that madame was only conversing with her lord lover at the time that her lord spouse was talking to the constable and the king; at which he was pleased, and so was his wife--a case of concord rare in matrimony.

"I was saying to monseigneur," said the constable to the provost, as he entered the king's apartment, "that every man in the kingdom has a right to kill his wife and her lover if he

finds them in an act of infidelity. But his majesty, who is clement, argues that he has only a right to kill the man, and not the woman. Now what would you do, Mr. Provost, if by chance you found a gentleman taking a stroll in that fair meadow of which laws, human and divine, enjoin you alone to cultivate the verdure?"

"I would kill everything," said the provost; "I would scrunch the five hundred thousand devils of nature, flower and seed, and send them flying, the pips and apples, the grass and the meadow, the woman and the man."

"You would be in the wrong," said the king. "That is contrary to the laws of the Church and of the State; of the State, because you might deprive me of a subject; of the Church, because you would be sending an innocent to limbo unshriven."

"Sire, I admire your profound wisdom, and I clearly perceive you to be the centre of all justice."

"We can then only kill the knight--Amen," said constable, "Kill the horseman. Now go quickly to the house of the suspected lord, but without letting yourself be bamboozled, do not forget what is due to his position."

The provost, believing he would certainly be Chancellor of France if he properly acquitted himself of the task, went from the castle into the town, took his men, arrived at the nobleman's residence, arranged his people outside, placed guards at all the doors, opened noiselessly by order of the king, climbs the stairs, asks the servants in which room their master is, puts them under arrest, goes up alone, and knocks at the door of the room where the two lovers are tilting in love's tournament, and says to them--

"Open, in the name of our lord the king!"

The lady recognised her husband's voice, and could not repress a smile, thinking that she had not waited for the king's orders to do what she had done. But after laughter came terror. Her lover took his cloak, threw it over him, and came to the door. There, not knowing that his life was in peril, he declared that he belonged to the court and to the king's household.

"Bah!" said the provost. "I have a strict order from the king; and under pain of being treated as a rebel, you are bound instantly to receive me."

Then the lord went out to him, still holding the door.

"What do you want here?"

"An enemy of our lord the king, whom we command you to deliver into our hands, otherwise you must follow me with him to the castle."

This, thought the lover, is a piece of treachery on the part of the constable, whose proposition my dear mistress treated with scorn. We must get out of this scrape in some way. Then turning towards the provost, he went double or quits on the risk, reasoning thus with the cuckold:--

"My friend, you know that I consider you but as gallant a man as it is possible for a provost to be in the discharge of his duty. Now, can I have confidence in you? I have here with me the fairest lady of the court. As for Englishmen, I have not sufficient of one to make the breakfast of the constable, M. de Richmond, who sends you here. This is (to be candid with you) the result of a bet made between myself and the constable, who shares it with the King. Both have wagered that they know who is the lady of my heart; and I have wagered to the contrary. No one more than myself hates the English, who took my estates in Piccadilly. Is it not a knavish trick to put justice in motion against me? Ho! Ho! my lord constable, a chamberlain is worth two of you, and I will beat you yet. My dear Petit, I give you permission to search by night and by day, every nook and cranny of my house. But come in here alone, search my room, turn the bed over, do what you like. Only allow me to cover with a cloth or a handkerchief this fair lady, who is at present in the costume of an archangel, in order that you may not know to what husband she belongs."

"Willingly," said the provost. "But I am an old bird, not easily caught with chaff, and would like to be sure that it is really a lady of the court, and not an Englishman, for these English have flesh as white and soft as women, and I know it well, because I've hanged so many of them."

"Well then," said the lord, "seeing of what crime I am suspected, from which I am bound to free myself, I will go and ask my lady-love to consent for a moment to abandon her modesty. She is too fond of me to refuse to save me from reproach. I will beg her to turn herself over and show you a physiognomy, which will in no way compromise her, and will be sufficient to enable you to recognise a noble woman, although she will be in a sense upside down."

"All right," said the provost.

The lady having heard every word, had folded up all her clothes, and put them under the bolster, had taken off her chemise, that her husband should not recognise it, had twisted her head up in a sheet, and had brought to light the carnal convexities which commenced where her spine finished.

"Come in, my friend," said the lord.

The provost looked up the chimney, opened the cupboard, the clothes' chest, felt under the bed, in the sheets, and everywhere. Then he began to study what was on the bed.

"My lord," said he, regarding his legitimate appurtenances, "I have seen young English lads with backs like that. You must forgive me doing my duty, but I must see otherwise."

"What do you call otherwise?" said the lord.

"Well, the other physiognomy, or, if you prefer it, the physiognomy of the other."

"Then you will allow madame to cover herself and arrange only to show you sufficient to convince you," said the lover, knowing that the lady had a mark or two easy to recognise. "Turn your back a moment, so that my dear lady may satisfy propriety."

The wife smiled at her lover, kissed him for his dexterity, arranging herself cunningly; and the husband seeing in full that which the jade had never let him see before, was quite convinced that no English person could be thus fashioned without being a charming Englishwoman.

"Yes, my lord," he whispered in the ear of his lieutenant, "this is certainly a lady of the court, because the towns-women are neither so well formed nor so charming."

Then the house being thoroughly searched, and no Englishman found, the provost returned, as the constable had told him, to the king's residence.

"Is he slain?" said the constable.

"Who?"

"He who grafted horns upon your forehead."

"I only saw a lady in his couch, who seemed to be greatly enjoying herself with him."

"You, with your own eyes, saw this woman, cursed cuckold, and you did not kill your rival?"

"It was not a common woman, but a lady of the court."

"You saw her?"

"And verified her in both cases."

"What do you mean by those words?" cried the king, who was bursting with laughter.

"I say, with all the respect due to your Majesty, that I have verified the over and the under."

"You do not, then, know the physiognomies of your own wife, you old fool without memory! You deserve to be hanged."

"I hold those features of my wife in too great respect to gaze upon them. Besides she is so modest that she would die rather than expose an atom of her body."

"True," said the king; "it was not made to be shown."

"Old coquedouille! that was your wife," said the constable.

"My lord constable, she is asleep, poor girl!"

"Quick, quick, then! To horse! Let us be off, and if she be in your house I'll forgive you."

Then the constable, followed by the provost, went to the latter's house in less time than it would have taken a beggar to empty the poor-box.

"Hullo! there, hi!"

Hearing the noise made by the men, which threatened to bring the walls about their ears, the maid-servant opened the door, yawning and stretching her arms. The constable and the provost rushed into the room, where, with great difficulty, they succeeded in waking the lady, who pretended to be terrified, and was so soundly asleep that her eyes were full of gum. At this the provost was in great glee, saying to the constable that someone had certainly deceived him, that his wife was a virtuous woman, and was more astonished than any of them at these proceedings. The constable turned on his heel and departed. The good provost began directly to undress to get to bed early, since this adventure had brought his good wife to his memory. When he was harnessing himself, and was knocking off his nether garments, madame, still astonished, said to him--

"Oh, my dear husband, what is the meaning of all this uproar--this constable and his pages, and why did he come to see if I was asleep? Is it to be henceforward part of a constable's duty to look after our . . ."

"I do not know," said the provost, interrupting her, to tell her what had happened to him.

"And you saw without my permission a lady of the court! Ha! ha! heu! heu! hein!"

Then she began to moan, to weep, and to cry in such a deplorable manner and so loudly, that her lord was quite aghast.

"What's the matter, my darling? What is it? What do you want?"

"Ah! You won't love me any more after seeing how beautiful court ladies are!"

"Nonsense, my child! They are great ladies. I don't mind telling you in confidence; they are great ladies in every respect."

"Well," said she, "am I nicer?"

"Ah," said he, "in a great measure. Yes!"

"They have, then, great happiness," said she, sighing, "when I have so much with so little beauty."

Thereupon the provost tried a better argument to argue with his good wife, and argued so well that she finished by allowing herself to be convinced that Heaven has ordained that much pleasure may be obtained from small things.

This shows us that nothing here below can prevail against the Church of Cuckolds.

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