

HUYSMANS' CONVERSION

BY F. C. HANIGHEN

THERE is a controversy about Huysmans' conversion to the Catholic Church. It is rarely mentioned. It lies buried in old files of the *Revue Hebdomadaire* or precious ephemeral quarterlies. It seems to slumber. But let some rash critic refer to "that famous literary conversion" and it is wide awake. There are worse charges against Huysmans than literary impressionability. There are, in fact, attacks which impugn his spiritual sincerity. The Freudians, of course, have their say, and the novels, from "Mathe" to "The Oblate," furnish them with abundant ammunition. And cynics have mentioned his gastric disorders. But these assaults seem puny and ineffective against the impressive array of the defenders of the true conversion. Literary abbés, Academicians and litterateurs all affirm that this godless follower of Zola became a Catholic for the purest of reasons. In late years, the friends and admirers of Huysmans and his works have united in forming a *Société Huysmans*, obviously inspired by the example of the famous *Stendhal Club*. Lucien Descaves, of the *Goncourt Academy*, Huysmans' personal testator, is the president, and the list of charter members includes such illustrious names as Paul Valéry, Rachilde, Paul Bourget, and Léon Hennique.

It is important to state that Huysmans, in his will, expressly forbade the publication of his correspondence. M. Descaves is a veritable Cerberus in defense of this testament. Certain dealers in autographs have inserted in their catalogues whole letters of Huysmans in order to excite collectors. M. Descaves, in an address to the *Société* fulminates: "This is an intolerable abuse and, if necessary, we will obtain an injunction from the tribunals to eradicate it." M. Descaves was as good as his word in the case of De

Fresnois' book "A Stage in the Conversion of Huysmans," that contained some letters of Huysmans, and the volume was withdrawn from sale at the request of the testator. Gossip about this closely-guarded correspondence has aroused among a public ravaged by the Goncourt journal "cache-cache," similar suspicions and similar reactions. It is true that some of Huysmans' epistolary comments on sacred things and his religious interests are revealed as rather flippant in de Fresnois' book, and indeed the letters may contain a Huysmans quite different from the accepted legend. But it was well known that Huysmans was quite mercurial in his conversation and in his personal letters about people and things which he treats reverently in his books. He consecrates some of his most beautiful pages to St. Theresa, but he cannot resist dubbing her "a metallic lily," and St. John of the Cross, another idol, becomes merely "a red-hot iron." It was quite true, as has been said, that he was a cat that liked to try its claws on current reputations and friends. Thus it is not surprising that the correspondence, so mysteriously withheld, should be regarded by many as mollifying in no important respect those statements, first of allegiance, and then of faith, which in "Against the Grain," "Down There" and finally "En Route," form such an impressive stairway to the foot of the Cross.

If M. Descaves is the legal protector of his shade, so is the Abbé Mugnier his spiritual guardian. It was he who said mass in his memory at St. Séverin's on the twentieth anniversary of his death and who recited the "De Profundis" over his grave. His participation was most fitting, for it was to him that "Joris-Karl" Huysmans, baptized Charles-Marie-Georges as an infant, first turned when he felt the stirring of faith and said, with his usual acerbity, "I wish to clean my soul. Have you some lye?" The Abbé can pride himself on this, his most signal conversion, among the many which he is said to have worked in the social and intellectual world of Paris. A frequenter of the salons, he is also a great diner-out and says that he expects to have a napkin as his shroud. He was once intrepid enough to make an assault on the great unfaith of Anatole France. It was at a time when M. France was mourning the death of Madame de Caillevet, his Egeria. "God is good," the Abbé told him, "and he will surely unite two such noble souls in heaven." "But my good Abbé," M. Bergeret is

said to have replied, "Will Madame and I be able to take our morning coffee together there?" And as the priest remained quite non-plused by such a question, the creator of "Thais" continued, "You should know, M. l'Abbé, that for me the morning coffee with the loved one is the best moment of l'amour." And the good Abbé had no reply.

A less pious, perhaps, but more clairvoyant admirer of Huysmans is M. Léon Deffoux. M. Deffoux is an authority on the naturalist movement and has filled his excellent little book, "Le Groupe de Médan," with a mass of fascinating information about Zola, Maupassant, Céard, Hennique, Alexis and Huysmans. The chapter on the latter is entitled, "J. K. Huysmans, Literary Convert." Needless to say, he assigns no anthropomorphic causes and paints a picture of Huysmans languishing in the arid stretches of Naturalism, long overworked by Zola's followers, and yearning for the fresh uncultivated fields of religion. He traces with considerable humor the stages in the conversion, and observes that "he approached penitence with the arguments and delays of a sick person who tries to run away from treatment and who hesitates before the salutary bath which he affects to find either too hot or too cold." M. Deffoux maintains a discreet reserve about the correspondence, confessedly with a wary eye to M. Descaves and his menacing tribunals, but suggests that the publication of the letters would destroy the Huysmans of legend.

The threat of the assizes did not silence Deffoux on the "vie amoureuse" of Huysmans. It has been customary to regard the sponsor of Durtal as a cold, fatigued sensualist who, to quote his words in "Down There," took "his disgusting herd of desires to the brothel-abattoirs to be knocked in the head by the butcher-girls of love" and who experienced no sentimental feelings in his contacts with women. M. Deffoux discloses a beautiful, but tragic idyll in this celebrate's career. In his student days in the Latin Quarter Huysmans met a girl named Anna Meunier who became his mistress and from whom he was separated by the Franco-Prussian war. He found her again fifteen years later and revived his early Mimi-Rudolphe liason. She had two little daughters, who used to call their mother's lover "Papa Georges," which does not mean, however, that he was really their father. This appellation should bring a smile from those who recall his vituperation of women

and the domestic state. She is the heroine of "En Route" and Huysmans actually spent a vacation with her and one of her children in that macabre chateau, that dominates like a House of Usher that strange, hallucinative book. The malady of the heroine was insanity, and Anna died of it about ten years later, about the time of "En Route"; it is significant to note. That he loved her profoundly is certain, and he undoubtedly wanted to marry her and establish a real domestic refuge against the horrors of a bachelor's lonely struggle with bad restaurants and slovenly servants, a struggle which he described so vividly in "En Ménage" and "Down There."

As Anna Meunier became more and more afflicted with this mental malady and finally had to be confined in the St. Anne Asylum, the agony and disappointment of this affair, one may suggest, provided a reaction in Huysmans which was quite characteristic, a reflex which took the form of an irritable animosity to all that was feminine or domestic. Certainly this throws a fresh light on Huysmans, and one can assemble under another heading clues to his conversion. One remembers that "The Carnal Struggle" was the first tentative title of "En Route" and M. Deffoux quite properly asks "if [after Anna Meunier's death] Huysmans had not lost the terrestrial inspiration of a part of his writing, the helpmate of his life, the little Notre-Dame d'Amour, to whom instead of our Mother Mary he first addressed his devotions." He wonders "if Huysmans' cult of the Blessed Virgin was not determined mainly by the sensual perfume of his love-memories which flowered into purity through the medium of prayer."

Thus M. Deffoux. To him reports M. Léon Hennique who strenuously dissents from all these non-confessional surmises. "No, his faith was completely free from such memories: Huysmans remained wholly master of himself before and after the conversion. Once a Catholic, he had nothing but horror for his former self, for the young boaster of vices which the friends of his youth had known. He was conducted to Catholicism blindly, almost by hand, through the shivers, the frights, the astonishments of the supernatural."

The supernatural! It is a strange sight—that of Huysmans, so long an apostle of Naturalism, credulously participating in séances of Spiritualists and table-tippers. This neurasthenic, who was wont

to attribute his changes in health to the weather and changes in weather to supernatural influences, was undoubtedly ready and receptive for the fantastic doctrines of the occultists. To obtain the material for "Down There," he made friends and lived for a time with an ex-abbé, Boullan, who was in continual combat with the Satanists. The ex-abbé asserted that these people were endeavouring to cast spells on him from their centers in Paris and Bruges, and he performed for Huysmans' benefit elaborate exorcisms to repel their maledictions. Did Huysmans at the time recognize Boullan for the half-demented rogue that he was? There is no evidence about this except a letter which M. de Fresnois exhumed, poking fun at some of Boullan's ceremonies. But there was something more than the "there-is-something-to-this-sort-of-thing" attitude. Huysmans utilized some of Boullan's consecrated wafers and participated in the absurd alarums and excursions against the Rosicrucians. Without these wafers, he professed to feel himself unprotected against the ill-will of the ex-abbé's enemies. Table-tipping is one thing, but what must one think of the extraordinary credulity of a man who believes that he felt blows from a phantom fist, directed, he felt sure, by those enemies? He paid Boullan's fine when the latter was arrested for practicing healing. Is it possible that he found something akin to his own strange coprolalia in a man who employed human ordure to cure the maladies of the soul? He defended him while he was living and paid for his tomb when the latter died. But after he had examined the papers of the deceased he altered his views. Only to a few friends did he confide much later that the late abbé was in fact a Satanist. Mindful of these facts, one has little difficulty in understanding the completeness of his conversion.

That it was not a conversion at all, but simply a return to the faith, was the view of James Huneker, who introduced Huysmans to American readers. He was captivated by his paradox that Huysmans had always been a Catholic at heart and that the official genuflexion was not surprising. The works from "Drageoir aux Épices" to "The Oblate" abound in references, images and tendencies of thought which could be adduced to support this contention. But it is difficult to estimate how much atmosphere had to do with this. Huysmans lived most of his life in a former Prémontré convent, converted into an apartment house. In France, the Catho-

lic spirit and trappings had invaded not only the everyday life but the forms of thought to such an extent that a French writer could rarely form a metaphor without alluding in some way to something connected with the church. Perhaps, to draw a finer distinction than Hanneker, it would be more accurate to say that Huysmans was never an atheist. He was never, even in his apostolate under Zola, an anti-clerical, never attacked the Church. Nor was he a probing agnostic. He never took the trouble to fabricate an abstract philosophy of his own and he avoided discussion and the free play of general ideas. He took from Schopenhauer only his general pessimistic attitude and apparently was not a deep student of his epistemology. He averted his gaze from the discoveries and hypotheses of modern anthropology and science, and mentally associated all such ideas with the repellent materialism of modern France. His early prejudices against the Church were superficial, his aversion to the ideology of the Third Republic was profound, and so it was not surprising that such a keen polemist should be on the side of the angels.

Hanneker was also responsible for the erroneous statement that Huysmans renounced, in his latter days of piety, the immoral literary progeny of his youth. The courtesan, Marthe, the loose Vatar girl, and Des Esseintes were all candidly recognized by the *Oblate* of 1904. In an interview with the editor of "Gil Blas" in that year, he proclaimed that he would never consent to destroy these works, assailed the narrow clerical attitude towards Art, that urged this step, and contrasted it with the broad Catholicism of mediaeval days. He urged, rather than affirmed, with a defiant attitude toward the Abbé Belleville and other clerical critics and an uneasy glance at the Vatican, that all his works represented the successive steps in his conversion and so were necessary to the understanding of his own particular way to Damascus. He was doubtless sincere in stating this attitude. But even to the last he cherished an affection for "En Ménage," that repellent examination of a single man's sexual life, an attitude which seems rather the fondness of a literary parent toward his favorite child than any interest in the stages of his spiritual evolution.

Huysmans was no academic advocate of the Catholicism of mediaeval times. He saw in it the perfect flowering of art. But he also saw in it the Devil and he brandished Satan to flagellate the

perpetrators of the modern sins against art. In his later work he would maintain that a hideous modern sanctuary was the work of Lucifer and that a piece of restoration on an old church was instigated by the Evil One. He was thus doubtless more Catholic than his fellow communicants, but he was perhaps less of a Christian. Guiches and Coquiôt, close personal friends and intimates, are both constrained to point out instances of his uncharitable tendencies in personal contacts. I take little stock in theories that are based on his early researches in the slums of Paris, in "Croquis Parisiens," for instance. The meager evidences of humanitarian sentiments found therein are most probably lip-service to the creed of his master Zola. His faithfulness to Villiers de l'Isle Adam was due to loyalty for an old comrade-in-arms in the battles of Symbolism rather than to any deep feeling of compassion. Did not the Abbé Mugnier say that he had made Huysmans a Catholic, but that he could never make him a Christian?

But whether or not he observed all the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount cannot affect the contestable fact that his was a sincere conversion. It certainly bore no resemblance to the buffoonish conversions which are nowadays the latest affectation of futuristic poets. That literary cupidity led him into sacred groves is undeniable. But once there, other factors became more important. His talk was a *mélange* of violent prejudices, atrabilious sentiments, corrosive detractions and graphic phrases, and never did he make an attempt to arrange these ideas into some intelligent system of thought. Was his allegiance to Catholicism the response to a more humane ideal, which even the most abandoned of decadents must experience? In any case, there are few things more curious than the rebound of this apostle of disintegration into the classical shelter of the Church. Much given to neurasthenic states and melancholia, he indulged himself in petty superstitions at first, then progressed to spiritualism and an amazing credulity in Satanism, all of which is co-extensive with elementary religious beliefs. He found nothing to love in life, and in love, nothing but an unfortunate trauma which sent him groping for a stable, imperishable affection. Add to that his passion for external form, his visual appetite, his legitimate disgust for tawdry modernism, and it is easy to see how he found more to worship in the great fanes of Paris than ogival beauty and the mediaevalism of plain-

chant. One should not forget that even so individual a person as Huysmans was a unit in a society which was moving towards the great Dreyfus struggle; nor that he was the companion of Barbey d' Aurevilly, Léon Cladel, Léon Bloy, Villiers de l'Isle Adam, Paul Bourget; that he was not a lone voice crying in a bourgeois wilderness, but a single member of a whole school of protest against materialism.

To sum up all these factors makes for a satisfactory explanation—that explanation, or M. Deffoux', or, I am tempted to say, almost any other. For as William James has pointed out, science and religion are agreed that beyond a certain point there are forces outside the consciousness of the individual which bring redemption. If you choose, you may explain it, beyond that point, by "unconscious cerebration," the "subliminal mind," or other scientific terms. Or perhaps that unknown field appertains to religion rather than to psychological and literary autopsy. However that may be, do not be deceived. M. Descaves may continue to reign triumphant over an enigmatic correspondence, even M. Deffoux may recant, and it does seem to slumber. But there is a controversy and there will always be one as long as there are the two forces of science and religion.