FRANÇOIS VILLON

SIR SAMP. *Has he not a rogue's face? Speak, brother, you understand physiognomy; a hanging look to me. He has a damn'd Tyburn-face, without the benefit o' the clergy.*

FORE. *Hum—truly I don't care to discourage a young man. He has a violent death in his face; but I hope, no danger of hanging.* LOVE FOR LOVE.

A NOTE ON THE MAP OF PARIS IN 1530

REPRODUCED AS THE FRONTISPIECE

This Map, by G. Braun, is one of the three earliest maps of Paris, and the most beautiful. The others, both made at this time, Sébastien Munster's and the map called *de la Tapisserie*, are in no way comparable. Braun's map was made just before the hand of the Renaissance touched Medieval Paris, and therefore presents essentially the Paris Villon knew.

On such a reduced scale many street and other names are impossible to decipher: nevertheless certain landmarks are easily discoverable. The University quarter on the Left Bank is the half-moon on the right of the map, with the road from Orleans entering at the Porte St. Jacques, becoming thence the *Grant Rue St. Jacques*, the theatre of most of Villon's life, and driving across the Petit-Pont and the Pont Notre-Dame (whose houses can be plainly seen) through to the Porte St. Martin and out into the country again.

To the east of University the abbey of St. Victor and the bourgs of St. Marcel and St. Médard are plain, and to the west the great abbey and bourg of St. Germain-des-Prés, within its walls: equally plain are the fortresses of the Louvre, the Bastille, and the Temple, the prisons of the Grant- and the Petit-Châtelet, the other main thoroughfares of Medieval Paris, the *Grant Rue St. Denis*, the *Grant Rue St. Martin*, and the *Grant Rue St. Honoré*; and the other bridges, the Pont St. Michel, the Pont au Change, and the Pont aux Meuniers.

The gibbet of Montfaucon, with fruit, is seen on its hillock to the extreme left of the map, that is, to the north, outside the walls.

The walls of Paris shown in this map are of two periods: the whole wall of the Left Bank and the inner wall of the Right were built by Philippe-Auguste between 1190 and 1209. Etienne Marcel, Charles V, and Charles VI, expanded the Right Bank and built its outer wall between 1356 and 1383.

PARIS IN 1552

A STAR BOOK

FRANÇOIS VILLON

A DOCUMENTARY SURVEY BY
D. B. WYNDHAM LEWIS

WITH A PREFACE BY
HILAIRE BELLOC

GARDEN CITY PUBLISHING COMPANY, INC.
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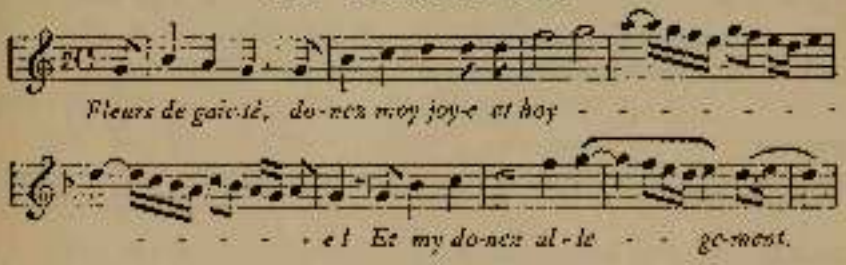
DEDICATION.

TO

the Red-Headed Cerberus, regardant between the Pont Royal and the Petit-Pont; to the Frothing Vorticiff; to the Harpy behind the Little Grille; to the Bilious but Gaitered Platonic; to the Surgical, Hairy, yet Invisible Troll of the Dieppois; to the Stout Love-Child of the Pierides; who Believes Aquinas to be a Mineral-Water; to the Bouncing Benthamite of Bloomsbury who is Unaware of the Medieval; to That Other, the Cranoisy One; to the Dodging Lutheran of the Rue de Grenelle; to the Pythoness of Bayswater; to the Commandant of Infantry who Babbled of the Grand-Orient; to the Lady with the Hard Grey Eyes; to the Levantine of London who Did Not Think Poetry Would Do; to the Military Chorister who Sacked the Lat; and to all prattling Gablers, sycophant Varlets, forlorn Snakes, blockish Grutnols, fondling Fops, doddipol Jolteheads, slutch Calf-Lollies, codshead Loobies, jobernol Gonsecaps, groupt-head Gnat-Snappers, noddiepeak Simpletons, Lob-Dotterels, and nunniehammer Flycatchers,

THIS,

IN DERISION.



PREFACE

I do not know why I should have undertaken to write a Preface for Mr. Wyndham Lewis' *Villon*. It was a presumption, and one which perhaps I ought not to have made. I am putting these few words introductory to a work of great scholarship and research wherein the author has discovered all that Villon was, within and without. I myself can pretend to no such scholarship. I have no more position in the matter than that of the man of general education who from early youth has felt an unchanging admiration for that distinctive and typical voice of the later Middle Ages and of its France. All I could do was to put, as best I may, the effect produced by Villon upon myself; and what I believe to be the essentials of his greatness: though in this I know that I have no standing, and that Mr. Wyndham Lewis' work is there to tell the reader a hundred times more than I can.

Villon, as it seems to me, attained at once the very high place he took, has increased in the scale of European letters, stands higher now even than he did in the height of the Romantic movement, and will in the future (if we retain our culture—which is a big "If") appear as one of the very few unquestioned permanent summits in Western letters, through the quality of *hardness*.

Mr. Wyndham Lewis says it in this book (p. 297) in three words: "*clarity; relief; vigour;*"—and these are the marks of hardness: of the hard-edged stuff: the surviving.

They say that when men find diamonds in primitive fashion, they scrouch and grope in thick greasy clay till they come upon something *hard*, quite different in material from its surroundings; *that* is the stone. In the monuments of Europe, when they fall into

ruin, there survive here and there what seem almost imperishable things; it is marble, it is granite which survives.

Now in letters the simile applies. I heard it well said by a great critic weighing one of the best of our modern versifiers (and "the best" is not saying much), that he liked the stuff well enough, but that it had no chance of survival because it was "carved in butter": an appreciation profound and just. It is with the production of verse as with the chiselling of a material. You handle a little figure of the fourteenth century in boxwood; it is smooth, strong and perfect. So is the cut oak of the medieval stalls. But the pine has perished.

Now this quality of hardness in any poet or writer of prose is difficult or impossible to define—more easy to feel.

It is to be discovered by certain marks which are not the causes of it, but are its accompaniments. Of these the chief is what the generation before our own used to call "inevitableness": the word coming in answer (as it were) to the appeal of the ear: the conviction, when you have read the thing, that the least change destroys it; the corresponding conviction of unity through perfection.

Villon has that. There are times when he seems to have arrived at it by heavy strain of search, "working the verse," as the French say. More often it seems to have come to him with what our fathers called "inspiration"—and after all, that is the best word. But everywhere in Villon, sought by him or discovered by him, you find it.

There goes with this, and is inseparable from it, a run, a sequence, which is not smoothness, but which is a sort of linking or leading on without the least threat of dislocation; that also is a mark of hardness. Further, carving in hard matter is alive with the power of economy, which most certainly is not an economy of excision, but the economy of direct speech. And that again you find in Villon everywhere. He puts into a phrase all that could be said to strike home:

Paradis peint, où sont harpes et luts.

Or:

Sire, et clarté perpetuelle.

And again:

Emperiere des infernaux palus.

And again:

Helas! et le bon roy d'Espaigne
Duquel je ne sçay pas le nom?

Take the most famous, the Ballad of the Dead Ladies. Look how exact and immediate are the subsidiary phrases, the sharp arrowpoint of

Qui beaulté ot trop plus qu'humaine?

or the rise and swell of

Berte au grant pié, Bietris, Alis,
Haremburgit qui tint le Maine,

It will be said that this intensity of style—for that is "hardness"—does not alone make up a poet. The criticism is just. It is but the manner of the poet; were he not a poet no manner could save him. But still it is the manner which preserves his achievement.

As for the matter, Villon has, being French, that supremely national acquaintance with the grandeur and bitterness of reality, and therefore the power of jesting with it; bitter sometimes, sometimes sombre, and sometimes almost genial. And he has what goes with the bold appreciation of reality, the refuge in beauty, and the natural (not weak) refuge in affection. But of these last he is a little afraid—wherein again he is national.

If you desire one word to use as an antithesis to the word sentimental, use the word Villon.

Now apart from all this, Villon is also the ending of the Middle Ages. The verse is the living voice of a man speaking right out of fifteenth-century Paris, as though you heard him at your elbow. But were I to follow up the fascination of the historical, of the picture from the past, I should make this Preface much too long—with kennels and gables, spires, black icy water, Paris under a snowy winter of Louis XI. Since I must not make this Preface too long, nor keep you from your author, I will end.

HILAIRE BELLOC.

Oppian was (if I remember rightly) the first poet of the Greeks to reduce Fishing and Venery to an art; Ovid the first Latin Poet to reduce Love to an art; and the learned German Vincentius Opsopœus the first who taught the art of trowling the Bowl, buffeting the Flagon, and passing a long and merry rime at table;[1] but Villon was the first, and (I believe) the only French Poet to make a profession of plunder and larceny.

—Guillaume Colletet, 1650.

[1] V. *Opsopœi Victoria Bacchi seu de Arte Bibendi*, Nuremberg, 1536.

FOREWORD

Nam neque adhuc Vario videor nec dicere Cinna
Digna, sed argutos inter strepere anser olores.
—VERG., *Buc.* IX.

I nor to *Cinna's* ears, nor *Varus'*, dare aspire,
But gabble, like a Goose, amidst the swanlike Quire.
—DRYDEN.

THIS book began in my mind on a gray day, heavy with snow, of last winter, as I was loitering in the courtyard of St. Julien-le-Pauvre, that little hidden church which is the heart of the Latin Quarter and is so charged with memory; for it stands on the great Roman road marching from Paris to Orleans, Genabum, *and in the earlier shrine on its site St. Gregory of Tours sang the night Office in the sixth century; and much later (having been rebuilt) it became the official church of University and the scene of Rectorial elections for four centuries, and was served by the Cluniacs, and Dante himself said his prayers in it—for such was a quaint custom of the time. He came (as I had come myself that day) from Straw Street, where the Schools were, and in his great mind there still shone the refulgence of*

la luce eterna di Sigieri
Che leggendo nel vico degli strami,

though since Siger de Brabant ceased to lecture in 1277 (as well he might, being vanquished in debate by the Angelic Doctor and asked to take his Averroism elsewhere by Etienne Tempier, Bishop of Paris) I do not see how Dante can ever have sat at his feet, Boc-

caccio's story notwithstanding. But what has all this to do with Villon?

Here, then, in the little courtyard, contemplating the west front of St. Julien, so damnably defaced by Master-Mason Bernard Roche, pacing those stones and thinking of that winter when the wolves were abroad in the streets of Paris, I first thought of writing this book. It began in a glow of pleasure, was continued with pleasure, and is now ended; also with pleasure. Praise be to God and St. Thomas of Canterbury for the same!

On this day before this book floated into my mind, I had been wandering down the Rue St. Jacques, the docte Rue St. Jacques, *and over the Petit-Pont, as I had often done before, repeating verses of this poet, whom I have revered since that day of my boyhood when I first lighted on Robert Louis Stevenson's essay, evoked (as will be easily remembered) by the great biographical study of François Villon by Auguste Longnon. Of Stevenson's essay I still think with gratitude; and indeed it must be acknowledged the best study of the mediæval world (with "The Black Arrow") ever put on paper by a nineteenth-century Calvinisto-Agnostic. From the day of reading it I became eager for more of this poet, and so having passed without much hurt through the pale antechambers of the Pre-Raphaelite mysticocards and the Æsthetes ("Æsthetic: refined. (Gk.) Gk.* αἰσθητικός, *perceptive."—*Skeat*) I came at last to the fountain-head, as joyously as ever did Pantagruel and his companions to the Dive Bouteille. It is now impossible for me ever to be alone in this ancient heart of Paris; the whole University quarter is alive with the thronging ghosts I know. I have stepped aside for the Provost Robert d'Estouteville, riding home to the Rue de Jouy in his scarlet and fur, attended by his twelve Archers, and have brushed against Master Jehan Cotart,* Promoter Curiæ, *staggering home after a stout night with the bottles: and on the Petit-Pont the voices of the fishwives are shrill.*

"Nobody," said Dr. Johnson, blowing his tea in Conduit Street, "can write the Life of a man, but those who have eat and drunk and lived in social intercourse with him." This I believe to be true, and I have done it. Villon I know now almost as I know some of my friends—or more, for how much does a man know his friends?

I have fingered manuscripts concerning him. I know his temperament. I know his Faith, and I have at one time or another fallen into some of his follies, excluding (at this moment) manslaughter and burglary. His physical appearance lives in his verse. If I believed any Oriental dribblings about transmigration I should have known François Villon to have been a transport driver attached to a British infantry battalion on the Western Front in the year 1915; for this fellow resembled the poet in every way, scarred upper lip, long nose, swarthy features, and skinny dried-up body, saving that he was no poet, only a great rascally thief and runner after women.

I have traced Villon's footsteps in the banlieue *and along the Loire, in what remains of the great Innocents Charnel (it is now a neat little, tidy little Bloomsbury square), along the Rue St. Denis, the way of the condemned, out through the ghostly Porte St. Denis in the vanished ramparts to the gibbet of Montfaucon, which is near the Gare de l'Est; the way he often went to see men hanged. I have stood on a midnight near Christmas outside the Ecole Polytechnique, which was the College of Navarre, on the Hill of St. Geneviève, and reconstructed the burglary of 1456. In the Rue des Porcheminiers by St. Séverin I have lingered many a night, watching for the four companions to issue from the sign of the* Chariot, *all drunk, and involve themselves in that row with Master François Ferrebourg which all but hanged Villon for the second time in 1462. I know the fellow, his habits and his haunts.*

Of the authorities (one must have Authorities) by whose light in varying degrees I have proceeded, I give a list in an Appendix. It is not an exhaustive list, and the names of Bijsanck, Vitu, Schöne, and others do not appear in it: the reason for this is that I have not read them, or only in extracts. I have, indeed, tried to obtain one or two of them, but with no success, since they are all long out of print and difficult to discover, except in libraries. In my pursuit I have been greatly hindered and discouraged by the red-haired man who stands first in my Dedication. May St. Anthony's Fire scorch his snout. Happily they were not essential. As for P. Champion's two volumes on Villon's age, they are a monument of erudition, but they are not to be possessed by me, nor will they ever be in this world. Once I was within an ace of laying hands on them, but they turned

into hornbeam leaves, like fairy gold. I do not doubt that they are Troll books, of the kind in which Morgan le Fay wrote the true history of the Dark Mere of Locmariquier. They were published mortally in 1913, and became faëry shortly after.

Of the documents which enrich and adorn this book, and are not only translated but successively numbered and described with their official numbers and descriptions for the convenience of those honest men who may wish to see them in the original, the more important I have examined myself in the Bibliothèque Nationale; *but as for the deciphering of them from their crabbed originals, I have not troubled about this, but have taken them,* manibus lilia plenis, *from Longnon and Thuasne, in whose editions they appear in fair print: for only a fool goes rooting about in the flubble when harvest is laid up.*

The text of the two Testaments and the remainder of Villon's verse I have chosen, with some care, from the three best editions available, which are Longnon's of 1892, Foulet's third edition of Longnon, revised, 1923, and Louis Thuasne's Edition critique, *1923. And since in any half-dozen critical editions of Villon's verse you may find one and the same line given in three different ways, I have occasionally found the problem of choice exacting. This may seem drudgery to some, but to me—as the Landgrave of Hesse observed when assured by Luther that the rich were permitted bigamy—it is a pastime. When, therefore, one scholar has carefully amended a clear line of another scholar into something obscure, I have where possible taken the clearer line: for Life is short. As to my running translation in footnotes of the documents and passages of the text scattered throughout this book, I will say only that it pretends to no elegance, but simply to plain brevity: 'strong sense unguaced by sweetness or decorum,' as Mr. Hill said about Dr. Johnson's stage-play. Other footnotes, with the exception of a few employed for "ritual adornment and terror,"* [1] *I have used, I hope, as sparingly as possible.*

Pedantry in presenting the text I have avoided: hence I have given the Petit Testament *and the* Grant Testament *these names by which they are commonly known. But since the titles given in the*

[1] H. Belloc, *First and Last.* ("On Historical Evidence.")

most ancient manuscripts are Les Laïs *and* Le Testament *respectively, I have placed these underneath, in brackets. Similarly, the title of the greater part of the Ballades in the ancient editions is simply* Balade *or* Autre Balade. *The more celebrated titles are the work of Clément Marot chiefly, in his edition of 1533, and also of Prompsault after him, and perhaps one more. I have therefore continued to use these—Marot's jollily, since they are the titles of a poet—and have included the ancient titles, where they are worth including at all, in brackets also; in this way provoking neither the sneer of frantic impiety nor the screams of outraged virtue.*

As much of the Testaments (a considerable amount) as reveals valuable aspects of Villon's life and adventure I have used in the chapter called "The Life," and much of the same verse again, if necessary, in reviewing the Works. It is even possible that a small amount may occur a third time in that final short chapter called "The Cream of the Testaments," which contains a selection of the finest of his verse in its own pattern, not wrenched from the context: but there should be no complaint about such repetition, for great poetry can never be read too often. If there should be any fuss over this, why, I am completely indifferent; like the gentleman in the eighteenth-century poem:

> Though pleas'd to see the dolphins play,
> I mind my compass and my way.

The book is rounded off by a selection of English renderings of Villon from the hands of Rossetti, Swinburne, Henley, and J. M. Synge, though I take it to be axiomatic and Matter of Breviary that to translate great poetry into great poetry is impossible, Dryden and Pope notwithstanding. The celebrated Rossetti rendering of the Ballade of Dead Ladies I have included, therefore, in spite of its "yester-year" and its "overword," and the very terrible swapping of rhymes twice which occurs in it, destroying the Ballade form and flying dead in the teeth of the Rubrics. The Swinburne version of the Ballade of the Hanged I have included as well, suppressing my personal feelings about "yea, perdie," which affects me in much the same manner as those books on travel called "The Lure of ——,"

which are written by maiden ladies in New England. J. M. Synge's brief prose-paraphrase of the Ballade to Our Lady goes in because the speech of Catholic Kerry chimes naturally with the strong and simple passion of this noble poem; and lastly, W. E. Henley's exercise in nineteenth-century London thieves' slang is a jolly thing of itself, and Villon would, I think, have grinned with pleasure at "moskeneer" and "rattle the tats."

There is no fiction in this book that I know of. I have on the other hand permitted myself occasional Legitimate Assumptions. For example, in the opening chapter, the news of the ringing of the Angelus at Sorbonne is Villon's own testimony. I have assumed (I trust not too daringly) that

(a) *the bell did not ring of itself,*
(b) *it was therefore rung by some agency,*
(c) *this agency was probably mortal,*
(d) *the bell was probably rung, therefore, by the minor official of University appointed to ring bells, rather than by (say) the Rector Magnificus, or the landlord of the* Mule *tavern.*

Again, in recording the death-sentence of 1462, I have assumed that it was not handed to Villon on a silver salver, but that he was brought before the Provost in the prescribed form; and during the ceremony experienced some of those feelings which a man in his position would most generally feel. And so forth. I believe such assumptions, within strict limits, to be allowable and agreeable. If I am to be damned for making them, why, then, I am damned in the excellent company of Austin Dobson (see his Essay on Swift): not to speak of the malignant Gibbon, the glittering Macaulay, and the amiable John Richard Green; all three Authorities—or so Mrs. Ramboat of Bloomsbury assures me. My own assumptions, however, have no ulterior motive.

I have to thank the following: M. Pierre Champion, for permission to reproduce the frontispiece map, which is published by the Société de l'Histoire de Paris; Dr. Théodore Gérold, of the Faculty of Letters of the University of Strasbourg, for permission to use

the music of five fifteenth-century songs from his edition of the Manuscript of Bayeux, so full of historical value, described in my Bibliography; Mr. Belloc, for permission to quote from "Avril," and also for writing a Preface; and Mr. E. V. Lucas, for bringing to my notice a letter from Marcel Schwob to Sir Sidney Colvin. Acknowledgments are also due to Mr. Charles Whibley and Messrs. Macmillan for permission to print "Villon's Straight Tip to all Cross Coves," by W. E. Henley; to Messrs. Heinemann for permission to print Swinburne's versions of the "Ballade of the Hanged" and of some stanzas from the "Lament of the Belle Heaulmière"; and to Messrs. Allen & Unwin for permission to print J. M. Synge's paraphrase of the "Ballade to Our Lady."

And in conclusion, this is not a book for a rabble of pedants nuzzled in the brabbling-shop of Sophisters, but for those dear souls who love high poetry and the unfortunate—for if it is not in the nature of misfortune to be shoved into prison at regular intervals, to be forced to absorb huge and unreasonable quantities of water, and to be all but hanged on two known occasions at least, what is? To these, and to none other, I lovingly present this book. As for those others, vietsdazes, visaiges d'ânes, *may the Maulebec trust them all.*

St. Germain, *January* 1928.