

On the Art of Yvette Guilbert

By Stanley V. Makower

IN a few days Yvette Guilbert will be here once more, and all London will be flocking to Leicester Square to secure seats at the Empire Theatre. The chief cities of Europe and America through which the French singer has now passed in triumphal procession have subscribed to an almost unparalleled success with a truly rare enthusiasm. One obscure town in Europe* is said to have sprung into notoriety owing to an obstinate refusal to recognise a genius to which the whole civilised world has done honour. But this, the sole exhibition of hostility with which the great artist has met in her wide travels, has only served to enhance her reputation.

The extraordinary wave of enthusiasm that greets Yvette Guilbert when she is here is only another proof that London is the most cosmopolitan city in the world. We are constantly having evidence of this, not the least striking being that last year a play by a German author † was being acted at three different London theatres at the same time in French, German, and Italian. Nevertheless it is singular that a genius essentially French, though
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* Napoli—on the western coast of Italy.

† Sudermann's "Die Heimath."

in no sense a type of France, exercised in a department of art peculiar to one side of Paris, should win unanimous applause from every class of London society.

The crisis which the drama has reached in England and in France is in some respects the same, but there is a point at which the parallel ceases. In both countries the drama is corrupt, but France with characteristic precocity is the first to teach the lesson. It has said the last word about the drama of this generation in providing the glorious impossibility of a Sarah Bernhardt. It is on the great actress that has fallen the task of showing that drama written and conceived from outside has reached its culminating point in the latest manuscript plays from the pen of Victorien Sardou. No one with a personality less splendid could have proved that the history of the drama during this century has been almost exclusively the history of an art entirely alien to that which made Shakespeare a writer of plays. In England we have no personality great enough to sum up the whole situation, and the consequence is that we are still at the mercy of those who line the pavement of the Haymarket with gold to witness "Trilby," or who pour with equal profusion to the doors of the St. James' theatre to see Mr. Alexander in "The Prisoner of Zenda." And all the conscientious endeavours of Mr. Pinero and Mr. H. A. Jones fail to stem the tide, for the very simple reason that they are neither of them great men.

It is to Norway then that we have to look for the future welfare of the drama, and whilst Henrik Ibsen has given a fresh impulse to the literary minds of France and England, an impulse which has as yet had insufficient time to translate itself to any appreciable extent into the dramatic literature of these countries, there is a temporary transference of the popular interest in England from the Stage to the Music Hall, in France from the Stage to the

Cabaret

Cabaret or the *Café Chantant*. But there is a wide difference between the Music Hall and the Cabaret. The history of both is still to be written, but it will be found that the circumstances, the traditions or the art displayed in each are different, and, more important than all, the literary value and artistic significance of each are different. In England the text of the songs sung is written by illiterate people, the artistic part lies in the performer, and even then the performer is quite unconscious of his art. In France the songs written for the Cabaret are mostly written, as we shall see later on, by men of culture, of University education, and though there is perhaps on the whole less ability to be found in the ranks of the French than in those of the English performers, each performer in France knows that he is engaged in an artistic pursuit requiring talent of a special kind.

Yvette Guilbert constitutes the one brilliant exception to the general statement, advanced with some hesitation through want of sufficient knowledge, that we have more individual ability on the Music Hall Stage than the French have in the *Café Chantant*. But the weight of Yvette Guilbert's individuality goes far to counterbalance the deficiency if there is one. It is an individuality so marked, so rare, that it almost constitutes by its own force a development by itself, independent of a place in the history of its art, in the same way that the strength of Chopin's individuality makes it almost impossible to put him into relation with other composers of music. Curiously enough we find that during the life-time of Chopin there was the same tendency to call him "modern," "new-fangled" and so forth, that we observe in those critics who have used the word *fin-de-siècle* in connection with Yvette Guilbert. In both cases the epithets are idle. It is the misfortune which attends all histrionic art that it cannot be handed down to posterity, but if it were possible to preserve something of
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the art of Yvette Guilbert, we should want to preserve the beauty which she conceives internally, the look of inward imagination that comes from her eyes, whilst the simplicity of her dress, the almost conventional quality of her gestures, and the long black gloves, which she adopted at the beginning of her career and has never abandoned, are at the most evidence of an unerring taste and of a distinguished simplicity.

There is then nothing essentially contemporary in Yvette Guilbert, nor indeed is there anything contemporary in the form of the art, which her instinct has guided her to select for the display of her genius, for it is a compromise between the dramatic and lyrical form which has its parallel in early classical times. Nothing could equal the obtuseness of more than one English critic who has advised Yvette Guilbert to forsake this quasi-lyrical form for the drama—advice which goes conclusively to prove that such critics misunderstand the nature of her genius from beginning to end. Moreover, if we examine the qualities which constitute Sarah Bernhardt the greatest living actress, we find at once that they are of an entirely different order from those possessed by Yvette Guilbert. It is indeed by setting the two side by side that we are enabled to grasp more clearly the character of the genius which has secured for each a unique position in her art. Sarah Bernhardt has a personality—a personality so strong that she has succeeded in reducing the drama to a formula by which that personality can be expressed. It is the extraordinary power of that personality that makes her a great actress, and perhaps the predominant characteristics of it are pictorial and musical. She cannot avoid looking and sounding beautiful. Only once do I remember the reality of the situation to have asserted itself over a superb pose, and then the result was destructive. In the last act of "Fédora," in which the heroine dies in her lover's arms, there

is a moment when the magnificent harmony of her movements is merged in the realism of a dying woman's agony. The tiny lace handkerchief (an exquisite symbol of her art), which has accompanied her through two and a half acts of frenzy, is flung to the ground, and with it she seems to abandon the last artifice of a great artist; but this death, unlike most of her deaths, is unlovely—it is as revolting as would be the actual death of a person on the stage; it is outside the domain of art. From this we see that, the moment Sarah Bernhardt forsakes her personality and falls into a realism, she ceases to be an artist. On the other hand, in Yvette Guilbert personality can never be detected, and her realism, as will be seen later on, is never naked or unlovely. You can have no idea of what she is like off the stage from seeing her on the stage. With unerring instinct she moves very little when she is singing, and with an unflinching courage which makes us marvel, she has never been tempted to employ the dress or "make-up" of any character from the beginning of her career until to-day. She pins herself to no personality, but stands completely unfettered, illustrating in the abstract, by a method of intense conception, a number of fundamental truths of humanity in a song which does not take her five minutes to sing. When she is singing Béranger's "Ma Grand'mère," she makes no attempt at looking and speaking like any individual old grandmother whom one can picture to oneself. It is true that she wears a white cap and sits in an arm-chair, but that is only for her own purposes, as, so far as the audience is concerned, the incongruousness of her youthful face and dress and the white cap only serves to dissociate the mind more than ever from any single character. She gives the impression of infirmity in her voice, and in the last verse you can almost see the mist of age creep over her eyes as she waves her hand feebly in front of her. No impersonation of an individual grandmother

mother could give us such an impression of all grandmotherhood as Yvette Guilbert manages to convey by the subtle variety of tone and manner in which she sings the refrain :

Combien je regrette
Mon bras si dodu
Ma jambe bien faite
Et le temps perdu.

After this, to talk of the drama as an appropriate field for the display of her powers is surely irrelevant, for, in its present condition, it could do nothing but corrupt and reduce to a minimum those powers of lyrical intensity which are the keynote of her success. Luckily for us there is no chance of her forsaking her present form, for she well knows the nature of her talent. And it is sufficient answer to the ignorant, who look upon the drama as a higher form of art, that eminent teachers of Schumann's songs take their pupils to hear Yvette Guilbert, in order that they may learn the value of words in singing.

It is worth noticing here that Yvette Guilbert has to suffer largely from that class of people who admire and misunderstand. This is a penalty that all public people have to pay, and its effect is not really far-reaching ; but the nature of the misunderstanding in the case of Yvette Guilbert is a singular one. It creates an impression in the mind of the uninitiate that the charm of Yvette Guilbert is that of a very pretty, very wicked, sparkling little soubrette. Such impression is conveyed by remarks which everybody has heard, such as, "She sings the most indecent songs with the most absurd innocence." Young men tell it you with a perplexed look in their eyes which at once conveys the impression that the point of the songs is that they are all that Mrs. Grundy loathes. It is almost needless to say that it is usually people who

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do not understand the French who speak like this. Moreover, it is little short of fatuous to suppose that a few indecent sentences delivered naïvely will account for the spell which Yvette Guilbert throws over her audience. Obviously such an effect is produced by something far more rare and fundamental—the possession of an individuality without parallel. Indeed, the obscene with her is clearly a mere accident in her art—a thing so entirely outside herself that she can treat it with the utmost indifference, with even a frank gaiety that is inborn, which no amount of study or pose could ever produce—an almost unique cleanness of soul, “under which vice itself loses half its evil by losing all its grossness.” The novelty of method, the total lack of sensuality were what took the French by storm; for, wearied by a host of singers whose individuality never raised them above the grossness and sordidness of the *bête humaine*, they had never yet dreamed of a treatment of another kind—a treatment that again seems to remind us of the classics more than of anything contemporary.

Yvette Guilbert is lucky in having poets of no mean order to write for her. Prominent among these is Aristide Bruant, a well-known literary figure of Paris, who was presented to the “Société des Gens de Lettres” in 1892 by François Coppée as “the descendant in a direct line of our Villon,” in a speech full of genuine enthusiasm. An excellent review of his chief work, “Dans la Rue,” a collection of songs, many of which are interpreted by Yvette Guilbert (e.g., “A la Villette,” “A Menilmontant,” “A Saint Lazare,” &c.), was published in 1892, curiously enough in an English provincial newspaper, in which the writer points out very clearly the distinction between Bruant’s treatment and that of other literary men, who have dealt with the criminal classes. I cannot do better than quote an extract :

“This

"This book is about the life of the criminal classes in Paris. It is the first successful attempt that has been made to do them from inside, to make them talk in their own persons. The way in which they have been dealt with hitherto in literature is exemplified by "Les Misérables," with its long digression on the *troisième dessous*. They have been described, criticised, explained; they have not expressed themselves. But here we have them discussing one another and giving utterance to their own feelings. The treatment of their language is similar to the treatment of their life. In other books it has been introduced as a curiosity patiently studied by the writer; Hugo and Balzac, for instance, discuss it at some length; they point out its picturesqueness; they call it expressive, terrible; and when their characters use it their speeches are printed in italics. In "Dans la Rue" it is employed quite naturally, as if it were the only language; there is no glossary, no foot-notes; and the result is that though half the words have to be guessed, the effect produced is far more real and definite."*

Here at once, then, we have the clue to the terrible nature of the songs in which Yvette Guilbert achieves her greatest triumphs. They are songs full of argot, which has a different significance to our slang, for it has traditions of a peculiar kind, and its history is unique in the history of languages. It takes us back to the fifteenth century, to the organisation of a licensed society of beggars—*Truands et Gueux*—a great national school of beggary, which became the nursery of all the vice and crime of Paris, which had its *Cour des Miracles*, and its own especial language in which the uninitiate were instructed on their admission to the fraternity. It was not until the middle of the seventeenth century that this great guild was dissolved, the reason for its lasting so long being that the clergy resorted freely to it, when they wished

* *The Cambridge Observer*, Vol. I., No. 14.

wished to rehabilitate a failing credit by the performance of miracles. Members of the fraternity would simulate diseases for years, until they were well known as lepers, paralytics, or epileptics, and when a religious procession passed in the street they would, by previous arrangement with the clergy, stagger up to the shrine, and rise healed, to the delight of the populace.

The argot of Bruant is not, of course, the pure argot of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. On the dissolution of the Guild of Beggars in 1656, the argot of the streets began to make its way into the older language, and the confusion was still further increased by the publication of songs and novels in which a mixed argot was freely introduced, so that the purity of the original language of the Gueux is gone. But the seeds of the old tongue are still to be found in many of the French songs of to-day, and it is to this we must look for an explanation of the hideous character of many of the songs which Yvette Guilbert sings. We must remember that she is singing a language, the traditions of which are associated with the criminal classes, a language of vice and blood, poor in relation to the number of objects denoted, but rising in vocabulary when we want words to express drunkenness, assault, profligacy. In a small dictionary of French argot we find in the introduction the following table of words :

To denote	"Eating"	10 words.
"	"Drinking"	20 "
"	"Drunkenness"	40 "
"	"Money"	60 "
"	"Prostitute"	80 "

And the only word which is used to mean an honest man is the contemptuous *simple*, while the horror of the language is here and there redeemed by such touches of fancy as *fee* to mean a young girl.

Enough

Enough has now been said to show conclusively that there is far deeper reason for the use of obscene words in these songs than the idle desire to raise a smile on the face of the young man who has an insatiable thirst for what is depraved, and who spends most of his time retailing dubious after-dinner stories to his friends.

Beside Aristide Bruant stands Jules Jouy, whose work Yvette Guilbert interprets with perhaps even greater success, and examples of which we have heard in "La Soularde" and "Morphinée"—both very remarkable, but "La Soularde" the more successful of the two, owing to its far greater simplicity. Indeed, in this song, the art of Yvette Guilbert is exhibited in its perfection, and here the history of how it came to be written throws an interesting light on the success that it has achieved.

It was Yvette Guilbert herself who suggested the idea of a woman half crazy with drink lurching along the street with madness and disease in her eyes. Jouy wrote the song and gave it to her, saying, "I have written a masterpiece, but I don't know whether you will make anything of it." Then Yvette Guilbert took it and studied it with all that power of intensification which is her peculiar gift. She decided the character of the melody that was to be used, by constant recourse to the piano to try different effects. Finally, when the song was sung Zola was wild with enthusiasm, and the whole of Paris rang with applause. Certainly the song is admirably written. There is a truth in its simplicity, a directness of purpose, a perfect knowledge of the requirements of the art, but no one from reading the poem could dream of the extraordinary thing which Yvette Guilbert would create from it. She threw into it all her imagination, and out of the bare words sprang a beauty which baffled every one. When it was sung in London the audience were taken by storm, and yet not one half of them could understand
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the meaning of the words. At the end of the verse which describes the people throwing cabbages and rubbish at the drunken woman as she lurches along, Yvette Guilbert throws her head back and breaks the final syllable of the refrain "La Soularde" (the *arde* in Soularde) into a cry of two notes. It would scarcely be too much to call this the greatest moment that has ever been brought off in executory art. It takes your breath away. The whole scene rushes on the mind with a force that is overwhelming. You positively see the drunken woman with dishevelled hair and bloodshot eyes reeling down the street, pursued by a jeering crowd—but in the meanwhile Yvette Guilbert, in modern evening dress, is standing comparatively still on the stage with that background representing a Mauresque palace which has become a traditional drop-scene at the Empire Theatre. The reality of the picture that she creates then is not the lettered realism that is conveyed by any external method, like that for example of Mr. Tree, when he is made up to look exactly like a Russian spy, an Italian cut throat, or a Jewish pianist; nor is it the realism of Sarah Bernhardt when she dies in "Fédora;" but the spiritual realism of a thing deeply conceived, deeply felt, and translating itself to the audience without any delusion of accessories. It is conveyed in the quality of the voice, in the marvellous narrative of the eyes; and these are so inimitable that we are not surprised at the incapacity of a Cissy Loftus to give us a more fundamental notion of Yvette Guilbert than could be given by any one who would put on a pair of long black gloves. It is not possible that she should suggest her prototype any more than a stuffed animal suggests a living one. The best proof of this is, that if you hear the accomplished little mimic before you have heard Yvette Guilbert, you get an absolutely false and ineffectual impression of what the French singer is like ;

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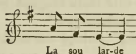
if you hear her afterwards, the impression made on you by her prototype is so strong that you cannot stop yourself from filling up in your mind the big gaps in the imitation, and you come away thinking of Yvette Guilbert, and yet feeling perplexed, cheated, dissatisfied. You have wanted the suggestion of a mind—you have been given the suggestion of a body, and even that a very imperfect one, because of the distinction of physique in Yvette Guilbert. This is obvious enough when we look at a photograph of her, which all the cunning of M. Reutlinger is unable to conjure into anything approaching a likeness; and of the three hundred pictures which have been painted by different artists of the singer, no single one gives any complete idea of the original, though many have caught a trait here and there, and suggested it powerfully enough. In fact, there is nothing sufficiently photographic about Yvette Guilbert to lend itself to imitation of any sort; and when Miss Cissy Loftus tries to imitate Yvette Guilbert, she is like a child trying to make a drawing after Velasquez. The effect that Yvette Guilbert produces is far removed from that produced by any external realism. If we were to see a person imitate accurately a drunken woman—so accurately, in fact, that, were it not for the stage, we should be unable to guess that she was acting, we should feel much the same physical disgust that is aroused in us when we see a drunken woman reeling down a street. We should be no more edified than by the ingenuity of the man who exhibited a picture with a real face peering through the canvas. But when Yvette Guilbert is telling you about a drunken woman, though you shudder, it is not with disgust—for the thing is transfigured by her into something different. You see the scene, but you see it in a new light, with something of the light which goes to make the genius of the performer, and which she has such a rare power

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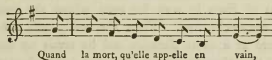
of communicating. When she steps outside the characters of the scene, crying out against the profanity of ridicule and raising a plea for the woman to pass unmolested, she conveys by her voice a suggestion of that universal humanity which binds the world together. The subtlety of this is indescribable. It reaches its climax again in the refrain "La Soularde," sung this time in a way which makes us feel at one moment both the infinite pity of the spectator and the crushing weariness of the woman. It is just this poetry of vision which robs these songs of all their horror, for it is in the beautifying of the terrible that lies the supremacy of her art.

If we think over this song, it seems to provide us in its success with a complete logical understanding of the proportion which words, scenery, and music ought to bear to each other. However strange it may sound, it seems to teach us that the Elizabethans were right when they acted Shakespeare before a placard announcing the nature of the scenery, that Henrik Ibsen is the only man who has realised the conditions of the modern drama, and made a splendid endeavour to cut them from under him, that the foundations of the work of Richard Wagner are false. It is just possible that had the great musician heard Yvette Guilbert sing this song, he would never have said that music is a MEANS (in large capitals) and not an END (in large capitals), for he would have been bound to recognise the perfect unity of this song, and he would then have realised what a limitation he was setting by his assertion, on the art in which he excelled. He would not have been alone among the foremost musicians of the time in admiring Yvette Guilbert, and when he came to examine the notes in "La Soularde," he would have seen that they are scarcely music at all, but a consumately skilful arrangement in the nature of a compromise between talking and singing. We can
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trace the truth of this down to a single note, in which it is manifestly exemplified, and which is here quoted.



Here in this passage the final note is scarcely articulated at all; it is at all events a mere talking sound and expresses no musical value. Again in the following extract the *musical* accent should fall on the first note of the second bar but the necessity of the words throws it in recitation upon the second note to which the word "mort" is sung, and the departure from the regular movement of the rhythm produces its effect directly. The music and the words have come into conflict, and the words rise triumphant from the encounter.



And when this is sung the correctness and inevitability of the sacrifice of the music to the words is immediately felt. The secret of the perfectness of the relation between words and music has already been alluded to. It lies in the fact that Yvette Guilbert plays with the words at the piano until she finds a suitable medium for the expression and then the scheme is worked into an accompaniment. Thus by subordinating the material to the requirements of the executant a perfect unity is obtained. Wagner too imagined that he was subordinating his music to his words, but it is clear that where he achieves his greatest triumphs in music he is actually untrammelled by his text, and it is fortunate for us that he was unconscious of the fact that he was constantly sinning

sinning gloriously against his favourite theories or we should never have had "Tristan and Isolde" but should have been left to puzzle and lift our eyebrows over more enigmas as incomprehensible as the recitatifs in "Die Niebelungen."

Besides "La Soularde," perhaps the most famous of M. Jouy's songs is "La Pierreuse," which is a great favourite with French audiences,* but which Yvette Guilbert does not sing in London as it would be almost impossible to sing it without the sympathy of an audience which understands and can appreciate what is at stake. In Paris there is a breathless silence while this song is being sung. The sublime horror of it takes hold of every one, and never has a deeper thrill been sent in so few words through a vast assembly of people. The stillness that it commands is magical, the applause at the close frantic. This is the story of a woman who makes her living by wandering about the fortifications of Paris in wait for men whom she entices up to one of the entrenchments. Then she softly calls for her lover who is posted at a short distance and he steals up and murders the victim—throwing his corpse into the entrenchment after he has robbed it of all the money and valuables he can find on it. The cry of the woman "pi-ouit" is the refrain of the song, followed by the sound of blows and the thud of the body as it falls. In the last verse the woman who is telling her own tale explains why she wears mourning. It is for the lover who was caught and guillotined. And then she describes his execution in the early morning. She sees him let out at the dawn. There is the faint cry of "pi-ouit" sent by a brother thief in the distance to cheer him

* A *pierreuse* or *femme de terrain* is strictly a woman who wanders in and out of the stone-heaps that lie round houses which are in course of building.

him as he goes and then, before he has time to answer, he is cast upon the block. Deibler lets the knife drop—and the head and trunk fall into the box of bran.

As Yvette Guilbert sings this song she transplants you to the scenes she is describing. And when she whispers the cry of the brother thief sounding faintly as it travels across the sleeping city of Paris in the early dawn "pi...i...i...oui...i...i...t" to the man who is just on the point of being guillotined, the effect is astounding. As in the refrain "La Soularde," she contrives in this cry of "pi-ouit" to show you and make you feel through her poetry of vision the whole scene. She gathers up into one overwhelming moment the misery of the woman who is watching in the distance, the speechlessness of the figure that is conducted to execution, and the human compassion of the comrade who whistles the old refrain as he sees his friend borne out to die. You get in this cry the whole feeling of what a great brotherhood in crime means. There is in it a ring of reckless despair. "Your turn to-day, mine to-morrow: pi-ouit." It seems a lot to get out of the two syllables, but hear Yvette Guilbert whisper them and she makes you feel all that and more. She manipulates the last stanza with consummate skill. How the voice sinks as she begins to think of the scene:

Oui, c'est l'autre jour à l'aurore
Qu'on m'a rogné mon gigolo.

Then the choke of horror with which she says,

C'te fois-ci, c'est pas rigolo.

She watches the priest talking to him at the doorway. You see the terror in her eyes, and when she closes the song with the sound of the body falling into the box and the brutal comment

Ça s'fait très-vit'!

Pi...ouit.

it is almost impossible to believe that the simple figure that retires from the stage has only told you about it and that it is a sham. A remarkable feature of this song is the extraordinarily vivid effect of physical violence which Yvette Guilbert conveys by the use of sounds—which cannot be spelt. She really manufactures a language of her own which no one could talk but which every one understands. The same gift enables her to extract an extraordinary value out of a cough or such ejaculations as la! la! ha! ha! (a fact which again points to the lyrical quality of her genius) which often sum up in a vein of gentle criticism what has gone before. The delicacy of the impression is indescribable. We get it in “Ça fait plaisir,” and “Les nouveaux mariés.” (Xanrof).

In “La Pierreuse” more even than in “La Soularde” we see the power of Yvette Guilbert to make the terrible beautiful. Nothing could well be more horrible than the whole story, and yet even the shocking brutality of the thing is merged in the completeness of her vision. It leaves you aghast, bereft of all powers of moral criticism. You are taken so far down below the surface of the incidents recorded, so deeply into the roots of humanity that the sense of relation between the characters in the song and those of well behaved people is entirely lost, and you come away with an insight into the criminal classes which no amount of statistics and blue books could ever give you. As in “La Soularde” the music of “La Pierreuse” is entirely subordinated to the words, the intervals between the notes very often representing little more than the inflection of the voice in speaking.

Enough has been said for it to be easily recognised that the men who write these songs are of no ordinary capacity, and their position

position in the literary and artistic world of Paris is one of distinction. But Yvette Guilbert has popularised their work, she has made it intelligible to the mass of French people, and she has even carried it all over the world with phenomenal success, and the peculiar excellence of the workmanship is in many cases not obvious to the uninitiate until the song is actually sung. No one who was a stranger to the intricacies of the *métier* could possibly guess from the text of "La Soularde" what it really means when it is sung. It is so simple as you read it that you are apt to raise your eyebrows in inquiry and ask where the point of it all lies. The story of "La Pierreuse" makes its significance more apparent, and in M. Sémiane's "Mon Gosse," which requires especial attention, it would be difficult not to see that the writer is a poet apart from anything else.

Perhaps the text of this song is finer than any which Yvette Guilbert has sung. A mother talks to the child in her womb, and bids it not hurry into the world where all is misery and crime. Rich people can have children but poor people have no right to bring them into the world. "The offspring of love," she goes on, "have tender hearts. Some vile woman will tear yours to pieces. Then you will be food for the cannon and will putrefy on the field of battle." She ends with a prayer for forgiveness and begs the child, if ever it raises its hand against society, to spare to curse the mother whose fault it all is. It is truly astonishing to see this set forth with almost Shakespearian simplicity in a language which English people are always accustomed to associate with something ornate. There is not a superfluous word and there is a noticeable appropriateness in the platitude :—

Mais, là, vrai quand on manqu' de pain
On n'devrait pas s'créer d'famille.

which

which we should hardly expect to see in a French poem. Few people would have had the courage, almost the audacity, to be so simple, but the effect of these words in the mouth of the unfortunate woman who speaks them is perfectly appropriate. And the refrain, "Pauv' gosse," (poor urchin—although it is impossible to get a word in English quite as soft as "gosse") could not be surpassed. It brings you down with a blow at the end of each stanza. The last stanza should be quoted to be appreciated :

Pardonne ! . . . lorsqu'il me poussa,
 Au villag', sur un banc de pierre,
 J'aurais dû songer à tout ça ;
 Mais j'savais pas c'que j'allais faire.
 Et si jamais tu montres l'poing
 A notre société féroce,
 Moi, ta mère, oh ! ne m'maudis point
 Mon gosse !

Here look again at the effect of

J'aurais dû songer à tout ça.

Who but a poet could have expressed a great thing in a line so commonplace, so simple? Obviously the poem makes a deep impression on us when we read it—but when Yvette Guilbert interprets it, it defies description. The note of weariness which she throws into it, the maddened hatred of life which pours forth as she says

Mais, vois-tu, la vie est atroce

the whole of maternity weeping in the two words "Pauv' gosse," these must be heard to be felt. It is almost impossible to talk about them without belittling them, and perhaps the best tribute to their greatness is to be silent.

We

We cannot however dismiss the song without noticing the music which has been written with infinite skill by M. Paul Hucks, and the key to the success of which is to be found in the use of the following chord :



This is resolved into the major for the refrain "*Pau' gosse,*" but look how the important word of each verse falls on this chord. Thus in the first verse, "*on lui (à la vie) rend tout.*" Again "*t'auras faim toi ;*" again "*ton coeur pleurera ;*" and in the last verse "*moi, ta mère oh ! ne m'maudis point.*" From this we see that the musician has realised the sentiment of the song admirably in throwing the weight of the balance into the minor key. The notes for the voice are as usual quite simple, and the substructure of the accompaniment is contained in a modulation in less than six chords, but the invention of the chord above quoted is the creation of a peculiar mind. We can single it out almost as we can single out certain notes in Chopin and say "*That is Chopin—no one else could have done that.*" And it is clear that no substitute could ever produce such a telling effect.

The songs described above form but a very small portion of a very large repertoire which Yvette Guilbert is always extending by the study of new productions. Infinitely delightful are her renderings of the songs of Xanrof and others in which she displays the lighter side of her talent, a vein of broad and yet delicate humour and a taste that is unimpeachable. When you hear her sing

sing "Les demoiselles de pensionnat," you realise how impossible it is for her to be vulgar. The treatment is so frank and direct that before you have time to collect your thoughts you are laughing with the performer at the demoiselles. She has the knack of getting her audience on her side before she has said two words. Who will forget the charming intimacy that she established between herself and the London public rather more than a year ago when she stood in front of the stage and announced "Linger Longer Loo" with a distinct emphasis on the last syllable of Longer? The audience of the Empire stroked itself all over, and took with the most friendly courtesy and enthusiasm the compliment which Yvette Guilbert elected to pay them by burlesquing the popular song of the hour. This excellent bit of foolery never failed to put the whole house in a boisterous good humour, and though her burlesques cannot be put on a level with her greatest achievements, yet they exhibit a humour and a delicate fancy that makes it difficult to forget them. They show again that she has an extraordinary feeling for the value of words. Her burlesques of the American songs are full of a fun that is robust, incisive, spontaneous, and her French version of the English "Di, Di," illustrates the creative nature of her genius. Out of the rather colourless, commonplace English text she makes a thing that sparkles and dances with fun, with at least one masterly phrase in it:

Ne fais pas ça :

Ça m'fait du mal,

Ca froissera

Mon idéal.

But the numerous songs of which she has written both the text and the music afford abundant proof that she is never at a loss for an idea, and indeed in many of her great successes she has suggested

suggested the idea of the songs herself, as in Jule Jouy's "La Soularde," which was discussed in detail in the early part of this study.

To attempt to describe the appearance of Yvette Guilbert would be folly when even the art of M. Steinlen has failed to give us more than a very imperfect idea of what she is like. Indeed, as might be expected, her physique is as rare as her qualities as an artist. Her face bears in it the irregularities of genius, and moreover it never seems to look the same twice running. It has in it something *insaisissable*, something which evades the precision of mental as well as actual portraiture. Perhaps this is owing to the remarkable imagination in the eyes, which in Yvette Guilbert more than in anybody else give the key to the individuality. There is in those eyes a great melancholy; not the morbid melancholy of a creature unable to struggle with the world—but a look borrowed from the whole of nature, something of the look of infinite sadness which shines from the eyes of Botticelli's *Prima Vera*: and in that look lies a wisdom which makes us wonder.

Mr. Walter Pater in his study of Dionysus points out the tinge of melancholy in the god's face in that point in his evolution when he passes from the joyous spirit of the country, with its rivers and rich imagery of grape and wine, to the town the abode of human misery and woe. He traces from this the growth of Greek tragedy.

Such is the look that steals into the eyes of Yvette Guilbert when she leaves the rose gardens of her villa on the Seine, to come and sing in the heart of Paris of the joys and sorrows, the laughter and the tears that are born in the great French city.