

MISCELLANEOUS.

"THE DECADENCE OF FRANCE."

Some time ago (May, 1904) we published in *The Open Court* a number of letters on "The Decadence of France," which appeared in the *Européen*, a weekly periodical published at Paris. Mr. Theodore Stanton now sends us a number of letters on the same subject, written by English celebrities, which are here published for the first time in English.

COLONEL SIR HOWARD VINCENT, M. P.

"*La France est-elle en décadence?*" To this question there is only one response: "No! a thousand times No!" I find myself in the happy condition to make this statement. I have just completed a journey through France: Calais, Paris, Angoulême, Bordeaux, Le Médoc, Agen, Toulouse, Carcassonne, Marseille, Nice, Cannes, Antibes, Lyons, Dijon. They are the places visited by a delegation of the British Parliament. Everywhere is order; everywhere prosperity; everywhere a quiet and happy people, well fed, well nurtured, gay, content, hospitable, generous. The poor are not to be seen. Luxury is extensive. Such are the impressions received by my colleagues and myself, and this is the reason why I answer: "No! No! No!"

EDMUND GOSSE,

Librarian of the House of Lords.

La France est-elle en décadence?

My reply is, peremptorily, categorically, NO!

What is "decadence"? Is it not a phrase by which the timid often attempt to mask their fear of what is new, active and rebellious?

The only decadent nations are those which do not dare to change, which live on in a constant terror of encouraging audacity of thought or perversity of conduct. The living nations are forever making new experiments, at which conventional people shudder and scream.

We may scour the horizon of the world at this hour and see no nation which seems so little to deserve the rebuke of "decay" as the French. To my apprehension, no country at the present hour is so full of intellectual youth and hope, offers to the observer so great a variety of points of vitality, or draws the attention of the thoughtful to it with so vivacious a sympathy, as France.

"*La France est-elle en décadence?*" If by "decadence" you mean evo-

lution, the painful metamorphosis of life.—Yes! If by “decadence” you mean dulness, apathy, a sinking of the moral and mental temperature, a thousand times—NO!

SIDNEY LEE,

Editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*.

I hardly feel in a position to express any opinion on the weighty question you propose. I know little of France from the economic point of view; my pursuits have led me to study France exclusively in her literature. Although I believe that France, like all other civilized countries, is at the moment passing through a somewhat sterile period in the history of her literature, I judge the influence that she is still beneficially exerting on the literary style of the world to be great. In clearness of expression and perception French writers still seem to me to set an example to the world.

I am at the moment engaged at tracing, more minutely than has, I think, been done already, the influence of France on our Elizabethan poetry, and I am inclining to the opinion that the extent of French influence on our past as on our present literature has been hitherto underestimated.

LUCAS MALET.

The question which you propose, I, as a lover of France, venture to answer with an emphatic negative. France is not in a state of decadence; but she is, in my humble opinion, in a state of convalescence—and the symptoms of the latter condition may easily, by superficial observers, be mistaken for those of the former. From the middle of the eighteenth century she has passed through a series of convulsions, both moral and material, of experiments, of splendors and disasters, culminating in the cruel tragedy of 1870—1871, which must always remain to the student one of the amazing chapters of human history. That she should have retained her solidarity, her genius, and revived as a nation, shows a vitality so enormous, and an intelligence so adaptable and fertile that it is impossible to entertain misgivings as to her future. But the effects of her past sufferings are still upon her in a certain nervousness and sensitiveness, which result in episodes painful to her admirers. She is taken with unreasoning fears, and these lead to a violence both of feeling and of action which strikes the observer as unworthy and exaggerated. Two very dissimilar episodes, having their rise in these nervous terrors, appear especially unfortunate—I refer to the “Affaire Dreyfus” and the expulsion of the Religious Orders. In the first case there was a fear of abstract justice, in the second a fear of religious liberty. As a Catholic and a Liberal, alike, it is inconceivable to me that the highest interests of any nation can ever be served by the repudiation of such fundamental principles of social existence and of progress. Such repudiation, like all other recourse to artificial and arbitrary remedies, suggests a lack of faith in herself, and in her splendid destiny, which might be alarming, did one not remember that she still bears the scars of the tremendous adventures of the later years of the eighteenth and nearly the whole of the nineteenth century. Her convalescence must of necessity be long; but there are, surely, already signs, that her restoration to health will be complete and lasting. There are, perhaps, nations in Europe whom we “could do without”; but France very certainly is not among these! Indeed, it is not too much to say that never have

the influence and traditions of the Latin races been of more vital importance to the evolution of a true and noble civilization than at the present moment.

GILBERT MURRAY,

Formerly Professor of Greek at Glasgow University.

I hesitate to pronounce any opinion upon a subject so vast and so intricate, but there are two remarks that I venture to make.

1. If France is decaying, then the whole European civilization, as at present understood, is decaying. The same bad symptoms which appear in France appear also in England, Germany, Italy, and, from what one hears, in the nations of Europe. Nor can I see that the United States are much better.

2. France throughout her history has generally taken all her diseases severely and recovered from them vigorously. The present bad symptoms may be more severe in France than elsewhere, the recognition of them is certainly more outspoken, and the effort towards regeneration more resolute and far-reaching.

ISRAEL ZANGWILL.

A country may be in decadence materially or spiritually. Materially, I cannot believe that a fertile land with such hard-working and intelligent population as France, and the most capable women in the world, can be on the down grade. For foreigners, however, the greatness of France has always lain in the spiritual realm. She has fed the world with ideas and ideals. It has been a bitter blow to the hopes of the human race that precisely the country of "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity" should have produced a Dreyfus case. Here in Avignon, when I read on the walls "*Mort aux Juifs*" it is not only as a Jew that I feel that France has plunged back into the Dark Ages. I always studied Lemaitre with the greatest admiration for the universalist sympathy and critical intelligence—and lo! one day I find that *Lemaitre du jugement est devenu l'esclave du préjugé*. I was in America when the Dreyfus trial was taking place at Rennes—if Frenchmen could only understand the horror that shook all America at the verdict, they would be able to gage how much they have lost in the opinion of mankind—they who, however distanced in material progress, might still aspire to the spiritual hegemony of the peoples. The license of the French stage and of French literature is another argument for decadence. None but a French playwright would be permitted to place on the stage the caricature of a living personage, though Dr. Nordau may console himself by the remembrance that Aristophanes lampooned Socrates. Moreover, the exploitation of the sex-theme is pushed in France to the limits of silliness. Will Frenchmen never get tired of reading the same joke and seeing the same pictures? There is a total absence of perspective and a total lack of humor in their feverish interest in this subject. One would say a nation of schoolboys gloating over their first discovery of sex. The serious study of life by a Flaubert or a Zola is quite another affair.

Still France is too great to be despaired of, and too necessary for civilization, and if she produced a Dreyfus case, she produced also a Dreyfusard party, and men like Colonel Piccard able to sacrifice all for honor. It is such elements as these that will ever preserve France from decadence.

HERBERT VIVIAN,

Vice-President of the Carlton Club.

I do not believe that France should go further down the slope where so many nations seem to lose their primitive manhood. Since the Revolution, France has gone through many disasters, but has not France at present reached the nadir of her misfortune? To-day she is governed by a democratic clique. She opposes the Church. She is without faith and almost without law. She has lost her rank among the great powers.

Nevertheless, the true Frenchman remains courteous, chivalrous, hard-working, a lover of duty, the drudge of this civilization, which finds its future in the past.

Such a race can only spend itself entirely. Oh, that your legitimate king came with the ancient oriflamme, that the old civilization would reappear, that the sun of Louis XIV. would rise again from its eclipse, and that France would be the cradle of a reaction filled with glory!

 BOOK REVIEWS AND NOTES.

PRIVATE LIVES OF WILLIAM II AND HIS CONSORT, AND SECRET HISTORY OF THE COURT OF BERLIN. From the Papers and Diaries, extending over a Period beginning June, 1888, to the Spring of 1898, of Ursula Countess Von Eppinghoven, Dame du palais to her Majesty the Empress-Queen. By *Henry W. Fischer*. Fischer's Foreign Letters, Inc. New York: 1904. 2 vols. Pp., xviii, 551, 347. Price, \$7.00, net.

Since William II, the present German Emperor, ascended the throne, he has constantly grown both in intrinsic worth as a ruler and in the estimation of the world. No doubt he has his faults; he is impulsive, easily irritated, and apt to rush into publicity where discretion might advise keeping out of view; but, withal, he is honest, courageous, and always ready to do his duty. He may frequently be mistaken, but we may be sure that he could never act contrary to his conscience. Besides, he is one of the most versatile monarchs that ever sat on a throne, and though, as a painter and composer he may be a dilettante, he is certainly an unusually talented monarch, and the many interests he takes in the arts and sciences have certainly done no harm.

The proverb says that before his valet no one is a saint, nor a hero either, nor a genius or generally great; and that is true, for it takes greatness to appreciate greatness, and a valet is a menial, of vulgar mind and sneaking habits, with mean ambitions, and will always be apt to disfigure the very facts of which he may be a witness. He sees the mud on his master's boots, but knows nothing of his aspirations and ambition.

The book before us is written by Henry W. Fischer, a German-American who claims (and there is no reason to doubt it) to come from a distinguished family. He has drawn his information from a personality whom he calls Ursula Countess Von Eppinghoven. In his information to the reviewer, he says:

"Eppinghoven is a fictitious name, used by the author to shield his informant. For, as the reader will readily believe when he has read some of the disclosures made in this book, the countess (she is in truth a countess of a very distinguished family) could not retain her liberty an hour after the volumes reached Germany.