

A medieval-style illustration depicting the Virgin Mary holding a lily, with a man kneeling before her in a church setting. The Virgin Mary is shown in a long, flowing white robe with a blue mantle, holding a white lily. She has a halo and is looking down at the man. The man is kneeling, wearing a dark tunic with a red and black diamond pattern, and looking up at her. In the background, several men in white robes are watching. The scene is set in a church with stone walls and a large window.

JAN M. ZIOLKOWSKI

# READING THE JUGGLER OF NOTRE DAME

Medieval Miracles and Modern Remakings





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## 15. Henri Pourrat, “Péquelé”

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Henri Pourrat, born in 1887 and died in 1959, secured widest fame during his lifetime for *Gaspard des Montagnes* or, in English, *Gaspard of the Mountains*.

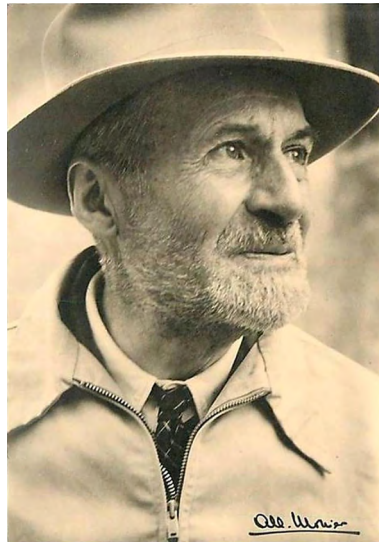


Fig. 21: Henri Pourrat. Photograph, date and photographer unknown.

The twentieth-century French writer began releasing his novel serially in 1921, brought out a first volume in 1922, published two more in the course of the decade, and rounded off the whole project with a fourth in 1931. Each of the four books that make up this grand whole recreates seven evenings of socializing and storytelling imagined to have taken place in the early nineteenth century. All the action in the fiction is set in central France, in the region of Auvergne, in the community of Ambert where the author was born and died. The entire enterprise is stamped by linguistic regionalism and local folk spirit, in both of which he took pride as a native son.

Already in 1910, Pourrat set out to inventory Auvergnat oral traditions and to stockpile jottings in which he summarized tales he had heard, along with their telling contexts. Roughly a quarter of a century later, he started to reconstitute these narratives and to see some of them into print. The project of seeking out such stories and publishing them became a lifelong mission, but it would not see fruition until after World War II.

When France fell to the Germans in June of 1940, the country was divided into an occupation zone in the north and west and a nominally free zone in the south. Both were in theory under the control of a French regime. Vichy France, as this government is often called, was headed by Henri Philippe Pétain, the Marshal who from 1940 to 1944 held office as Chief of the French State. A noun derived from his name, Pétainism, can be synonymous with collaborationism, owing to his policy of acquiescing to the demands of the German occupying forces. The word also evokes the ultra-conservative ideology associated with his nationalist and traditionalist regime and its supporters.

Pourrat's populism and conservatism aligned so well with the cultural priorities of Vichy that he has been called, with debatable fairness, "[the official writer of Pétainism](#)." After the war, the stances he struck while aligned with Pétain's government during the occupation rendered him suspect, rightly or wrongly, for having been a sympathizer or even a collaborationist with the Germans.

Once peace returned, the man of letters made sure not to embroil himself any further in politics. Instead, he concentrated on writing that stuck close to what had been his winning formula when he first made his name. Now a collector of folktales, he remained true to his long-held images of local people and their rural and regional arts, customs, and speech. The result was more than a decade, from the late 1940s through his death in 1959, in which he saw into print the fruits of indefatigable collecting over nearly a half century.

The cultural tide after World War II flowed in favor of whatever the French counterpart to "mid-century modern" should be named. Pourrat's interests in the old days of peasants and agrarian life fell hopelessly out of step with the radically changed new world, which of course encompassed a new France, that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century. Unswayed by shifting vogues, he devoted himself unblinkingly to an immense enterprise that goes by the overarching title *Le Trésor de contes* or, in English, [The Treasury of Tales](#). This magnum opus, based on the fieldwork that Pourrat conducted across almost fifty years, achieved a staggering expanse. Its first edition comprises thirteen volumes, published originally between 1948 and 1962, totaling close to a thousand tales. The next iteration, edited by his daughter long after his death but apparently in accordance with his express wishes, came into print between 1977 and 1986. It consists of seven formidable tomes, organized thematically without being numbered.

These days the assemblage of tales, however impressive its scope, is [not much known](#) within France and even less internationally. It fits loosely alongside the so-called fairy tales in German by the Brothers Grimm, the Uncle Remus stories in African-American dialect by Joel Chandler Harris, and other ventures of comparable magnitude. Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, founding fathers of such activity, sought to mediate between common folk and the elite, toward the goal of solidifying one people and nation for Germany by preserving lore that threatened to disappear in the tumult following the Napoleonic wars. Their imitator in the United States, Joel Chandler Harris, coaxed

from former slaves the contents of trickster tales that starred the weak Brer Rabbit and showed him triumphant over the stronger Brer Fox. The efforts of both the Grimms and Harris relied on first interviewing oral informants and later [recording on paper](#) the gist of the tales and lore collected, along with sketchy details on the tellers and context. Neither the efforts of the German brothers nor those of the American would pass muster by the standards of present-day ethnography. Among other things, none of them could rely on audio recording or even word-for-word transcription of the interviews. At the end of the day, their prose must be regarded as literature and not as field notes. Their books do not record undoctored tellings by informants but instead offer their own creative retellings.

Calling Pourrat a Gallic Grimm or an Auvergnat Harris would go too far, but the Frenchman's volumes and archives, filled with extensive but hardly stenographic or scientific dossiers, adhere in many ways to the models of such nineteenth-century precedents. In his copious and yet not comprehensive notetaking, he often homed in on particularities of phrasing that lend the tales an aura of authenticity. For all that, he brought to the endeavor preconceived notions of the peasantry in Auvergne and of their orality. These preconceptions constantly informed and sometimes deformed the literary form that he imposed on the stories he heard.

Pourrat's longhand records served as the points of departure for exercises in redaction that cry out for a culinary metaphor: they were bouillon cubes, ready to be rehydrated into nourishing broth in a matter of minutes. In rewriting, he reconstituted the base and used it to infuse soups and stews. The resultant dishes retained the underlying flavor of oral tale-telling but added much complexity of his own making and accorded with his personal values and aesthetics. Like a chef aspiring to a Michelin rating, he served up regional fare from his native cuisine to the primarily Parisian audience of the prestigious Gallimard press. In this narrative cooking, he replaced the original tellers and tales with his reconceptions of the two.

Pourrat often endeavored, even if not to a degree that would satisfy a trained folklorist, to corroborate his fidelity to the oral deliveries of stories he heard that underlay the literate versions he wrote. Present-day researchers can consult the rich documentation in archives of his field notes. Yet those files give no hint whatsoever about the provenance of the story of relevance to us here, "Le Péquelé." Indeed, they contain no particulars at all about the tale, teller, or context. If truth be told, we have no guarantee even that the narrative reached the writer through oral tradition.

In the absence of records, we are left to speculate about Pourrat's sources. Theoretically, the progeny of "Our Lady's Tumbler" or of the exemplum associated with it could have lived on in Auvergne generation after generation from the late Middle Ages to the mid-twentieth century. The oddity would be that before Pourrat, no one else anywhere in all of France ever recorded this oral tradition. Likelier would be that the story came into (or back into) folktale-telling via "The Juggler of Notre Dame" as transmitted through Anatole France, Jules Massenet, or a medium influenced by one,

the other, or both. Readers of the short fiction, viewers of the opera, or, to put forward one further hypothesis, listeners of a radio program could have recounted the tale from memory, with alteration and embroidery. Yet curiously, Le Péquelé's activity as an acrobat recalls the unnamed tumbler of the medieval poem more than the juggling Barnabé of Anatole France or the jongleur Jean of Jules Massenet and Maurice Léna. Therein lies the mystery.

We find ourselves stuck, as so often, with regard to questions about oral or written origins. Whatever route of transmission delivered the story to Pourrat, he did his best to transform it into the semblance of a folktale, even one redolent in some ways of literary fairy tale. Right off the bat, he opened the narrative with the typical "once upon a time" phrase. Immediately afterward, he identified the hero first by his profession of [juggler](#) and then by his name of Péquelé. The entertainer, here struggling (as in France's story and Massenet's opera) rather than prosperous (as in "Our Lady's Tumbler"), wishes to live in a monastery so as to serve the Mother of God, but is not permitted to do so. The abbot believes that Mary would not want a physical performer in her service. Ultimately, the head of the abbey is forced to realize his mistake after witnessing the image of the Virgin as she leaves the stone column on which she stood, descends to Péquelé on a beam of light, and wipes the sweat from his brow with the edge of her veil. Thus persuaded to modify his views, the leader of the community allows the juggler to stay.

The English is reprinted from *French Folktales from the Collection of Henri Pourrat*, selected by C. G. Bjurström, translated and with an introduction by Royall Tyler (New York: Pantheon, 1989), 36–41, with the kind permission of the translator. Tyler has also produced the fullest [assessment in English](#) of Pourrat's immense project, with close comparison of tales as published with their oral field versions. By the luck of the draw "Le Péquelé" happens not to be one of these case studies, but they can inspire suggestive comparisons. Pourrat's folktale or, as some might prefer, "faketale" has had a modest but interesting afterlife in English-language [children's literature](#).

A final note about the title is in order. In both printed editions of the folktales, the story of concern to us is called "[Le Péquelé](#)," after its principal character. The distinctive designation of this eponymous hero may carry embedded within it connotations along the lines of [péquenaud](#), denoting a simple or, more pejoratively, brutish peasant. In the long run the name might then derive from the Latin *pagus*, which produced the French *pays* and Italian *paese*, both meaning "country," and *paganus*, whence the French *paysan* "peasant," Italian *paesano* "fellow countryman," and both the English *pagan* and *peasant*. Alternatively, speculation has also posited a relationship with the Spanish *pequeño* for "little." This second etymology is more convenient than convincing. Considering the additional uncertainty as to whether "Le Péquelé" is a true name or a epithet, no attempt is made here to translate and to evoke any of the possible associations. The definite article is dropped and the second element is capitalized.

### "Péquelé"

There was once a poor juggler people called Péquelé. He lived off the little shows he put on in village squares, when he rolled out his threadbare mat. Heaven knows what acrobatics he launched into then, leaping and somersaulting, walking on his hands, twisting himself up, tying himself into knots like a snake and then untying himself again, or springing about like a squirrel.

He lived off these tricks but he didn't live well. People always look down a bit on those who wander the countryside, though they may admit the wanderers keep the rest of us amused. For themselves, their work is to grow bread. With the strength of their arms they struggle mightily with wheatgrass, brambles, and thistles. They can hardly think much of strolling entertainers. Poor Péquelé didn't see many coins fall on his carpet. He now only knew by rumor what a roast of beef might be, or even a nice steaming bowl of thick soup. As pale as a church candle he was, and as thin as a draft through a keyhole. But he roamed on, hawking and coughing, hair in his eyes, like a skinny cat. He really was almost like a ghost, or like one of those scarecrows made of crossed sticks and a few rags that people put up in cherry orchards to keep jays and orioles off the fruit.

Lightly though he wandered, one December evening at nightfall Péquelé fell. He stumbled in some brambles and collapsed a few paces farther on, on the steps of a roadside cross. There he fainted.

Happily two [begging friars](#) on the way home to their cloister found him, just as it was beginning to snow, and loaded him on their donkey. At the monastery he got some wine to drink and some hot soup. The next day he tried walking again, but his legs were all rubbery and wouldn't hold him up. The abbot said he could stay a week to get his strength back.

The week went by and the snow melted. The south wind cleared the roads. One fine morning the abbot had Péquelé brought to the locutory, the cloister's visiting room.

"My good Péquelé," said he, "all friends must part. We're going to fill your pack and you're going to set out on the road again."

"But you see, Father Abbot, I'd rather stay here," replied Péquelé.

"You'll come and see us again next year, and we'll give you three days on retreat. Our rule won't let us keep a passing traveler for more than three days."

Poor Péquelé was dreaming of good round bread on the table, of bowls full of lentils, and of chunks of cheese washed down with a little wine. There was especially the peace of the monastery, like the peace of a room where you sit by the fire while it's snowing outside. How miserable it is then, on the road! The wind whistles, the rain beats in your face, and the dogs people loose at the sight of you bark savagely and snap at your heels. And above all, there's the whole countryside's sullen ill-will. Here, in the white-vaulted passageways, there was peace always present and always found; sweet, assured peace.

But there was still more in the monastery to capture the heart of poor Péquelé. Ever since he was a tiny boy, doing somersaults in the grass, he'd loved Our Lady and had given her his heart. There before her image, in the cloister's beautiful chapel with its red and blue stained-glass windows, he felt closer to her than anywhere else in the world.

"Oh please, Father Abbot, won't you keep me, so I can be a friar with the others?"

"My poor Péquelé, weren't you born instead to roam the highways and byways? You're good at somersaults, but that's all. Do you think Our Lady needs an acrobat in this monastery of ours?"

Péquelé hung his head. One tear, then another and another, ran down his cheeks.

"All right," said the abbot after a moment. "Listen. Will you promise me you'll be a good monk, worthy of the name?"

"Oh yes, yes, Father! I so love the Holy Virgin!"

"All right, we'll keep you here as a novice, and in three months' time we'll see."

Péquelé shone with happiness. Carried away by joy he flipped upside down, walked on his hands, then turned cartwheels round and round the locutory. Nothing like that had ever been seen in the room before.

"Enough, enough, Péquelé! We'll overlook your gamboling this once. But now you're a novice, we'll have no more of your mountebank tricks. Do you understand me, Péquelé?"

"I understand you, Father."

"No more leaps or somersaults!"

"Absolutely not. No, no."

"You're going to put on the habit, and you must stop acting like a carnival buffoon. Agreed?"

"Yes, Father Abbot, agreed!"

Péquelé had promised with all his heart, like a child. And with all his heart he kept the rule three days, three weeks, and three months. But winter was past now and spring was coming. Soon there'd be no more snowflakes sailing by on the wind, but instead petals of hawthorn and plum. Already you could hear the blackbird, the first bird to sing in the year's first thaw, like a little flute in the trees still bare and stirred by the wind. Far off, in the heart of the woods, cuckoos were calling forth yellow flowers to bloom in the grass. Wet garden paths, drying now, were running off toward the sun.

Something got into Péquelé's legs—something like the fife's mad magic, when the music comes to life before your eyes, dancing to each measure and phrase. The abbot, whose eye watched everything, saw well enough that Péquelé had quicksilver in his veins.

"Listen, my son," said he, "your work for today is to prune the orchard. Get up there in the tops of the apple trees and take out all the dead or weak branches."

So Péquelé got up in the trees, pruning hook in hand. Here and there he hopped, like a tightrope dancer. And all at once, in the spring wind, he discovered he was lighter than down. He ended up leaping from apple tree to apple tree like a squirrel.

When he got to the end of the orchard, of course, he had to come down and put back on the habit he'd taken off for climbing. But first, on the grass in his shirt and breeches, all alone, free and full of fun, he just couldn't resist. Off he went, standing on his head, walking on his hands, doing leaps and twists and flip-flops of all sorts, filling the orchard with acrobatics as a goldfinch fills its cage with song.

The abbot came to check on Péquelé's progress. He saw everything.

Péquelé promised very contritely that he'd never do it again. No more somersaults, oh no! In fact he apologized so humbly and so sincerely that the abbot couldn't help relenting. He sighed a big sigh and drew his hands back into his sleeves.

"Very well," he said, "I'll keep you on probation a while longer. But if you don't keep your promise, out you go! Remember that, my son, if you hope to stay."

The abbot thought the problem was quicksilver in the veins, did he? No, it wasn't so much that as heartfelt joy. Some evenings, Péquelé's heart was just bursting with joy.

The weather was fine, cool, and bright with a nice breeze. The setting sun, as red as a red-hot iron quoit, was turning the air in the distance all pink. You could see, beneath a few homing birds, the blue countryside settling into evening calm, and all space opening to the peace of God. Poor Péquelé (so he told himself) didn't know how to offer up dignified prayers like the other monks. But somehow he had to thank the Lord who



made all things so beautiful. And it seemed to him that he could do this only by doing the one thing he was good at in this world: his tricks of a showman and a carefree child.

The abbot called the chapter together. The matter seemed clear to him and to all the monks: it was wiser not to keep at the monastery a monk who leaped about like a goat—in a word, a mountebank.

"Surely he's no great sinner," one monk objected.

"Ah," replied another, "but there are all these somersaults of his. That's what he was born to and he can't help it!"

"We haven't been able to get him to mend his ways," concluded the abbot. "He's still a madcap, and no madcap will ever make a monk."

Péquelé confessed his fault and wept. He didn't dare try to defend himself. All he had were his tears. He wept at the very idea of leaving the monastery; his white, vaulted cell; the little garden full of box and pansies; and all the peaceful, kindly friars. Poor Péquelé wept like the spring at the back of the orchard.

The abbot, his eyes on Péquelé, felt a quiver in the pit of his stomach. More than one friar was close to tears, and so was he. But this mad spate of flip-flops seemed just too outrageous to let pass. Péquelé hadn't managed to keep on the path of wisdom and live like a monk, so he'd have to go back to his old path as a strolling acrobat.

They stripped off his habit and gave him back his mat and pack.

The abbot left right away and went to pray in the chapel. "I had to do it," he kept repeating, sunk in his stall. "Poor Péquelé's still a child. And we, Our Lady's servants, can't be romping children any more."

He'd gotten that far in his thoughts when from his dark corner he heard a slight noise. Not far away, Péquelé was unrolling his mat on the chapel's flagstones. He was right in front of the column which supported the Virgin's wooden image.

"Our Lady Mary," said Péquelé, "I wanted to live in your house all the days of my life, but as you can see, I'm not worthy. Still, I mean to thank you for the time I've spent here almost as your little boy."

Believing himself alone in the chapel, he addressed Our Lady as volubly as a child. And what did he do next but start in on his tricks. Bending and stretching, rolling and leaping, he did every trick he knew, but with so much spirit, so much soul, that the abbot, who was about to get up and stop the whole thing, stayed right where he was.

Suddenly, dazzled and bathed in light, the abbot slid from his seat down onto his knees. For at a certain moment Péquelé had come down on his feet, his face streaming with sweat and almost breathless. And at that very moment (the abbot saw it happen), the Virgin left her stone column and came to Péquelé on a ray of light. She leaned over him and, with the edge of her veil, gently wiped his streaming forehead.

Like a mother caressing her child, she caressed the strolling acrobat. The chapel was ablaze with light.

"Forgive me, Our Lady, forgive me," murmured the abbot, bowing his head to touch with his forehead the rail of his stall. "I thought I was truly wise, and yet could not see wisdom. What do we really know, after all, except to gather at your feet like children, innocently and with joy? That's all the saints have ever known—to love God with all their heart, and God's Mother, and everything that is of God. This mountebank is a greater saint than us all."

Péquelé stayed at the monastery to pray and to do his leaps and tricks, which in spirit were easily worth any prayers. Then, one fine day, he died. They say Our Lady appeared at his bedside and the abbot saw her there again, as he had that evening in the chapel when to wipe away with her shining veil the sweat of exhaustion, Our Lady had come and leaned down over her poor acrobat.

