

A LITERARY CAUSERIE

ON THE "INVECTIVES" OF VERLAINE



NEVER read a book with more regret than this book of "Invectives," which has appeared since the death of Verlaine. I do not see why it should not have been written, if the writing of a petulance helped to clear that petulance away. But what might have been a sort of sad or vexed amusement to Verlaine, in some sleepless hour in hospital, should never have been taken for more than what it was, and should never, certainly, have gone further than one of the best-locked cupboards in Vanier's publishing office. I should like to think that Verlaine never intended it to go further; and I am quite sure that, in the first instance, he never did intend it to go further. But I know Vanier, and I know that whatever Vanier got hold of he was not likely to loose. Gradually the petulances would have heaped themselves one upon another, until they had come to about the size of a book. Then there would be the suggestion: why should we not make a book of them? Then jest would turn into earnest; Verlaine would be persuaded that he was a great satirist: it was so easy to persuade him of anything! And now here is the book.

Well, the book has some admirable things in it, and, as perhaps the most admirable, I will quote a piece called "Deception":

"Satan de sort, Diable d'argent!"
Parut le Diable
Qui me dit: "L'homme intelligent
Et raisonnable
Que te voici, que me veux-tu?
Car tu m'évoques
Et je crois, l'homme tout vertu,
Que tu m'invoques.
Or je me mets, suis-je gentil?
A ton service:
Dis ton vœu naïf ou subtil;
Bêtise ou vice?"

Que dois-je pour faire plaisir
 A ta sagesse?
 L'impuissance ou bien le désir
 Croissant sans cesse?

L'indifférence ou bien l'abus?
 Parle, que puis-je?"
 Je répondis : "Tous vins sont bus,
 Plus de prestige,

La femme trompe et l'homme aussi,
 Je suis malade,
 JE VEUX MOURIR." Le Diable : "Si
 C'est là l'aubade

Qu tu m'offres, je rentre. En Bas.
 Tuer m'offusque.
 Bon pour ton Dieu. Je ne suis pas
 A ce point brusque."

Diable d'argent et par la mort !
 Partit le Diable,
 Me laissant en proie à ce sort
 Irrémédiable.

In such a poem as this we have the Verlaine of the finer parts of "Parallèlement." But what of the little jokes for and against M. Moréas, the pointless attack on Leconte de Lisle, the unworthy rage against M. Rod, the political squibs, the complaints against doctors and magistrates, the condescension to the manner of M. Raoul Ponchon? Here is neither a devouring rage, which must flame itself out, nor a fine malice, justifying its existence, as the serpent does, by the beauty of its coils. Verlaine's furies, which were frequent, were too brief, and too near the surface, to be of much use to him in the making of art. He was a big child, and his furies meant no more than the squalling and kicking of a baby. His nature was essentially good-humoured, finding pleasure on the smallest opportunity; often despondent, and for reasons enough, but for the most part, and in spite of everything—ill-health, poverty, interminable embarrassments—full of a brave gaiety. He often grumbled, even then with a sort of cheerfulness; and when he grumbled he used very colloquial language, some of which you will not find in the dictionaries of classical French. These poems are his grumblings; only, unfortunately, they are written down, and we can read them in print, critically, instead of listening to them in sympathetic amusement. And what injustice they do him, alike as poet and man! How impossible it will be, now that this book

has appeared, to convince anyone, to whom Verlaine is but a name, that the writer of these "Invectives" was the most charming, the most lovable of men. The poet will recover from it, for, at all events, there are the "Fêtes Galantes," the "Romances sans Paroles," "Sagesse," "Amour," and the others, which one need but turn to, and which are there for all eyes. But the man!

Well, the man will soon become a legend, and this book will, no doubt, be one of the many contradictory chapters of the legend. In a few years' time Verlaine will have become as distant, as dubious, as distorted, as Gilles de Retz. He will once more re-enter that shadow of unknown horror from which he has but latterly emerged. People will refuse to believe that he was not always drunk, or singing "Chansons pour elle." They will see in his sincere Catholicism only what des Esseintes, in the book of Huysmans, saw in it: "des rêveries clandestines, des fictions d'un amour occulte pour une Madone byzantine qui se muait, à un certain moment, en une Cydalise égarée dans notre siècle." And they will see, perhaps, only a poetical licence in such lines as these, in which, years ago, Verlaine said all that need ever be said in excuse, or in explanation, of the problem of himself:

Un mot encore, car je vous dois
 Quelque lueur en définitive
 Concernant la chose qui m'arrive :
 Je compte parmi les maladroits.

J'ai perdu ma vie et je sais bien
 Que tout blâme sur moi s'en va fondre :
 A cela je ne puis que répondre
 Que je suis vraiment né Saturnien.

ARTHUR SYMONS.