

FICTION

Anatole France

Putois

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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PUTOIS

By Anatole France

Translated by William Patten.
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Dedicated to Georges Brandes

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I

This garden of our childhood, said Monsieur Bergeret, this garden that one could pace off in twenty steps, was for us a whole world, full of smiles and surprises.

"Lucien, do you recall Putois?" asked Zoe, smiling as usual, the lips pressed, bending over her work.

"Do I recall Putois! Of all the faces I saw as a child that of Putois remains the clearest in my remembrance. All the features of his face and his character are fixed in my mind. He had a pointed cranium..."

"A low forehead," added Mademoiselle Zoe.

And the brother and sister recited alternately, in a monotonous voice, with an odd gravity, the points in a sort of description:

"A low forehead."

"Squinting eyes."

"A shifty glance."

"Crow's-feet at the temples."

"The cheek-bones sharp, red and shining."

"His ears had no rims to them."

"The features were devoid of all expression."

"His hands, which were never still, alone expressed his meaning."

"Thin, somewhat bent, feeble in appearance..."

"In reality he was unusually strong."

"He easily bent a five-franc piece between the first finger and the thumb..."

"Which was enormous."

"His voice was drawling..."

"And his speech mild."

Suddenly Monsieur Bergeret exclaimed: "Zoe! we have forgotten 'Yellow hair and sparse beard.' Let us begin all over again."

Pauline, who had listened with astonishment to this strange recital, asked her father and aunt how they had been able to learn by heart this bit of prose, and why they recited it as if it were a litany.

Monsieur Bergeret gravely answered:

"Pauline, what you have heard is a text, I may say a liturgy, used by the Bergeret family. It should be handed down to you so that it may not perish with your aunt and me. Your grandfather, my daughter, your grandfather, Eloi Bergeret, who was not amused with trifles, thought highly of this bit, principally because of its origin. He called it 'The Anatomy of Putois.' And he used to say that he preferred, in certain respects, the anatomy of Putois to the anatomy of Quaresmeprenant. 'If the description by Xenomanes,' he said, 'is more learned and richer in unusual and choice expressions, the description of Putois greatly surpasses it in clarity and simplicity of style.' He held this opinion because Doctor Ledouble, of Tours, had not yet explained chapters thirty, thirty-one, and thirty-two of the fourth book of Rabelais."

"I do not understand at all," said Pauline.

"That is because you did not know Putois, my daughter. You must understand that Putois was the most familiar figure in my childhood and in that of your Aunt Zoe. In the house of your grandfather Bergeret we constantly spoke of Putois. Each believed that he had seen him."

Pauline asked:

"Who was this Putois?"

Instead of replying, Monsieur Bergeret commenced to laugh, and Mademoiselle Bergeret also laughed, her lips pressed tight together. Pauline looked from one to the other. She thought it strange that her aunt should laugh so heartily, and more strange that she should laugh with and in sympathy with her brother. It was indeed singular, as the brother and sister were quite different in character.

"Papa, tell me what was Putois? Since you wish me to know, tell me."

"Putois, my daughter, was a gardener. The son of honest market-gardeners, he set up for himself as nurseryman at Saint-Omer. But he did not satisfy his customers and got in a bad way. Having given up business, he went out by the day. Those who employed him could not always congratulate themselves."

At this, Mademoiselle Bergeret, laughing, rejoined;

"Do you recall, Lucien, when our father could not find his ink, his pens, his sealing-wax, his scissors, he said: 'I suspect Putois has been here?'"

"Ah!" said Monsieur Bergeret, "Putois had not a good reputation."

"Is that all?" asked Pauline.

"No, my daughter, it is not all. Putois was remarkable in this, that while we knew him and were familiar with him, nevertheless--"

--He did not exist," said Zoe.

Monsieur Bergeret looked at his sister with an air of reproach.

"What a speech, Zoe! and why break the charm like that? Do you dare say it, Zoe? Zoe, can you prove it? To maintain that Putois did not exist, that Putois never was, have you sufficiently considered the conditions of existence and the modes of being? Putois existed, my sister. But it is true that his was a peculiar existence."

"I understand less and less," said Pauline, discouraged.

"The truth will be clear to you presently, my daughter. Know then that Putois was born fully grown. I was still a child and your aunt was a little girl. We lived in a little house, in a suburb of Saint-Omer. Our parents led a peaceful, retired life, until they were discovered by an old lady named Madame Cornouiller, who lived at the manor of Montplaisir, twelve miles from town, and proved to be a great-aunt of my mother's. By right of relationship she insisted that our father and mother come to dine every Sunday at Montplaisir, where they were excessively bored. She said that it was the proper thing to have a family dinner on Sunday and that only people of common origin failed to observe this ancient custom. My father was bored to the point of tears at Montplaisir. His desperation was painful to contemplate. But Madame Cornouiller did not notice it. She saw nothing. My mother was braver. She suffered as much as my father, and perhaps more, but she smiled."

"Women are made to suffer," said Zoe.

"Zoe, every living thing is destined to suffer. In vain our parents refused these fatal invitations. Madame Cornouiller came to take them each Sunday afternoon. They had to go to Montplaisir; it was an obligation from which there was

absolutely no escape. It was an established order that only a revolt could break. My father finally revolted and swore not to accept another invitation from Madame Cornouiller, leaving it to my mother to find decent pretexts and varied reasons for these refusals, for which she was the least capable. Our mother did not know how to pretend."

"Say, Lucien, that she did not like to. She could tell a fib as well as any one."

"It is true that when she had good reasons she gave them rather than invent poor ones. Do you recall, my sister, that one day she said at table: 'Fortunately, Zoe has the whooping-cough; we shall not have to go to Montplaisir for some time?'"

"That was true!" said Zoe.

"You got over it, Zoe. And one day Madame Cornouiller said to my mother: 'Dearest, I count on your coming with your husband to dine Sunday at Montplaisir.' Our mother, expressly bidden by her husband to give Madame Cornouiller a good reason for declining, invented, in this extremity, a reason that was not the truth. 'I am extremely sorry, dear Madame, but that will be impossible for us. Sunday I expect the gardener.'"

"On hearing this, Madame Cornouiller looked through the glass door of the salon at the little wild garden, where the prickwood and the lilies looked as though they had never known the pruning-knife and were likely never to know it. 'You expect the gardener! What for?'"

"To work in the garden.'

"And my mother, having involuntarily turned her eyes on this little square of weeds and plants run wild, that she had called a garden, recognized with dismay the improbability of her excuse.

"This man,' said Madame Cornouiller, 'could just as well work in your garden Monday or Tuesday. Moreover, that will be much better.' One should not work on Sunday.'

"He works all the week.'

"I have often noticed that the most absurd and ridiculous reasons are the least disputed: they disconcert the adversary. Madame Cornouiller insisted, less than one might expect of a person so little disposed to give up. Rising from her armchair, she asked:

"What do you call your gardener, dearest?'"

"Putois,' answered my mother without hesitation.

"Putois was named. From that time he existed. Madame Cornouiller took herself off, murmuring: 'Putois! It seems to me that I know that name. Putois! Putois! I must know him. But I do not recollect him. Where does he live?'"

"He works by the day. When one wants him one leaves word with this one or that one.'

"Ah! I thought so, a loafer and a vagabond--a good-for-nothing. Don't trust him, dearest.'

"From that time Putois had a character."

II

Messieurs Goubin and Jean Marteau having arrived, Monsieur Bergeret put them in touch with the conversation.

"We were speaking of him whom my mother caused to be born gardener at Saint-Omer and whom she christened. He existed from that time on."

"Dear master, will you kindly repeat that?" said Monsieur Goubin, wiping the glass of his monocle.

"Willingly," replied Monsieur Bergeret. "There was no gardener. The gardener did not exist. My mother said: 'I am waiting for the gardener.' At once the gardener was. He lived."

"Dear master," said Monsieur Goubin, "how could he live since he did not exist?'"

"He had a sort of existence," replied Monsieur Bergeret.

"You mean an imaginary existence," Monsieur Goubin replied, disdainfully.

"Is it nothing then, but an imaginary existence?" exclaimed the master. "And have not mythical beings the power to influence men! Consider mythology, Monsieur Goubin, and you will perceive that they are not real beings but imaginary beings that exercise the most profound and lasting influence on the mind. Everywhere and always, beings who have no more reality than Putois have inspired nations with hatred and love, terror and hope, have advised crimes, received offerings, made laws and customs. Monsieur Goubin, think of the eternal mythology. Putois is a mythical personage, the most obscure, I grant you, and of the lowest order. The coarse satyr, who in olden times sat at the table with our peasants in the North, was considered worthy of appearing in a picture by Jordaens and a fable by La Fontaine. The hairy son of Sycorax appeared in the noble world of Shakespeare. Putois, less fortunate, will be always

neglected by artists and poets. He lacks bigness and the unusual style and character. He was conceived by minds too reasonable, among people who knew how to read and write, and who had not that delightful imagination in which fables take root. I think, Messieurs, that I have said enough to show you the real nature of Putois."

"I understand it," said Monsieur Goubin. And Monsieur Bergeret continued his discourse.

"Putois was. I can affirm it. He was. Consider it, gentlemen, and you will admit that a state of being by no means implies substance, and means only the bonds attributed to the subject, expresses only a relation."

"Undoubtedly," said Jean Marteau; "but a being without attributes is a being less than nothing. I do not remember who at one time said, 'I am that I am.' Pardon my lapse of memory. One cannot remember everything. But the unknown who spoke in that fashion was very imprudent. In letting it be understood by this thoughtless observation that he was deprived of attributes and denied all relations, he proclaimed that he did not exist and thoughtlessly suppressed himself. I wager that no one has heard of him since."--"You have lost," answered Monsieur Bergeret.

"He corrected the bad effect of these egotistical expressions by employing quantities of adjectives, and he is often spoken of, most often without judgment."--"I do not understand," said Monsieur Goubin.--"It is not necessary to understand," replied Jean Marteau. And he begged Monsieur Bergeret to speak of Putois.--"It is very kind of you to ask me," said the master.--"Putois was born in the second half of the nineteenth century, at Saint-Omer. He would have been better off if he had been born some centuries before in the forest of Arden or in the forest of Broceliande. He would then have been a remarkably clever evil spirit."--"A cup of tea, Monsieur Goubin," said Pauline.--"Was Putois, then, an evil spirit?" said Jean Marteau.--"He was evil," replied Monsieur Bergeret; "he was, in a way, but not absolutely. It was true of him as with those devils that are called wicked, but in whom one discovers good qualities when one associates with them. And I am disposed to think that injustice has been done Putois. Madame Cornouiller, who, warned against him, had at once suspected him of being a loafer, a drunkard, and a robber, reflected that since my mother, who was not rich, employed him, it was because he was satisfied with little, and asked herself if she would not do well to have him work instead of her gardener, who had a better reputation, but expected more. The time had come for trimming the yews. She thought that if Madame Eloi Bergeret, who was poor, did not pay Putois much, she herself, who was rich, would give him still less, for it is customary for the rich to pay less than the poor. And she already saw her yews trimmed in straight hedges, in balls and in pyramids, without her having to pay much. 'I will keep an eye open,' she said, 'to see that Putois does not loaf or rob me. I risk nothing, and it will be all profit. These vagabonds sometimes do better work than honest laborers. She resolved to make a trial, and said to my mother: 'Dearest, send me Putois. I will set him to work at Mont-plaisir.' My mother would have done so willingly. But really it was impossible. Madame Cornouiller waited for Putois at Montplaisir, and waited in vain. She followed up her ideas and did not abandon her plans. When she saw my mother again, she complained of not having any news of Putois. 'Dearest, didn't you tell him that I was expecting him?'--'Yes! but he is strange, odd.'--'Oh, I know that kind. I know your Putois by heart. But there is no workman so crazy as to refuse to come to work at Montplaisir. My house is known, I think. Putois must obey my orders, and quickly, dearest. It will be sufficient to tell me where he lives; I will go and find him myself.' My mother answered that she did not know where Putois lived, that no one knew his house, that he was without hearth or home. 'I have not seen him again, Madame. I believe he is hiding.' What better could she say?"

Madame Cornouiller heard her distrustfully; she suspected her of misleading, of removing Putois from inquiry, for fear of losing him or making him ask more. And she thought her too selfish. "Many judgments accepted by the world that history has sanctioned are as well founded as that."--"That is true," said Pauline.--"What is true?" asked Zoe, half asleep.--"That the judgments of history are often false. I remember, papa, that you said one day: 'Madame Roland was very ingenuous to appeal to the impartiality of posterity, and not perceive that, if her contemporaries were ill-natured monkeys, their posterity would be also composed of ill-natured monkeys.'"--"Pauline," said Mademoiselle Zoe severely, "what connection is there between the story of Putois and this that you are telling us?"--"A very great one, my aunt."--"I do not grasp it."--Monsieur Bergeret, who was not opposed to digressions, answered his daughter: "If all injustices were finally redressed in the world, one would never have imagined another for these adjustments. How do you expect posterity to pass righteous judgment on the dead? How question them in the shades to which they have taken flight? As soon as we are able to be just to them we forget them. But can one ever be just? And what is justice? Madame Cornouiller, at least, was finally obliged to recognize that my mother had not deceived her and that Putois was not to be found. However, she did not give up trying to find him. She asked all her relatives, friends, neighbors, servants, and tradesmen if they knew Putois, Only two or three answered that they had never heard of him. For the most part they believed they had seen him. 'I have heard that name,' said the cook, 'but I cannot recall his face.'--'Putois! I must know him,' said the street-sweeper, scratching his ear. 'But I cannot tell you who it is.' The most precise description came from Monsieur Blaise, receiver of taxes, who said that he had employed Putois to cut wood in his yard, from the 19th to the 28d of October, the year of the comet. One morning, Madame Cornouiller, out of breath, dropped into my father's office. 'I have seen Putois. Ah! I have seen him.'--'You believe it?'--'I am sure. He was passing close by Monsieur Tenchant's wall. Then he turned into the Rue des Abbesses, walking quickly. I lost him.'--'Was it really he?'--'Without a doubt. A man of fifty, thin, bent, the air of a vagabond, a dirty blouse.'--'It is true,'" said my father, "that this description could apply to Putois.'--'You see! Besides, I called him. I cried: 'Putois!' and he turned around.'--"

'That is the method,' said my father, 'that they employ to assure themselves of the identity of evil-doers that they are hunting for.'--'I told you that it was he! I know how to find him, your Putois. Very well! He has a bad face. You had been very careless, you and your wife, to employ him. I understand physiognomy, and though I only saw his back, I could swear that he is a robber, and perhaps an assassin. The rims of his ears are flat, and that is a sign that never fails.'--'Ah! you noticed that the rims of his ears were flat?'--'Nothing escapes me. My dear Monsieur Bergeret, if you do not wish to be assassinated with your wife and your children, do not let Putois come into your house again. Take my advice: have all your locks changed.'--Well, a few days afterward, it happened that Madame Cornouiller had three melons stolen from her vegetable garden. The robber not having been found, she suspected Putois. The gendarmes were called to Montplaisir, and their report confirmed the suspicions of Madame Cornouiller. Bands of marauders were ravaging the gardens of the countryside. But this time the robbery seemed to have been committed by one man, and with singular dexterity. No trace of anything broken, no footprints in the damp earth. The robber could be no one but Putois. That was the opinion of the corporal, who knew all about Putois, and had tried hard to put his hand on that bird. The 'Journal of Saint-Omer' devoted an article to the three melons of Madame Cornouiller, and published a portrait of Putois from descriptions furnished by the town. 'He has,' said the paper, 'a low forehead, squinting eyes, a shifty glance, crow's-feet, sharp cheek-bones, red and shining. No rims to the ears. Thin, somewhat bent, feeble in appearance, in reality he is unusually strong. He easily bends a five-franc piece between the first finger and the thumb.' There were good reasons for attributing to him a long series of robberies committed with surprising dexterity. The whole town was talking of Putois. One day it was learned that he had been arrested and locked up in prison. But it was soon recognized that the man that had been taken for him was an almanac seller named Rigobert. As no charge could be brought against him, he was discharged after fourteen months of detention on suspicion. And Putois remained undiscoverable. Madame Cornouiller was the victim of another robbery, more audacious than the first. Three small silver spoons were taken from her sideboard. She recognized in this the hand of Putois, had a chain put on the door of her bedroom, and was unable to sleep....

About ten o'clock in the evening, Pauline having gone to her room, Mademoiselle Bergeret said to her brother: "Do not forget to relate how Putois betrayed Madame Cornouiller's cook."--"I was thinking of it, my sister," answered Monsieur Bergeret. "To omit it would be to lose the best of the story. But everything must be done in order. Putois was carefully searched for by the police, who could not find him. When it was known that he could not be found, each one considered it his duty to find him; the shrewd ones succeeded. And as there were many shrewd ones at Saint-Omer and in the suburbs, Putois was seen simultaneously in the streets, in the fields, and in the woods. Another trait was thus added to his character. He was accorded the gift of ubiquity, the attribute of many popular heroes. A being capable of leaping long distances in a moment, and suddenly showing himself at the place where he was least expected, was honestly frightening. Putois was the terror of Saint-Omer. Madame Cornouiller, convinced that Putois had stolen from her three melons and three little spoons, lived in a state of fear, barricaded at Montplaisir. Bolts, bars, and locks did not reassure her. Putois was for her a frightfully subtle being who could pass through doors. Trouble with her servants redoubled her fear. Her cook having been betrayed, the time came when she could no longer hide her misfortune. But she obstinately refused to name her betrayer."--"Her name was Gudule," said Mademoiselle Zoe.--"Her name was Gudule, and she believed that she was protected from danger by a long, forked bead that she wore on her chin. The sudden appearance of a beard protected the innocence of that holy daughter of the king that Prague venerates. A beard, no longer youthful, did not suffice to protect the virtue of Gudule. Madame Cornouiller urged Gudule to tell her the man. Gudule burst into tears, but kept silent. Prayers and menaces had no effect. Madame Cornouiller made a long and circumstantial inquiry. She adroitly questioned her neighbors and tradespeople, the gardener, the street-sweeper, the gendarmes; nothing put her on the track of the culprit. She tried again to obtain from Gudule a complete confession. 'In your own interest, Gudule, tell me who it is.' Gudule remained mute. All at once a ray of light flashed through the mind of Madame Cornouiller: 'It is Putois!' The cook cried, but did not answer. 'It is Putois! Why did I not guess it sooner? It is Putois! Miserable! miserable! miserable!' and Madame Cornouiller remained convinced that it was Putois. Everybody at Saint-Omer, from the judge to the lamplighter's dog, knew Gudule and her basket. At the news that Putois had betrayed Gudule, the town was filled with surprise, wonder, and merriment....

With this reputation in the town and its environs he remained attached to our house by a thousand subtle ties. He passed before our door, and it was believed that he sometimes climbed the wall of our garden. He was never seen face to face. At any moment we would recognize his shadow, his voice, his footsteps. More than once we thought we saw his back in the twilight, at the corner of a road. To my sister and me he gradually changed in character. He remained mischievous and malevolent, but he became childlike and very ingenuous. He became less real and, I dare say, more poetical. He entered in the artless Cycle of childish traditions. He became more like Croquemitaine,* like Pere Fouettard, or the sand man who closes the children's eyes when evening comes.

**The national "bugaboo" or "bogy man."*

It was not that imp that tangled the colts' tails at night in the stable. Less rustic and less charming, but equally and frankly roguish, he made ink mustaches on my sister's dolls. In our bed, before going to sleep, we listened; he cried on

the roofs with the cats, he howled with the dogs, he filled the mill hopper with groans, and imitated the songs of belated drunkards in the streets. What made Putois ever-present and familiar to us, what interested us in him, was that the remembrance of him was associated with all the objects about us. Zoe's dolls, my school books, in which he had many times rumped and besmeared the pages; the garden wall, over which we had seen his red eyes gleam in the shadow; the blue porcelain jar that he cracked one winter's night, unless it was the frost; the trees, the streets, the benches--everything recalled Putois, the children's Putois, a local and mythical being. He did not equal in grace and poetry the dullest satyr, the stoutest fawn of Sicily or Thessaly. But he was still a demigod. He had quite a different character for our father; he was symbolical and philosophical. Our father had great compassion for men. He did not think them altogether rational; their mistakes, when they were not cruel, amused him and made him smile. The belief in Putois interested him as an epitome and a summary of all human beliefs. As he was ironical and a joker, he spoke of Putois as if he were a real being. He spoke with so much insistence sometimes, and detailed the circumstances with such exactness, that my mother was quite surprised and said to him in her open-hearted way: 'One would say that you spoke seriously, my friend: you know well, however...' He replied gravely: 'All Saint-Omer believes in the existence of Putois. Would I be a good citizen if I deny him? One should look twice before setting aside an article of common faith.' Only a perfectly honest soul has such scruples. At heart my father was a Gassendiste.* He keyed his own particular sentiment with the public sentiment, believing, like the countryside, in the existence of Putois, but not admitting his direct responsibility for the theft of the melons and the betrayal of the cook. Finally, he professed faith in the existence of a Putois, to be a good citizen; and he eliminated Putois in his explanations of the events that took place in the town. By doing so in this instance, as in all others, he was an honorable and a sensible man.

** A follower of Gassendi (d. 1655), an exponent of Epicurus.*

"As for our mother, she reproached herself somewhat for the birth of Putois, and not without reason. Because, after all, Putois was the child of our mother's invention, as Caliban was the poet's invention. Without doubt the faults were not equal, and my mother was more innocent than Shakespeare. However, she was frightened and confused to see her little falsehood grow inordinately, and her slight imposture achieve such a prodigious success, that, without stopping, extended all over town and threatened to extend over the world. One day she even turned pale, believing that she would see her falsehood rise up before her. That day, a servant she had, new to the house and the town, came to say to her that a man wished to see her. He wished to speak to Madame. 'What man is it?'--'A man in a blouse. He looks like a laborer.'--'Did he give his name?'--'Yes, Madame.'--'Well! what is his name?'--'Putois.'--'He told you that was his name?'--'Putois, yes, Madame.'--'He is here?'--'Yes, Madame. He is waiting in the kitchen.'--'You saw him?'--'Yes, Madame.'--'What does he want?'--'He did not say. He will only tell Madame.'--'Go ask him.'

"When the servant returned to the kitchen Putois was gone. This meeting of the new servant with Putois was never cleared up. But from that day I think my mother commenced to believe that Putois might well exist and that she had not told a falsehood after all."