

BRYAN YOUNG

On the Ferry to St Christophe

“CAN YOU SEE IT YET, Ronald?”
“Not really, Dr Millefort.”

They are talking of St Christophe, an island fifty-three miles off the coast of Brittany, entirely surrounded by fog.

“Hah!” bellows Geoffrey Millefort, the celebrated architect and mediaevalist. He is proud of his eagle eyes. What a splendid physical specimen he is! His legs, planted wide apart on the deck planking, are pillars! Such black boots! What a girth his dashing cape encircles! Young Ronald, his protégé, looks like a—like a paper cut-out beside him. And certainly Ronald feels like he is about to blow away like one. A gale must be blowing. But it doesn’t bother Millefort. It would take more than a gale to blow him away. It would take a whole hurricane probably. What an edifice the man is! Like Solomon’s temple, he beggars comparison. You really wonder, when you look at Geoffrey Millefort, if anyone else is half as solid.

“Hah indeed,” thinks Ronald.

The young sourpuss.

“It steals—” Millefort lowers his baritone until it rumbles like the distant troubling of thunder. What power the man has! “Like the Edda it steals, on the edge of consciousness. A premonition ...” He gazes through that impenetrable wall of fog. How could anyone see through such fog? He is bearded like a prophet, and perhaps it is like that that he sees. But a prophet with dash. That cape for instance. Who else could carry it off? And the wide-brimmed bottle-green hat. What a massive cranium lies under that rakish slope! There were young lady students who simply fell down the first time they saw that dome. It looked like it was bursting with brains. More than one frail thing had thrown herself at him, but it was like a ship flinging itself against the rocks, that’s how rugged and rock-like he was.

“The old goat must have lasers for eyes,” muttered Ronald under his breath. “Senile old fraud.” *He* didn’t think that Millefort could see the island any more than he could.

“Can you identify that, Ronald?”

“I’m afraid the fog is too thick, Dr Millefort.” Ronald, from Iowa, where the world never undulates as capriciously, had no interest in elusive islands that were not securely anchored beneath his feet. His stomach had less than no interest, and his stomach was also entertaining second thoughts about the breakfast that it had earlier enjoyed just as much as Ronald had. That was the difference between the two men. The parts of Millefort’s body worked in concert under the conductorship of those prodigious brains of his, while the components of Ronald were unruly, divisive, and quarrelsome. And because of that Ronald would never be great. One must be simple to be great! Simple like a massive slab of granite, which is both great and simple. Simple like God, who has no parts at all.

Millefort eyed his young disciple. The young disciple stuttering with chill, clutching the rail and staring into the green foam, which increasingly resembled the swirling water in a giant toilet bowl, wasn’t even aware that those eyes that could pierce walls were drilling into the side of his head. They were blue, bulging eyes, sometimes like billiard balls that looked like they were going to pop out and give you a good knock. Ow! But now they had bits attached, and they were boring, boring, taking a core sample of Ronald’s brain.

“I meant the allusion, Ronald.” Rumbling, vaguely menacing, the voice was like a handsaw on its first tentative stroke. The man might have had a whole tool shed hidden under that cloak! Nothing would surprise you about him.

Ronald closed his eyes, and in his head he struggled up the sloping deck of memory, trying to recall what Millefort had said. He was not a fast thinker. Iowa was his birthplace, and his mind operated with the plodding deliberation of farm machinery at the best of times, and this was the worst of times. Never before had he been so homesick for topsoil, manure, turnips, and whatever else is in Iowa. Finally a tumbler dropped into place.

“You mentioned the Edda?”

“Did I?”

“The ghost army in *Elbrulfus the Crusader*.”

That was it!

Ballad, fourteenth century: required reading in “Constructing the Mediaeval Mind,” G. Millefort, Instructor, 1 Credit.

“*Well done, my boy.*”

O Ronald: receiving plaudits from that giant! No master spoke with kinder feeling to his favourite hound. But what is this, Ronald? No beams of gratitude radiating from thy face? Still sunk in misery, absorbed in thine

own self-obsessed feelings of seasickness, of cold, of wet—it was now actually raining. His teeth chattered.

Presently.

Millefort: “Surely now, Ronald. Look!” He traced into existence with a finger sheathed in kid leather the outline of the island of St Christophe. Ronald, willing his head up, saw, or thought he saw.

“Softly etched. Double humped, like the Bactrian camel. See, Ronald, the cleft or caesura in the profile. We can yet imagine, while the island still stands a good way off, those slopes vine clad, and dressed with olive groves, and in that hollow, were these indeed southern climes, we would find the voluptuous Greek had built his temple. To the Pagan imagination such hollows contact with the sexual juices of the earth. They are geological vaginae.” A wry smile hiding behind the Mosaic beard was visible in the eyes. Millefort believed that it was important for the broadening of Ronald’s mind to introduce sexual references into conversations, for the boy being Iowan, naturally was repressed by a Republican conviction that sexual discussions were best confined to cubicle walls.

“Hah!” continued Millefort exultantly, “But we shall find no vision of fecundity in these latitudes, or on that island, which I am sure is as bleak as it is remote. God but how the wind whistles!”

Ronald rejoiced. The great man, his mighty thought winging like Pegasus across Periclean Greece, roaring like a 747 over the pine forests of the Holy Roman Empire, the castles of Frankish kings, had finally arrived on the ship and was at last attending to sensory stimuli of the immediate environment. The wind! The cold! The rain! Rain? It was sleet!

“By God, but there is nothing like a damned bit of stiff breeze to blow out the cobwebs. And that brine in the air, is it not the best tonic?” Filling his lungs like double sails. He wasn’t a man—he was a man-o’-war! Ronald, who couldn’t disagree more, was gulping air for other reasons. Then an anvil landed on his shoulder. The old bear was giving him a fatherly clasp.

“By God, let the Greek have the south. There is nothing better than the North Atlantic!”

The concussion was catastrophic to Ronald’s stomach, with all pumps manned already in a heroic bid to divert the indivertible, and with a final cry he gave up the ghost. Pitching forward. When completed, Ronald moaned, “Oh shit.”

Looking over the rail, Millefort murmured, “On the contrary.” The great man was not above a well-placed jest. Like the Lord, he was not above occasional levity.

Well, such embarrassments from time to time befall youngsters. That is the charitable view, and we will forebear saying more. The elevation of his great woolly eyebrows was Millefort's sole signification of astonishment. He addressed the boy, "If you are ill, my lad, you should not be out in the elements."



When we next find or meet up with Ronald, he is inside, his stomach is composed, now that it is unburdened of breakfast, for which he feels almost thankful to Millefort. He is warm, he is dry, and he is far more comfortable sitting in the middle of the vessel, which rocks, but doesn't pitch as much as the bow. He has entered into conversation with a young lady about his own age who is sitting across from him, who has long hair, black and shiny, like a raven's wing he thinks, and emerald eyes, whom he has quite by chance fallen in love with.

"My boyfriend and I were skiing in Italy," she brags. "It's a terrible secret, but since you're a stranger I don't mind telling you."

"Why should it be a secret?" asked Ronald, crestfallen about the boyfriend. She had been writing postcards, and one of them was still in her lap, and such a nice lap he thought, under a little tummy. This girl was far better company than the old goat, old Captain Hi-liner.

"*Why?*" she gave him a provoked look. "Obviously you don't know anything about St Christophe. Where are you from?"

"Iowa."

He was accustomed to the blank stare he now received. Often followed by panicked rapid eye movement signalling mental groping for alternative topics, but the fine brow of this girl merely narrowed inquisitively.

"Do you live on a *farm?*"

"I'm from Iowa *City.*"

"Then you're lucky. There are no cities on St Christophe. It is a tiny, oppressive community where the clergy still control everything. In fact, my boyfriend is the Bishop's nephew. That's why we want everyone to believe that I was visiting my older cousin in Nantes. You see how everybody is forced to be a hypocrite."

"Wow," said Ronald, with feeling, for truly he was morally shocked.

She wanted to know why they were coming to St Christophe.

"Now it's my turn to tell a secret," he said, delighted to be able to do so. "By the way, my name is Ronald, what's yours?"

"It's Zephrelle."

“Well, Zephrelle, it’s an interesting coincidence that you know the Bishop, because it’s him we’re meeting, only he won’t tell Millefort why. Perhaps it’s to design a palace, or some other priestly decadence, and he doesn’t want anyone to know.”

She laughed. “That’s not the reason at all! And it’s not really a secret. Since the Bishop obviously wants to tell you himself face to face, perhaps I shouldn’t say anything, but what the hell. You see, many people believe that the Virgin Mary has been appearing on our island. You know, miraculous apparitions.”

“Really? How obsolete!”

She gave an indifferent shrug. “Who knows? But I suppose it’s something the Bishop thought couldn’t be explained easily on the phone. That’s why this boat is so crowded. All these passengers aren’t tourists. They’re pilgrims.”

“No kidding?” said Ronald, staring around as though she had just disclosed that everyone was a CIA agent.

“There are more and more of them, and so the Virgin has been asking for a while now that we build a shrine.”

“My God, what century do you people live in?”

“The nineteenth, I guess. You can’t imagine how dull it is.” Zephrelle gave a martyr’s sigh of resignation.

Realization dawned on Ronald’s face. “No, Zephrelle, the thirteenth. You won’t believe this, but I *must* tell you. The thirteenth century is when Millefort believes that the apogee of architecture was reached, specifically in the region of Picardy. Everything’s gone downhill since then.”

“How bizarre,” she said.

It was bizarre, agreed the boy, and he explained to her that Millefort refused to build anything that did not follow the principles of gothic architecture.

“But what if he’s asked to build a police station?” asked the perplexed girl. “Would it need to have flying buttresses?”

“He has never built a police station,” replied Ronald.

“You know what I mean. Say a radiology lab.”

“He has never built one of those, either.”

“Then what has he built?”

“Nothing. It would compromise his principles. That’s why he’s so celebrated, and teaches at a university. He has a famous maxim, ‘I do not build, because I am an architect!’”

“Oh.” Zephrelle thought about this for a minute, and decided it didn’t interest her. She noticed that the boy was staring at her with a gaze that was clearly adoring. As always, it pleased her. She flipped back some of

her abundant hair and smiled. "I really should finish my postcards, if you don't mind. We'll be docking soon." She wondered, a little uneasily, whether there was something other than adoration in his eyes. Her geography of the United States was hazy, but she had a general picture of Iowa lying in the vicinity of Utah, one of those emanating centres of American weirdness, she recalled. It excited her a little.

He leaned forward and confided, "Of course, the old goat is *nuts*."

She started. It was as though he half read her mind.

"I should know."

"Then why are you with him?"

Answer that, Ronald!

She saw him hesitate, then a thoughtful look came into his eyes, and she feared that her question was going to lead to a tedious explanation.

Why was he with him? The answer flashed in his mind as soon as she asked the question. *Why—because I'm Ronald!* Because Ronald knew he did not have the talent of others. He wasn't gifted. He was a third-rate who had to work twice, no, *three* times as hard as other students. Why else would he wheel into school an enormous contraption, a frame supporting a thousand strands of hanging string weighted with precisely measured pouches of sand? It was supposed to be an inverted model of gothic vaulting. What a spectacle it had created. It was the sheer quantity of effort that amazed, like the product of a maniacal worker ant. Millefort had glared fiercely. He had blustered. His criticism was erratic. The truth was, he was caught off guard. The boy had struck a chord, and so, irony of ironies, Ronald won for one year an internship with Geoffrey Millefort—a great honour, a key perhaps to opening doors, and prudently Ronald had accepted, though all he had done was to cravenly reproduce an experiment that Millefort himself had performed as a youth, and referred to incessantly. Ronald accepted and despised himself, for he was convinced that Millefort was as much a humbug as he.

He smiled apologetically and said, "It's a long story."

Zephrelle, barely disguising her relief, bent to her postcards.

Twice Ronald almost spoke, then stopped himself, before blurting out, "I should have known that a pretty girl like you would have a boyfriend."

She looked up and smiled. "That's sweet of you, Ronald." It was only her own opinion that he expressed. Again the hand, the hair, the delicate ear revealed fleetingly. Lovely ear, like a seashell. Her eyes flashed emerald, a little teasing. "You're too young for me, anyway. You barely look twenty."

"I'm twenty-four."

“There you go, you’re only a year older than me. My boyfriend’s thirty-two.”

“Well, why’s age so important?”

She gave him a look as though the answer were obvious. “Because my boyfriend is old enough to have a career. He is an entrepreneur, and he has a good income. Good enough to afford a sports car, and to take me skiing in Italy.”

“And that’s all he means to you?”

“Of course not. You can call me materialistic for saying what I just did, but actually you’ll have to admit that all I’m being is truthful. Most people are not half as honest.”

She gave him a forthright stare, and he lowered his eyes in defeat. “I guess you’re right.”

She bent over her cards again.

Brainwave. “What about Gandhi?”

“What *about* Gandhi?”

Deflated. “Oh, never mind. I suppose you’re just as honest with him?”

“With Gandhi?”

“Your boyfriend.”

“Harry?”

“*Harry?*”

“Yes of course.” She laughed. “Only he thinks I’m joking. It’s very funny.”

“Did he go to the restroom or something?”

“Harry? No, he’s down in the car.”

“The *sports* car?”

“Yes.” Then she added unnecessarily, “It’s a vintage MG.”

“Oh, he’s down in the MG? I guess you had a fight, huh?”

Her face grew hard. “I don’t think that’s any business of yours. I’m going to finish my postcards now.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, and hesitated. “And I didn’t mean to call you materialistic.”

“I don’t mind if you do, because I am materialistic. I don’t pretend that I’m not.”

“Are you writing postcards to your family?”

“I am going to see my family in less than an hour,” said Zephrelle. “I am writing postcards to people I met during our ski trip. And since you are so curious, Ronald-from-Iowa, about Harry and me, I will tell you that we did have a small fight, because of these postcards I’m writing. So he went downstairs. You see, I think he was a little jealous about the friends

I made in Italy. Of course, I was only enjoying myself. Do you realize it was the first time I was ever in Italy, or ever skiing in my life, or practically anything like that? I wanted to have as much fun as I could. I don't think he was very pleased when other men showed interest in me, but they were just casual friendships. I happen to make friends easily, and I like enjoying myself, so there you are. He should have felt complimented, but instead he was a little jealous."

Ronald nodded slowly, wondering what constituted "friendship" for her. He smiled weakly. "So he's the jealous type?"

She smiled back at him. "You're a sweet boy, Ronald. I think I just needed to get all that off my chest. It's funny how we met this way, on the ferry. I mean, we'll probably be meeting again, on St Christophe. You see, Harry is not only the Bishop's nephew, he also acts as a financial consultant for the pilgrimages and the new shrine. In fact, the Bishop would be completely lost without Harry."

What a giant this Harry was! Thirty-two years of age, financial wizard, consultant to bishops, owner of a vintage MG. Super Boyfriend! Poor Ronald was just an ant.

It's time to meet this fellow ... and here he is! An affectionate and obviously familiar hand placed on Zephrelle's shoulder, a well-made hand with a sprinkling of dark hairs on it. A tiny bald patch at the back of the crown, suggesting a laurel wreath, as he bends to kiss her cheek, and then a very pleasant, regular-featured face as he looks up again. Superb teeth. Rosy complexion. An amiable fellow, with no trace of sulkiness after the little tiff Zephrelle had spoken of—on the contrary, he looks bright as a bee!

"Sorry to take so long, darling." Sitting beside her.

"That's all right. I was chatting with Ronald here. Guess what, he's Mr Millefort's assistant."

"The architect's?"

"Yes, and we met completely by accident."

"Imagine that!" said Harry, and addressing Ronald, "I was just in a phone conference on that very subject."

"Oh—were you on the phone, sweetie?"

He gave her a funny look. "Well yes. I thought you said you were going to write some postcards."

"Oh, I'm done those. I just had to write a few lines to Pierre and Maurice and Maurice's sister."

"Did you say love from Harry?"

"I didn't think you even liked them." She giggled as he nuzzled her neck, and possibly flicked his tongue in her ear.

Presently they were clutching hands and whispering. They appeared to have forgotten Ronald, and he was wondering if he shouldn't make his excuses and quietly slip off into the nearest heating register—when who should come along but the Maestro himself, the venerable walrus exuding saltiness and spray.

“Ah, here you are, Ronald. A ship's officer informs me we are docking in under twenty minutes.”

No reference to Ronald's recent illness. The incident, already filed away with a billion others inside the prodigious repository of thought under the green hat, did not bear recalling.

Ronald was never happier to see his master. Now his existence had purpose, to be the intermediary for the introduction between parties, and to unveil to Millefort the reason for the Bishop's summons, which was not a secret at all, but simply a thing too extraordinary to convey by phone, and as he was explaining this he was also wondering in the back of his mind if perhaps the lovely Zephrelle had a younger sister, one who would be awfully impressed by a young man who had attained legal drinking age and a driving license.

Said Harry, “Professor Millefort, you must be freezing cold standing out on the deck so long!”

“No, by God, I love the whistling cold and icy spray. Nothing like the elements to drive out humid vapours and sentiment. I am a northerner in spirit, sir, and I love the awful, terrible beauty of the north. It is why I admire the gothic mind, sir, that wrought those shivering vertical masterpieces.”

“Then you must be a great fan of igloos, too,” observed Harry tartly.

“The dome,” Millefort pronounced the word as though it were a rotten egg, “I do not admire. It is effeminate like the Roman cult it houses. No, give me a gothic cathedral with its bare bones like the ribs of a mastodon sticking out of a glacier.”

“Well St Christophe should be right up your alley,” returned Harry. “Especially this time of year. Nothing but ice and sleet. Unfortunately, we don't have any gothic cathedrals, that is, not until you build our shrine to the Blessed Mother.”

Millefort's eye hinted at the wry smile playing behind the beard. “I am not positive that I will, Mr Roche. I am not sure that I approve of Christianizing the Goth.”

This rather stunned the others, except of course Ronald, who had heard it all before. He enjoyed the shocked expressions of Zephrelle and Harry.

“But Mr Millefort,” said Zephrelle. “I thought Christianity and the gothic style were more or less synonymous.”

“Hah!” shouted Millefort, relishing the opportunity to pulverize this erroneous commonplace. “The true gothic is foreign to the Christian cult, positively foreign! Plus I object, young lady, to calling it a style in the first place.”

“But I think that’s absurd,” said Harry. “I mean, what about all the saints they have around the portals? And the stained glass windows?”

Millefort snapped his fingers. “Subject matter. Hardly avoidable by the artists of the time. No, I speak of the true northern spirit of the gothic, that cold, disciplined rigour married to an implacable will. What has that to do with sentimental yearnings for protectors and maternal figures?”

“Then,” said Zephrelle, “you don’t think that Mary is appearing on our island?”

“I have nothing to say about her wanderings. But I will say this about her son, that I do not find him an admirable figure. He was, if one reads the Scriptures critically, an indolent vagabond who expected to be fed wherever he went. He luxuriated in the pampering of his female groupies, and was happiest when the focus of attention. I am sure he never would have said the things he did say had he known what the outcome of saying them would be. Of the mother, what is there to know? A most obscure figure of history. Still, if children take after their parents, then the son must have followed her lead in idleness and voluptuousness—in fact the circumstances of her pregnancy, which the Scriptures are barely able to conceal with their posterous miracles, point to a debased character.”

“Well, I think that Jesus was a great religious teacher,” said Zephrelle, feeling a little pious, and leaving it at that. “What about you, Ronald?”

“Me?” said Ronald, and started to panic. “Well, I suppose . . . I suppose if I was to follow organized religion, it would be Buddhism, because it is a gentle religion, tolerant and peace-loving. Christ is said to be Love, but his followers have never much practised what he preached.”

Millefort, glaring at both of them, vented like a steam engine. “My God, young people today are teddy bears. Filled with fluff! How can anyone take you seriously? You think of love as sentiment, a fuzzy warmth and kindness to vegetables and bloody nonsense like that! But real love, what the Christian calls the love of Christ, is a searing brand. It’s the rack and the burning stake! The Christian man knew that at least, despite his superstitions and fables. He went to war to save men’s souls, and never pretended there was a better reason to lop off a man’s head or to be cut down himself. Look up at some of those stained glass windows and you’ll see the pelican tearing flesh from its own breast to feed its young! That is the love of Christ, and

not some Oriental passivity. It's the woman who would rather see her lover's head cracked open under a rock than on the breast of a rival. Yes, and she herself would do the cracking! And peace? There is no peace but the peace that descends on the battlefield when even the raucous carrion crow have gone, and nothing remains but the bones of the dead picked clean. That, my friends, is the peace that passes understanding!"

"But why," asked Harry slowly, "do you quote the Bible if you disbelieve it, and think that Jesus was a vagabond?"

"So I do believe, and so he was, but I never said that he was stupid, did I? He saw many things clearly enough. Oh yes, my young lady," he said, turning to Zephrelle. "It was quite right, what *you* said. He struck a chord in people. That is undeniable. He said he came with the sword, and by God, he did do that, didn't he? Even if they depict him nowadays as some kind of bloody Greenpeace peacenik. He was sharp, he was clever. He was a Jew, of course. His followers have not been Jews, and they have not been as clever, but some of them have been mad. *He* was never mad. And mark this, young lady," he said, fixing her with his eye, "it is *madness* that is divine. Cleverness is merely human."

He leaned back, satisfied.

"And what about you, Mr Millefort?" asked Zephrelle, a little thrilled, and hiding it with sauciness. "Are you mad, or merely clever?"

"Mad, Miss Zephrelle. *Dangerously insane.*"

It was not this that silenced her so much as his eyes. They seemed to pin her down, like the pins through the wings of a butterfly. And they were so pale and so blue those eyes, like the sky over Iceland. She was struck dumb. She no longer breathed. Then the ship's horn blared, and she was shaken out of the spell. Piles slid past the windows, and the little town of Liberty could be seen, looking so sodden and derelict, like a wreck that has been thrown up on the rocks. The small party of four, taking their own time, let the eager bands of pilgrims pass first. At the narrow staircase to the car deck, there was momentary confusion over precedence, resolved by Zephrelle becoming sandwiched between Millefort and Harry, with Ronald tagging along. Zephrelle was smiling to herself, in a little dream. Ronald had called him an old goat, and that he was. But a dashing one, she had to admit. How old—Fifty? Sixty? Old enough to be her grandfather? Old enough to have deflowered many a she-goat. Perhaps she would fall in love with him. Perhaps she might even let him trample her heart, and leave it lying behind his path like a dead bird. It was a romantic prospect. And what a delicious scandal it would make! Not only was he far too old for her, his opinions were inappropriate, as far as she could make them out. Then there was young Ronald of Iowa, which was the same as nowhere,

inexperienced, already hopelessly smitten with her. She knew she could already command him to do her will. If she wanted, she could make him very unhappy. Finally Harry, walking beside her now that they had reached the car deck, his arm around her, handsome, masculine. One day he would be a millionaire, able to shower her with every luxury, though she perceived that at critical moments, perhaps when she most wanted him, he would be making a conference call. Zephrelle's heart beat with excitement. Though she would hardly have believed it a short while ago, she was actually eager to be back on St Christophe.