THE REAL HUYSMANS

EN ROUTE. *By Joris-Karl Huysmans. Translated by C. Kegan Paul. 12mo. 463 pages. E. P. Dutton and Company. New York.*

TO build again in fancy the personality of J.-K. Huysmans is almost as difficult a task as to reconstruct the Gothic Paris of Villon and Louis XI. It would be easier to revoke the *milieu* of the Sun-King itself. Architecturally, at least, the French have learned little that is new since the seventeenth century; the somewhat foolish architectural ideals advanced in that period have, with certain modifications of time and fashion, remained all but stationary, and after allowing for things like tram-cars and taxicabs, a courtier of the Grand Monarch might well feel himself perfectly at home on the Rue de Rivoli or the Boulevard de la Madeleine. The childish obviousness, the pitiless regularity of those broad smiling avenues, shaded by their bright theatric greenery, terminating in the inevitable obelisk or arch, the *urbs beata* of the late Baron Haussmann, the apotheosis of a glaring bourgeois opulence, the architectural ideal of an adjutant or a housemaid, all this exasperated the soul of Huysmans, a man of another age, who said that, thanks to the Americans, Paris was fast becoming "a sinister Chicago." A phrase, one may add, that is fair, neither to Chicago nor to Paris. But it was ever the tragedy of this brilliant and unhappy artist, not that he was satisfied with so little, but that he was never satisfied with anything. The most active years of his literary life were spent in the eighties and nineties, when the taxi and the metro still slumbered in the platonic limbo of unrealized ideas, and it is a melancholy fact that he did not know when he was well off. It is pleasant, by way of change, to turn back to that other post-bellum city, which he himself has evoked in marvelous pages, and to that fascinating period of intellectual *débâcle* and moral exhaustion which produced, notwithstanding, so memorable a literature.

Huysmans himself lived, at the time of his first success, in a former convent, Number 11, rue de Sèvres, now a noisy monotonous

street, full of the shriek and din of tramcars and trucks. He has fully described the monastic edifice in his book De Tout, now out of print, and it was there that he wrote his early volumes, including the admirable Croquis Parisiens and A Vau l'Eau. Of all his lodgings, it was this one that he loved the most, and he often regretted it in the days after his conversion, when ill-health, and a habit of running about half the Benedictine houses of France, forced him to abandon it. In that still unregenerate time (1891), he had already written La-Bas, which gained him an exasperating notoriety with all sorts of spooky and uneducated people (New Thought, they would be called handsomely in America), but he still remained an unknown and poorly-paid clerk, lost in the Dantesque glooms of the Ministry of the Interior. He had been there since 1866. Miracles like that happen. The author of A Rebours, a misanthrope, a perverse, highly sensitized hypochondriac, all nerves like a cat, lived for twenty-five long years in a soul-destroying office, surrounded by a world of sorry functionaries, the imbecility of whom no one who knows French bureaucracy from the inside will be at all likely to doubt. And during that interval, he was able to write incomparable books, of a narrow range, dominated by a few ideas, but books which have become a permanent portion of nineteenth century literature. He even wrote them in his bureau. When he was ultimately decorated, not, one notes, as a man of letters, who had enhanced with a special lustre the glories of French prose, but as a "serious and punctual" public servant, who was incidentally a man of letters, no one was more dumbfounded than his colleagues in the office. They had not even known that he wrote. And after the first shock, their astonishment was grudging and short-lived. "Did he write for the journals *à grand tirage?* No? Oh well, he was probably of no great account after all."

It was in his little cell on the Rue de Sèvres, or at a cabaret, La Petite Chaise, 36, rue de Grenelle, that Huysmans revealed himself to a few intimates as a witty, acid, and, on the whole, a very charming talker. He did not think very highly of much of the great literature of the past, and he made no bones about saying so. Though a man of extraordinary erudition in certain directions, he was the antithesis of a pedant, at least in those days. The patron saints of French classicism, Racine and Corneille, bored him to

tears, and he put in the same wearisome category, Dante, Schiller, and Goethe.

"I have read them with attention, these solemn pontiffs," he said, "and I have never failed to ask myself in what their interest consisted."

In the same connection, praising the verse of Tristan Corbière, he said that "there was nothing faultless about it, in other words, soporific."

As for most of contemporary literature, he tried not to think of it at all. According to him, his great master Zola, to whom he remained always more or less loyal, through the wreck of conversion and the abandonment of the good ship of naturalism, according to Huysmans, Zola knew nothing whatever about art, which appears to have been the truth.

"Turgenev," cried Huysmans once with heartfelt emotion. "What a tub of tepid water!"

The two writers whom he respected the most in his century were, naturally, Baudelaire and Barbey d'Aurevilly, and the only thing that displeased him in the case of the latter was his entourage. "He had a whole gang at his coat-tails," said Huysmans, "and it was impossible to chat with him five minutes without seeing a Bourget jump out of the chimney-cupboard."

His preferences in painting had many of the same affinities and rejections. Though he began as a collaborator in Les Soirées de Médan, and never wholly abandoned the basic truths of naturalism, he turned more and more, both in literature and art, to the mystical, the fevered, and the perverse. For him, it was the same thing; a kind of spiritual naturalism, a malady of the soul. Thus he had little taste for the large, the serene, and healthy in painting; the joyous and heady canvasses of the Renaissance, the "golden colour-music" of the Venetians, for instance, left him cold. He ridiculed Da Vinci with his pretended profundities; Raphael bored him like Racine, as well he might; and he even disliked Botticelli with his Venuses masquerading as Virgins. Though he railed at modernity and detested "his vile century," he turned for consolation to some of its more sickly and talented children. He profoundly admired Odilon Redon, Gustave Moreau, Raffiélli, Felicien Rops. Like his contemporary, Octave Mirbeau, with whom, despite the latter's hatred of Catholicism,

he had much in common, Huysmans was a brilliant, if not always fair, critic of painting. He was always too much afraid of being taken in, and his horror of insincerity and self-deception, his distaste for the merely beautiful, to say nothing of his malady of Carlyle, led him often into ungenerous excesses. His favorite school was the German and Flemish Primitive, his favourite painting the marvelous and horrible Crucifixion of Grünewald in the Cassel museum.

In 1884, appeared A Rebours, a ludicrous and ghastly book, resembling in its structure nothing so much as the artificial heaven of glass and ivory in which its hero withdraws from the inescapable horror of his life. A Rebours is the chart by which one may study the extreme ravages of the aesthetic disease, the complete breakdown of the great theory that charmed the men of the nineties in two hemispheres. Nor is Huysmans a *farceur* fooling a foolish public in this meticulously composed and terrible book. No one was less equipped for that sort of game than he, no one was more self-revelatory, more sincere; he was really Des Esseintes, just as he was the lamentable Folantin in A Vau l'Eau, and was to be, unmistakably, Durtal in the trilogy of conversion. A Rebours represents the spiritual Land's End, the aesthetic hell to which ennui, disgust, ill-health, exacerbated individualism, the egotism of the aristocratic artist, as Mr Huneker would admiringly call it, had conducted this honest and unhappy man. After A Rebours, what? He was a celibate, in all probability despising the demands of the senses and yet wedded to them. For women, considered as anything but the objects of physical need, "the eternal feminine of the eternal simpleton," he had the contempt of a coenobite. One has only to read the two masterly and shameful chapters X and XIII of La-Bas for a capital illustration of the pessimism and ignobility of Huysmans' attitude in these things. "*Mon Dieu, que c'est donc bête,*" sighs Durtal, as he awaits Mme Chantelouve, and "My God, how stupid it is," is wholly descriptive of their creator's sentiment in regard to the chief of human pleasures.

And if the blasphemies which he offered to love are shocking, what can be said of these addressed to humanity, to life? "*Quelles trombes d' ordures soufflent à l' horizon!*" murmurs Durtal charitably of the approaching century on the last page of La-

Bas. "What is there to hope of the future?" replied Des Hermies, "Do you expect the kids issuing from the fetid bourgeois of this soiled time to be clean themselves? I often ask myself what it is they will do in life." "They will be like their parents," said Durtal, "They will fill themselves with tripe and they will empty the soul by the abdomen!"

Even his art, the *spes unica* of many similar men, had ceased to interest him. He had given up naturalism, as it was commonly practised and understood, "an art that investigates only below the navel," he called it, and La-Bas proved to be anything but a worthy example of the manifesto delivered in the first pages. For humanity in general, he had nothing but loathing, especially in its aspects of suffering and sin; he had practically no friends who did not bore him; he was a man without love. There must be something else, something that rises luminous and undying above the everlasting welter and filthy din of "our vile time." He had always loved certain dim corners and moments of the past, in "the dolorous and exquisite end of the Middle Ages," for instance, he found something that infinitely pleased him; there he was at home. And what was at once the radium and the beacon-light of that feverish and delicious period? An individualist to the end, passionately intent on his own salvation, this convict of life, alone in the thick darkness, looked up in despair, and as if in sudden starlight, he saw the face of Jesus Christ. "I have wept and I have believed," said Chateaubriand.

The result was En Route, in certain respects his best book, and with it we enter on the ultimate stage of his pilgrimage, such as it was. The psychology of conversion, depicted so poignantly in its beautiful pages, is interesting, but it would not interest every one. "He speaks of sin, of salvation, of redemption, and conversion, as if these things were realities," said Renan of a similar case. Huysmans was drawn to Catholicism primarily through its art, "that art which has never been surpassed, and which is its true proof." It was his passion for beauty and his disgust for existence, he says frankly, complicated by solitude and inactivity. "What remains incomprehensible is the initial horror, the horror imposed on each one of us of living; that is a mystery which no amount of philosophy can enlighten. . . . And when I think of this horror, of this disgust for life, which year after year

has mounted in me, I can understand why I have inevitably drifted to the only port where I could find shelter; the Church."

Nothing could be more precise—or more sad.

He began by haunting the churches on the left bank, at first St Sulpice, whose vast Jansenist ugliness and appalling horde of bourgeois devots did not repel him, as long as he could sit in the shadows on a November evening, and listen to what was and still is the only well-trained choir in Paris. "It seemed to him that at St Sulpice, divine grace had mingled with the eloquent splendours of the liturgy, and that supernatural appeals on his behalf had passed into the marvelous sadness of the voices; thus he felt a gratitude wholly filial to this church where he had passed so many sweet and sorrowful moments."

Then, on the afternoons when he had dreamed before the canvasses of the Primitives in the Louvre, he took refuge in the thirteenth century church of St Severin, whose charming belfry with its little golden cock could be seen above the masses of old roofs and blackened chimneys from the Place St André des Arts. Huysmans has devoted some magnificant pages to this church, one of the most exquisite in Paris. He speaks of "that melancholy delicate apse, planted like a desolate garden with wintry trees, rare and a little mad. . . . Even as St Agnes remained immaculate in the brothels, this church has rested intact amid its villainous surroundings, when all about it, at the Château Rouge, at the Crémerie Alexandre not two steps away, the modern riff-raff of pimps and blackguards prepare their misdeeds, swigging with prostitutes innumerable absinthes and triple-sixes." Only the war prevented the archeologists from stripping St Severin of its rags and decking it with trees in the prison of a square, a project of long standing since Huysmans refers to it in his book. "It was an oratory for the poor, a church on its knees, and it would be the most absolute nonsense to remove it from its surroundings, to disengage it from its eternal twilight, from the dim hours which enhance its beauty of a handmaiden, kneeling at prayer behind the infamous hedge of brothels."

Listening in such touching surroundings to the Missa Orbis Factor or the Missa Alma Redemptoris, to that incomparable anonymous music which he is correct in saying has never, in its way, been surpassed, "he ended by being moved to the quick,

choked by nervous tears; all the concentrated bitterness of his life mounted in him; full of vague fears and half-formed resolutions, he cursed the ignominy of his days, and swore to overthrow the charnel-house of his desires."

After En Route was published, Huysmans spent much of his time wandering over Paris in the effort to find the perfectly formed sanctuary or the perfect choir, much as another type of gourmet devotes a lifetime to the quest of the impeccably cooked chop. Finally his confessor told him that the Benedictine nuns of the Rue Monsieur, near the Invalides, sang Plainchant in a manner to satisfy the most simon-pure; he went there and hardly ever left it afterward.

Naturally, Huysmans lost much of his art on the road to Damascus. From the author of La Cathédrale to the author of Carnival I have never known the inevitable complement to conversion to fail, and if George Moore were not the worst dialectician in the world, he could have made out a strong case for his contention that, since the Reformation, a Catholic has produced not one good book.

A lifelong sufferer from dyspepsia and neuralgia, Huysmans was attacked by the malady he has often described, and which killed him a few months later. Mme Miriam Harry, the author of La Petite Fille de Jérusalem, has published some of his last letters to her in the Revue de Paris. One of them recalls the touching prayer of the Puritan Cromwell, quoted in Carlyle's Life :

"Il m'a rendu la vie pour travailler, mais un point, c'est tout. Neuralgies du front et du cuir chevelu, rages de dents, çà n'arrête guère. Et il faut s'estimer content—car l'important en effet, c'est de voir clair.

"C'est égal, le cher Seigneur, il m'en a donné! Si, comme j'espère, vous avez un peu d'influence sur lui, demandez-lui un peu de répit pour son pauvre serviteur qui est tout de même, en dépit de toute sa résignation, un peu las !"

M Blandin has described the miscellaneous crowd that waited under the porch of his last home, Number 31, rue St-Placide, and followed his coffin to the church. . . . "Never was there seen

such a funeral. I can still see old Communards, with their picturesque disorder, always a little conscious, side by side with the soutanes of numerous priests and monks, and here and there the scarlet ribbon of some high dignitary."

I do not know what drew "the criminals of the Commune" to the obsequies of this Christian hedonist and icy anti-socialist, unless it was that he never spared their bourgeois masters in his writings, especially when they were his own co-religionists. Certainly he possessed no love for them, nor for the humanity in the cause of which they suffered. And yet, there are certain pages in an early book, Croquis Parisiens, which seem to disengage a special perfume, a sense of pity that was later to be stimulated, in a degree, by his recovered Christianity. His descriptions of the infinite sadness of poor working quarters near the fortifications, of the lost river Bièvre, long since extinct under warehouses and factories, "The joyous and sorrowful tumult of grand poor streets," the dolorous charm of the *banlieue*, are among the most moving and magical that he ever wrote. Perhaps there was more hidden in this illustrious and wretched writer than the spiritual aristocrat turned Catholic epicurean.

He said many notable things, among them, that all the chatter about schools in art was beside the point; either you had talent or you had not. And again: "*Contrairement à l'opinion reçue, j'estime que toute vérité est bonne à dire.*" And I like to recall his sentence in the preface to Marthe, his first book: "I write what I see, what I feel, and what I have experienced, and I write it as well as I can: that is all." He has written extraordinary books in a chiselled and jewelled prose, some of which will endure, principally, I think, because, within their limits, they leave nothing unsaid. He was a man of great intellectual honesty, many virtues, and one sin, perhaps the most unpardonable—his ingratitude to life.

In the quarter which he loved, near the Church Notre Dame des Champs, from which he was buried, they have cut through a new street, doubtless demolishing a garden and convent or two in passing. The street is short, plain, ugly, lined on either side with apartment-houses of Boche design and more than American smartness; it is called the rue Huysmans.

CUTHBERT WRIGHT