

**ANATOLE  
FRANCE**

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Anatole France by Lewis Piaget Shanks

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**LEWIS PIAGET SHANKS**

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LEWIS PIAGET SHANKS

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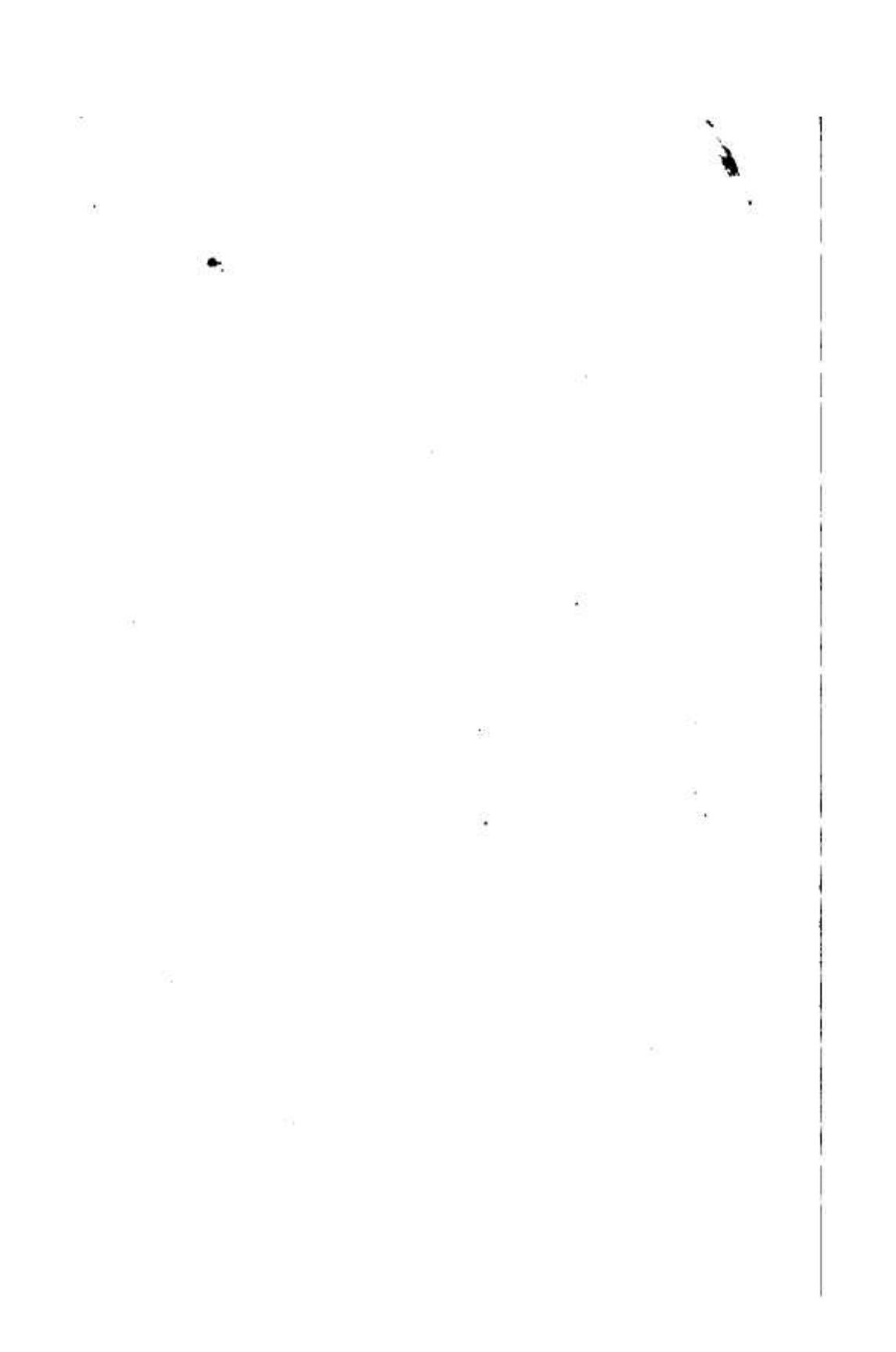
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## PREFACE

AMONG the would-be volunteers of 1914 was the virtual Dean of French letters, a man of seventy years. We were surprised, not at his age but at his transformation; for nearly twenty years he had preached pacifism, and the brotherhood of man. We were surprised because he was Anatole France. Yet scarcely twenty-five years before, this radical was known as a skeptic, an intellectual hedonist, a dilettante; in 1889 no one could foresee the future dreamer of reform in the nihilistic pages of *Thaïs*. So his final heroic inconsistency is only a part of a greater problem, a single phase in a life's drama, whereby a skeptic and a pessimist developed into a man of action.

This problem, this drama, must be the excuse of the present volume. Its hero is perhaps our greatest living man of letters. For nearly half a century Anatole France has found the muses

gracious. He has climbed the Sacred Mount; he has had for many years his cult and his votaries. But his company might be larger—ought to be larger now that we have such admirable translations of the master. His company must be larger, if reason and humanity are ever to do away with war. If that vision may be brought ever so little nearer, if some individualists and pessimists should find in his pages the Damascus road toward a broader and brighter ideal, this book will find its apologia.

The story of an intellectual Odyssey, it was prompted by the same optimism as the modern traveler's log. In most books of travel the best things are the illustrations. So with quotations in biography and criticism—prudence no less than reverence requires them. Moreover, even the temptation of a ready camera is less than the desire to translate—to attempt a translation of Anatole France, a perpetual challenge despite the quality of one's results. To quote wherever possible, to condense and still quote, and to strive to set one's mosaic in a surface not absolutely disparate is of course a bit presumptuous; but how else could one present a writer so personal, whose thoughts and impressions

and memories are day by day woven into his work?

With such a literary Proteus, no stippled portrait is worth a series of sketches. One must tell the history of his ideas—the story of his mind's development. So, beginning with his heredity and early environment, we follow the poet and thinker through his first imaginative enthusiasm for science, until his belief in her dies away in skepticism and he returns to the world of poetry and art. After this conflict of youthful illusions, when a victorious intellect has rejected the faith and effort which its philosophy finds vain, comes the second phase: content now to enjoy his own talents, without attempting to coordinate them to any principle but style, the erstwhile Darwinian develops his skepticism philosophically in order to range more freely in the galleries of the past. This is Anatole France in his forties, dilettante and disciple of the later Renan. But he wearies in the Palace of Art, grows sick of self and eager for a stronger draught of reality. Hence the descent into the arena, provoked by the Dreyfus affair and the corruption of French politics: the idealist, the man of heart and imagination now dominates the *intellectuel*. Then comes the reaction, after less than a decade of