

A LITERARY CAUSERIE :

ON A BOOK OF VERSES



BOOK of delicate, mournful, almost colourless, but very fragrant verses was lately published by a young poet whom I have the privilege to know somewhat intimately. Whether a book so essentially poetic, and at the same time so fragile in its hold on outward things, is likely to appeal very much to the general public, for which verse is still supposed to be written, it scarcely interests me to conjecture. It is a matter of more legitimate speculation, what sort of person would be called up before the mind's eye of any casual reader, as the author of love-poetry so reverent and so disembodied. A very ghostly lover, I suppose, wandering in a land of perpetual twilight, holding a whispered "colloque sentimental" with the ghost of an old love :

" Dans le vieux parc solitaire et glacé
Deux spectres ont évoqué le passé."

That is not how I have seen my friend, for the most part ; and the contrast between the man as I have seen him and the writer of verses as I read them, is to me the most attractive interest of a book which I find singularly attractive. He will not mind, I know, if I speak of him with some of that frankness which we reserve usually for the dead, or with which we sometimes honour our enemies ; for he is of a complete indifference to these things, as I shall assure myself over again before these lines are printed.

I do not remember the occasion of our first meeting, but I remember seeing him casually, at railway-stations, in a semi-literary tavern which once had a fantastic kind of existence, and sometimes, at night, in various parts of the Temple, before I was more than slightly his acquaintance. I was struck then by a look and manner of pathetic charm, a sort of Keats-like face, the face of a demoralized Keats, and by something curious in the contrast of a manner exquisitely refined, with an appearance generally somewhat dilapidated. That impression was only accentuated, later on, when I came to know

him, and the manner of his life, much more intimately. I think I may date my first real impression of what one calls "the real man"—as if it were more real than the poet of the disembodied verses!—from an evening in which he first introduced me to those charming supper-houses, open all night through, the cabmen's shelters. There were four of us, two in evening dress, and we were welcomed, cordially and without comment, at a little place near the Langham; and, I recollect, very hospitably entertained. He was known there, and I used to think he was always at his best in a cabmen's shelter. Without a certain sordidness in his surroundings, he was never quite comfortable, never quite himself; and at those places you are obliged to drink nothing stronger than coffee or tea. I liked to see him occasionally, for a change, drinking nothing stronger than coffee or tea. At Oxford, I believe, his favourite form of intoxication had been *haschisch*; afterwards he gave up this somewhat elaborate experiment in visionary sensations for readier means of oblivion; but he returned to it, I remember, for at least one afternoon, in a company of which I had been the gatherer, and of which I was the host. The experience was not a very successful one; it ended in what should have been its first symptom, immoderate laughter. It was disappointing, and my charming, expectant friends, disappointed.

Always, perhaps a little consciously, but at least always sincerely, in search of new sensations, my friend found what was for him the supreme sensation in a very passionate and tender adoration of the most escaping of all ideals, the ideal of youth. Cherished, as I imagine, first only in the abstract, this search after the immature, the ripening graces which time can but spoil in the ripening, found itself at the journey's end, as some of his friends thought, a little prematurely. I was never of their opinion. I only saw twice, and for a few moments only, the young girl to whom most of his verses were to be written, and whose presence in his life may be held to account for much of that astonishing contrast between the broad outlines of his life and work. The situation seemed to me of the most exquisite and appropriate impossibility. She had the gift of evoking, and, in its way, of retaining, all that was most delicate, sensitive, shy, typically poetic, in a nature which I can only compare to a weedy garden, its grass trodden down by many feet, but with one small, carefully-tended flower-bed, luminous with lilies. I used to think, sometimes, of Verlaine and his "girl-wife," the one really profound passion, certainly, of that passionate career; the charming, child-like creature, to whom he looked back, at the end of his life, with an unchanged tenderness and disappointment: "*Vous n'avez rien compris à ma*

simplicité," as he lamented. In the case of my friend there was, however, a sort of virginal devotion, as to a Madonna; and I think had things gone happily, to a conventionally happy ending, he would have felt (dare I say?) that his ideal had been spoilt.

But, for the good fortune of poets, things never do go happily with them, or to conventionally happy endings. So the wilder wanderings began, and a gradual slipping into deeper and steadier waters of oblivion. That curious love of the sordid, so common an affectation of the modern decadent, and with him so expressively genuine, grew upon him, and dragged him into yet more sorry corners of a life which was never exactly "gay" to him. And now, indifferent to most things, in the shipwrecked quietude of a sort of self-exile, he is living, I believe, somewhere on a remote foreign sea-coast. People will complain, probably, in his verses, of what will seem to them the factitious melancholy, the factitious idealism, and (peeping through at a few rare moments) the factitious suggestions of riot. They will see only a literary affectation where in truth there is as poignant a note of personal sincerity as in the more explicit and arranged confessions of less admirable poets. Yes, in these few, evasive, immaterial snatches of song, I find, implied for the most part, hidden away like a secret, all the fever and turmoil and the unattained dreams of a life which has itself had much of the swift, disastrous, and suicidal energy of genius.

ARTHUR SYMONS.