

THE INIMITABLE CHRONICLES OF THE WORTHY GIANT GARGANTUA

by Jean Françaix, after the work of François Rabelais

translated by Laura Marris

9.3.15

In the beginning of the world, or a bit later—I wasn't there, quite yet—in the beginning, there was the glass, the bottle.

One day, when Phaëton, with his sun-chariot, came too close to the earth, he dried up all the countries below him. The meadows had no grass, the avocados had no help, the rivers ran dry. Birds fell from the dewless sky; animals collapsed open-mouthed in the fields. Every effort went into protecting the holy water in the churches. Desperate for shade, people took refuge under the bellies of cows.

And so, the people began to swell up.

Some, in the back; that race descended from Esope the Phrygian, the one you've all read about in pretty stories. Others swelled in the fingers on their hands, so that they looked like bagpipes. Others expanded lengthwise in the leg, so they looked like cranes or flamingos.

Still others had noses that got so big they resembled the spout of a distillery flask, glittering with sweat—such was the nose of Father Tipplecup, and also the nose of Firefart, that fresh water doctor in the village of Angers. Others grew swollen ears that covered their wives like a bullfighter's cape. Finally there were some who inflated evenly, harmoniously all over their bodies, and from them was born the race of the Giants.

The first of these was Haschtarfsprok, who begat Hirtspennsfroc, who ate his soup and reigned so well at the time of the flood. Sitting astride Noah's arc, he steered it wherever he liked with his feet.

He begat Atlas who used his shoulders to keep the sky from falling. He begat Nobreadforyou, who begat Héliconario, who drank for all the thirsts past, present, and future; note, too, that he was the first to play dice with spectacles, and he begat Hapfchepfesse, who begat Gribouillis, who begat Wolfaware of the hairy thighs, who begat Bolivorax, who begat Bricabrac, who begat Falourdin de Conimbre, who was vanquished by the Danish ogre, who begat Colophoniac, who begat Flamesarehot, he who made lip-noises like a monkey when he picked apart crayfish, who begat Cornabon, the skin of whose stomach hung remarkably far from his kidneys, and he begat Mou, who begat Louft, who begat Plouc, who begat Grangousier, who begat my master, the noble Gargantua.

Who was most shocked and dumbfounded by Gargantua's birth? Why, his father, Grangousier. Since his wife, Badebec, had died, Grandgousier was confused about whether to cry for his spouse's death or to laugh at the birth of his son. "Should I weep?" he said. "Yes, for such a

good wife is dead, she was this, she was that; it's an immensurable loss. Oh God! What have I done, for you to punish me this way? Why didn't you let me go first? To live without her is nothing but . . . *languishing*—Oh Badebec, my darling, my sweetheart, my radish-root, my quail-egg, my little bedroom slipper, I'll never see you again! Ah! Poor little Gargantua, you've lost that dearly beloved woman, your true mother, your sweet nurse!”

Saying this, he wept like a veal-calf. But, just as quickly, he started to belly-laugh thinking of Gargantua.

“Ha! Little milksop!” he said, “my big-big boy, so happy, so giggly, so handsome! Oh! How comforted is my heart! Let's drink! Let's forget sadness! Bring out the best wine, rinse the glasses, spread the table cloth, kick out the dogs, build up the fire, light up the candles, dole out the soup, close up the front door, send away these beggars, hand out to them whatever they ask for . . . and bring me my embroidered robe—I want to wear my best, to entertain the ladies.”

As he said this, he heard the ritual chants of the priests putting his wife into the ground. He cut off his merry speech and cried out:

“Lord, must I grieve on and on? I'm not young any more, the weather is bad, I might be coming down with some kind of a fever. By my faith as a gentleman, it's better to cry less and drink more. My wife is dead: dead!— by God, my tears won't bring her back to life. She's surely in Paradise, unless there's some place even better. She prays for us, she's well and happy, my dear wife doesn't need to bother herself with our miseries. . . I'd better think of finding myself another one...”

Like all little Christians, Gargantua was brought to the font and baptized. He passed the time in three ways: food, sleep, and drink; sleep, drink, and food; drink, food, and sleep. And after fourteen hundred flagons of wine and nine jugs of milk a day, little Gargantua had a fat, jolly face, adorned by no fewer than eighteen chins. One of his nurses often swore that at the very sound of the flasks he was in ecstasy, as if he tasted the joys of paradise, bobbing his head and smiling at the bottle. And when she dinged the glasses with a knife, the pints with their stoppers, he rocked himself, strumming with his fingers and baritoning with his bum...

How wonderful it was to hear him! But when he roused himself, dear people, he fell into the muck, muddled his nose in it, fished for frogs, ran after butterflies. He used his sleeve for a hanky, dropped boogers in his soup. He pissed in his shoes, he drank from his slipper, he washed his hands in his stew, and he tickled himself for laughs. His father's little dogs ate from his dishes and Gargantua ate with them. He nibbled their ears, they scratched his nose.

He played at hand-standing, at snorting, at pirouetting, at ferreting, at toadying, at captaining, at see-sawing, at blind-man's bluff, at bum-trumpeting, at ripping the feet off flies and pulling birdies out of their nests. He had a lovely rocking horse, and he made it charge, jump, prance, and smash into everything. Meanwhile, Sir Appetite arrived. Then he'd barrel through the women, running to the kitchen to know what was roasting on the spit. Theologically thirsty, he'd get stewed on eleven or twelve jugs of wine. Before long, he would bellow like a whole troop of

devils: Stentor's voice, at the Battle of Troy, was nothing to his!

All this while, Gargantua thrived and grew, day by day. His intelligence was sharp and subtle, as if he'd been touched by some divinity. To get the highest degree in science, he was sent to Paris, to the Sorbonne. He carried a satchel heavy as seven thousand tons and under the guidance of Flummoxouse Holoferne, Theoreticus Bridé, Jean-Jacques Getitupus, and other coughing, toothless old scholars, cunning marketers of outlandishness and abstractors of quintessences, he studied Donat, Facet, Derringdou, Alanus in Parabolis, with commentary by Merdebouef, Biggersow, Deutschbubler and stacks of others. This course of study took him eighteen years, eleven months, and fourteen days. Then he entangled himself in learning the lives of Saint Foutin the farsighted, of Saint Immaculata the Nosedripping, and of Saint Canard, who was martyred by cooked potatoes at the seat of Toulouse. Gargantua knew all this material so well that he could recite it backwards and forwards at the whims of those eminent scholars. He spent twenty-four years, four months, and three days on it. They finally made him a Provostial Coprophage in the Simian Academy, an Enhanced Junior Fellow of the Heffalumpian Society, a Full and Engorged Professor of Priestly Bagpipery, a Third Degree Laureate of the Flatuential Order of the Presidential Rattatouie, an Impactful Muzzler of Dames, and a Dean's Figment of Innovative Leadership and Celestial Worth.

In spite of all these studies, nevertheless, Gargantua graduated as a dreamy nitwit, biased, limp, dim, feeble, slow, spoiled, lethargic, dazed, the type who spouts nothing but dead donkey farts.

One morning, Gargantua received the following letter from his father, Grandgousier:

The fervor you've given to your studies would make me hesitate to disturb such philosophic undertakings, were it not that a friend and ancient ally, whom I completely trusted, because of a mysterious affair between our peoples, has declared war against me. Our intention was not to attack him, but to make peace and keep our faithful subjects and hereditary lands which Picrochole has just invaded, where, day after day he pursues his furious plans, to such degrees as cannot be tolerated by free men. I sent him a friendly note, enquiring what or who provoked his rage, but all I got in response was a declaration of war. So, my beloved son, as soon as you have your degree, come in haste to rescue us. The peace of God be upon you my dearest child!

*The twentieth of September,
your father,
Grangousier*

At the same time, Picrochole was holed up in the stronghold of Roche-Clermaud, where the Duke du Fleckdrabble, Lord-General Buckleswash, Commodore Shittle, and other nasty bits of brass came before him and said:

“Sire, today we proclaim you...the king, the king of—, the em—, the emperor of—, the greatest conqueror there ever was since Alexander the Great.

“Oh come, come!” said Picrochole.

“Here is what we propose: you leave some captain garrisoned here to guard this fort. Your army will divide into two—the first part will smash into Aunis and the Saintonge, Gascony, and the lands it can take with no resistance. At Fontarabie, you’ll seize all the battleships and, outflanking Portugal, pillage all the ports between here and Lisbon, where you’ll find the reinforcements you need to continue your conquests. Jove’s tit! Spain will be at your mercy, since they’re a bunch of nincompoops. You’ll pass Gibraltar, where you’ll erect two columns lovelier than Hercules’, to perpetuate the memory of your name. The strait will be re-named the Picrocholian Sea. Passing through the Picrocholian sea, the Barbares, the Balearics, all the islands in the Gulf of Genoa! Once Narbonnish Gaul, Provence, Lucca, and Florence are taken from behind, you’ll enter Rome: that pathetic Monsieur the Pope is already trembling with terror! Once Italy is done, we’ll make Cyprus, Rhodes, and the Cyclades surrender to us. Then we’ll move on to the Peleponese, we’ll capture it, and then...God save Jerusalem!”

“I don’t want anything bad to happen to Jerusalem!” Picrochole assured them. “Quite the opposite, I’ll have the temple rebuilt. It will be a hundred times more magnificent than Chambord or Chantilly and, in the seven-armed chandelier, I’ll enclose one of King Solomon’s real hairs.”

“But wait,” said Commodore Shittle, “don’t be so hasty in your plans: that will be for the return journey. First we’ve got to take Asia Minor, and all the countries on this side of the Euphrates.”

“But what will we drink in those deserts?”

“We’ll take care of everything. Nine thousand and fourteen great battleships full of the best wines in the world will arrive in Jaffa, to be met there by twenty thousand camels and one-thousand-six-hundred and fifteen elephants. Crossing the two Armenias and the three Arabias, they’ll arrive at our camp. Won’t we have enough wine?”

“Hmmm . . . but we’ll have to drink it warm!”

“A knight in shining armor, a conqueror pursuing the throne of the universal empire can’t always have his luxuries. Give grace to God that you and yours will arrive sound in mind and body at the Tigris.”

“But,” said Picrochole, “what will the other part of our army do in the meantime?”

“They won’t sit on their heels. Once they crush the army of that shameless drunk Grandgousier, they’ll have conquered Brittany, Normandy, Flanders, Burgundy, and Lyon for you, where you’ll find your garrisons when you return from these naval conquests in the Mediterranean. Passing the Rhine, they’ll sac Germany, Austria, Poland, Russia, Wallachia, Turkey, entering Constantinople! They’ll have the Sultan quivering in his breeches like a suppository.”

“Then I’ll be emperor of Trebizond!”

“Come, come Sire, raise your two armies!”

“Duke du Fleckdrabble, we give you Carmania, Syria, and all of Palestine.”

“Ah! Sire! Great thanks!”

“Your lordship General Buckleswash, we give you Hungary and Transylvania.”

“Ah! Sire! God keep you prosperous forever!”

“Commodore Shittle, we give you Bavaria.”

“Ah! Sire! We wish to live and die under your rule!”

There was one old, battle-hardened general at this meeting who declared:

“I’m afraid this will end like the farce of the milk jug: where a little girl with great imagination breaks the pot and has nothing left for dinner.”

But they called him a worm-eaten old hypocrite, and Picrochole cried:

“I bite, I smash, I whack, I catch, I kill, I crow. Down with the enemy! And all those who love me —follow me!”

Soon, Picrochole’s advance troops arrived before the wall of Abbey Seuillé, and they entered the monastery grounds. It was just the beginning of autumn, the pretty harvest season. The sun was high and clear, the air was cool, nature delighted the eye...

The Picrocholian flag-bearers laid their plumed helmets along the wall. The buglers filled their bugles with grape vines and the drummers kicked in one side of their drums, to fill them with clusters of grapes. Each one went about this business, quietly as he could.

The monks, unaware of their misfortune, were in the chapel, where they sang in the following manner:

“Ohh ass per a gus me
Duo-----mi-ne, hy-so----po,
et mun dab’rrr,
SSSSU----per ni-ven de—al ba bore.

But one true monk, if there ever was one, since the monkish realm first monked monkery, Brother Jean of the Breadfeets, young, alert, gallant and tough, glanced through a faulty bit of stained glass and saw Picrochole’s soldiers enjoying their horrific harvest.

“Aïe! Good fathers!” he cried, still using his singing voice: “goodbye baskets! The harvest’s

done—this coming year we'll have nothing but vinegar to drink!”

Straightaway he stripped off his robe and grabbed the stem of the cross (which was pure serviceberry wood) and, without any warning, he fell upon his enemies, swinging his arms, swashbuckling the old fashioned way.

And they thought they were dealing with all the devils in hell.

He squashed the skulls of some, ripped off the arms and legs of others; he flattened noses, blacked eyes, broke jaws. He punched bellybuttons so hard that guts came out: a glorious sight. Some died without a word. Other talked without dying, shouting: “Miserere! Confiteor!”

Almost all those who had entered the fields were overcome by his prowess, some thirteen thousand six hundred and twenty-two by number, not counting the women and children. By some misfortune, a few enemies turned back, and seeing that a humble monk had singlehandedly managed this skirmish, they rushed him and took him prisoner.

At the same time, Gargantua hurried to his father's aid as fast as his horse could carry him. Old Grandgousier's men cheered Gargantua's return. With the military tactics of his chiefs and the money of the good king, the army truly ran like clockwork.

Count Jumpthegun led the forward guard; Lieutenant Stoldisize led the infantry; General Brokefire commanded the cavalry; the rearguard was trusted to the care of the celebrated Colonel Narrowbum.

Gargantua—whose exploits surpassed those of Themistocles, Scipio Africanus, and Julius Caesar combined—took charge of the army as a whole. He declared that they would march on the fortress of Roche-Clermaud as night fell, to surprise Picrochole.

When evening came, Gargantua stood tall and proud, and ordered:

“Forward, march!”

They all marched in such good order that you would have said they were the children of Israel leaving Egypt through the Red Sea.

As they neared Roche-Clermaud, the army was caught in a heavy rain. Right away, Gargantua cried:

“Halt, I command you!”

And so, gathering all his people before him, he got down on his knees and began to stick out his tongue bit by bit, covering them like a mother hen covers her chicks; so well that you could

wander around underneath, like you can at Notre-Dame in Paris or at Haggia-Sophia in Constantinople.

“And now, cataracts of the air! Thunder all you like! Gargantua’s soldiers will laugh.”

Nice and warm, they dreamed of noble exploits.

The rain had stopped by daybreak, when the lookouts from Roche-Clermaud signaled their arrival.

As they contemplated Gargantua’s terrifying stature (which allowed him to see well above the clouds) it occurred to Duke du Fleckdrabble and his lordship General Buckleswash that conquering the world might not be as simple as they had, at first, imagined. They decided it would be prudent for them to discreetly fall back on positions they had prepared in advance, leaving the honor of defending the fortress to their flock.

Only Commodore Shittle stayed by Picrochole’s side. He was, to tell the truth, of no more than middling intelligence, but he was nonetheless an excellent soldier. He raised the alarm, aimed his artillery at Gargantua, and commanded Satan’s greeting from the cannon.

After the thunder of cannon passed, Gargantua thought he felt some kind of vermin scabbling in his hair. At first he thought it was a couple of lice he’d brought back from the Sorbonne. But when he shook his head, forty-four thousand, seven-hundred and eighty-three cannon balls fell out, almost crushing a little ecclesiastical flea who ran beside him.

It was Brother Jean, who’d managed to escape. They got his spirits up, since there’d been so little wine in prison that the spiders made webs in his teeth. Meanwhile, Commodore Shittle reloaded, preparing to fire on Gargantua once again.

With the kind of obsessive military steadfastness that only benefits arms dealers and blunderbuss salesmen, Shittle certainly would have ordered a third attack, but Gargantua decided to put an end to the whole business, annoyed by these prickles which irritated him like a hail of grape seeds. Tearing an enormous oak from the ground, he fashioned a club, and continuing his advance on Roche-Clermaud, he set out to demolish the towers, crash the turrets, crush the wall-walks, rip out ramparts, shatter the murder-holes, fracture the barbican, and dismember the draw-bridge. To finish his master-work, he inundated his enemies with such a mighty shower of piss that they all drowned except Picrochole who, drenched and furious, fled on the back of an old donkey who wasn’t sticking around either.

In memory of this victory, the noble Grandgousier ordered an abbey built on the site of Roche-Clermaud. And he wanted to appoint Brother Jean to be the Abbot, to honor the first man to fight Picrochole. But Brother Jean quickly replied that he did not wish to be charged with the care and keeping of monks. How could he govern others without knowing how to govern himself?

Nonetheless Grandgousier convinced the monk he could run it as he saw fit.

And so, by the side of the harmonious Loire, near a great forest, this famous abbey was founded, the Abbey of Thélème, which so many still speak of.

For its construction and appointment, Gargantua supplied six-hundred-sixty-nine thousand pieces of gold. The magnificent building was in the form of a hexagon, with a large round tower at each corner. The light poured in, rippling over the porphyry, the chalcedony, and the serpentine marble. Each floor was divided into the languages of its books in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Etruscan, and French. Brother Jean only admitted beautiful, well-proportioned women and handsome, well-muscled men. Instead of having to stay for life, each one could come and go as he pleased. Instead of living in chastity and obedience, they could be married, wealthy, and free.

There were no clocks or sundials in this tranquil utopia; they weren't ruled by the sound of the bell, but by the voices of good sense, love, and reason.

And because well-born, well-taught people, when they converse in honest company, have by nature an instinct which pushes them toward virtue and distances them from vice, there was but one rule in the Abbey:

“Do what you want.”

And Picrochole, you may ask, what happened to him? He became a meat-pie seller and a hawker of green sauce. In the evening, by his hearth, while he darned his socks, he dreamed of taking back the empire an old prophetess promised would be his at the second coming of the cockatrices. And thanks to a little pension that the benevolent Gargantua gave him, in secret, he lived well enough, except for the occasional beatings he got from his wife. And that's how he was remembered in folk-ballads throughout the land.

And ever since, people claim that in France, everything ends with songs.