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FRANCOIS VILLON



FRANÇOIS
VILLON

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INTRODUCTION

"VILLON WAS BORN in 1431, the year in which Joan of Arc was burnt by the English. It was one of the most fantastic epochs of European history, an epoch which, behind a startlingly different decor, has an under-current of resemblance to our own."

Thus our new biographer of Villon—and it is quite true. Perhaps reality is always the same, and the decor is always different and always startling. Some short passages of time in the nineteenth century, which we now call "Victorian", have given us the illusion that society has long periods of stability, peace, and mediocrity; but is that not because we—or our forebears—lived in a specially sheltered spot? Actually, the Civil War in America, the Franco-Prussian war of 1870, the conquest of large parts of Asia by the Russians, the Balkanic troubles, India, South Africa, etc. Had it happened that we lived elsewhere, we might have died otherwise.

In any case, had Villon's lot been cast in France between 1934 and 1946, he might have had adventures much like his own—escapes into provinces, manslaughter on his hands, prostitutes, flights from the police or the Gestapo, concentration camps, friends and foes, prayers to the Virgin, and *Where are the snows of yester-year?* His experiences and his moods might have been much the same—possibly worse: where would he have found a Prince to save him occasionally, as he did in his own days? But then suppose him to have lived under the French Revolution and Napoleon—or a

century earlier in those last terrible years of Louis the XIVth, the days between Blenheim and Denain when France was starving and the countryside full of Erigands; or a century earlier during the religious wars either before or after Henri the IVth—and a century earlier we are in his century. What choice, then?

It is the periods of peace and plenty that are delusions—the Golden Ages that never were.

Of course, also, in every age there are quiet destinies—Men in Priors that were not sacked in the wars formerly—Golden Californias nowadays—peaceful corners of China in 1450; though no one could say when or where calamity was to descend.

Things being so, Villon has several lessons for us. Genius is strangely linked to his time and his adventures—Genius is strangely independent from either time or adventure. Villon would, in any period, have written much the same kind of poetry—*A Ballad of the Concentration Camps* would have been the present *Ballade des Pendus*; his *Ballad of Fair Ladies* could have been in Swinburne's good days, when also the Marquis de Sade was not far.

Quiconque meurt, meurt a douleur.
Celui qui perd vent et haleine,
Le fiel lui tombe sur le coeur,
Puis sue—Dieu sait quelle sueur.

It happens in every period:

Whoever dies, dies to his dam and hurt—
Whoever loses wind and breath
His gall unto his heart does fall
And, O God—the sweat he sweateth—

Death is a terrible thing, and all men die. So what does the period matter? or the adventures? We are all in the same plight.

So pray to God that He forgive us all

The prosperous Victorian merchant escapes no more lightly at the end than the bandit that is hanged. Yet the Virgin is always behind us all. There is, at bottom, no difference between the French youth of 1941 who wrote on the eve of being shot "fe meurs pour le communisme", and died well, and Villon who wrote:

En cette foi je veux vivre et mourir.

Communisme and *Notre-Dame* are the same thing: that thing that is to happen after our death.

Thus Villon. Death is very important, and throws much light on the significance of life. But life is very important, and throws much light on the insignificance of death. Whether one dies or not, this is sure:

Il n'est bon bee que de Paris—
Prince, aux dames parisiennes
De beau parler donnez le prix—

As for the *Dames du Temps fadis*—what a wonderful glow they give to the Dames d'aujourd'hui!

Where are the snows of yester-year?
Gone, of course—but we have our own snows today—
La Belle Heaulmiere has been with us—the bad one—and the good ones:

Et fehanne, la bonne Lorraine
Qu'Englois brulerent a Rouen—

The true artist never lacks material.

What does his life matter to Villon? You may be sure he enjoyed it all—much more than you do when reading

of it. We may be sure he was indifferent to it all—as we cannot be. The man who asked

Dictes moy ou, n'en quel pays,
Est Flora, la belle Romaine— ?

was a peer of that Ronsard who was to come and say;

Or, soule-toi de mon visage
Si jamais tu en eus souci,
Tu ne me verras plus ici;
Je m'en vais faire un long voyage

and of that Baudelaire who was to say:

O mort, vieux Capitaine, il est temps, levons
l'ancre

Ce pays nous ennuie, o mort, appareillons—

I was going to say Villon was the greatest of all French poets—but no; it is always the same poet Ronsard saying;

fe m'en vais faire un long voyage;

Baudelaire asking the Ancient Mariner, Death, to weigh anchor, all of them, they are going to find out

n'en quel pays
Est Flora, la belle Romaine.

So what does death matter to them? Death is the only way to find out. It is always the same poet. As soon as we touch real poetry, there is Villon.

What more can one say?

D. SAURAT.

CHAPTER I

THERE is SOMETHING extraordinarily contemporary in the figure of Francois Villon, as though—like all great artists—he had been too much for the ordinary restrictions of time and space and, bursting the boundaries of France and of the fifteenth century, had become part of the universe and of all time. You can imagine him today, a student turned spiv, knocking off a job with his flash companions, drinking up the proceeds in one of those furtive pubs off Tottenham Court Road, treating the tough blondes to gin, and then reeling off home to write a ballad about the whole affair, before the inevitable hang-over awakens uncomfortable thoughts about the future. You can see him well enough in the clothes of the twentieth century, undersized and meagre, dark and dry as a nut, squint-eyed, a boaster and teller of tall stories, gayer and wilder than all the rest of the gang, bitter and jealous because of his poverty, a great hater, and more clear-sighted about himself than he would care his friends to suspect.

In actual fact, Villon was born in 1431, the year in which Joan of Arc was burnt by the English. It was one of the most fantastic epochs of European history, an epoch which, behind a startlingly different decor, has an undercurrent of resemblance to our own. A civilisation was crumbling away among untold misery and suffering. The Middle Ages and feudal society were rapidly breaking up and the new civilisation which was to grow into the modern world had not yet formed itself. "The fear of God and the respect of custom,

those twin brakes of feudal times," says Michelet, "were broken down during the fifteenth century." They left a vacuum, as yet unfilled by the new conceptions of society which were in some degree to replace them, so that it was a time of change and chaos, of the decline of old values, of moral and material anguish: a time of intellectual curiosity and a great time for criminal violence. The first printing presses had been set up in Italy some ten years earlier, and an immense hunger for knowledge was sweeping through Europe, carrying with it the first seeds of religious doubt. In Italy, three years later, Cosimo de Medici was to become ruler of Florence and the Renaissance was at hand, but in France a ruined and harassed people was too busy trying to quieten the clamour of empty stomachs to follow the Florentine example. The Hundred Years War, which had begun as a knightly, chivalrous affair, had ended as serious business, sordid and brutal—the birth of modern warfare—and had drained the country, spiritually and materially, as dry as a squeezed lemon. The English had battered on the land since Agincourt, but the demoralisation of France was less the work of the occupying forces than the result of the bitter internal feud between Armagnacs and Burgundians which had almost entirely obscured the more obvious national issue. There was no more law; plague and famine swept the country and the exhausted people could only suffer impotently, unable to understand the reason or source of their misery.

It must have seemed, at the time of Villon's birth, as if France had sunk for ever into the bog of her despair. As long as living memory went, the people had been crushed by taxes to pay for the endless war and decimated by diseases which had first been introduced by the Crusades. Depopulation had increased to a terrifying extent. A contemporary account of the year 1418 says: "Towards the end of September people were dying in such numbers and so quickly that great ditches had to be dug in the cemeteries, where they were laid in layers, thirty or forty at a time, hardly dusted over with earth. The streets were deserted except for the priests, hurrying with the Last Sacraments. ... At eight o'clock there was such a great

throng at the bakers' doors that you must have seen to believe it. . . , You would have heard nothing throughout all Paris but the pitiful lamentations of the little children crying out: 'Alas, sweet Jesus, alas, I am dying of hunger!' One often saw twenty or thirty children, boys and girls, lying on a rubbish heap, dying of cold and hunger/

In 1421 the famine was worse than ever. The harvests had not been collected, since all the labourers were dead or had fled from the devastated countryside, from which the wolves converged upon Paris, to roam the streets and devour the corpses. At the same time the citizens fled from the capital, driven away by a pitiless taxation, found the surrounding country absolutely barren, and took to the woods where they lived like wild beasts. The town was given over to the beggars, who outnumbered the rest of the population and established their own law, living under a king elected by themselves. At the same time, among all this misery, a frenetic, hysterical gaiety reigned periodically, a reaction as horrible as the tragedy which evoked it.

When the English at last evacuated Paris and retired to the southwest, France, as Michelet expresses it, continued to exterminate herself. The Northern provinces became a waste land, the uncultivated scrub invaded the fertile plains and swept down like a tide to the Central Plateau. The countryside was devastated by the bands of "Ecorcheurs", led by brutal Armagnac captains who were less interested in the English than in looting and ravaging on their own account. These troops of freebooters were commanded by petty nobles, "kings of the castle" as they were known, who submitted to no control from the real king or any other human. Their prototypes are that Gaston La Hire, a terrible brigand and a faithful companion of St. Joan, who prayed to God with a touching and simple arrogance; "Lord God, I pray to you to do for La Hire that which La Hire would do for you, if you were a captain and La Hire were God"; or the Castilian Villandrando, who came to France to seek his fortune, attaching himself first to the Duke of Burgundy, then to Charles V I I , but fighting first and last for himself. He had quickly earned the title of "King of Plunderers" and had methodically pillaged almost

every province in France, one after the other. In each province where he made his unwelcome stay, he kept up a princely court, with a Chancellery and retinue of knights and pages-all at the expense of the unfortunate inhabitants. In this way he amassed immense riches and was able to make loans to the French Barons which assured him an impregnable position.

These robber captains had absolute power over their followers. They had been trained for war and nothing else, so once the war with the English was over, they were left with no outlet for their energies except the systematic terrorisation of the lands within the orbit of their action. A bourgeois of Paris noted, in his journal for the year 1440, some of their misdeeds: "Foreign kings have been used to say to French merchants who came into their lands: that the King of France was the right arm of all the thieves of Christendom. And for certain of them they did not lie, for there were so many of these brigands in the Ile-de-France that it was peopled with men worse than any Saracen, as can be seen by their great, enormous sins and tyranny over the poor in every country into which the King led them.

"Item. They took the little children they found in the roads near the villages or elsewhere and shut them up in cages, and there they died of hunger or from other causes, unless they were ransomed with a very great ransom.

"Item. When a gentleman had a wife, and they could lay hold of her and he could not pay the ransom they asked, they tortured and tormented him most grievously; and certain of them they shut up in great cages and then took their wives and placed them by force on the roof of the cage and cried out: 'Wretch, in spite of all you can do, your wife shall be bestridden in this place.' And they did so, and when they had finished their work they let the poor soul perish of hunger, unless he paid the ransom they demanded. And neither the king nor any prince came to the aid of these poor people: and to those who complained they said: 'They must live somehow: if it were the English you would not speak of it; you are over-rich.' "

To escape these marauding bands, the peasants fled into the towns, leaving their farmlands to return to virgin soil, their beasts

and cattle to die of hunger or to swell the loot of the bandits. It was probably for this reason that Villon's parents came to Paris from the Bourbonnais, where they had their origin, and settled in the aristocratic quarter known as the Celestins, where his mother probably became a servant in the house of some noble, or of one of those rich bourgeois who were just emerging as a new and important middle class in France.

Surnames were a less stable ticket in the fifteenth century than they are today, and Francois Villon began life as Francois de Montcorbier or, alternatively, Francois des Loges. His family had some connection with the powerful Montcorbier family from the Bourbonnais, certainly not through any relationship as we know it today, but probably through the fact that they had lived in the village which depended from their castle, or because they had been servants in the castle itself. As far back as memory went, they had been extremely poor, never possessing anything of their own, constantly dependent on the whims of their employers. The grandfather, named Horace, had died in poverty. The father has left no trace at all, except that Villon tells us later that he is dead and recommends his soul to God. Probably he died when his son was still almost a baby, leaving his widow penniless with the child on her hands and no means of earning her living; but it is also quite possible that Francois was a bastard, perhaps of the Montcorbier family itself, since he hints from time to time at the existence of rich and powerful relations who could have helped him if they had been willing to do so.

At any rate, he was left to the sole care of his mother, and **knew** at too early an age the miseries of extreme poverty and constant anxiety. There was little to eat, and few pleasures except those of the imagination. His mother was a poor little woman, prematurely aged, quite illiterate and capable only of teaching her little boy her own simple faith, a few songs, and the charming legends of the saints that had passed down from mother to child through the centuries. Her one consolation, in a terribly hard and dreary life, lay in the religion which she practised with such ardent piety. **The**

cloister of the parish church was the only place where she could know peace and a little happiness, and there she used to lead her little boy, day after day, to pray and gaze with alternating joy and terror at the fresques on the wall which represented on one side the joy of the blessed souls in Paradise, and on the other the torments of the damned who writhed in the flames of Hell. Years later, Villon wrote a ballad at her request, in which he tells us all we know of her and in which he pictures her praying in her simple, devout way in these peaceful cloisters which she loved so much:

*Femme je suis povrette et ancienne,
Qui riens ne scay, oncques lettre ne leus;
Au moustier voy dont suis parroissienne,
Paradis paint, ou sont harpes et lus,
Et ung enfer ou damnes sont boulluz-
Ung me faict paour, l'autre joye et liesse.
La joye avoir me fay, haulte Deesse,
A qui pecheurs doivent tous recourir,
Comblez defoy, sans faincte ne par esse.
En cestefoyje vueil vivre et mourir.**

Poetry, which had not yet been shut away in books, was in those days the very climate of childhood. Story and legend had a reality of their own and material misery was offset by the profound conviction of the close presence of a whole world of compassionate and fantastic and terrible figures, of saints, fairies and witches who distracted the minds of the poor and uneducated from their material misery.

Villon's mother—of that at least we may be sure—told him endless stories, those same stories which she had been told by her own

* I am but a poor old woman—who has no learning and cannot read—I see in my parish cloister—A painted Paradise with harps and lutes—And a Hell where the damned are boiling—One fills me with fear, the other with joy and happiness—May I come to that joy, great Goddess—To whom all sinners have recourse—Full of faith, sincere and unfailing—I desire to live and die in this faith.

mother when, as a little girl, she had cried with fear of the ferocious English, with their long tails, which they hid in their breeches, and their cruel ways. She must have told him of that poor woman, so like herself, who could neither read nor write, but who loved God devoutly. It seems that the old woman of the legend knew only a few, easy prayers which she had learned as a child, but, since she was old and friendless, she had no other pleasures but to speak to Him in her own simple way. One day, when she was praying in her parish church, a learned clerk passed by and stopped to listen to her. When he heard what she was saying, he was filled with contempt, and called out to her, "How can you expect God to listen to such foolish prayers which are worthy only of a child that knows no better?" The old woman looked at him sadly, for she felt that the reproach was deserved, but she knew no other words with which to speak, so she only shook her head and continued her prayer, while tears rolled down her cheeks at the thought that she could do no better. The clerk turned away, but as he looked back at the old woman, he saw that the most beautiful roses and lilies were issuing from her lips. An angel hovered over her to gather them and then, as he watched, he saw the angel fly upward and lay the flowers in the lap of the Blessed Virgin, who smiled with joy and blessed the old woman praying below in the cloisters.

Then again the mother would sing to him the nostalgic, regretful songs like *Triste plaisir et douloureuse joye*, which were popular at the time, and then kiss him, and beg him once again to remain steadfast in the Faith which meant so much to her. Villon loved her deeply, remained in touch with her as long as she lived and admitted that she had suffered on his account, "bitter pain, God knows, and much sorrow".

Paris at this time was still nominally occupied by the English, but few troops remained, since whole regiments had deserted because no one troubled to pay them their wages. The chaos and disintegration of the capital had accomplished that which the nationalist army had failed to do and the invading forces were completely demoralised. One of Villon's earliest memories must have been the

fine spectacle of the entry into the town of the Seigneur de l'île Adam at the head of a great throng of Armagnac troops. The people of Paris, who knew the reputation of these brigand-soldiers all too well, went into hiding and had to be coaxed out by a solemn undertaking of good behaviour, proclaimed by the town-criers in every street. The promise was kept, the people took heart, and there were tremendous scenes of rejoicing. The last remnants of the invading army had taken refuge in the Bastille, where they had organised a blockade, but after some negotiations, the Lord High Constable de Richemont received their surrender, on condition that they were allowed to go free. They withdrew piteously, followed by the jeers of a delirious populace and accompanied by joyful cries of "There go the foxes! There go the tailed ones!" until they were at last safely beyond the gates.

Paris was once again the capital of France. In token of thanksgiving there was a solemn procession through the town, in which all the churches and the whole of the University took part, carrying banners and tall candles. Although it was a rainy, windy day, not one of the candles blew out, and this was generally accepted as a miracle denoting God's satisfaction at the liberation of the city. We can suppose that the small Francois Villon was there to stare at the fine procession and to wonder at the bright, steady flame of the candles. Then, when evening came, there were the grand bonfires lit in the streets, with the people singing and dancing around them, convinced that their sufferings were at an end.

On the following day, a Saturday, so much food came into Paris that wheat, which three days earlier had cost forty to fifty *sols*, could be bought for twenty *sols*; seven eggs could be bought for one *blanc*, where the day before five eggs had cost two *blancs*; and the old corn-market in front of the Madeleine was opened up for the first time in twenty years. The Parisians bought, ate, and adored their king, who was expected to make a triumphant entry with the Duke of Burgundy, to whom he had finally become reconciled. They were rudely brought to their senses a few days later, when a new and even more enormous tax was levied on them. In order to

make sure that even the poorest should pay up, Burgundy adopted the simple method of taxing the money itself, so that the *sol paris*, the *denier*, the *blanc* and such small coins all became an automatic tax on every kind of foodstuff. As for the timid and self-indulgent Charles, he took one look at his capital and was so horrified by what he saw that he rode away at full speed and never returned again.

Paris in 1437: "Hunger and misery", says Michelet, "had made of the capital a mere focus of revolting diseases that, as no one could distinguish one from the other, were known simply as the 'Plague'. Charles caught a glimpse of this frightful thing that was still named Paris, was filled with horror and fled. The English made no attempt to return. Both parties kept away as if by a mutual understanding." The town was abandoned to its misery, only the wolves remained faithful. As there was nothing left to eat in the countryside, they entered each evening, maddened by a hunger that turned them into man-eaters. In a single night, in September 1438, fourteen grown people were killed and eaten between Montmartre and the Porte St. Antoine. In spite of the influx of people from the surrounding country, Paris had the appearance of a deserted city. Street upon street of empty houses provided the only available firewood for the freezing and starving population, who tore down doors, window frames, anything inflammable, and set fire to them in great bonfires, around which they danced with a reckless, bestial gaiety until they fell from weakness and lay gazing pitifully at the dying flames.

There have been many speculations on the problem of Villon's double character—of the poet-pimp, of the man of Faith who was at the same time a gangster, of the erudite scholar and professional thief. Few of them take into serious account the extraordinary spectacle of Paris during the first half of the fifteenth century—a spectacle which, for the first and most impressionable years of his life, must have seemed the normal way of life for humanity. It should not be forgotten that, until he was about six years old, Francois Villon belonged to the lowest grade of the plebeian class, the class that took the full impact of the legacy of misery left by the Hundred Years War. The noble, the bourgeois, the ecclesiastic,

might conserve a little comfort, or even a somewhat shameless luxury—according to his rank—but the fate of the little people of the capital was supremely unimportant. They belonged to the bottom of a social scale that was as yet unquestioned, and seem to have existed largely in order to pay taxes. Villon's earliest experience of life, like that of the other children of his class, brought him into intimate contact with starvation, pestilence and death. The hideous spectacle of leprosy—introduced into Paris during the first Crusades—was a normal sight for him. Death was so familiar that it had become a farce, a popular pageant produced in the famous charnel house known as the *Cloître des Innocents*. Human life was of astonishingly little consequence and Authority was the enemy of the poor. The cracking of a few cribs, the outwitting of a rich tradesman, even a murder, must have seemed the merest chicken-feed when seen in relation to the vast tragedy which was playing itself out before eyes to which custom had lent indifference. When death is always near at hand it is logical to profit to the utmost from a life which offers no guarantees of any kind; to profit wildly, madly, oblivious of consequences which can hardly be worse than the immediate consequences of continuing to live.

The artist, even more than other men, is the product of his environment. He is by nature more than normally receptive, influenceable; every sight and sound, especially those seen and heard in childhood, take on a special significance. Everything is vastly important, because even the simplest details of everyday life, when they have been sifted through the filter of the artist's perception, become *more than themselves*. That is to say that small, seemingly insignificant things, once the artist has made them his own, belong to all time, instead of just to the time and place in which they occur.

Viewed in this light, Villon's character is hardly a problem at all. It is one more contradiction in an age of contradictions, thrown into high relief by the added factor of genius. The careers of almost any of the Armagnac captains who followed St. Joan, with their mixture of incredible ferocity and ardent piety, are far more illogical. Villon was driven into crime by circumstances, aided by poverty

and a certain disinclination for honest work. In relation to society his misdeeds were mere assertions of individuality, a matter of getting a litde of one's own back, since Villon's crimes against society could never weigh in the balance against the crimes of society against Villon.

It is not to be supposed for a moment that Villon himself argued in this way. Had he lived today he would probably have done so, but in the fifteenth century much was taken for granted that has since been brought into question. His own revolt could have probably been analysed as a less intellectual and more instinctive feeling that everything was against him. Most poets are more or less ill-adapted to their surroundings and the special circumstances of the time merely widened the inevitable gap and made it almost impossible, not only for poets but for any man of learning and refinement but without fortune, to adapt himself to the social scheme. French society of the fifteenth century was so organised as to make outcasts of its intellectuals—unless they happened at the same time to be skilful flatterers of the great.

The same epoch which produced Villon produced Gilles de Rais, who showed some of the same contradictions of character, exaggerated to the point of monstrosity. He presents one of the most extraordinary psychological problems in history and yet, in his mixture of sincere piety and ferocious cruelty—so inexplicable to the twentieth century—was typical of the *ecorcheurs* and indeed of many ordinary criminals of the time.

This Gilles was born into a position in which his natural tendencies could develop with complete freedom, untrammelled by the limits placed on ordinary people by social sanctions and the pressure of public opinion. He was one of the great feudal lords of France, a Breton with domains which stretched from the Loire to the limits of Poitou, with almost absolute power over every living soul within them. He was an intellectual, an artist, passionately interested in music, in painting and in the theatre. He spoke and wrote Latin with great ease and had considerable learning in many other subjects. Yet he was at the same time a man of action, a brilliant and

courageous soldier. At the age of twenty-five he had been the devoted companion of St. Joan, had ridden at her side, with La Hire and de Richemont, until at last he had seen the Dauphin crowned at Rheims and had received from him, on the day of his coronation, the rank of Marshal.

After the betrayal and death of his leader, he retired to his castle and gave himself up to a taste for occultism. Even as a very young man he had been deeply interested in magic and had consulted many of the old *grimoires* with their strange recipes and formulas, in the hope of evoking demons who would procure for him the science, power and riches for which his vanity craved. News of these strange preoccupations travelled quickly and soon he was surrounded by a host of cunning and obsequious charlatans, who installed themselves in the castle, lived at his expense and assured him that they could help him to discover the philosophers' stone.

It was not long before sinister rumours began to travel the countryside. Children were disappearing, more and more of them, children who took their flocks to pasture and never returned, children who had gone to play in the fields, children left alone for a few minutes in farm or cottage. Soon it became common knowledge that these children had been stolen by agents of the Marshal for some terrible, half-guessed-at purpose. Everyone knew, but no one dared to act. Jean V, Duke of Brittany, either could not or would not interfere, and the state of anarchy in the country was such that for eight years the Marshal was able to commit one of the most terrible list of crimes ever imputed to a single person, with complete impunity.

The children stolen by his agents were brought to the castle and sacrificed with horrible rites and hideous tortures in the attempt to evoke the Devil. At least one hundred and forty boys and girls were immolated in orgies of cruelty—uselessly, since de Rais later admitted that he had never succeeded in forcing the Devil to appear, although several of his assistants claimed to have done so in his absence. His aesthetic sense never deserted him, and the rites were carried out with a sort of tragic beauty, while he himself was sometimes moved to tears by the beauty of some decapitated head, which

he would fondle and dwell upon with the appreciation due to some supreme work of art.

Gilles de Rais' practice of black magic and witchcraft in no way interfered with his more orthodox piety. He divided his adoration between God and the Devil and seems to have seen nothing illogical in his own attitude. He had already murdered a number of children when he founded a perpetual service at Machecoul in memory of the Holy Innocents and for the salvation of his soul. When the Devil refused to appear to him, he believed that God was determined to save him in spite of himself, and seriously considered making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the remission of his sins. Every Easter he received Holy Communion, humbly, among the poor of his domains; and when his judges later informed him that he was a heretic, he was sincerely astonished.

It was only in 1440 that justice began to stir. In spite of the apathy—or, as some say, complicity—of Jean V, powerful forces were moving against him. In that year he made the fatal mistake of violating the right of sanctuary in laying hands on a clerk with whom he had quarrelled. This gave an opening to an old enemy. Jean de Males troit, Bishop of Nantes. The net closed around him at last and he was brought for examination before the Bishop and the Vice-Inquisitor and then committed for trial by the Seneschal of Rennes.

The trial must have been the most dramatic ever seen in France. Hundreds of witnesses were brought against him, and the Court was crowded with weeping, screaming parents, crying out for vengeance. At first de Rais was arrogant, proudly denying the accusations, but later, as the weight of evidence grew heavier and heavier against him, and as he was threatened with torture, he broke down, admitted the whole series of his crimes, and made a public confession.

The confession was so terrible that the whole assistance seemed to be paralysed with horror. The judges were as pale as corpses and a low weeping and moaning accompanied the long avowal. One of the judges rose, apparently with a great effort, and silently veiled the face of the crucifix, so that it should not be sullied with the

awful recital of blasphemies and obscenities which rose from the lips of the prisoner.

Gilles de Rais was given over by his judges to the Civil Power to be burned as a murderer and a heretic. He seemed to welcome the sentence, longing for the fire as a means of purification. He was certain of his own salvation and, shortly before the end, embraced his chief accomplice, Prelati, saying to him: "Farewell, Francois, my friend. We shall not see each other again in this world but be sure that, if you will have patience and trust in God, we shall meet in the great joy of Paradise." He was burned on October 26th, 1440, while a great crowd sang psalms and prayed for the repentant sinner.

De Rais remains the supreme symbol of his time, in the sense that a symbol is the quintessence of the object from which it derives. He was illogical, irresponsible, mystic and ferocious—a product of despair and anarchy which, in essence and without the supreme culmination in crime, was reproduced through the whole strata of early fifteenth-century society, and of which Villon himself was a hardly less extraordinary example.

CHAPTER II

THE MONTGORBIERS THEMSELVES, as we have seen, belonged to that infinitely unimportant multitude of the population of France that existed only in order to make life comfortable for a privileged minority. However, away in Burgundy, the family had prospered rather better and an uncle, or other relation, of Francois, named Guillaume de Villon, had come to Paris as a student, had done well for himself, and was now a member of the powerful religious community of St. Benoit-le-Bestourne. He had been appointed a master in the University schools of the rue St. Jean-de-Beauvais, then, in 1423, had received the benefice of the parish church of Notre-Dame in Gentilly, by which he was entitled to all the corn ground in the local mill. He continued, however, to live in the community, and received from them the house known as "The House of the Red Door"—probably from the sign hanging over the portal, since private houses, like inns, carried hanging signs from which they commonly took their names. He also possessed two other houses—in a bad state of repair, it is true—in the cloister, and was thus a man of some substance.

It was to Maitre Guillaume de Villon that the mother brought her little boy when she could no longer provide for him herself, and from that time on the child had his home in the cloisters and even took his protector's name. This sort of adoption was quite a common thing; the ecclesiastics of St. Benoit and other communities often took children into their establishments and gave them an education

in return for their services as pages, choir-boys, and so on. The arrangement usually worked to everyone's satisfaction and in this case there was the bond of family relationship as well as that of mutual usefulness.

Poor, kind Maitre Guillaume might have been less ready to make the arrangement if he could have foreseen the life which his protégé was to lead him: the anxiety, the humiliating interventions to be made, the fines to be paid, not to mention the shame and distress which it must have caused this respectable priest when he saw his nephew, in spite of all his careful upbringing, going so resolutely to the bad. Meanwhile he took the child into his home and became to all intents and purposes his father. He even earned a rather ironic gratitude, for Villon was later to refer to him as "my more-than-father" and recognise the fact that the good man had fished him out of a prodigious amount of hot water—which was about the nearest to conventional nice feeling to which that fundamentally ungrateful character ever attained.

Life in the cloisters must have made a strange contrast to the noisy, chaotic existence of the Paris he had known. St. Benoit-le-Bestourne was not just an ordinary church, but a village, enclosed in its own walls, living its own life and highly jealous of its rights and privileges. Its clergy lived in a state of perpetual feud with the Chapter of Notre-Dame, which considered itself to be the hierarchical superior of St. Benoit, so that the rivals were constantly suing each other before the ecclesiastical tribunals, for restitution of rights, breach of privilege, and even assault. Little Francois listened to the talk at table, when these dignified priests swelled with indignation at some new villainy committed by those outrageous rogues over at Notre-Dame, took their quarrels to heart, and later avenged himself in his own way on several prominent members of their community.

The quarrels culminated each year on July 11th, the dreaded date on which two of the canons from Notre-Dame regularly arrived to carry out an official visitation of the premises. First they took part in a service at which the clergy of St. Benoit were obliged to sing or

say the responses, then they collected the annual tribute and finally made a tour of inspection to ensure themselves that the cloisters were kept clean and in good repair. One can imagine the stout old priests, Guillaume Gotlin, Thibault de Vitry and their colleagues, their mouths pursed in fussy disapproval, trailing an inquisitory finger over the font or lectern, in the hope of a dusty mark and the occasional for a dignified reproof.

Another burning grievance of St. Benoit was that it was forbidden by Notre-Dame to describe itself as a Chapter. As its priests considered that their whole prestige depended on this title, they consistently defied the order and the result was a continual series of legal actions, leading to an extraordinary amount of ill-will between the two parties, and culminating in 1408 in the imprisonment and excommunication of a Canon who had been proved guilty of the offence. Even Maitre Guillaume found himself, most incongruously, in prison, in the year 1450, for some technical offence concerning the administration of the community.

St. Benoit was loyalist in sentiment, whereas Notre-Dame had tolerated the English a little too easily. The two lawyers who undertook the preparation of the process for the rehabilitation of St. Joan were members of the community, and, since Maitre Guillaume kept good company at his well-provided table, little Francois probably heard long discussions on the political and legal implications of the affair. Indeed, he must have heard much wise and learned conversation during these early years, for Maitre Guillaume was making a fine career in the priesthood and entertained the flower of the society in the neighbourhood. Villon's phenomenal memory enabled him to retain the juridic language he heard from these grave men of law, just as he retained the jargon of the schools and, later, the underworld slang of organised gangsters.

It was a life of strange contrasts. Within the walls of the sheltered and privileged community, the passing of hours and days was marked by the solemn and moving ceremonies of the Church. Three times a day, the fine bell of the Sorbonne tolled out, and all business was suspended while the community, and indeed most of the people

of Paris, bowed their heads and murmured a prayer. The seasons evoked a perpetual pageantry of the Evangiles. Christmas was heralded by the singing, during twelve days, of a

of twelve

verses, so that for twelve whole days the excited children of the town lived in growing anticipation of this most adorable feast of their year. Villon in the "Testament" recalls the growing excitement, the wild impatience as the interminable days slowly diminish and the children "have cried Noel so often that it comes at last".

Then came the Epiphany, with the traditional games which are still played in France today and the cake with the lucky bean which still designates the King of the ceremony. In Lent the whole church was swathed in black and became the House of Death, solemn and awful. There was the distribution of blessed palms on Palm Sunday. The Blessing of the Candles was marked by a grand procession around the cloisters with the priests carrying tall wax candles wound around with spring flowers.

For each of the summer festivals the church floor was strewn with green grasses. On Whit Sunday doves were let loose in the church, to flutter above the heads of the people, while flowers and handfuls of flaming oakum were thrown from the arches, to the singing of the *Veni Creator*. The inimitable poetry of the Catholic Faith permeated the little boy's whole life with its splendour and tenderness, a constant background which was never entirely to fade.

Maitre Guillaume himself attended to his nephew's education, so that he was spared the terrible schools of the day. Villon says that his uncle was gentler with him "than a mother to her nursing child", which shows that he held original ideas far removed from the educational fashion of the time. He taught the child his letters, probably a little arithmetic, and some Latin and grammar. Probably he learned to sing a little, since he was destined for the priesthood. He would have learned to chant the responses, and the hymns of the Church. The "Testament" shows that he was familiar with the popular songs of the day, which the children used to sing together in rounds, delighting in the light, vivacious melodies, which were fast replacing the stiff, heavy compositions and artificial songs in the Dutch style,

which had taken the joy from singing during the previous century. But apart from the usual subjects, Francois became familiar with an endless procession of figures from the Old Testament, from the Gospels and from the rich storehouse of the legends of the saints, all of whom were constantly evoked in this ecclesiastical *milieu*. Then at other times Maitre Guillaume would tell him the classic myths which were in great favour at this period: of Flora, the beautiful Roman courtesan; of Jason and the Golden Fleece; Narcissus, Daedalus, and Proserpine in her infernal palace; of Thais of Athens; of the nymph Echo, whose voice is heard over rivers and valleys, but whose beauty is never seen by human eye; of Alexander the Great and the wise men of Greece and Rome. Their names, distant and recondite, mingle in the poet's verse with the homely names which must have occurred often enough in the conversation at the House of the Red Door: Joan, the good maid of Lorraine; the most-wise Heloise, with Pierre Abelard who had been a master at the University a century earlier; the kings of France; the Popes. the "preux Charlemagne" who was still a living legend to the people of his country. "Where are they, Sovereign Virgin? . . ." cried Villon, when the time came for him to make the bitter but inevitable discovery that all flesh is dust: "But where is last year's snow?"

Inside the walls of St. Benoit were comfort and security, but once outside the gates, dirty, starving, riotous, clamorous Paris offered an infinite variety of spectacle and sensation. Even today, it is impossible to wander in the few remaining quarters of Villon's Paris which the picks and drills of the demolition workers have left untouched without being impressed by the extraordinary feeling of drama which pervades these narrow, turbulent streets. There is still the ancient quarter around St. Severin and St. Julien-le-Pauvre, where the streets are like narrow wells, and there is always a faint perfume of incense hanging in the air, and small churches of infinite grace and dignity rub shoulders with infamous cafes in which half-naked beggars sprawl on the sanded floors and savage battles break out and rage until they exhaust themselves, since the police know better than to intervene. There one can enter straight into the

fifteenth century and taste Paris as it appeared to a curious, sensation-loving child with vagabond instincts, who had been born as part of this seething, primitive mass of the very poor, and felt more at home among it than in the sedate calm of the well-to-do Bourgeoisie.

The small Francois must have slipped away often enough to mingle with the crowd that screeched and bargained in the open market known as the Haberdashers' Gallery, where one could buy clothes of all kinds, both old and new, and the stalls glittered with gold ornaments and precious stones, or were piled high with furs and embroidered cloths. Here the servants of grand ladies forced a passage through the crowd so that their mistresses might examine tiny dolls, dressed with luxury which outdid even their own. Fine young gentlemen haggled over sets of chess and dice. The pickpockets were busy and here and there screams and oaths arose from some unhappy creature who had loosened his fingers an instant from the purse at his side. Their outcries could hardly be heard above the general din, for Paris in those days was above all a deafeningly noisy city. Out in the streets there was such a medley of street cries that it must have been almost impossible to hear oneself speak. Villon—a true Parisian sparrow—could distinguish each one, even from a great distance: "Vinegar! Vinegar!" "Try my fine oranges!" "Old iron, old clothes!" "Hot patties! All hot!" "Fresh almonds!" "Red herrings!" "Bring out your milk-jugs!" each chanted to its traditional melody.

The noise of the street-criers, the rattling of carts over cobbles, the bawdy songs of the students, were drowned by the vociferations of quarrelling women. Villon never tired of listening to their marvellous flow of language. "I I n'est bon bee que de Paris", he was to assert nostalgically in later years. Only the women of Paris know how to talk—and this was the kind of talk he most appreciated. He was fascinated by the sight of the rivals, arms akimbo, screaming their picturesque oaths with a wealth of invention and imagery which were to be found nowhere else in France. The *mechanceti*, the noisy spitefulness of the Parisian women stimulated and excited him. His imagination seized avidly on their shrewish invective—and what shrews these women were!

Michel Menot, a shoemaker who lived at this period, has left a record for posterity and tells us of women with "snakes' tongues whose blow is more terrible than that of a lance! At feasts, for instance, as soon as hunger is assuaged, it is time to eat living flesh. The shrewd gossip will begin: Is there any news from your street?¹ —'No, no news from our street.' But the cunning gossip will not fail to add, 'No news, that is, except that our neighbour did such and such a thing yesterday'. What leeches they are!"

Villon was accustomed to these "leeches" from his early childhood and caught from them a great taste for malicious gossip. There was a little of the male shrew in him, and we shall see that, when he came to write the famous "'Testament", he employed something of their technique.

In the small, compact Paris of the time, everyone knew everyone else—at least by sight or by reputation—in his own quarter. There were certain characters in the neighbourhood of St. Benoit and of the Sorbonne who touched his imagination sharply. There was, for instance, a toothless and horrible old hag, who had once been *La Belle Heaulmiere*, wife of a merchant dealing in fine Italian arms, and a famous beauty whose charms had been tasted by all the noble and wealthy young men of her day. The child Villon heard the old folk mumbling their tales of her beauty and amorous successes; then he turned from them to admire the new beauties: Blanche, the cobbler's wife; Guillamette, the tapestry worker, who had been expelled by her mistress for her immoral conduct; fehanneton, the hat-maker; Katharine the spur-maker, whose haughty indifference drove her lovers to despair. Later, he was to imagine the poor old woman urging these gay young girls to profit from their youth and to give and take pleasure while they could, since they would so soon follow her into old age and hideousness.

One of the spectacles dear to the children of the quarter was that of Maitre fehan Gottard, a worthy chaplain of the Chapel of St. Pierre-et-St. Etienne at Notre-Dame, blundering drunkenly homeward after one of his homeric orgies in his favourite tavern. He was

evidently one of those determined drunkards who want no help from anyone, and was commonly to be *seen*, blundering into doorposts, reeling from side to side of the street, muttering and singing, and oblivious to the jeers and hoots of the spectators. On one occasion Villon had the excitement of seeing him drop like a log in the doorway of a butcher's shop, and lie there, snoring happily, regardless of his surroundings. The lawsuits and scandals which pursued this litigious old reprobate must have provided plenty of gossip for St. Benoit, where any disgrace to the community at Notre-Dame was considered as a personal triumph.

Then there were the theatres—an endless joy to children. The Confraternity of the Passion, which had almost died out during the English occupation, was reviving with the gradual return of peace. On the day of the entry into Paris of Charles VII after his reconciliation with the Duke of Burgundy, its members performed a Mystery in honour of the occasion, and from that time on continued their repertory of religious plays, performed with great solemnity and with a vast number of actors. The various guilds and confraternities also performed their own "Mysteries" and "Moralities" to large audiences, but Villon probably preferred the less serious allegorical dramas played by the *Basoche*—a company formed from the clerks of Parliament and the Law Courts—or the noisy satires, spiced with horseplay, of the *Enfans Sans-Souci*.

Sometimes he may have been lucky enough to meet a procession of the Saturnalia, composed of drunken students, disguised and often wearing animals' heads, led by an elected "bishop" and behaving with the wild, hysterical gaiety—bordering upon orgy—that was typical of the rejoicings of this period. These processions were already declining and were looked upon with great disfavour by respectable citizens and especially—one may feel sure—by the good priests of St. Benoit.

He must have grown agile, like the other children of Paris, in slipping out of the way of the men of the Watch, who—little more than brigands themselves—were ready to ride down anyone who lingered unduly in their way. Sometimes he must have penetrated

into the streets reserved for the gay ladies of Paris: the Abreuvoir Magon, rue Tiron, rue Chapon, rue Pavée and other districts. Here, under the protection of the Provost de Lore—who took more than a legal interest in these pretty creatures—they lived a life of riotous ease, dressing in finery which the wife of any rich bourgeois might have envied, drinking and making merry in the taverns from morning till night and wandering, in spite of the laws which prescribed the roads where they might assemble and be hired, in any district which took their fancy. We shall hear more of some of these ladies later on, since Villon's connection with them was to be close and intimate. In 1446 a new Act put an end to their care-free existence, forbidding them to wear insets of miniver in their gowns, cloaks of squirrel fur or turned-over collars such as were fashionable in more respectable circles. Their silver belts were confiscated and sold for the King's coffers, and they were closely confined, on threat of fines and imprisonment, to their own quarters. Their heyday corresponded to Villon's childhood.

And above all, there were the attractions of the cemetery of *Les Innocents*, where all fashionable Paris gathered to watch the painting of the great new fresque that was to encircle the cloisters. In it Death was depicted leading his disciples in a weird, capering, grinning dance—the last vestige of the terrible *danse macabre* which had swept like a grisly disease through Paris during the fourteenth century.

At that time—well within living memory—the miseries of daily life had induced this strange form of hysteria. In the midst of an apparent calm, someone would start to dance. His neighbours would seize his hands and join him; their wild contortions affected others; the chain grew longer and longer until it stretched for several miles. It was a chain of madness, wildly dancing, diabolically laughing. It went on and on and when night came the dance still continued. The starved and weakened people, shaken with this terrible dancing madness, could not have stopped if they wished. They danced and danced and danced, and when they dropped from exhaustion their bodies still continued to jerk in the contortions of the rhythm they were no longer able to follow on their feet. Many

continued the frenetic movement until they died of exhaustion and each new outbreak left the street littered with feebly twitching corpses whose limbs seemed to have taken on a sinister life of their own.

The epidemic of dancing madness had passed, but the tradition lingered and coloured to some extent the mentality of the people of Paris. They watched greedily, shuffling among the piles of whitened bones, while the artists painted the terrible chain and the grinning Death at its head. It was a fashionable rendezvous, with death familiar and disregarded among the pleasure-makers. All sorts of small merchants took advantage of the popularity of the place to set up stalls, where they sold books, haberdashery, forged ironwork, and so on. The churchwardens made a profitable sideline out of the sale of sites, but it was considered disrespectful to spread out wares on the tombs, and merchants who persisted in doing so were punished by a fine. To these purely frivolous activities were added the sermons of the wandering friars who counted on the macabre associations of the place to add point to their denunciations and menaces of hell fire, and the patter of the alchemists who hoped to find their audience in a philosophical mood.

On All Saints Day the people flocked to *Les Innocents* from every corner of Paris, and the cemetery resembled nothing more than a fair-ground, with its vast crowd, jostling and quarrelling, kept in some semblance of order by a special service of the Sergeants of the Watch; its stalls selling fragrant-smelling *gaufres*; its acrobats, alchemists and musicians.

One can imagine how tempting was this pulsing, high-pitched life to a child of Villon's temperament and how tame the well-regulated existence of St. Benoit must have seemed in comparison. The gentle, charming poetry of the stones told by Maitre Guillaume were never forgotten, but it was the cruel, noisy life of Paris outside that corresponded most nearly to the complicated, neurotic and adventurous character which was slowly forming and which the cloister influence, though it could set up a conflict which was never to be wholly resolved, could do nothing to check.

CHAPTER III

FRANCOIS VILLON became a student in the University of Paris at the tender age of twelve. He could read and write and knew the elements of Latin grammar, and that was enough to secure his entry to the Faculty of Arts, which served largely as a sort of preparatory school to the superior Faculties of Theology, Law and Medicine.

The University of Paris, grouped round the Mont Ste. Genevieve, was divided into a number of residential colleges, of which the Sorbonne was the chief, and into four "Nations"—France, Picardy, Normandy and Germany, this latter replacing the "English Nation" which reminded the French too unpleasantly of the occupation of their capital. Like St. Benoit, but on a larger scale, the University was a town within a town. The graceful Gothic spires of many churches and convents rose, dominating all the left bank, among the fine lecture halls, the hostels, the great libraries of St. Victor (whose catalogue has been parodied by Rabelais), the Sorbonne and Notre-Dame. Beside these stately buildings which testified to the ancient dignity and traditions of the University there was a great huddle of houses, where lived the university officials, beadles, mace-bearers, messengers, servants and hangers-on of all kinds. Then there were the taverns, whose hosts grew rich on the enormous thirsts which seem to have been common to professors and students, to priests and laymen; and then the multitudinous shops of those engaged in academic trades—the parchment-makers, binders, writers, copyists,

booksellers, illuminers, and so on. Every person who lived in the precincts came automatically under the control of the University and was subject to its somewhat sporadic discipline.

The University of Paris had long been the intellectual capital of Christendom, to which ardent young men were used to set out on foot from all the countries of Europe, drawn by the fame of its learning and the reputation of certain great professors. Aquinas, Abelard and Albert the Great had lectured from its forums, and the best intellects of mediaeval times had been drawn to Paris by the fame of its studies in philosophy and theology, but by the time that Villon arrived in the Faculty of Arts the University had fallen into a sad decadence.

There were more students than ever—far more, indeed, than the authorities could properly cope with—but the quality was by no means up to the standard of the great days of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The social life of France had disintegrated into chaos during the latter part of the Hundred Years War, and the University had been engulfed as thoroughly as any other institution. A great number of the students lived in extreme poverty, so that they were more in the condition of beggars than of men of learning. It was still the custom for students to travel on foot from their homes, or to wander from one University to another in the hope of studying under some professor whose reputation attracted them particularly. After the long and often dangerous journey on the brigand-infested roads, they often arrived penniless and starving in the capital. Once there, they had to live as best they could. Charitable masters often came to the help of those hailing from the same province as themselves; those who could find no protector in Paris begged or earned their living by copying, sweeping, collecting rubbish or acting as college servants. Many of them, who had not the force of character or the energy to earn their meals as well as learning their lessons, simply roamed about the town, picking up bad companions and giving the University such a bad name that "student" had become more or less synonymous with rogue and vagabond.

The situation of the students of Paris appears all the more incon-

gruous when one remembers that all of them, scholars, "clerks" and professors, by the mere fact of their inscription at the University, became members of the clerical world, which—enormous and ill-defined as it was at this time—included practically everyone who was engaged in any kind of intellectual profession. Even the youngest and most unruly student had the right to be judged by ecclesiastic law and could no longer be touched by the lay authorities. Upon graduating they received the tonsure and became "clerks" who, in theory, dedicated their lives to the cult of God, although they did not take on the full obligations of the priesthood, and were not, by this time, obliged to remain celibate. Their immunity from the law had long ago inspired the regular underworld of Paris with the bright idea that any barber can cut a tonsure, so that Paris was full of false graduates, who had certainly never been inside the walls of a lecture-hall and could probably not even sign their own names. They mingled with the real graduates and students, indistinguishable from them in conduct and appearance, drinking, gambling, running after women and playing outrageous practical jokes. At night the whole band would sally forth, armed with sticks and daggers, bent on mischief, and would frequently end the evening's celebrations by a bloody clash with the Watch.

The Civil Arm raged impotently against this state of affairs, while the University, as a State within a State, guarded its privileges with watchful jealousy. Clashes were frequent. From time to time, the Civil Power, goaded beyond endurance, arrested some student for theft, brawling or other crime. The response of the University was to go on strike, stopping all lectures and—a trump card in their hand—suspending all sermons throughout the churches of Paris. The University always won.

Although the students leagued together in baiting the Civil Power, they varied the sport by terrible rivalries among themselves. A contemporary chronicler, Jacques de Vitry, tells of the frequent battles between "Nations": "Because of the differences of their homes they disagree, are envious and insulting, and without shame offer each other much insult and contumely, saying that the English are

drunkards and have tails; that the French are proud, soft and womanish; the Germans mad and indecent in their feasting; the Normans stupid and boastful; the Picards traitors and fair-weather friends. Those who come from Burgundy they hold to be brutish and slow, and thinking the Bretons fickle and unstable, they often throw the death of Arthur in their faces. The Lombards they call avaricious, full of malice and unwarlike; the Romans given to sedition, violent people who bite their nails; the Sicilians tyrannical and cruel; the men of Brabant men of blood, incendiaries, freebooters and robbers; the Flemings wasteful, prodigal, given over to feasting and soft as butter. And because of such wrangling they often proceed from words to blows."

This riotous, disorderly life of the University during the first half of the fifteenth century corresponded, strangely enough, with an extraordinary thirst for knowledge which was spreading through all classes of society. The very fact of their intense material distress seemed to give the people of France an ardent longing to acquire the art of reading as a means of escape. Where manuscripts had hitherto been closely guarded within the walls of the convents, and learning confined to a single caste, a new popular literature was growing up. The "Romance of the Rose"—which Villon admired passionately—had enthralled what was, for those days, an immense public. The translation into French of the "Imitation of Christ" had an even more profound effect, for it seemed to open up a whole new world of consolation. If such comfort, argued the people, could be found in books, if the written page could bring peace and serenity to suffering mankind, then scholars must be blessed above all other men. So the few who could read, read aloud to avid audiences, while anyone who could write was in constant demand, and it was no longer he who boasted the floweriest hand who was most popular, but he who could write most quickly. Manuscripts were copied and recopied, passed from hand to hand and spelt over with pain and joy by quite simple people whose fathers could not have signed their own names. Villon himself, whose parents, as we know, were unlettered, was one of this new generation. Although he tells us that he was not a great

reader, he possessed a number of manuscript books, which he had either copied out himself or persuaded or bribed professional writers to copy for him.

This new interest in reading explains why the students of Paris were tolerated, and even respected, in spite of their abominable conduct, and why the crowd so often took their part against the Watch. It represented a mystery, infinitely desirable—the mystery of knowledge.

It was still the age of symbols, when a man was considered not only for what he was, but for what he stood for. No one had yet suggested that a king was a man like other men; monks and priests, although their lives were often an open scandal, remained the representatives of God's Church on earth; and in the same way, a scholar was a man who had an insight into things which remained hidden to the common herd, and who was thus absolved, to some extent, from a close adherence to the normal rules of society.

By the time Villon entered the Faculty of Arts, the patience of the authorities—and perhaps even of the townspeople—was wearing rather thin, and there had been some effort at tightening up University discipline. A curfew had been imposed and the Arts students were locked up at night in the College buildings or in their hostels, where they slept and ate with their masters, who conducted them to their classes and back again. They had to wear a long gown and flat cap, and received instructions to walk decently, with eyes downcast and thumbs tucked into their belts, and to answer with modesty and decency when spoken to.

Villon, because he was one of the few students who slept in his own home, remained immune from this sudden severity. He could come and go as he liked and, outside the lecture-halls, the University had little control over him. This liberty automatically brought him into contact with the wildest elements among the students—those who played truant and rebelled against the new regulations. There must have been plenty of them, for liberty had become a tradition of the University and the extreme poverty of most of the students made it impossible to enforce the laws very effectively. They had

become accustomed to spending most of their time in the four thousand wine taverns which flourished in Paris at that time, to transacting all their business, and even to electing the, university examiners, in these taverns or in the even more numerous private wine-shops which abounded in the city; so that it was difficult if not impossible to make them change their habits. The efforts at reform were thoroughly resented. Montague College, for instance, soon became renowned for its strict discipline and austerity, and was consequently looked upon with horror by luckier students from less resolute colleges, who agreed with Rabelais who, some fifty years later, made Ponocrates, sketching out his plan for Gargantua's education, reassure Grandgousier: "Think not that I have placed him in that lowsie college which they call Montague . . . for the Galley-slaves are far better used among the Moores and Tartars, the murtherers in the criminal dungeon, yea the very dogges in your House, than are the poor wretched Students in the aforesaid College."

Villon, then, came and went as he liked. He would probably not have dared to play truant too often from the lecture-halls, but he must have found plenty of opportunity of slipping into a tavern on the way from St. Benoit to the rue de la Fouarre, of sponging a pot of wine and—all too soon—of paying hasty attentions to the lazy, good-natured trollops who lay in wait for precocious young students. Drinking was one of the major occupations of the citizens of Paris at this time, and besides the regular taverns, most of the small shops—the cobblers, the bakers, the glove-makers, and so on—sold wine privately. It is not surprising therefore that Villon formed an early taste for a terrifying drink called hypocras, which was exceedingly popular at the time and of which he regularly consumed enormous quantities. It was made from the following recipe: "Take half a pound of fine cinnamon; one pound of fine sugar; one ounce of white ginger; one part of cloves, mace and nutmeg; and one part of black pepper—all these spices to be hot and full. Grind them together and add them to hot wine. . . ." One can imagine the effects of copious

draughts of this concoction on a hot-blooded young man, well inclined by nature towards every kind of dissipation.

If Villon needed any introduction to the joys of tavern life, Regnier de Montigny was there to provide it. This young man was three years older than Villon and a nephew of Etienne de Montigny, one of the Canons of St. Benoit and a friend of Maitre Guillaume. He had played with the small Francois in the cloisters while the two priests held grave and learned conversation together, so it was natural that the elder boy should be put in charge of a new student, and inevitable—as we shall see—that he should become his evil genius.

Regnier was the younger son of a family of nobles, who had been dispossessed and ruined by the Duke of Burgundy for their loyalty to the Dauphin. He had charm, the glamour of a great name, and was as wild as a hawk. Through him, Villon met another student, named Colin le Cayeux, the son of a Parisian blacksmith, and the three soon became inseparable.

At first their exploits consisted mainly of practical jokes and of illegal picnics beyond the walls of the city. Once outside the gates, the town gave way abruptly to a rich countryside, with farms and vineyards, and here vagabond students loved to wander, accompanied by young girls as lawless as themselves, stealing grapes and fruit as they went, and dining deliciously off duck poached from the moat which ran below the walls. Soon, however, Villon learned from his new friends lessons more dangerous than poaching, notably the art of gambling with loaded dice and subtle methods of cheating at cards. When the wine-shops refused credit, it was always possible to lure some simple soul into a game of *marelle* or *glic* and to emerge with sufficient funds for an orgy of hypocras. Then, as time went on, other doubtful characters joined them, and soon they became the centre of a band that comprised most of the riff-raff from the Faculty of Arts and a good many queer characters who belonged to no faculty at all.

As a natural rebel, Villon found the stiff, pedantic atmosphere of the University almost unbearable. The students of his Faculty were

expected to study grammar, rhetoric and dialectic (Trivium), and arithmetic, music, geometry and astronomy (Quadrivium). The students sat on the ground in cold, forbidding lecture-halls, at the feet of the master, who spoke from a small, raised dais, explaining the books which had to be mastered for the first examination, or *Baccalauriat*. As most of the students were too poor to buy books, the whole matter had to be dictated. This dictation took up the greater part of the hours devoted to study, and it was followed by questions and disputes in which both masters and students took part. To Villon, whose excellent memory must have made most of the proceedings superfluous, the whole business appeared unbearably wearisome, and he was later to take a savage delight in parodying the solemn jargon of learning with which his masters—many of whom were little more than youths themselves—sought to impress their audience.

The level of real learning had decreased disastrously and the professors were mainly inferior scholars who made up for the gaps in their own knowledge by an insufferable pomposity and masked the poverty of their ideas under a verbosity which made their classes as incomprehensible as they were boring. Its leading light at this time was a certain Thomas de Courcelles, pedantic, hypocritical and conceited to the point of megalomania. He had been one of the judges of St. Joan and had constantly vociferated his horror at her lack of respect for qualified authorities, such as himself. He had been the first to demand that she should be submitted to the Question by torture and had shown such ruthlessness that even some of his colleagues had been a little doubtful about his conduct of the case. Yet this was the man who was later chosen by the University to preach the funeral oration at the burial of Charles VII.

The vanity of the University doctors was extremely susceptible, as may be judged from an event which, occurring in 1445, shortly after Villon's inscription as a student, threw the whole Professoriat into such a turmoil as had not been experienced in living memory. A young Spaniard named Maitre Fernand suddenly arrived in Paris from his native Cordova and announced with simple grandeur

that he knew *everything* and could beat any master of the University in discussion. This public statement was evidently considered as a mortal insult, for the whole matter was discussed with extreme seriousness and Maitre Fernand was challenged to prove his boast immediately. As anyone might have guessed, he was next heard of well out of Paris and riding hard for Spain. Thereupon the University arose in its wounded pride and—not, apparently, having yet rendered itself sufficiently ridiculous—demanded that Maitre Fernand should be returned to them by force so that his awful accusation might be disproved in the-eyes of the world. It is hardly surprising that the cynical Villon had little respect for these tiresome old windbags.

A few of these masters did have great prestige among their students—though the great days of Abelard or Buridan, when the students formed a group of devoted disciples around a loved and revered master, were over for ever—but the majority of them did little to deserve even the precarious authority they enjoyed. They were notably suspected of being open to bribery and receiving tips from rich dullards who had little chance of passing their examinations by ordinary means. Some of them charitably received into their houses young students from their own provinces who were without means, and fed and clothed them at their own expense; but others were not above making a profit out of the money given them to buy food for the scholars in their hostels. Their authority was never very solid. For instance, they were usually obliged to finish their lessons whenever it pleased their audience. When the students felt they had had enough, they would begin to clap and stamp and tap their pens in unison against their writing-tablets; and if the professor tried to ignore these gentle hints, there would arise such an uproar that it would be physically impossible for him to continue.

The first examination consisted of a series of solemn disputes, based chiefly on logic. Aristotle was the darling of the schools at this period and no argument was considered really solid unless it could be supported with some profound quotation from the great philosopher. This was enough to inspire Villon with a deep dislike for the

famous Greek, and at least twice, in later days, he seized the opportunity for a sarcastic comment on his teaching.

Many of the students passed their first examination at the age of fourteen, and the fact that Villon only became a "batchelor" in 1449, when he was eighteen, suggests that he was far from being an industrious worker. In later years he liked to bewail his own idleness—"Ah, God! Had I but studied, in the days of my wild youth!"—but these lamentations were largely poetic. He may have been idle and insubordinate, but his work shows that he had considerable learning, had a good knowledge of Latin and was well versed in the classics, in theology and the old philosophers. Furthermore, he passed both his examinations, at a time when there were more failures than successes. He was evidently one of those fortunate students who are sufficiently brilliant to get good results without having to work for them—which was just as well, considering the very small proportion of his energy which he seems to have reserved for his studies.

In 1451, for instance, we find him instigating a long and complicated practical joke which was to have serious consequences for a number of people. We know that he kept his own record of the affair—his first recorded literary work—since he made a legacy to Maitre Guillaume, in the "Testament" of the *Romaunt du Pet-au-Diable*, composed by himself and copied out by an accomplice, named Guy Tabarie. Unfortunately the manuscript has never been found, so that we have to rely on the accounts of the judicial proceedings which followed the exploit.

It seems that one of the curiosities of Paris at that time was a large stone, of curious shape, commonly and vulgarly known as the *Pet-au-Diable*. It had been set up, at some previous period, just outside a house owned by a certain Madame de Bruyeres, an elderly pious widow who devoted herself, with the aid of a number of devout ladies, to the conversion of women of evil life. This acid and interfering old person disliked noisy, impertinent students and probably made a habit of denouncing their escapades to the authorities. The stone was the pride of her life and it was probably for that

very reason that Villon conceived the idea of stealing it and setting it up on the Mont Ste. Genevieve. This he did, with the aid of a band of his followers, and to the great indignation of the good lady, who consoled herself by procuring a second stone, as like as possible to the first. It was promptly stolen, baptised as *La Vesse*, and set up on top of its predecessor. The students celebrated its capture with wild—and certainly unseemly—rejoicings, dancing and feasting around it and forcing passers-by to pay tribute to the stone, which they endowed with a personality of its own.

This double success was followed by an outbreak of sign-stealing. House signs usually hung from iron bars over the doors and it was a fairly simple matter to unhook them. The students soon had a fine collection and were able to celebrate marriages between such incongruous partners as "The Sow" and "The Bear", using *La Vesse* as an altar.

Meanwhile the lawful proprietors grew more and more outraged as the thefts continued, until finally the City Provost, who would have been only too glad to turn a blind eye, was forced by public opinion to take action. He accordingly assembled his sergeants and set off for the Mont Ste. Genevieve to rescue *Le Pet-au-Diable* and *La Vesse*. The result—as anyone might have foreseen—was a pitched battle, in which a number of students were wounded and one lost his life. The Provost and his men won the day, but it brought them little good, for the University promptly filed a complaint against them, alleging that they had shown unnecessary brutality, and, as they were not immediately compensated, went on strike in the manner which had invariably proved successful in the past.

This time it took nearly a year for them to get their way, and during the whole of that period all courses and lectures at the University were suspended. The Civil Power held out as long as it could, but as the University showed every sign of remaining on strike indefinitely, the Provost was finally sacrificed and, once he was dismissed from his post, the University consented to take up its functions again.

Even so, its triumph was not undiluted. The King had not

forgotten its complacency under the English regime and the disorders of the past few years provided him with a good excuse for a personal intervention which would be in the nature of a slight revenge for the past. He accordingly entered into negotiations with the Pope, who despatched the war-like and insubordinate Cardinal d'Estouteville, who was at that time Legate to France and absentee bishop of half a dozen sees, to attend to the reform of the University. The new measures which he introduced mainly concerned the Faculty of Arts, which had been—as usual—the focal point of the trouble. D'Estouteville created a new Magistrature in the Faculty, with a "Censor" for each of the four Nations, charged with visiting the colleges and hostels and with "examining attentively if the conduct therein conformed with decent behaviour, if all lived in common, if the masters were attentive to the instruction of the young", and so on. The authorities were obliged to accept these restrictions on their liberty with an apparent good grace, but as soon as d'Estouteville's back was turned they began to sabotage his reforms as far as they dared without coming into open conflict with the King, and very soon the Faculty sank back into its old habits.

In the following year, Villon gained his degree of Master-of-Arts and became a clerk with an ecclesiastical grade and the right to a benefice. Maitre Guillaume probably hoped that his troublesome nephew was at last going to settle down to a career in the Church, where he could help him through his own rapidly increasing influence. The good man was doing very well for himself and had recently become the Lord of Malay-le-Roy, an estate which he bought from a family of ruined nobles. Here he exercised full feudal rights over lands, fields, vineyards and villages, and was noted as a very considerable personage. He kept good company, mostly among the priests of the cloister, and a good table at which he entertained the best bourgeois society in Paris. At some point during Francois' boyhood, he had introduced another nephew into his household—a certain Jean Flastrier, a barber from Burgundy. This young man had married a sister of his uncle's friend and disciple, Canon Jean le Due, but had s

leading a life of exemplary piety and venerating his uncle as a saint. That is all that is known of him, but something about these simple facts suggests that he may have been an eternal good example who was constantly being held up to the black sheep of the family.

At any rate, Francois had passed his examination at last, and it looked as though he was safely launched in life. His kind uncle must have assured himself that age and experience would cure many of the boy's faults and that he himself would, in future, be always at hand to steer him in the right channels and keep an eye on his behaviour.

We do not know what happened to upset Maitre Guillaume's plans. Villon seems to have been ready enough to fall in with them. Something went wrong, however; someone more worldly-wise than Maitre Guillaume put a spoke in the wheel and—as was usual in those times—corruption and favouritism had the last word and Villon never got his benefice. Perhaps his sharp tongue got him into trouble, as it was so often to do in the future; perhaps his bad reputation stood in his way, or—even more likely—someone else simply had more influence than his uncle and used it for a protegee of his own. It is probable that those old enemies of Notre-Dame had something to do with it, for in the famous "Testament", in which he methodically paid off the scores of a life-time, he ironically renounces his right to a benefice in favour of "two poor clerks, speaking Latin, peaceful children, causing no trouble, humble, and singing well in the church services". Their names—Guillaume cottin and Thibault de Vitry—are those of two important old Ganons of Notre-Dame.

At any rate, neither then nor at any other time did Villon get the slightest benefit from his degree and nine years of wearisome study left him in the particularly futile and humiliating situation of an unemployed intellectual.

CHAPTER IV

AT THIS POINT it becomes necessary to separate Francois Villon, the man, from the legend which he has become. This is all the more difficult because the legend grew up during his own lifetime, and was quickly fostered by the anonymous, early sixteenth century ballad in honour of his exploits known as *Les Replies Franches de Maitre Francois*

Villon, while soon after his death Rabelais added to the romantic Robin-Hoodish myth by creating the famous character of Panurge, for whom he was popularly supposed to have taken Villon as his model. The Villon of the legend is *un bon foldtre*—that is, a good companion, a great joker, drinker, cheater of the rich and friend of the poor; a gay, romantic character, reckless and a little mad.

We cannot know how much truth there is in the recital of Friar Baulde, but, as the account is contemporary, it is likely to be at least based on fact. It recounts, with a great deal of spirit, how Villon used to manage, by tricks and the use of his sharp wits, to obtain for himself and his companions anything they happened to want but for which they were unable to pay.

Maitre Francois Villon and his companions, recounts Friar Baulde, desired to hold a feast, but having no money made up their minds to eat gratis. Maitre Francois accordingly went to the baker's, declared that he was the butler of a large household, and ordered a large quantity of bread—six or seven dozen loaves. When half of it had been packed up he declared that his master was in a hurry, that he

would take what was ready and return for the rest. A varlet was charged with the tray of loaves and followed him through the town until they arrived at the doorway of a fine, great house. Here Maitre Francois ordered him to put down the bread and to run as fast as he could back to the bakery to fetch the remainder. As soon as the varlet had disappeared, he picked up the tray and went off with more than enough bread for his needs.

The wine for the feast was procured in this way: Maitre Francois took two great wooden casks, filled one of them with water, and went off to the inn called "La Pomme du Pin", of which the host, Robin Turgis, seems to have been an habitual victim of his pranks. There he asked for the best white wine, and saw the empty cask filled with "un tres-bon vin blanc de Baigneux". When the varlet had finished, Maitre Francois put down the two casks side by side and inquired what sort of wine he had been given. On being told that it was Baigneux wine, he pretended to enter into a great rage and insisted that he had asked for a vintage from Beauvine. As he talked and shouted, he skilfully changed the position of the casks, then, ordering the varlet to pour back the wine, he left the cask of water and went off with the second cask filled with wine.

As for the fish: Maitre Francois went to the fishmonger's and bought what he required, then ordered the varlet to carry the fish to his home, where he would pay him on delivery. They set off together, and on the way Maitre Francois stopped at Notre-Dame and, leaving the varlet to stand apart, spoke in private to the priest who was hearing confessions. He told the good man that he had brought his nephew, who was a very irreligious young person and who thought and talked about nothing but money. Francois then went out to the varlet, took the basket with the fish and assured him that the priest would pay him. There follows a play on the words "despacher"—to pay off, and "d6pescher"—to confess. By the time the priest and the varlet had come to understand each other, Francois was well away with the fish. And so on, for the meat and other good things for the feast.

All of this should be taken with a good pinch of salt, and the

bread-trick, at any rate, is lifted without acknowledgement from the adventures of Til Eulenspiegel, which were much in fashion at that time. It is not the details of the various tricks that are important, but the fact that Villon is chosen as the hero of every episode, as a sort of infallible leader who is never at a loss, who plans every *coup* and then carries it out with wit and daring.

Later on, Rabelais was to take up the legend and portray Villon in the guise of Panurge. "Panurge", he says—the picture had become somewhat idealised with the passage of years—"was of middle height, neither too tall, nor too short, and had a somewhat aquiline nose, thin as a razor blade . . . a very gallant man in his person, except that he was rather wanton and that he suffered from a malady which was known at that time as 'lack of money is the sharpest of pains'—at any rate, he knew of sixty-three ways of finding it when he needed it, of which the most honourable and the most common was in the way of a little furtive thieving; an ill-doer, cheater at dice, drunkard, vagabond, scrounger, if there was ever one in Paris; at the same time the best comrade in the world and always ready to play some trick on the sergeants or on the Watch." Then follow the details of all sorts of practical jokes which his hero was supposed to have played on the people of Paris and which are in a direct line—with the usual enormous Rabelaisian exaggerations—from the hoaxes recounted by Friar Baulde. "He was a nursing mother", says Rabelais again, "to those without coin"; his name appears in the writings of many sixteenth-century authors, whenever there is question of the care-free romantic rascals of the past.

How much truth is there in this picture of a reckless, light-hearted story-book hero? My own guess is that it has very little to do with the real Villon. I cannot reconcile the Villon of Friar Baulde with the bitter poet, obsessed by death and the inevitable horror of the body's dissolution, desperately cocking snooks at that which he most feared. I see Francois Villon as a jealous, bitter man, terribly conscious of his physical ugliness, his poverty and his lowly origins. I can see him among the smart, rich young men whom he met through his uncle—the young men who frequented the house of Madame

d'Estouteville, daughter of that Provost de Lore* who had taken such a paternal interest in the gay ladies of the reserved quarter; or through Pierre St. Amand, the wealthy financier who gave him a job for his uncle's sake and sacked him reluctantly when his wife complained that the young man was nothing but a beggar. When he turned from them, it was to the less respectable company of his bosom friend, the dashing young Regnier de Montigny, who was going to the bad as fast as his means would allow him; or to outright toughs like Colin le Cayeux, or men of the Watch, like the ex-bargee Jean le Loup, and the wine-cooper, Casin Cholet, who, like most of their kind, were half police and half crooks and were known and feared throughout Paris for their brutality and venality.

All these young men were either richer, stronger, or more handsome than himself; and for a youth of twenty-one, these are the qualities that count in life. One can imagine that Villon bitterly resented their superiority and compensated himself by proving constantly that he was wilder and more daring than they, that he could drink harder, make love more successfully, and think up more daring schemes for getting the better of the comfortable Bourgeois whom he despised. Not long after, he was to look back nostalgically on these care-free days and mourn for the loss of his gay young friends; "such fine talkers, such fine singers, so pleasant in word and deed"; yet, when he came to write his "Testament", nearly all the "legacies" suggest that he had some grudge against the legatee. Even Regnier de Montigny only got three dogs—purely imaginary ones, too—which he would have found decidedly superfluous in his nomadic existence.

Villon had one great advantage over his friends—he was a poet. He could celebrate their adventures in verse, thus conferring on them a sort of heroic importance; and if they offended him he could, and frequently did, turn them to ridicule in most effectively waspish rhymes. By this talent he made himself respected and it gained for him an immense prestige among the female underworld.

Villon did not aim high so far as his love life was concerned. He enjoyed creeping up the back stairs of bourgeois houses and

trundling servant girls While their masters slept. In the "Testament" he looks back with a wry grin on these ancillary loves:

Item, and to girls of good family
Who have father, mother and home,
By my soul, I give nothing at all,
For I've given it all to their servants.

When the dirty little serving maids palled, there was the vast legion of professional pleasure-givers, Marion the Idol, Big Joan from Brittany, Fat Margot, and so on, who were the close companions of all the dissipated clerks, students, dissolute friars and plain crooks from whom Villon chose his associates; as well as the numberless amateur prostitutes, wives of shop-keepers for the most part, who were ready for any kind of fun with gay young men who had a few *sous* to spend on them.

For these women, to whom reading and writing seemed mysterious arts reserved for the elect few, a poet was something like a magician. When one remembers the tremendous respect for learning which was a feature of the age and had penetrated, by this time, to the lowest strata of society, one can imagine how easy it must have been for Villon to gain an ascendancy over these simple and sensuous creatures. He could turn their names into rhyme in the twinkling of an eye and create for them the illusion of immortality. It was enough to make Marion, fehanne, Isabeau, Rose, and the rest, forget all about the squint eye, the yellow skin, the meagre limbs and the ragged clothes. The poet Villon cut a great figure in his time, and in the eyes of these light ladies it was a distinction to be singled out for his favours.

One suspects that these women satisfied only one side of his nature and that he would have preferred less facile conquests, but the only love which he ever avowed for a woman of virtue and position ended badly enough to convince him that the underworld was the world for him. The lady concerned was a woman of the Bourgeoisie, framed Katharine de Vaucelles, a heartless coquette who

seems to have treated him with extraordinary cruelty. She encouraged his attentions for years, flattered to have a poet for her adorer, and then, after playing with him as long as it suited her, sent him about his business.

Villon riposted with the only arm he possessed, composing a defamatory ballad of extraordinary virulence and mobilising his friends to sing it outside her window. Katharine promptly had him arrested for slander and "blasphemy", with the result that poor Villon was sentenced to be whipped on front of her house by the public executioner. Incidentally, he seems to have made a habit of revenging himself for the slights of his lady-loves by insulting them in verse. There was a certain Rose who was more interested in his money than in his heart, and who received a ballad in which there is a nasty reference to her twisted nose and which Villon confided to his friend Perrinet Marchant with the injunction that, if he met her on his way, he was to address her as "Dirty whore". Denise, too, who has left no other trace behind her, brought an action against him for slander and blasphemy. He was defended, this time, by that mighty drinker fehan Cottard, who probably saved him from disagreeable consequences, since we hear no more of the affair and Villon seems to have had some reason to be grateful to him.

Platonic loves, in which the woman concerned was set on a pedestal and adored from a distance as a sort of divinity, were the fashion of the day. Villon had at least one of these pleasant and harmless adventures. Ambroise d' Estouteville, wife of the Provost, was something of a famous beauty and received, according to a fashionable chronicler of the day, all the "noble and honest persons of Paris" in her salon. It was the mode to be in love with Madame d'Estouteville and to write her plaintive poems, which she received with charming good humour. Villon, who moved in official circles, through his connection with Maitre Guillaume and the de Montignys, frequented the Provost's house, and composed poems in honour of his hostess which must have been infinitely superior to anything produced by the vast number of his richer and more handsome rivals.

Although Villon had learned to conduct himself with grace among people of rank, one must suppose that the frequentation of the brilliant *milieu* of the d'Estoutevilles left a somewhat bitter taste in his mouth. His was not a nature which could have easily accepted the fact that he could not compete, on the material plane, with any of their other guests. He, who never for an instant lost the consciousness of his own poverty, and who resented it so furiously, must have been constantly exasperated by the fine velvet robes, the luxurious furs, grand swathed hats and jewels of the rich young clerks who feted the lovely Ambroise. Yet he continued to visit the house for years, sighing conventionally for the cruelty of his hostess and not forgetting to flatter the Provost. Some day, he foresaw, the friendship of Robert d'Estouteville might be very useful. As he points out, in a ballade which he sent to the Provost for his wife, there are many temptations and tricks of fate in the path of a young man, and none can foresee the future.

There can be no doubt that an important clue to the real Villon is to be found in his relations with women. He frequented, in general, only the lowest type and avoided the fine ladies who would be less easily impressed with bravado. Yet he wrote some of the loveliest poems to women in the French language, heartbreaking in their sadness and longing, and which have kept their freshness and poignancy through the passage of five centuries.

*Fausse beaulte, qui tant me couste cher,
Rude en effet, hypocrite doulceur,
Amour dure plus que fer a mascher:
Nommer te puis de ma deffaçon seur,
Cherme felon, la mort d'un pauvre cœur,
Orgueil musse, qui gens met au mourir,
Teux sans pitie ! . .*

* False beauty, which costs me so dear—Cruel in truth under hypocrite kindness—Love harsher than scrap-iron which I, sure of my destruction, might well call—Wicked charm, death of a poor heart—Hidden pride, that puts men to death—Pitiless eyes! . . .

There is the authentic note of love and suffering, at a time when-amorous **poetry** was still a conventional *jeu d'esprit*, and when sincerity was more or less synonymous with bad taste. Villon has created images which repetition has rendered banal, but which are nevertheless poetic discoveries of pure genius. When he says of his dead mistress "We were two, and had but a single heart" he is saying something about lovers which at that time was as fresh and exciting as a new landscape, and his poems abound in these inventions, which we can take for granted today, but which were revelations at the time when they first appeared in poetry.

Later on, Villon's attitude towards women became more and more tainted with an obsession for revenge. Just because he was so vulnerable to them, so often and so bitterly wounded in love, he liked to gloat over the swift passing of their beauty. He could not, and perhaps did not want to, forget that the lovely girl of today is the old hag of tomorrow. The sight of *La Belle Heaulmiere* must have calmed his spirit like the accomplishment of a personal revenge, and then stimulated him like a sudden reminder of the short time for which he himself might profit from Beauty. He loved frenziedly, as if the disintegration of the tender flesh was proceeding visibly under his eyes.

This extreme awareness of the transitory nature of all mortal things, allied to a certain indifference bred of familiarity, was part of the late Mediaeval period. The whole spectacle of Paris shouted out that death was always at hand; the terrible sermons of the wandering friars, preaching the fifteen signs of the approaching end of the world, pointed the lesson with horrible descriptions of the fate of the human body; the psychosis of death was such that the cemeteries were the favourite place for encounters between the young men of Paris and the thousands of prostitutes who hired themselves out in the city; while the base of the gibbet of Montfaucon, with its grisly load of corpses, was the usual site of midnight picnics.

Villon was exceptional only in the intensity of his reaction. If he had lived at a period nearer our own, it would be safe to assert that he took a perverse pleasure in the idea of the ultimate fate of the

flesh, and that it stimulated him in his amatory exploits. He could thus be classified as suffering from a neurosis well known to psychiatrists. It is rash, however, to apply the jargon of modern psychology to a century during which the sources of men's actions and reactions were so far removed from those of our own time. Especially is it necessary to take into account the Christian tradition which impregnated every aspect of life during the Middle Ages. The religious significance of death, the impermanence of all earthly joys, were conceptions which intimately concerned even the most rebellious of evil-livers. Villon's intense desire to profit from youth and life may well have been the result of a highly mystic nature combined with a complete lack of discipline. At any rate, his ballads show that he was permanently and intensely conscious of sin; while at the same time certain phrases lead one to suspect that this very consciousness lent spice to the pleasure.

The truth is that there were two Francois Villons. One was the dashing, unscrupulous and witty rogue who appeared in public. The other was the disappointed, bitter and tormented poet who slipped away from the gay companions of the taverns and cemeteries, back to the bare little room in the House of the Red Door, to shiver at the thought of death, to weep for unrequited love, and to pray desperately for God's mercy on his soul.

CHAPTER V

IN EVERY MAN'S life there comes some decisive event that launches him upon a path from which there can be no turning back. This event occurred when Villon was twenty-three years old, and turned him from a mere dissipated youngster into an habitual criminal. It should not be forgotten that he had, up to this point in his history, continued to live at St. Benoit and that he was as much at home in the highly respectable society that frequented the House of the Red Door as he was with his own disreputable friends. He had managed, by the exercise of a good deal of skill and subtlety, to keep a foot in each camp, and his good old uncle could still cling to a diminishing hope that he would one day mend his ways. The final break with all that was represented by Maitre Guillaume only came in 1455.

June 5th was the Feast of Corpus Christi. All day the charming ceremonies which marked this solemn feast-day of high summer had transformed the cloister of St. Benoit into a garden of delicious pageantry. The floor of the church had been strewn with green herbs, giving off an exciting bitter-sweet smell as they crushed beneath the feet of the crowd. The lovely offices of the day had been sung in decent order. Then out from the dark church after Vespers had come the long procession of clergy and notables, wearing wreaths of crimson roses, carrying the dais, smothered with roses, streaming with golden ribbons, which sheltered the Host borne by a priest in the finest vestments that the ladies of the parish could weave and

embroider. The crowd followed after, singing and dancing—since this was a popular fete which was half religious ceremony and half an occasion for general rejoicing—while children strewed rose petals in the path of the Sacrament.

Towards evening, Francois Villon, who had been assisting at the ceremony, came to sit and rest on a bench in the rue St. Jacques, just under the church clock. Near him were a priest and a woman, and, although neither of them come into the story and they both disappeared from the scene at an early stage, it seems that the woman may have been an acquaintance of Villon's, that they were in conversation and that she was the original cause of the trouble. At any rate, after a time, they were disturbed by the arrival of a priest named Philippe le Sermoise, or Ghermoye, in company with a clerk named Le Mardi. Le Sermoise seems to have been drunk and in a highly quarrelsome mood. Probably he was an old enemy of Villon's, or else an old friend of the lady, for on catching sight of the young man he cried out, "By God, I have found you !" and, after a heated exchange of words, struck him in the face with his dagger, cutting his lip and marking him with a scar that was to last for the rest of his life,

Villon, snatching up a stone in one hand and holding a dagger in the other, his face streaming with blood, retreated towards the cloister gate. Le Sermoise pursued him, abusing him wildly and threatening him with his dagger. Le Mardi, either to keep the peace or to assist his friend, threw himself at Villon and attempted to disarm him, but at that moment Villon planted his dagger in Le Sermoise's groin and, as he fell, hurled the stone in his face.

From the various testimonies taken at the time of the inquiry, it seems as if Villon had acted throughout in a complete panic. The quarrel had certainly been forced upon him and he had struck in self-defence, but at the same time the killing of a priest was too serious a matter to be lightly explained away. His conscience does not seem to have been perfectly clear in the affair, for he made his escape before Le Mardi had time to call for help, and went straight to a barber to get his wound bandaged. When the barber, in accord-

ance with police orders, made inquiries about the wound, he gave a false name, declaring himself as Michel Mouton, and denounced Le Sermoise.

Meanwhile, the priest had been carried into the cloister and an examiner from the prison of Le Chatelet had arrived to question him. He gave his own version of the affair and named Villon, but next day, after being transported to the Hotel-Dieu and knowing himself to be dying, he admitted that he had been the aggressor in the quarrel and asked for pardon for his assassin.

This affair finally put an end to Villon's equivocal existence, cutting him off from the society to which he naturally belonged and turning him into a professional crook. Instinct—and a fairly close acquaintance with the proceedings of Justice—warned him that it would be better not to wait for an inquiry. Before a warrant could be issued for his arrest he was out of the city and away on the road to the South.

Villon seems to have had the gift of vanishing into thin air, and is thereby as tantalising to posterity as he was to the representatives of the law. We next hear of him at Bourg-la-Reine, hiding in the shop of a barber named Perrot Girard, who, under cover of shaving his clients and performing minor surgical operations, made a more fruitful livelihood as a receiver of stolen goods. In all probability Villon had been recommended to this personage by Colin le Cayeux, the clerk-turned-bandit who, with himself and Regnier de Montigny, had formed a close-bound trio of rogues during the years of law-breaking and dissipation in Paris.

Colin, who was still one of Villon's closest friends, was by now renowned for his disorderly life and for his skill as a *pipeur*—that is, a specialist in gambling with loaded dice. He had already served two terms of imprisonment in the Chatelet, reappears in the prison records in 1456, and was later to end his career on the gallows at Montpipeau. The King's Proctor described him at his final trial—with complete justification—as "a thief, pick-lock, burglar and sacrilegious, an incorrigible criminal", but the most interesting

thing about him was that he was a member of the famous and infamous band known as *La Coquille*.

The *Coquille* was a secret society of criminals, operating in gangs of five hundred to a thousand in the regions of **Burgundy and Champagne**, and around Paris and Orleans. The nucleus of the society was formed from those *ecorcheur*, relics of the plundering Armagnac troops, whose exploits had devastated the countryside during the latter part of the Hundred Years War and the years that followed—a fact which explains why they confined their exploits largely to the Eastern counties, where the business of the gang could be combined with the harrying of the hated Burgundians. They were mostly men of at least middle age, old campaigners who had come through many wars and bore the marks on their bodies. Two of those who were hanged in Dijon at about this time are described as being earless—either having lost their ears in the wars or having had them cut off for minor crimes—and another as one-eyed. There were many nationalities represented among them, since the dregs of every army that had fought on French soil for the last fifty years had remained behind in search of adventure and profit when the main troops had been withdrawn. Among the *Coquillards* taken at Dijon were a number of Gascons, a Spaniard, who was probably a survivor from Villandrando's band of plunderers, an Italian, a Savoyard, and a Scotsman named fehan d'Ecosse, who must have deserted from Montgomery's army at the time of the English occupation. Many of them had followed the Dauphin Louis in his campaign into Switzerland, and had brought back with them an unintelligible patois known as Germania, and from this patois, and from odd words brought from a dozen different lands, grew up a secret language, a sort of thieves jargon known only to themselves and which served both as a means of communication which was incomprehensible to outsiders, and as a password proving membership of the band.

Nearly every one of the great wars which have been fought on French soil—at least up to the eighteenth century—have left behind them a residue of marauding ruffians organised more or less **on the**

same lines as the *Coquilk*; and in every case we find traces in contemporary records of a secret language known only to the member of the band. The "jargon" of the *Coquillards* had much in common with a usual type of thieves slang, traditional in Western Europe. It consisted partly of metaphors, by which objects were described by the name of other, incongruous objects presenting similar characteristics—"ears", for instance, were translated as "handles"; and partly by the use of opposites—the "lover" for the hangman, and so on. Add to this the weird, guttural phrases picked up on the German borders, the patois of the Dauphine and odd words from the various languages originally spoken by recruits of many nationalities—and you get a language so hermetic that it was completely incomprehensible to commentators as far back as the sixteenth century.

These old *icorcheurs* were soon joined by vast numbers of fugitives from justice, work-shy vagrants and plain criminals, who were sworn in as blood brothers of the *Coquilk* and initiated into its language and practices. They maintained among themselves an almost military discipline and an elaborate organisation. They believed in hierarchy and in the system of the division of labour. New recruits were known as *gascdtres* and trained as apprentices, until they were sufficiently skilled to be accepted as "masters", or, if they were especially gifted, they could aspire to the rank of "long" or even to become eventually "king". At the end of his apprenticeship, the *Coquillard* began to specialise. He could become a *vendengeur* and cut purses; a *beffleur* and cheat at cards; *ablanc coulou*, robbing merchants while they lodged at the inns; or *anenvoyeur*, 'sending' his clients into another world.

Each gang kept within its own frontiers and worked under the command of its own leaders, having its agents in Paris or in the large provincial towns, who acted as receivers, melting down and disposing of stolen gold and silver. All the *Coquillards* owed allegiance to a "king", who was the chief of the whole band, with absolute power over his followers, and whose identity was a close secret.

Under his direction the *Coquillards* had succeeded in making the

roads of France so dangerous that it was almost impossible for honest citizens to travel alone or even in small groups. The Burgundy gang was terrorising the citizens of Dijon to such an extent that no decent citizen dared to put his nose out of doors once dark had fallen. The authorities were making themselves ridiculous by their complete powerlessness.

However, in October 1455, shortly after Villon's departure from Paris, the *Coquillards* suffered a heavy defeat at the hands of the law. By some lucky chance, fehan Rabustel, the public prosecutor of Dijon and a terrible enemy of the *Coquillards*, was able to arrest three men, who proved to be the key to the whole Burgundian organisation. They were Regnault Daubourg—outwardly a respectable workman who was a carter in the service of the Duke of Burgundy; a man known as Sunday the Wolf; and a barber named Perronet le Fournier. The first seems to have been a tough old campaigner and all Rabustel's repertory of tortures could get nothing out of him, but The Wolf and Le Fournier were persuaded to turn King's evidence and to denounce their comrades to save their own-skins. Le Fournier was even persuaded to dictate a list of all the principal *Coquillards* in the district, giving a total of seventy-seven names and declaring that at least a thousand of the band were operating in the neighbourhood. Among the names taken down by Rabustels clerk was that of Regnier de Montigny, who had evidently found it prudent to leave Paris and who was consoling himself with an adventurous and profitable stay in Burgundy. He escaped with a whole skin, having been warned in time, and was not destined to hang until a couple of years had passed.

The Public Prosecutor had some difficulty in understanding the -evidence of The Wolf and Le Fournier, owing to the *Coquillard* jargon with which they sprinkled their conversation. They learned enough, however, to carry out a well-timed raid on the brothel of a certain Jacquot de la Mer, which served as the headquarters of the gang. A number of bandits were taken and brought to trial, and the accusation read against them sheds an interesting light on their methods and proceedings.

"The case is thus:" it begins. "For two years there has infested, and still infests, this town of Dijon, a number of idle and vagabond companions who, on their entry and during their stay in the said town, do nothing except eat, drink and squander money at dice, at cards and at other games. Most usually, and especially at night, they hold their assembly in a brothel, where they lead the vile, filthy and dissolute lives of ruffians and scoundrels, often losing and squandering all their money until they have not a single *denier* left. And then, when they have taken all they can from the poor, common prostitutes they frequent in the said brothel, some of them disappear, none knows where, and are absent, some for fifteen days, some for a month, and some for six weeks. And then they return, some on horseback and some afoot, well clothed and harnessed, with plenty of gold and silver, and begin once more, with those who await them or with new arrivals, their habitual games and debauchery. ... It is also a fact, as is affirmed, that some of the said *Coquillards* are pick-locks of coffers, chests and treasuries. Others cheat in the changing of gold or buying of goods. Others make, carry and sell false ingots of gold and false gold chains; others carry and sell false jewels in place of diamonds, rubies and other precious stones. Others lie at an inn with some merchant and rob both him and themselves, passing the booty to a member of theband and then lodging a complaint together with the said merchant. Others play with loaded dice and win all the money of those who play with them. Others practise such skilful tricks at card games that none can win money off them. And, what is worse, most of them are footpads and bandits on the highways, robbers and assassins, and it is presumed that it is this which enables them to lead such a dissolute life."¹⁵

Ten of the twelve arrested *Coquillards* were boiled in oil and hung, Fournier and The Wolf having their sentences commuted in recognition of their services to the prosecution. The authorities of all the neighbouring districts were warned and furnished with lists of the wanted men. A general hunt was up and a number of other *Coquillards* named in Fournier's list were arrested in the following months and suffered the same penalties. Three of them, who had

escaped into the forests which covered a large area of the province, had managed to take with them a considerable booty, but they came to a bad end, in the classic manner of thieves. A quarrel broke out over the distribution and two of the trio decided to rid themselves of the third and increase their own share. They were still dividing the spoil, near the body of their murdered comrade, when they were surprised by the Watch, arrested and hauled off to a speedy trial and execution. However, the gang still continued and was still infesting the district several years later.

Although Colin le Cayeux was hung without it having been officially proved against him that he was a member of the *Coquille*, it is certain that he belonged to the gang—even his name seems to be an allusion. Montigny, as we have seen, was denounced as a *Coquillard*. As for Villon, he refers to himself in the "Testament" as *un jeune coquart*, which may well be a punning reference to the *Coquille*, and he wrote a number of ballads in *Coquillard* jargon, which he could never have learned without being initiated as a member. In one of them he refers to the King of the *Coquille*—although in a somewhat allusive manner—and all of them show that he was well aware of their whereabouts and their methods. The barber of Bourg-la-Reine is known to have acted as a fence for goods stolen by the *Coquillaras*, and it can hardly be just a coincidence that Villon chose his shop as a hiding-place.

The most likely explanation is that Colin, who was in contact with the gang from the region of Orleans, and fled to join them later on, when Paris became too hot to hold him, had furnished his friend with the necessary introductions when he got into trouble. Villon would have made use of these introductions—in the form of a letter, a password, or some symbolic object—on the dangerous roads leading to Bourg-la-Reine, and then in order to contact Perrot Girard. He may not have actually joined the gang at this time, but at least he was in close relation with them. He knew something of their organisation, since they trusted him sufficiently to allow him to live at the barber's and observe their comings and goings, and his knowledge of the jargon seems to date from this period.

While the barber shaved his clients, drew their teeth and bled them for their ailments, other, inavowable clients were drinking and gambling in the back room. Villon, who—like all true Parisians—was lost when he was away from Paris, must have been only too glad of their company. Through them he became acquainted with crime which no longer had the romantic veneer of a students' rag. For the first time he was among professionals, and he seems to have learned from them as quickly and easily as he had learned in earlier and more innocent days from Maitre Guillaume and his masters in the University schools. Besides the jargon, he learned the art of the *crocheteur*, which consisted of a simple and ingenious method of picking locks by means of a piece of bent wire, known as a *rossignol*. He also learned some very skilful ways of cheating at cards, and a good deal about the safe disposal of stolen goods.

It may have been at one of the orgies organised by the *Coquillards* that he met Huguette de Hamel. This lady, who was already forty-five years old, was the Abbess of the Convent of Port Royal, and surely one of the strangest Mother-Superiors in the history of the Church. She was commonly supposed to be the daughter of a dissipated priest, the Abbe de St. Riguier, who had placed her—as was usual with unwanted daughters at the time—in a religious community. She had conducted herself with circumspection, proved that she had the qualities of a leader, and, although there was already some suspicion as regards her private life, had obtained several advancements. She had been put in charge of Port Royal about a year earlier and was still maintaining a certain prudence. Although she was generally suspected of bad conduct, it was difficult to prove anything against her, since she had immense power within her own jurisdiction and a great capacity for deceit outside it. At any rate, she soon ceased to take even elementary precautions and began to live openly with the Convent attorney, Monsieur Baudes. At night she liked to slip away and attend fetes and masked balls, making herself so conspicuous that the soldiers of the region composed a ballad about her, which became a popular song with the half-world and underworld of the region.

A little later a scandal, hastily smothered, revealed that she amused herself by debauching her nuns. A certain Alison, a very young nun in her charge, had been forced into a relationship with Huguette's cousin, who was on a visit to the Convent. A little later she sold the unfortunate girl to her own natural father.

It was a period when the wildest abuses were current in monastic society, when extreme and austere piety existed side by side with an incredible laxness. The Hundred Years War had brought ruin and desolation to the Church in France, and, although the country was gradually returning to some degree of material prosperity, the moral effects upon the clergy were such that they were becoming very largely discredited among the people. Country priests who had led quiet and useful lives among their village flocks had been torn from their parishes and left without any means of livelihood. Many of them had been swept up into the Armagnac armies and later drifted into the company of the *ecorcheurs*, and at least one of the *Coquillards* named by Le Fournier was a priest. Many of the monasteries had been abandoned, their members flying before the menace of the rival and equally terrible armies, so that the fine abbeys which had been one of the glories of France were left to crumble into ruins, either completely deserted or inhabited by a handful of survivors who soon gave up the unequal struggle to live according to the rule of their order. The priests themselves had not escaped the stigma of the times, with their violence, frenzied sensuality and hysterical gaiety. Scandals in the parishes had become so frequent that they were practically taken for granted, and many serious and godly men, considering the situation with deep anxiety, believed that the only remedy was to allow the priests to marry, since, as the poet Alain Chartier pointed out, "To what purpose serves the celibacy of our priests but to turn legitimate generation into adultery and honest cohabitation with one wife into the multiplication of scandalous wantonness?"

It was hard indeed for the people of France to respect their clergy when they so frequently received from them the worst possible example in the open scandal of their private lives, when they saw

bishoprics going for sale to the highest bidder, or rival bishops leading their private armies into battle for some coveted see; or when the Parisians were delighted spectators of the annual *Fete des Fous*, at which priests and others could be seen, in a state of bacchic exaltation, carrying out vulgar and even obscene practical jokes on the very steps of the altar.

Villon's own poems are full of allusions to the highly un-evangelical lives of monks and nuns. Like most of his contemporaries, at this hard and sombre period, he took a strange pleasure in mocking at that which he most venerated. The grinning Death on the walls of *Les Innocents* led away Popes and priests with as little discrimination as other mortals, and nothing he had seen, except perhaps at St. Benoit, could have given him a very high opinion of the ecclesiastical function or led him to make any sharp distinction between professed religious and the laity. Huguette de Hamel, escaping from her ruined convent with its three bullied nuns, would not have struck him as in any way extraordinary.

Neither, apparently, were the ecclesiastical authorities unduly moved by her conduct, since she remained in her office for another fifteen years. Action was finally taken against her in 1469, when she abandoned Port Royal to elope with Maitre Baudes, taking with her all the available funds of the convent. Even then, after a trial which dragged on over two years, she won her case and was re-installed in her functions.

Villon remained in exile, either at Bourg-la-Reine or in hiding at Port Royal, until the end of the year. Meanwhile, his foster-father had been busy in Paris, using all his influence to obtain a pardon for a crime which, after all, had only been committed in self-defence. Villon himself had written twice to the King, putting his case and begging for the royal pardon which would allow him to return home in safety. In fact, he evidently tried to make assurance doubly sure by writing as two separate people—presumably in the idea that the King might grant the request of one even if he refused the other—for two Letters of Remission exist in the criminal records of the day, one made out in the name of Francois des Loges, and the other in that

of Francois Montcorbier, both being dated January 1456, and granted on the grounds that the applicant is a first offender and that Le Sermoise had asked for his pardon as he lay dying. There was nothing now to prevent Villon from returning to Paris as a free man.

CHAPTER VI

MAITRE GUILLAUME, faithful and kind as ever but probably exasperatingly reproachful, was waiting for the exile on his return. The House of the Red Door was still open to him. There he found his own room—bitterly cold in this winter season—and his personal possessions, which he has catalogued for us in the "Testament": a few books, some candles, an inkstand, a table, a few benches, a bed made of a wooden frame stretched over with strips of webbing; some old shoes and clothes, a long coat and a garment consisting of a sort of trousers with a leather sole passing under the foot and taking the place of shoes, which were not usually worn in the house.

The good old priest certainly intended that Francois should find a lasting refuge in this rather austere sanctuary. He must soon have realised that things had gone too far, and that his ward had made a final choice between the respectable, and by now probably disapproving, company of St. Benoit and the counter-attractions provided by Colin, Regnier and Fat Margot.

This fat Margot was, quite simply, a brothel-keeper who provided the chief attraction in her own establishment. Villon had been introduced to her by his friend de Montigny, who frequented her house and had, a little previously, been thrown into the prison of the Chatelet after a bloody battle with the sergeants of the Watch who had called there to arrest him for immoral living, unworthy of a clerk in Minor Orders. She was a coarse, vulgar, good-natured woman, who prospered exceedingly in her trade and had a special

welcome for reprobate students. Her house was a place of rendezvous where they met to drink and dine, and Margot herself was a notorious personality in Paris. Villon, dashing, witty and fantastic, appealed to her robust nature. She took a fancy to him, and presently we find him moving into the house, and beginning, without any apparent scruples, to live on Margot's earnings.

We have seen that Villon's attitude to women was neurotic and incoherent. It seems as if he despised the stupid, greedy creatures whose beds he shared, and yet felt that they were his natural companions—in some way his female counterparts. If his way of life us Margot's companion filled him with mental disgust, he was yet able to observe his own abasement with a sort of savage joy. That most expressive phrase *la nostalgie de la boue* might have been invented expressly for his case.

Villon knew how to make himself useful. He could play the part of the classic pimp, servile to Margot's clients, ever ready to scamper off for a pot of wine, to prepare a meal, detail the charms of his lady and press them to call again whenever they had a mind; then discreet and swift to eclipse himself; and presently avid for the earnings, ready to aim drunken blows at the reluctant lady, to snatch at the little pile of coins before she had time to secrete them, and then, the battle over and settled to the advantage of one or the other, to enjoy a bawdy and half-stupefied reconciliation.

It is not a pleasant picture, and in itself profoundly banal. What is interesting is Villon's attitude to himself in the affair. The "Ballade of Villon and Fat Margot" is untranslatable, but it gives clear, precise details of their common life, without any attempt at poetic arrangement, as if he were watching the whole scene as an impassive spectator. It is a comic episode, to be treated on the model of the old farcical poems of Flanders and the Northern provinces, a great joke, in which he admires himself in his new role. Then comes the contrast of that sudden, moving *envoi* (which gives his own name in acrostic) where he cries out a defiant acceptance of the life that—he seems to insist—he has chosen for himself:

*Vente, gresle, gelle, jay mon pain cuict!
fe suis paillard, la paillarde me duit.
Lequel vault mieux ? Chascun bien s'entresuit,
Lung l' autre vault: c'est a mau chat mau rat.
Ordure amons, ordure nous affuyt;
Nous deffuyons honneur, il nous deffuyt,
En ce bourdeau, ou tenons nostre estat.*

It is not to be supposed that the Margot episode lasted long, or that it had much importance in itself. Villon was soon back at the House of the Red Door, probably delighted with himself for having discovered yet another method of getting those free meals of which he was so fond. It shows, though, how far he was from the days before the death of Philippe le Sermoise when he had belonged first to St. Benoit and only secondly to the *Pomme du Pin* and the Abreuvoir Popin.

Perhaps it was, in some measure and in spite of his kindness and excellent intentions, Maitre Guillaume's own fault. Parents and guardians throughout the centuries have cherished the illusion that, if they keep young people sufficiently short of money, they will at the same time keep them out of mischief. The principle has been regularly disproved, but has never seemed the worse for it. Maitre Guillaume, as we have seen, was a rich and prosperous man, and had introduced his ward into a society where a certain standard of luxury was taken for granted. Yet Villon, as he tells us himself, was little better than a beggar, and was haunted all through his life by the bitter resentment provoked by his poverty. Perhaps if he had been provided with a little more pocket-money, he might have been less inclined to help himself at other people's expense. The immoral earnings of Fat Margot might have attracted him less if he had been able to earn for himself. By this time, however, there was less chance

Wind, hail, frost, I am sure of my bread!—I'm a lecher and the whore pleases me—What is there to choose between us? Little indeed!—One's worth as much as the other: bad cat, bad rat!—We love filth, and filth pursues us—Wer flee from honour, it flees from us—In this brothel where we hold our state.

than ever of an honest job. With his bad reputation, ungovernable tongue and limitless independence of mind, one can hardly imagine him submitting to the dreary routine of a minor clerk in the Treasury. Pierre St. Amand, the most likely of his "connections", had given him one trial and was not likely to repeat the experiment. Anyway, he and his friends had long ago decided that only imbeciles worked for a living.

Villon was not exceptional in this way. There were far too many intellectuals in Paris and too few jobs to go round. There were no social distinctions at the University. Any child with the requisite small store of knowledge could be inscribed and set out on a career which—as his family would not fail to assure him—could lead straight to the highest offices of Church and State, to the post of Provost, of Chancellor, of Bishop of Paris, to the Papacy itself. Nothing in the fifteenth century made it impossible for the humblest little scholar to dream legitimately of the highest honours in the land—except the law of selection. Minor Orders could be a stepping-stone to great things, but they were more often a full stop. The intellectual or near-intellectual professions were hopelessly overcrowded and, after the high hopes which had driven the needy student on through the years of grinding study, were likely to leave him—like Villon—with a useless degree and not a penny in his pocket. It is not really surprising, under these circumstances, that so many of his friends drifted into a life of outlawry.

Colin and Regnier, and probably Villon himself, were members of the powerful brotherhood of the *Coquille* and had served their apprenticeship in the best school of crime in France. A number of clerks in the same situation had gathered around them and soon there was a regular gang in existence. Villon, who had the quickest wits of all of them, was their reconnaissance agent. One of his functions was to go ahead of the others, spy out the land, make himself familiar with the habits of the intended victim, and probably—since he seems to have been the accepted leader—to plan the details of the operation.

It must surely have been Villon who conceived the idea of robbing

the College de Navarre. This college, which had been founded by fehanne de Navarre, wife of Philippe le Bel, was one of the largest and most illustrious in the University, but it was chiefly known, by this time, for the extraordinary disorder of its administration. Although Villon had not been a student there, he was well acquainted with the college and knew a great deal about its internal affairs.

About twenty years earlier, at the time when a great influx of students was begining to flow into the University, a number of doors had been pierced in the walls, to enable non-resident scholars to come and go more easily, while several passages passed from neighbouring houses into the college. During the clean-up of the University which had been instituted just before Villon's admittance into the Faculty of Arts, an order had decreed that these doors should be kept locked and the keys kept by the Master of the College. They were now opened only on the rarest occasions and most of the inhabitants of the college had probably forgotten their existence, Villon, however, knew all about them, and also knew that the community kept its very considerable funds in a coffer in the chapel sacristy.

One night, just before the Christmas of 1456, Villon and a number of his companions met for a gay dinner in the Tavern at the Sign of the Mule, in the rue St. Jacques. There was Guy Tabarie, a clerk and old accomplice of Villon's, he who had copied out the manuscript recounting the heroic episode of the *Pet-au-Diable*; a monk from Picardy, named Dom Nicolas; Petit fehan, a specialist in the art of lock-picking with a *rossignol*; and, of course, the indispensable and incorrigible Colin le Cayeux. After a good meal and plenty of wine, they all repaired to the house of a certain Maitre Robert de St. Simon, where they left their outer clothes and borrowed or stole a ladder. Tabarie, who had been left out of the secret and must have been thoroughly bewildered by the proceedings, was left to keep watch and was able to observe from the window that the other three carried the ladder to the wall of the nearby college, climbed over and disappeared. This happened at about ten o'clock. He

waited for about two hours—certainly in a great state of fright, since he seems to have been an arrant coward—until, at about midnight, Francois, Colin, Nicolas and Petit fehan returned, carrying a small bag containing five hundred gold *ecus*. The three then set about sharing out this sum, setting aside for Tabarie ten *ecus*, which he received together with a promise that he would be immediately killed if he attempted to betray the secret.

That, so far as the thieves were concerned, was the last that was heard of the affair for quite a long time. They had evidently been right to count on the incompetence of the college authorities, for two months went by before the theft was even discovered. On the ninth of March, however, an inquiry was opened and the King's Examiner arrived from the Chatelet to investigate. The coffers were opened and examined, and then a search was made of the rooms of the three masters who kept the keys of the chapel, and of the vestry.

As no clue could be found, nine locksmiths were then brought in, sworn to secrecy and ordered to examine the coffers. They had no difficulty in deciding that the lock of the largest coffer, which contained a smaller coffer, chained and fastened with three locks, had been *crochete*, or picked with a *rossignol*, and that the lock of the robing room had been forced. Various signs suggested that this was the work of people who were familiar with the geography and habits of the college. The investigation would probably have ended there, since the King's Examiner soon gave up hope of discovering the offenders, but unfortunately Guy Tabarie was an incorrigible boaster and talker and had evidently persuaded himself by this time that he had practically led the expedition in person. Villon's treatment of him on the night of the burglary shows that he had a reputation for unreliability, and the fact that he had been allowed to know so much shows that the band were still first irresponsible ex-students, and only secondly professional burglars. At any rate, they must have bitterly regretted letting him even into their half-confidence.

On May 17th, when the whole affair had been almost forgotten, a priest named Pierre Marchant came to the Chatelet and made a statement. He said that shortly after his arrival in Paris from Paray-

le-Monial he had met and dined with a certain Maitre Guy, whose other name was unknown to him. Maitre Guy, after copious draughts of hypocras, had begun to boast of his exploits and of his skill as a *crocheteur*. Marchant, who had heard of the Navarre burglary and seems to have fancied himself considerably as an amateur detective, encouraged him to talk and showed a great interest in the instruments of the trade, asking especial to be shown a *rossignol* pick and learn how it operated. Maitre Guy then explained that he was not carrying any of these tools at the time because, after a highly important exploit, he had thought it better to throw them into the Seine rather than risk having them found on his person. However, he told Marchant of a jeweller named Thibaut, who specialised in forging these tools, and who also melted down stolen silver and gold.

The authorities at the Chatelet listened to Marchant with interest, and seemed to have shared his suspicion that this might provide a trail leading to the perpetrators of the Navarre affair. He continued to frequent Tabarie and, acting under instructions, gave him to understand that he would like to join the band. Tabarie, full of his importance, pointed out several of his companions, then introduced Marchant to them, and finally confided to him their plans for robbing a rich Augustinian friar, named Robert de la Porte. A cousin of Thibaut's, who lodged at the convent, was to take them into his room and disguise them as monks, so that they could circulate freely in the building and take the first opportunity to get into La Porte's room and break open his coffer.

Having got this far, Tabarie's tongue fairly ran away with him and in next to no time Marchant knew that the band had attempted to rob the Church of St. Mathurin but had been foiled by barking dogs; that they had robbed a monk named Brother Guillaume Coiffier, one of the band asking him to accompany him to St. Mathurin in order to say a Mass for his intention, while the others rifled his room and got away with six hundred *ecus* and some silverware; and finally, out came the whole story of the Navarre burglary. After this exchange of confidences, Tabarie and Petit fehan made an appointment with Marchant for the following Monday. The

band had a job in hand for that day and he would be able to make their acquaintance and to inspect the *crochets* in which he took such an interest. For some reason Marchant did not keep this appointment and the affair never came off, owing to the hue-and-cry raised by the outraged Robert de la Porte when he discovered the disappearance of his cherished *ecus*. Tabarie, however, met Marchant shortly after and explained that there was yet a better job in view. An accomplice, named Maitre Francois Villon, had gone to Angers to prepare the ground for the robbing of a rich old monk of that town. Villon was staying with an uncle, who was also a monk, and when he had finished his preparations, he was to return to Paris and then the whole band was to repair together to Angers.

At this point the police stepped in. Tabarie was arrested on June 25th, 1458, questioned and then tortured. He soon admitted everything, compromised all his accomplices and told all he knew about the College de Navarre. As his mother was able to repay part of the money stolen from the College, he was released and disappears from this story, having earned a scathing reference in the "Great Testament". Probably the authorities understood that he was the most ineffectual of gangsters.

Tabarie's denunciation made it impossible for Villon to return to Paris. He had been in Angers since the theft, and had probably gone there partly to be out of the way when inquiries should be made, and partly to escape from an intolerably unhappy love.

*En ce temps que jay dit devant,
Sur le Noel, morte saison,
Lorsque les loups vivent de vent,
Et qu'on se tient en sa maison,
Pour lefrimas, pres du tison,
Me vint le vouloir de briser
La tres-amoureuse prison
Qui souloit mon cueur desbriser.*

*At this time, as I have said—At Christmas, the dead season—When the wolves live on the wind—And one stays at home—To be warm near the fire—Has come to me the desire—To break out of this prison of love—Which has been breaking my heart into fragments.

Before he had left Paris he had written, as a sort of caustic farewell, and because the future was so uncertain, a long poem which is usually known as the "Little Testament", to distinguish it from the "Great Testament", which was composed some five years later. It consists of a sort of introduction, explaining his state of mind on leaving Paris, and then of a series of "legacies" to friends and enemies, which has shed a good deal of light on the good-for-nothings, thieves, poachers and bawds whom he frequented.

The "Testament" should not be taken at its face value. It is full of sly jokes and allusions, of more or less obscene under-meanings and of personal references to which we no longer have the key. For a long time, for instance, commentators have sentimentalised over Villon's good heart, because he left to "three little naked orphans" a small sum to enable them to have a good meal and remember him.

It was only at the beginning of this century that it was discovered that the three little children—Colin Laurens, Girard Gossoyn and fehan Marceau—were in reality three rich old moneylenders with whom Villon had probably had unfortunate professional dealings and on whom he revenged himself in this roundabout, and surely unsatisfactory, manner.

There is a sort of farcical bitterness behind most of Villon's "legacies". Either he leaves luxuries which he certainly never possessed, or else presents his friends with his nail-clippings, old clothes and such unsavoury souvenirs. His uncle gets his "tents and banners", decorated with his coat of arms—a legacy usually made by the chief of a great family to his inheritor. This whole section is really a series of sarcastic references to his own poverty, which show that his share of the five hundred *écus* from the college coffers did not last long.

Then, suddenly, the whole tone changes. Through the icy air comes the slow, rich tolling of the Sorbonne bell sounding for the Angelus. Instantly the deeply religious spirit which is never entirely submersed beneath the surface:

*Finalernent, en escrivant,
Ce soir, seullet, estant en bonne,
Dictant ces laiz et descriptvant,
fe ouys la cloche de Sorbonne
Qui toujours a neuf heures sonne
Le Salut que I Ange predit:
Cy suspendis et cy mys bourne,
Pour prier comme le cueur dit.*

Then, as the last note dies away, memory slides back to the old days at the University, a wave of resentment at the years spent in drudgery and boredom breaks over him and he begins to mock ferociously at the semi-sacred doctrines of Aristotle and at the pretentious language of the masters. Then, finally, the "Testament" comes to an end, for the excellent reason that the ink has frozen, the candle has gone out, and he can write no more. In any case, he has already given away all he has and a great deal he has not, and is ready to start for Angers and a new life.

Finally, while writing—This evening, being alone and in the right spirit—Dictating these legacies and describing—I hear the bell of the Sorbonne—Which always rings at nine o'clock—To tell the greeting brought by the angel—I put my work aside and knelt—To pray as the heart commands.

CHAPTER VII

ANGERS AT THIS period offered many attractions to a young poet. It was one of the loveliest provincial towns of Mediaeval France, abounding in fine churches and cloisters and inhabited by rich and cultivated citizens. At the time of Villon's arrival the charming poet-king Rene, king *in partibus* of the two Sicilies, Duke of Anjou and Lorraine, had established his wandering court in the neighbourhood. With his wife, fehanne-ton, he lived an idyllic life, surrounded by a medley of fews, Moors, Italians and such exotics, who travelled far and wide to procure for him the curiosities, rare manuscripts and fine paintings in which he delighted. He was that rare product, an amateur at once humble and highly cultivated, taking little account of the truly delightful romances and little oil paintings with which he amused himself, but passionately interested in the work of his numerous proteges. He must have been the ideal patron of the arts, since he not only supported a vast number of painters, writers and musicians, but really appreciated their work. His greatest pleasure was to organise lavish fetes and spectacles in honour of the great feasts of the Church, and for these occasions he habitually ordered a new "mystery", or religious play, to be written by some poet in whom he was interested at the time. He was a gentle and passionate mystic, in whom the love of God and the love of beauty mingled until they became one overwhelming emotion.

It may well have been the presence of King Rene that decided Villon's long stay in Angers. If we are to believe Guy Tabarie, he

went there in order to prepare the ground for the projected burglary, but it can hardly have taken him two years to do so. We know that he made several attempts to enter into relations with Rene and that he sent him a number of poems. He seems to have failed to attract the King's attention, however, and does not seem ever to have been invited to the Court or even to have received a present to reward him for his attentions. He may have been so much attracted by the strange, colourful society which was grouped around this Southern king that he decided to persevere until he got what he wanted, or he may have had some other business in Angers of which we know nothing; at any rate, he was still in the town when he received the news of the arrest and avowals of Tabarie.

It was the second piece of bad news that had reached him in Angers. The first concerned his old friend Regnier de Montigny, who had shared so many of his early scrapes and had had so much to do with leading him at an early age from the paths of virtue. About a year earlier Regnier, in company with a certain Nicolas de Launay (who was perhaps that same Dom Nicolas who had taken part in the Navarre burglary), had broken into the church of St. fean-en-Greve, which possessed a valuable chalice. With a speed and hability born of long custom, they had picked the locks of the various cupboards in the sacristy, disdaining a mere pewter chalice and a number of objects of lesser value until they found that for which they were looking. They then took the chalice to the shop of Jacquet le Grand, a clerk who had taken up the profession of jeweller, and required him to melt it down for them. Jacquet, knowing his clients, must have had more than a suspicion that they had not honestly come by the precious and sacred object which they were so anxious for him to render unrecognisable; and any doubts which remained were settled for ever when the clerk from St. fean-en-Greve rushed in to warn him that the chalice had disappeared and that the thieves would possibly bring it to him or some other jeweller for melting.

Jacquet had already started to melt and saw no reason to risk both his skin and his profit, so he said nothing and continued his work.

However, the clerk, or someone else, evidently suspected him, for a perquisition was made, the chalice—or what was left of it—discovered, and he himself arrested. He lost no time in implicating Montigny, who was taken in his turn and thrown into one of the prisons in the Chatelet.

A terrible list of accusations awaited him. He had already paid three visits to the Chatelet and on each occasion had been handed over at the request of the Bishop of Paris and had been allowed to go free on the payment of a fine and a promise to amend his ways. He had been in prison in Tours, in Rouen and in Bordeaux. In spite of the repeated clemency shown to him, he had never shown any sign that he really intended to reform his life. Then, after this long and depressing list of misdeeds, the prosecution charged him with the theft of the chalice and with being *a, pipeur* and incorrigible criminal.

As usual when a clerk was in cause, there arose a politely acrimonious tussle between the Civil and Ecclesiastical powers. The Bishop of Paris claimed that de Montigny had received Minor Orders, was unmarried and wore the robe and tonsure, thus coming undeniably under his jurisdiction. The Council, on the other hand, considered him merely as a dangerous criminal and refused to let him out of their hands. Perhaps the Bishop himself was a little tired of his unruly subject, for he seems to have given in without much of a struggle and on September 9th Montigny was condemned to be hanged and strangled.

As the de Montignys were nobles and most of the family occupied important positions in the administration, the trial caused a considerable scandal. The relations seem to have been divided as to whether to cast out this unsavoury member and try to forget that he had ever existed, or to use all their influence on his behalf and for the honour of the de Montigny reputation. A younger sister, feanne, who was married and shortly expecting her first child, seems to have been the only one who really cared what happened to him. She intervened bravely, pressing her suit as far as the King himself, begging him for mercy and swearing that it would kill both her and her unborn child if her brother were to be hanged. Her parents,

encouraged by her example, came forward with a guarantee that their son had truly repented and was prepared to lead an honest life from thence forward, and the King—moved by feanne's touching despair—granted a Letter of Remission.

Regnier was not to get off too lightly. The Letter stipulated that the sentence was only to be commuted and that he was to spend a year in the lowest dungeon of the Chatelet, feeding on bread and water, and that on his liberation he was to make a pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Jacques de Compostelle and bring back—since nobody trusted poor Regnier very far—a certificate to prove that he had really been there.

This Letter contained a long list of crimes committed all over the country, to which Regnier had confessed and which were to be considered as expiated on the completion of his sentence. However, Council was determined that this time he was not to escape them and, scrutinising the letter carefully, they discovered that it omitted to mention the forging of a number of rings of false gold, which he had committed at one time; nor his varying versions of the chalice affair, to which he had only confessed under torture; nor the murder of a certain Thevenin Pensete at the Sign of the Sheep; and furthermore that the Letter had been issued after sentence had been pronounced, and was thus invalid. Finally the original sentence was confirmed by Parliament and de Montigny was hanged, on September 15 th, at Montfaucon.

His end must have given a profound shock to Villon, even though the period in which he lived and the special circles in which he moved had accustomed him to the idea of violent death. He had known plenty of bad characters who had finished on the gallows, but Regnier had been his friend from childhood, his initiator and collaborator both in the follies of his student days and in more serious breaches of the law. The shadow of the gibbet had drawn near and was to threaten him for the rest of his life.

After the disclosure about his own part in the burglary of the College de Navarre, there could be no question of his returning to Paris unless he was ready to run the grave risk of sharing the fate of

de Montigny, He was henceforth to be an exile, for an indefinite period, and with no means of support except his poetic skill.

From this point, Villon's life becomes a tantalising series of disappearances. He turns up here and there, generally traceable through the judicial records of widely scattered towns from Brittany to Poitou; throws off a reference, in the Great Testament, to the nuns of Orleans, the girls of St. Generou, who taught him to speak the Poitou dialect; becomes familiar with the prisons of the Orleanais and pays court to great princes. In between these brief appearances, there are blank periods of which he makes no mention and of which we know nothing at all.

Vagabondage was not at that time the exceptional way of life which it has since become. The conditions of travel meant that anyone who wanted to make a fairly long journey had to make up his mind to a wandering life for a quite considerable period, and during that period to live according to the fortunes of the roads. Travel was difficult, dangerous, and supremely uncomfortable. The inns were scandalously bad, only the luckiest travellers attaining the luxury of a bed, while the rest huddled together on the ground in the kitchen or out in the stables. As they were perpetually overcrowded, the hosts had no need to trouble about pleasing their guests, most of whom, in any case, can hardly have been profitable clients.

Occasionally some rich lord would pass with his equipage, and there would be a great to-do while fine sheets and rich foods were prepared to receive him. Heralds, riding post-haste to deliver important messages to distant places, were distinguished visitors. Otherwise the roads were encumbered by a motley crowd of more or less miserable travellers, exposed to constant hardships and dangers and finding little comfort on the way.

The reputation of some of the great provincial Universities, especially those of Orleans and Montpellier, lured many students out on to the road, where they tramped doggedly, sometimes for many months, risking disease, starvation, and encounters with bandits, until they arrived, in the pitiful condition one can imagine, to sit at the feet of some great professor of law or medicine whose fame

had penetrated to the far corners of France and out beyond her frontiers. These students mingled with the bands of pilgrims who went on their way singing hymns as lustily as their lungs would allow them in order to scare away thieves, thus giving rise to the old French proverb:

*Pelerin qui chante
Larron epouvante.*

These were joined—since company meant security—by individual penitents, who had been forgiven their crimes on condition that they made a pilgrimage to some famous shrine, such as that of St. Jacques de Compostelle or of Notre-Dame de Liesse. Then there were the wandering friars, the sellers of faked indulgences, pedlars, quack doctors hawking universal remedies, beggars covered with terrible "sores" which they had concocted with the aid of a paste made of saffron, flour and blood; gypsies who lived mainly by horse-stealing, and a host of other strange characters. It was quite common for a traveller to strike up an acquaintance with one of the picturesque charlatans who gave themselves out to be alchemists, magicians, or invokers of the Devil. Most of them, like that Prelati who had been the chief accomplice of Gilles de Rais, came from Italy and were on their way to the court of some rich noble, credulous and curious of strong sensations, who was known to take an interest in witchcraft. Most of the great aristocrats of France were an easy prey for these adventurers; several of them were permanently established at the court of King Rene—who saw nothing contradictory in devotion to God and an interest in the Devil—and many others earned a comfortable livelihood as magicians-in-ordinary to the Dukes of Clermont and Alencon. They were not averse to doing a little trade on the journey, and were prepared to sell love-potions, tell fortunes, and generally work a little odd magic for their companions on the road.

In contrast to these gaudy and impressive rogues there were always a goodly number of honest labourers who wandered from town to town in search of employment, settling for a few months wherever they happened to find work and then, when the job came to an end, setting off again to explore new ground. The devastation

of the Hundred Years War had condemned them to this nomadic life and had forced them, in self-protection, into a sort of solidarity which was highly unpopular with their employers and with the authorities in general. They recognised each other by secret signs known only to members of the trade, helped each other on the road, and those who were already established—however impermanently—would help new arrivals to find work, or even lend them money until they were able to earn for themselves. The Freemasons were one of the most important of these clandestine associations and have developed into the powerful brotherhood of modern times, which no longer has anything to do with the building trade.

In fact, all these diverse and curious vagabonds who tramped the roadways of France were mysterious creatures, hermetic and isolated from all who were not of their own company. Few were quite what they seemed. Women who were forced to travel alone usually disguised themselves as men—a custom that provided some very pleasant surprises for their male companions when night fell. Rich men disguised themselves as beggars to pass more safely; thieves wore the travesty of honest merchants. Secret signs and secret languages were the common means of communication. The isolated traveller was in constant danger, but he who could give the right sign at the right moment, or mutter a word which was better than coin in any province from remotest Brittany down to the burning Mediterranean coast, could be sure of powerful protection.

Villon knew the best language of all—that of the *Coquillards*—and had little to fear wherever he might go. A long, hard journey across that once fertile plain of Beauce, which had been devastated by the *ecorcheurs* after the withdrawal of the English, brought him to Moulins. He had begged his way throughout the journey, sleeping in barns and stables and picking up whatever food he could find in **the fields** by the way or which his fellow-travellers would give him **for** charity. He arrived at Moulins exhausted but hopeful, for the pretty little town was a dependency of the castle of Jean II, Duke of **Bourbon**, known as Clermontois. As the family of Montcorbier

came originally from the Bourbonnais, Villon could claim—by stretching a point—that he had some feudal connection with fean. The Duke was only three years older than himself and, like King Rene and so many of the great *seigneurs* of that time, was a great patron of the arts, a friend of Charles d'Orleans, and himself a poet and moralist. His court was frequented by intellectuals from all over France, and this brilliant company spent its time in organising pageants, exchanging witty and learned conversation, and in the study of rare books and manuscripts. It was a younger, more easy-going court than that of King Rene, so that these recondite amusements were varied by hunting, hawking and music.

Villon, hopeful as ever, immediately sent a petition to the Duke, commencing with a tactful reminder of their relationship by addressing him as *le mien Seigneur*. Jean sent him six *ecus* and Villon followed up his success with another begging poem, in which he explains with a charming simplicity that he has spent the six *ecus* on food, that he is now as badly off as ever, and that a prince as rich as Jean would hardly notice the difference. It is hard to believe that the Duke could have resisted this appeal, but at any rate his charity seems to have been quickly exhausted, since Villon was soon off on the road again.

Although he had been disappointed by both King Rene and Duke fean, Villon did not give up hope of finding a generous patron who would enable him to live and work in peace. There remained another powerful protector of the arts, Charles, Duke of Orleans, who was one of the finest mediaeval poets, as well as one of the kindest and most unfortunate of men.

When Villon arrived in Blois to plead with Charles for a pension, the Duke was sixty-three years old. His life had been a long series of frustrations and misfortunes. He had been married at the age of eleven, for political reasons, to Isabelle, daughter of Charles VI and the virgin widow of Richard II of England. She was sixteen at the time, had adored her first husband although her extreme youth had prevented the consummation of the marriage, and made no effort to disguise her distaste for her child bridegroom. A year later,

Charles' father, Louis d'Orleans, was assassinated by order of the Duke of Burgundy and his mother died soon after of a broken heart and of the violence of her rage against his unpunished murderer. The Orleans children grew up in the cult of a revenge which was never to be fulfilled, and the formal reconciliation which had been insisted on by the King only increased their hatred and bitterness.

Charles became a widower at the age of fifteen, when Isabelle died in childbirth. He threw himself into the war against the English, raising the Armagnac army, which he considered as much an instrument of revenge against Burgundy as a national force against Henry. He seems to have been quite unable to control his troops, but distinguished himself by his daring and bravery until, finally, he was made a prisoner by the English during the terrible French defeat at Agincourt.

For a man of Charles' restlessly active temperament, a long captivity must have been almost unendurable. Yet he remained twenty-five years in England, kindly treated, allowed even a certain liberty, but with no outlet whatever for his youthful energy. He saw himself growing fat, heavy and grey, felt his agile spirit sink into a settled melancholy. To the Burgundian ambassadors who visited him he said sadly: "The body is well enough, but how miserable it is to use up the best of my life as a prisoner." Several times he offered his services as a mediator between French and English, but the English rightly suspected that he had above all his own liberation in view, and the only result was to get himself thoroughly distrusted by all parties. When he was at last liberated, as a result of many English reverses, King Charles, who suspected him of plotting with the Burgundians, refused even to meet him.

During his stay in England, Charles had consoled himself with meditation, the transcribing of works of piety, and by writing poetry. The grace, charm and gravity of his nature led him naturally to the composition of the delicious ballads which are among the few mediaeval poems which can be read with pleasure today, and which are a strange mixture of simplicity and formalism, with their graceful personifications of Sorrow, Love, Melancholy, Wisdom, and so on.

Then, after his release, and after a series of unsuccessful campaigns had at last convinced him that he was not cut out to be a romantic knight Or a subtle diplomatist, he finally retired to the castle of Blois, where he had passed the greater part of his childhood. Here he surrounded himself with a considerable court, redecorated the castle, and, renouncing the vanity of ambition, gave himself up to meditation and the delights of poetry.

Villon, arriving dusty, hungry and footsore after the long tramp across the plain of Touraine, must have felt his heart beat with hope at the sight of the massive building where so many poets had found shelter and protection. The castle of Blois was already ancient at this date, but it was not yet the jewel of Renaissance architecture which grew up during the reigns of Louis X I I and Francois I, but rather a simple and solid *chateau-fort*, crowning the little hill which overlooks the wide, serene Loire, and the little grey town huddled around it on the steep slope which runs down to the river. It was the perfect setting for the simple, calm and arcadian life which Charles had contrived for himself and his followers.

The grave, kind old man listened to Villon's request and took him into his household. Here he began a new life which must have seemed an almost staggering contrast to the sordid vagabondage of the previous months. More than eighty persons were in the service of the Duke, receiving stipends, lodgings and silken robes according to their degree. The castle, it is true, was uncomfortable even according to the standards of the day, and even the most distinguished visitors were put to sleep on straw palliasses, while the privilege of sheets and pillow-cases was reserved for Charles alone. The guests at Blois led a rustic life, which must have put a certain strain on those **with** delicate tastes, but Villon, who had never known greater luxury than that of the House of the Red Door, would not be likely to complain. Any deficiency in the bedding would be more than compensated for by the rich and excellent food. The *Repues Franches* reveal to what lengths he was ready to go to get a tasty meal, and **that** he was particular in his tastes, something of a connoisseur in food. He admits frankly to his own greed, speaks in a poem of "the

flesh that all too well we fed", and reveals an immense knowledge and appreciation of all kinds of fine wines. The Duke's table was famous, as much for its food as for the brilliant conversation that accompanied his banquets. His own reputation as a poet drew to the castle the flower of the intelligence of France, and the long meals were accompanied by witty and learned discussions, formal enough to resemble exercises in casuistry, and which usually dealt with the subject of love. Charles considered himself an expert in the matter and while he was in England had written a long poem entitled *LEchiquier d'Amour*, in which he considered love as a game of chess, a polite battle with moves and counter-moves. Poor Villon, who had been so torn and tortured with passion, who had wept for Katharine de Vaucelles, raged with cold fury at the cupidity of that Rose who had preferred a silk purse full of *ofecus* to his own heart, plunged into desperate orgies with Fat Margot, and cursed and insulted Marthe and Denise for their heartlessness, must have goggled with amazement at the unreality of these artificial emotions. Luckily, Charles was no prude, and the stilted disquisitions of his Court were spiced with broad jokes, in which Villon must have felt more able to hold his own.

There was a perpetual coming and going at the Court, since Charles' reputation had spread far beyond the French frontiers. Almost every day brought some new arrival—perhaps only a pedlar, come to spread out his wares in the courtyard and wheedle the fine ladies and the serving maids into buying his pretty frivolities; or a young poet with a ballad in which he hoped to interest the Duke; or an agent from the South with a rare musical instrument to add to his fine collection, or with some massive leather-bound volume dealing with one of the innumerable subjects which engaged his insatiable intellectual curiosity; or some great prince, arriving with all the pomp of his vast retinue to visit his colleague in poetry.

These visitors were often the *elite* of the nation, and always colourful King Rene made a stay at Blois in 1457, quite probably at a time when Villon was in residence, so that he was able to get a closer view of him than he had been able to do at Angers. During this visit the

romantically-minded Rene wrote a long allegoric poem, concerning the adventures of a knight named "Heart" during his courting and conquest of a lady, "Sweet Pity", with his journeys in the "Forest of Long Waiting", over the "River of Tears", accompanied by the usual symbolic figures, Melancholy, Hope, and so on. On another occasion there arrived an extraordinary personage whom Villon came to know intimately. This was Jouvenal Negro, an Italian from Lombardy, who was a professional chess-player and travelled around Europe, stopping at every castle on his way and offering to play against all comers in return for his board and lodging and a fee. Charles, who was passionately devoted to the game, retained Negro in his service over a long period, perhaps even for several years, and played with him every day.

At Blois everyone was a chess-player, just as everyone was a poet. One of the Duke's greatest pleasures was to organise a poetic tournament among his household. He would set a subject—sometimes a proverb, such as "The Frock does not make the Monk", or a theme, such as that by which his courtiers compared the sufferings of lovers to those mortifications endured by certain religious orders after the reforms imposed by St. Francis. Villon took part during his stay in at least one of these tournaments, at which the subject was that of a man dying of thirst near a fountain which he is unable to reach. Among those who competed were the Duke's doctor, Maitre Jean Caillau, his butler, and his physician. Villon's ballade was evidently appreciated by the Duke, for he inscribed it in his own hand in the little parchment-covered book in which he preserved his own poems and those of his servants which pleased him especially.

Villon has referred jokingly to this little volume as "this sacred book". It was kept in the library, where Charles used to work for the greater part of each day. Here he had a wooden writing-desk, with sockets in which to fix candles when dusk began to fall, a foot-warmer to preserve him from the damp chill of the stone floor, and shelves laden with cumbersome volumes, theological treatises, Latin histories, the works of the mystics and medical works. Often he would

take down the little book and he or his scribes would write carefully, in their fine flowery hands, noting poems that were full of intimate jokes and allusions, so that it has something of the flavour of a family album. It is still in existence in the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris.

Charles cared little for hunting or the usual amusements of the time. He was a passionate nature lover and could rhapsodise endlessly in verse over the changing seasons as he observed them from the window of his room in the tower built above the ancient dungeons. It was enough for him to sit looking out over the infinitely lovely landscape, down the broad Loire and over the rich wooded plain with its castles like red splashes against the green. An extensive correspondence with other *poetry-loving seigneurs* throughout France, the collecting of musical instruments and the playing of the harp, constituted the pleasures of this good man who had tasted so early of the futility of human hopes and loves. A calm resignation seems to have replaced the tempestuous passions of his youth. His second wife, Marie de Cleves, must have been a trusted companion rather than a great love, since he had married her at the age of forty-five, when she herself was only fourteen. Marie shared his tastes and was herself a poet of some talent. She often took part in the poetic tournaments and seems to have been a woman of gentle mind and excellent intelligence, but she could hardly have felt a passionate love for her elderly husband.

The Duke had also become exceedingly religious in his old age, and spent a great deal of his fortune on the foundation of pious institutions and in gifts to the Church. His own life followed the pattern of a simple goodness, yet he remained indulgent to his followers and to human weaknesses. When one of his servants, Etienne le Mol, got into trouble he gave him thirteen *livres* and fifteen *ecus* with which "to go and seek for absolution for a certain beating which he gave to a priest from the chapel of the said lord", and he tolerated the eccentricities of the poets, musicians, artists and learned men whom he gathered around him.

It must have needed all his broad-mindedness to put up with Francois Villon, who was dirty, quarrelsome and impertinent. It

is hard to imagine him in the exquisite company of mincing minor poets and flattering courtiers, for after all, however delightful life may have been in this "Kingdom of Indolence", its inhabitants were largely second-rate amateurs who took themselves a little too seriously. Even the good food must have palled after a time, and the regular stipend could not make up for the amenities of town life and the society of his own ill-chosen friends.

Villon was first and last a Parisian. The fields and woods and rivers of Touraine, that "Garden of France" which filled his patron with never-ending delight, merely filled him with an acute boredom. There were no taverns. The famous wines from the castle cellars had to be drunk with decency in a stately dining-hall. He can have had little to say to the company, and must have longed for the good old days when he could drink at the *Pomme du Pin*, in company with Colin, Robin Turgis, Jean the Wolf, bad Friar Baulde and all the rest. Worse still, there were no women, or at least none who were accessible in Villon's sense. He would certainly have been horribly intimidated by the fine ladies who were the companions of Marie de Cleves, while the Duke probably disapproved of his pensioners—running after the serving maids. He must often have dreamed nostalgically of Marion the Idol and her friends, of the bawdy, careless company of the Abreuvoir Popin. He may have been too busy scrounging a living during the hard months of foot-slogging along the roads to feel his homesickness. In the comfort and leisure of the life at Blois, there was plenty of time to taste all the bitterness of exile.

On the whole one can hardly be surprised that Villon's stay in the castle did not last long. We do not know if Charles, outraged by his manners or by some more definite misdemeanour, sent him about his business, or whether he himself could no longer bear the restrictions of polite life. At any rate, he was soon out on the road again—and soon regretted his departure, since he sent a poem to Charles begging him to restore his stipend. There seems to have been a second visit to Blois, probably an attempt to get money from the Duke, but the year of this visit is unknown.

Villon's wanderings are, in any case, a matter of pure guesswork. We know the names of many of the places through which he passed, and some of the events and people connected with them, but nothing of the order in which he visited them. They are like pieces fallen from a jigsaw puzzle, of which the greater part has been lost and which will never be fitted together to make a complete picture.

Only one thing is certain: he was thoroughly disappointed by his attempts to find a permanent patron. Just as the old offender of the twentieth century sometimes cherishes a favourite daydream of a bijou villa in suburbia, with a back garden and a hen-coop, but without ever asking himself whether he would really enjoy the dream life if he ever attained it, so Villon dreamed of a munificent patron who would ensure him a regular pension and a life of ease. The short experience of Blois by no means convinced him that he did not want what he thought he wanted and he continued imperturbably to blame his ill-luck in never coming across the right sort of prince.

In the "Great Testament" he tells the story—perhaps one recounted by Maître Guillaume during his childhood at St. Benoît—of a pirate named Diomedes, who was captured and dragged before the Emperor Alexander to be condemned to death. When Alexander asks him why he had become a robber on the high seas, Diomedes points out that, if he had been as rich as Alexander, he would have had no need to turn to crime for a living. The Emperor, much struck by his argument, pardons the pirate, gives him riches and a fine position in Rome, and is recompensed by finding in him a faithful servant for the rest of his days. If God, Villon concludes, had permitted him to encounter such another merciful Alexander, he too would have mended his ways and renounced the evil life to which necessity had driven him:

*Se Dieu m eust donne rencontre
Ung autre piteux Alexandre,
Qui m' eust faict en bon heur entrer,
Et lors qui m'eust veu condescendre*

*A mal, estre ars et mys en cendre
Juge mefusse de ma voix.
Necessite faict gens mesprendre,
Et faim saillir les loups du boys.*

* If God had let me encounter—Such another merciful Alexander—Who would have put me on the right road—And had then seen me descend to evil ways—I should have judged myself with my own voice to be burned and turned to ashes—It is Necessity that makes men err—And hunger brings the wolves out from the woods.

CHAPTER VIII

VILLON TELLS us in the "Testament" that he was at one time a travelling mercer from Rennes. Actually it seems unlikely that he ever got as far north as Rennes itself, but this town was the headquarters of the Mercers' Guild, which may account for the reference. These pedlars had an evil reputation and their trade was usually a mere cover for less avowable pursuits. They carried packs containing laces, ribbons, trinkets and such cheap finery as would appeal to the vanity of the simple country girls who were their clients. Sometimes they added crudely coloured pictures, writing-tablets, horn inkwells, harp-strings, and such pretty or useful objects. They were generally considered to be affiliated with the *Coquillards*, and two of them were involved in the great trial of Dijon, but the respectable merchants in Rennes either knew or pretended to know nothing, and asked no questions so long as business thrived.

In 1460, then, we find Villon in the region of Orleans, probably with a pedlar's pack on his back and on the look-out for a profitable crib to crack. In the same region—it can hardly have been a coincidence—was his old friend Colin le Cayeux, who was operating with a band of *Coquillards* around Montpipeau, some three kilometres from the town of Orleans. It is surely permissible to suppose that the two of them were engaged in the same operation. If so, it was an unlucky one for both of them, for Colin was hanged in September for a theft committed in the region, and Villon, when summer came, was lying under sentence of death in the prison of Orleans.

His career would have ended at this point if it had not been for a fortunate coincidence. On July 17th, as the poet was awaiting the convenience of the hangman, Charles d'Orleans passed through the town, in company with his Duchess, Marie of Cleves, and their only child and long-awaited heir. Little Marie was three years old at the time, but the people of Orleans, who adored their good old Duke, received her with as much respect and enthusiasm as if she had been a reigning princess. The city made her a present of one thousand pounds. Wherever she passed the children of the town crowded to catch a glimpse of her, so that she was greeted at every step by the cry of "Noel! Noel!" and by the sound of horns blown by heralds to announce her passage to the people. A great ball was given in the courtyard of the ducal palace, which had been spread with a carpet of flowers, and where the great ladies of Orleans danced solemnly with the tiny girl, to the music of tambourines.

Villon, in his prison, must have heard the sound of the rejoicings from the nearby castle. The faint strains of music, the echoes of the happy cries of the populace, meant hope to the condemned man, for it was usual on such occasions for the prisoners to be released. When this was done, they were provided with a *brevet* which allowed them a certain delay in which to apply for and obtain a Letter of Remission, and until the delay had expired the authorities had no right to molest them. Naturally, those who knew that they had little chance of obtaining a remission took care to be well away from the district before the *brevet* expired, so that the release was almost as good as a pardon.

Luckily for Villon, the kindly Duke followed the usual custom and commanded the Governor to unlock the doors of his dungeons. He must have been thoroughly surprised when a poem in honour of his daughter was brought to him from one of the ex-prisoners, and when that ex-prisoner turned out to be his old pensioner and fellow-poet. * The poem itself shows Villon in his most exuberant mood, so

* I am assuming that Villon's first stay at the Chateau de Blois was anterior to his imprisonment in Orleans. There is no proof one way or the other, but it seems the more likely supposition.

delighted at his release that no praise seems too extravagant for the little girl whose arrival has saved his life and whom he addresses—somewhat incongruously—as "work of God, worthy to be praised above all others, doted with all the virtues, both of nature and of intelligence"; praising her "assured carriage" and likening the poor child to wise Cassandra, worthy Judith, chaste Lucretia, and other unsuitable classical or biblical heroines. The poem ends on a characteristic note when, after this wild riot of compliments, Villon suggests to the little Marie that she might like to make use of him as a devoted servitor—i.e. accord him a pension.

Perhaps the suggestion worked, for it seems that Villon made another short stay in Blois. If this is so, the second experience must have been even more unsuccessful than the first, for after a very short interval we hear of Villon in the terrible prison of Meung-sur-Loire under sentence of death, either as a consequence of the theft at Montpipeau or of the theft of a chalice from the church at Baccon, which had been imputed to him.

This time things were really serious and poor Villon lived for months on the very fringe of death. His gaoler was fehan Thibault d'Auxigny, Bishop and feudal lord of Meung, the terror of evil-doers, and indeed of his whole diocese. He was a man of an extraordinary strength of character, rich, noble and miserly, a soul of granite. He was an excellent administrator and a great disciplinarian. During his term of office he made himself thoroughly detested by reforming the various religious houses under his control, putting an end to the pleasant, lazy lives of the monks and insisting on a most uncomfortable adherence to the rules laid down by the founders of their various orders. He incurred the detestation of his priests by meddling in their private lives and putting a stop to those unecclesiastical pleasures which they had come to consider as harmless foibles. His diocese and all its affairs were run like clockwork and his subordinates trembled before him and wished that he had never been born.

For Thibault d'Auxigny, black was black and white was white, and there were no intermediary shades of grey. A criminal was a

public enemy, to be punished with the utmost rigour, and no sentimental humanitarianism was likely to modify the Bishop's treatment of him. One can imagine that, of all the evil-doers in his charge, the irresponsible, bohemian, incorrigible Villon would have been the last to arouse his sympathy. As for Villon, he seems to have nourished a really terrible hatred of Thibault:

*S'il m'a este dur et cruel
Trop plus queje ne le raccompte,
fe vueil que le Dieu eternal
Luy soit doncq' semblable, a ce compte! . . .*

The impertinent charm which had got Villon out of so many scrapes had no effect at all on the Bishop. After being submitted to the Question by water and tortured until he was forced to admit his crime, the poet was locked up in a cold, damp dungeon, where only the feeblest glimmer of light dispelled the total darkness. He was heavily chained, fed on dry bread and water, and left to rot away until the time came for his execution.

There is no doubt that Villon suffered terribly during his confinement and that his health, already undermined by debauchery, was finally destroyed there. As the long days, hardly distinguishable from the nights, dragged by, and the terrible cold from the damp stone walls bit into his bones, and rats and vermin added to the miseries of starvation and immobility, he began to reflect on his past life. . . .

Solitary confinement is known to be an excellent—if drastic—method of bringing a man face to face with himself. The roistering life of Paris had given him little opportunity for introspection. He had lived from day to day, almost from minute to minute, abandoning himself completely to the swiftly changing sensations and emotions of his life. Now there was no respite from the continual contemplation of his own past. With death so near at hand he begins to feel the

* If he has been hard and cruel to me—Even more so than I can tell of—I hope that eternal God—Will treat him in the same way.

bitter regret of a wasted youth and to wonder how that youth can have slipped by so quickly and to so little profit:

*Je plains le temps de ma jeunesse,
Ouquel jay plus qu'autre galle,
Jusqu' a l'entree de vieillesse,
Qui son partement m'a celer:
Il ne s'en est a pied alle,
N'a cheval, hélas! Comment done?
Soudainement s'en est voile,
Et ne m'a laisse quelque don.*

The deep faith, which had never been absent but only dormant in the old days, was completely awakened:

*Je suis pecheur, je le scay bien:
Pourtant ne veult pas Dieu ma mort.*

He seems to be resigned to death, and, in one of his most beautiful poems, written probably in prison, he describes the terrible aspect of the hanged men on that familiar gibbet of Montfaucon, tossed by the wind, "more pecked at by birds than fruit on a garden wall". He must have recalled the careless days when he and his companions used to picnic in company with the ladies of the town near the base of the gibbet, and mock light-heartedly at those poor fools who had not been wide enough to keep out of the hands of the hangman. Now his two best friends, Regnier de Montigny and Colin le Cayeux, had joined the sinister company, and it looked as though he himself would be among them shortly. It no longer seemed funny to be hanged. "Men, do not come here to mock us—But pray to God that

* I mourn for the time of my youth—When I led a wilder life than most—till the entry into **old** age—Which has touched me now—It has not gone off on foot—**Nor** on horseback, alas!—Suddenly it was flown away—And has left nothing behind it.

I am a sinner, as well I know—And yet God does not desire my death.

He absolve us all", he begs, feeling himself already one of the sad brotherhood of the gibbet.

However, a lucky star must have been watching over Villon's fortunes, for, just when things were at their darkest, he was saved by precisely the same sort of coincidence that had delivered him from the prison of Orleans.

Earlier in the year Charles V I I had died and had been succeeded by the intellectually brilliant but cold-hearted and eccentric Dauphin, who now became Louis X I . The new king was an ugly, weak-looking, misshapen little man, with a huge, pendulous Valois nose, who added to his insignificant appearance by his plain, shabby clothes. He had none of the outward graces which make for a popular king, and indeed he seemed to have no special wish to gain the love of his subjects. He had thoroughly middle-class tastes and preferred the society of the bourgeois, with their taste for good food and drink and for coarse jokes, to that of his nobles. His restlessness, and the desire to see for himself what was happening in his realm, kept him constantly on the move, so that he was often to be met with in unexpected and often unsuitable places. An ambassador of France was once deeply shocked to find him breakfasting, after hearing Mass, in a common tavern in the market-place at Tours. His habit of talking so much that no one else could *get* a word in edgeways also did him much disservice, so that it was not for some years that the French perceived that here was the one man who was sufficiently clever and sufficiently ruthless to create a united kingdom of France.

Philip of Burgundy had started by taking the new king under his protection and for some time entertained the illusion that he himself was to be the real ruler. He had begun by organising a series of sumptuous fetes in Paris in honour of the accession, and in the hope of placing Louis under a permanent obligation. Louis, however, soon became heartily bored of the formality of the Court circle, and incontinently broke up the rejoicings by setting off for his beloved city of Tours. It was thus that, by the greatest good luck for Villon, he happened to be passing through Meung on October 20th, 1461.

One can imagine the sour looks of Bishop Thibault when he was

informed that the King wished all the prisoners in his dungeons to be liberated in honour of the occasion. One can be sure that this rigorous formalist saw no reason for letting malefactors escape their just punishment for a charitable whim. However, he was obliged to comply, and even to put a good face on the distasteful affair. The great doors were unlocked, creaked back on their rusty hinges, chains were knocked off legs which had grown almost paralytic from disuse, and the emaciated prisoners, unable to believe in their own joy, crawled out and up into the daylight.

One can picture the little group, dazed with joy and sudden light, weak with their privations but still strong enough to raise a cry of "Noel!" in the passage of the ugly little king whose coming had so unexpectedly delivered them. Villon, who had always been a great loyalist in the tradition of St. Benoit, felt himself transported with gratitude. Nothing he could say was good enough for his deliverer. In the "Testament", which he began to write shortly after his release, he expresses all his devotion, begging God to grant the King the good fortune of Jacob, and the honour and glory of Solomon, and to live as long as Methusalem. He wishes him twelve children—all boys—and that they should be as valiant as Charlemagne and as warlike as Saint Martial. Then he recounts how the good King delivered him "from the hard prison of Meung", and assures him that as long as he lives he will remember him with gratitude.

Villon would certainly not have lingered in Meung, and was probably in a great hurry to remove himself as quickly as possible from the diocese of the implacable Thibault. It is likely that he started off at once on the return journey to Paris, although the Navarre theft was still hanging over his head, and only an unbearable homesickness must have induced him to take the risk.

He probably travelled slowly, since he tells us that he emerged from prison with as little of health as of worldly goods. He must have dragged himself wearily along the roads, probably skirting Orleans, where there was still the matter of the theft from Baccon which had not been finally accounted for; passing perhaps through Bourg-la-Reine, with its memories of Perrot Girard and the profligate

Huguette; and then at last arriving within view of the spires of Paris. He must have been well known in the region and probably met some of his old friends of the *Coquille*, who must have believed him dead and been noisily astonished to come across him, outwardly changed but as full of life as ever, in the very district where he had taken such an active part in their exploits.

By the time he reached Paris the new year had set in. He seems to have gone back—instinctively, perhaps, like a wounded animal to its hole—to the House of the Red Door. Maitre Guillaume was alive and must have made him welcome, since he settled down in his old room and took up life more or less where he had left it.

After five years of exile, Villon found many changes in his beloved town. France was gradually recovering from the devastation of war and Paris was becoming a fitter place for decent people to live in—which means less agreeable for those who were not so decent. Louis XI had already begun to make himself felt, the power of the barons was on the wane and was soon to crumble under new measures towards centralisation. The glorious chaos of Villon's youth had spent itself out, and if students and clerks were still an unruly crowd, they no longer had the unlimited licence of the good old days which had preceded the affair of the *Pet-au-Diable*. In general, life was no longer so easy for law-breakers, for the extensive spy-system which Louis was just beginning to organise for political purposes had the secondary but effective result of keeping a check on crime.

There were tragic gaps, too, in the boisterous, light-hearted band of his old friends. Colin and Regnier, the most intimate of all of them, were rotting on the gallows of Montpipeau and Montfaucon, and the exact details of their end were painfully vivid to him. The ballad written in jargon—which remained incomprehensible for several centuries and has only recently been translated—reveals the cold shiver behind the cheeky humour:

*Coquillards who to Ruel ride,
Mind how you dance when out that way,
Or else you'll leave your hair and hide
Like Colin del' Escaillier.*

*For when the rope's mouth kissed him there
He stuttered out a squawking cry,
He couldn't peel his onion bare
And Master Hangman squeezed it dry.
Keep on the move with nimble feet,
Be on the watch for warning cries,
There's danger stalking on each street,
A comrade's wink can make you wise.
Montigny came there, loud did squeak;
He gurgled there a choking sigh.
The queerest jargon he did speak,
Till Master Hangman squeezed it dry.*

There were other faces missing from the company too. Some of his old friends had prospered, become rich and powerful and altogether too grand to have anything to do with a poor, seedy, ragged gaol-bird. Others had drunk and gambled away everything they had and were wretched beggars who "never saw bread except in the shop windows". Yet others had entered religious orders, such as the Celestins and the Chartreux, where they lived, feasting—at least in Villon's imagination—on fine wines, rich sauces, fish, tarts, flans and eggs cooked in many subtle and delicious ways. But above all, Villon himself was changed. The old, joyous attitude to crime was gone, and the band that still frequented the *Pomme du Pin* and the tavern kept by Grosse Margot no longer appeared to him as the charming gallants of his youth "so pleasant in words and deeds", but as "weak men, without sense—spoiled and of no consequence".

Yet it would be a great mistake to imagine that Villon was now a reformed character in the usual sense of the term. He had come to the conclusion that crime did not pay, but on purely practical grounds. As he puts it, very succinctly, in his "Ballade of Good Advice to Bad Lots": *Ou en va l' acquest, que cuydez? Tout aux tavernes et aux filles*. In other words, ill-gotten gains are soon swallowed up by

* Translated by Lewis Wharton.

women and drink. Yet he had no more inclination towards a respectable life or solid, worthy people than he had had before. The chief change in his attitude was his increased respect for the power of the Law and a feeling that it was not worth while to cross words with Authority. On the other hand, he was as determined as ever to profit to the utmost from life as long as it lasted. "Enjoy everything you can, Villon", he apostrophises himself in a poem which was probably written at this time, and then again he writes of the great kings and mighty ones of the earth, who are all dead, and concludes that it is better to be just the "poor Villon" but alive.

The "Little Testament" or "Lays" was written when Villon was about to make a break with his old life as a clerk and to leave Paris for an indefinite period. The "Great Testament", which he wrote just after his return to Paris, also marks a turning-point—that which came at a time when he believed, very honestly, that he was bidding farewell to a life of crime.

First of all, we must imagine Villon shutting himself up in his room in the House of the Red Door and assuring himself that no one is likely to disturb him. His "clerk", Fremin the Careless—probably some young student who admired his poetry and was proud to do an odd job for him—snores on the bed, waiting until Villon calls on him to write at his dictation. But first the poet gives himself up to meditation. He is thirty years old, and thus considers himself to be at "the entry into old age". His health has been ruined in the dungeons of Meung. He is going bald, losing his eyebrows. Perhaps he is tuberculous, since he tells us that he coughs and "spits white as cotton". He is poorer and more destitute than ever, and—worst of all—he has loved too much and too unwisely, and is now no longer in a state to love at all. Probably he is infected with erysipelas, a disease which was very common at that time, since he describes himself as being *noir et sec*, and the chief symptom of the disease was a blackness and dryness of the skin, as if it had been burned. It is time, he feels, to consider his own end, and to reckon up the past.

He begins by saying just what he thinks of his ex-captor, Bishop Thibault d'Auxigny—since this was a subject never far from his

thoughts or his tongue. Next he expresses his love and gratitude for Louis XI, and then, having freed his mind on these two matters, plunges into the subject which is never far from the heart of any poet: regret for lost and misspent youth. He evokes his life, episode by episode—sees himself as a student, playing truant from the schools instead of following the path which would have led to a comfortable middle-age; spares a thought for his mother, sadly, since he has been the cause of so much grief to her; recollects his wanderings, the hardships and consolations of the last years; then he sees his friends, and the good or ill changes which have come to their fortunes; and then the women who have passed through his life, recalling the pleasure and pain of love. Then, as he begins to tire, he names three executors to this strange will which he is about to make: Robin Turgis, whom we have already met—the tavern-keeper at the *Pomme du Pin* and Villon's constant creditor; Moreau, the baker, and Provins, the pastry-maker: all boon companions of his youth.

Then, with all his past thus fixed in his mind, he calls on his clerk and, recommending his soul to God and his body to the earth—warning the worms that they will find little fat upon it—he begins his curious list of legacies.

This "Great Testament", which is Villon's chief work and into which are incorporated the few ballades and rondels which have survived, is composed in an extraordinary variety of moods, with that capricious and childlike changeableness which was his great charm and his chief weakness. He is tender, ferocious, self-pitying, ironic, or nostalgic, according to the vision of the moment, somersaulting from one emotion to another as the procession of images passes before his eyes. His brain, at this point, is like an attic, into which a disparate medley of objects has been flung, pell-mell, through the course of years. When at last this attic is inspected by its owner, these same objects reappear without any logical sequence, each evoking some fleeting image produced by association. Thirty turbulent years, with their wildly jumbled events, personages, scenes, are tossed into eternity—and we are left to make what we can of them.

When Clement Marot, *valet de chambre* to Francois I, edited the earliest printed edition of Villon's works, he warned the reader in a preface that in order to understand the allusions and full meaning of the "Testament" it would have been necessary to *have* lived in Villon's day and to have known Paris as it was some seventy years earlier. A little later, once the oral tradition of Villon had died away, the "Testament" became practically meaningless, but since then, and especially during the nineteenth century, a number of wise and devoted French scholars have spent the better part of their lives in identifying the men and women whose names pass through this long, intricate poem. Little by little, with the help of the criminal records of the day, they have succeeded in fitting a personality to almost every one of the long list of names, with the personal jokes, allusions, and often inexplicable gifts which Villon attaches to them.

Most of the legatees represent the disreputable side of Villon's acquaintanceship. Most of his gifts are facetious, many ill-natured, and in general they refer to old jokes which must have provoked much sly laughter among the familiar circle of *pipeurs, crocheteurs, tailleurs* and so on, but which today merely afford inexplicable and tantalising glimpses of the queer, exaggerated characters of a late mediaeval underworld that lived under the perpetual shadow of the gibbet.

Friar Baulde, the reprobate priest and companion of his youth, gets a visor-less helmet and two halberds with which to defend his right to the favours of a certain pretty young woman in whom he is interested—for he was famous, in spite of his advanced age, for violent and amorous adventures. Drunken Jehan Cottard, who defended the poet when the outraged Denise accused him of slander and blasphemy, gets one *sou*—which Villon owed to him and was never likely to pay back in real life. Petit Jehan, the *crocheteur*, who was as thirsty as he was skilful in his trade, gets one of those water-pots which beggars wore suspended from their girdles. To an old acquaintance named Jacques James, who had managed to amass a fortune by more or less unavowable means, he leaves as many women as he could wish—so that they may help him run through his money

as quickly as possible. Marion the Idol and Big fehanne—those celebrated courtesans who had consoled his student years—receive the right to keep a School of Love, "where the scholar shall teach the master". perrenet de la Barre, the trusty messenger to whom in earlier days he had confided his amorous correspondence, gets a gift of loaded dice and a pack of cards, with which he would doubtless find a way of winning more consistently than he could have done by submitting meekly to the laws of chance.

But the "Testament" also provides for a different kind of legatee—rich, respectable personages with important official functions, whose mere existence was enough to provoke a savage irony in the poet. They had despised him for his poverty and he—the outcast who had only a cold bare room in which to dictate the gifts of his spirit—was taking an exquisite revenge which must have tasted all the sweeter for the long delay. One must remember that Villon was already a popular poet and that he had a very special audience, as disrespectful of authority as he himself, which adored his poetry and waited delightedly for the couplets which could be so finely roared out over wine-pots in the taverns, or when a riotous band was in the mood to create an uproar in the streets. Within a day or two Madame St. Amant, who had dared to call him a beggar and have him ignominiously dismissed from the Treasury, would hear ribald voices proclaiming beneath her window a couplet which would leave no doubt as to the intimate habits of her husband and her own curious relations with him. Several fine gentlemen would find themselves suddenly objects of ridicule. Michel Jouvenal des Ursins, the representative of one of the richest and most powerful families in Paris, for instance, would hardly appreciate being named a supplementary executor in the same breath as Maitre Jacques James; the wealthy friars at the Carmelite convent would hear a few home truths about their legendary greed, and Katharine de Vaucelles, in her prim bourgeois rectitude, would be reminded that the poet Villon had a long memory and was not to be flouted and humiliated with impunity.

Jacques Coeur, who is mentioned several times, was the richest

man in France, the moneylender of kings; Martin Bellefaye and Michel Jouvenel des Ursins were Councillors to the Parliament of Paris; Guillaume Colombel, a King's Councillor; and so on. Most of these comfortable personages seem to have inspired Villon with the deepest dislike, probably mingled with envy, and the legacies which he accords them show that he wishes them nothing but ill.

In Villon's lifetime, the students of Paris knew the "Testament" by heart and sang and recited it in the streets. Then, half a century later, it became for the people of France a sort of social document, an attack on the rich merchants and moneylenders whom they were just beginning to render responsible for their own miseries. Villon reminded them that death makes all men equal and that the fat merchants and the lean misers would cut a sorry figure once they were under the ground. The great thing, he taught them, was to be alive. The very fact of life conferred an immense superiority, and the most miserable beggar was a better man than a rotting king.

A people who groaned under taxes and oppression listened to this doctrine, recognised its truth and adored the memory of Villon, *le bon folatre*. It did not matter that nothing could have interested him less than these social repercussions of his work, and, indeed, that he might even have disapproved of them. He was destined, in spite of himself, to become a symbol of defiance to authority, yet Villon had that respect for institutions which is sometimes and so incongruously to be met with in the most lawless characters. He was a great patriot—as became a child of St. Benoit, which had remained proudly loyal to the Dauphin when Notre-Dame and the University had truckled, with a fine sense of opportunism, to Burgundy and the English. To the enemies of France he wishes all the ill that could befall traitors: that they should be turned into wild beasts, sold as slaves to the Great Turk, hung by their hair like Absalom, or turned out naked into the desert like Mary Magdalene. He respects authority even while he defies it. There is never any suggestion that he has been ill-used by any particular institution or that he has less regard for Law in the abstract because he happens to be continually in conflict with it. He hates Bishop Thibault, not

for having condemned him to death, but for treating him with more harshness than the law demanded while he was waiting for the execution of the sentence. He consoles himself for the inequalities of fortune by reflecting that Death is a great leveller and will inevitably have the last word.

It should be remembered that, although the Middle Ages were in their death-throes, the modern world was not yet born and men had not yet started to question the rights and wrongs of what still appeared to be a divinely established order. Villon himself was even less likely to occupy himself with revolutionary theories than his contemporaries, for, like most artists, he was a complete egoist. He wrote poetry because he felt like it, not in order to do good to other people. His legacies were his personal reactions to people he had known, and there is nothing symbolic about them. This did not prevent Jehan Thibault of Meung, the officials of the Chatelet, and all the rich representatives of authority who appear in the "Testament" from becoming, in the eyes of a later generation, personifications of injustice and the oppression of the poor.

If the "Testament" has lost its meaning, except as a curiosity and for the light it sheds on Villon's own life, the poems and ballads which are scattered among its clauses will be an endless delight as long as poetry is read. They have been collected by many scholars and arranged in various ways, since Villon himself scattered them prodigally among his friends and certainly did not include them in the work dictated to Careless Fremin. Many of them were not poetry at all in the sense of the day. They did not deal with a conventional poetic theme, such as the sporting of artificial shepherds, or the romantic laments of lovers. It was popular poetry in the fullest sense, written by a man of the people for men of the people, telling in rich colloquial language, without any polite "arrangement", of the Paris of the day, and its personalities, and above all of Villon himself, "poor Villon", with his hopes and disappointments, his fear of death and trust in God, and unlucky loves for unworthy women. It had its roots in life itself, instead of in some pre-conceived poetic conception of what life should be like.

CHAPTER IX

IT SEEMS ALLOWABLE to suppose that Francois Villon wrote his "Testament" at a time when he was determined to turn over a new leaf and become an honest citizen. It would be pleasant to think that he was able to do so, that he received, for instance, a tardy recognition of his right to a benefice, and that he was able to live in relative comfort, to attain some peace of mind and regain a little health, after the terrible trials of his youth.

Unfortunately, it has never been easy for a criminal to reform, however much he may wish to. "Povre Villon" had been dogged by ill-luck all his life, and he was to know no better fortune in middle age than he had in youth.

After his return to Paris, he was more or less in hiding, since he was still "wanted" for the burglary at the College de Navarre. Perhaps it was not even possible for him to remain at St. Benoit, or, if he did so, he would have been forced to come and go after the fall of night and to make himself as inconspicuous as possible. This meant that he inevitably associated with those who were more or less in the same situation as himself, with the survivors of the old band from the *Pomme du Pin* and any other underworld characters who would accept him as one of themselves and could be trusted not to denounce him to the authorities. The result was that, on November 2nd, 1462—just over a year after his release from Meung—he was arrested, charged with a minor theft, and thrown into the Chatelet.

For once Villon was innocent. He had had nothing to do with the theft, and was able to prove it. Yet at this point in his career the mere fact of arrest, of mistaken identity or whatever misunderstanding brought him to the Chatelet, was enough to undo him. Before he could be released the Faculty of Theology, which had never been able to swallow the bitter pill of the unsolved disappearance of the five hundred *ecus* from the College de Navarre, stepped in and claimed him as a person wanted in connection with this six-years-old crime.

As we have seen, many of Villon's friends had made acquaintance with the Chatelet at an earlier date. In the old days when Colin le Cayeux and other rascally students had kept the prosecutor's clerks busy at transcribing their misdeeds, it had tempered its rigours with a certain easy-going informality. The warders had been open to bribery, and were of a type which had at least as much sympathy with the criminals they guarded as with the Justice they represented. Anyone with a little money to spend could buy comforts and privileges of all kinds, and, if they were rich or noble, could arrange for themselves a life of relative luxury.

The Chatelet consisted of eight prisons, all of different degrees, varying from those which were fairly clean, light and well kept to underground dungeons to which the only access was by means of a trap-door in the ceiling. The prisoners were let down by a sort of pulley and left there, with only the occasional distraction of a little bread and water descending on the end of a string.

The prisoners paid for place and for a bed, unless they brought their own bed with them. There was a set "entrance fee" according to a tariff: ten francs for a Count, five *sous* for a knight or lady, eleven *sous* for a few, and usually eight *deniers* for a commoner. New arrivals celebrated their entry by treating the prisoners to wine, which was called *le quart de la bienvenue*, and often distributed money (known as "talking below the belt", the "monk's theft", or "speaking Latin"). The Criminal Lieutenant of Paris in charge of the prisoners was a certain Martin Bellefaye, a young man of Villon's own age, who was all the more indulgent towards the turbulence of the clerks

because he himself had a most unsuitable taste for practical jokes. In fact, two years earlier, on July 8th, 1460, Parliament had brought an action in respect of "excesses committed by Monsieur Martin de Bellefaye and his sergeants, who insisted on playing a Comedy in front of the Chatelet, in spite of the objections of the Parliament officials".

Unfortunately for Villon, he arrived at the Chatelet just at the time when the amiable eccentricities of its administration had disappeared before the rigorous reforms inaugurated by Louis XL. Most of the old, lax city officials had been dismissed in this widespread purge of the administration, and among the first to go had been Robert d'Estouteville, Provost of Paris and husband of Villon's platonic love, Ambroise de Lore, and the gay young Governor of the Prison. Martin Bellefaye had been replaced by Pierre de la Dehors, ex-Grand Master of the Guild of Butchers, a cruel and violent man, and the sworn enemy of all clerks. Under his rule, the minor consolations of prison life disappeared and the prisoners were submitted to a rule of brutal severity which, in allusion to his old profession, earned for the new Governor the nick-name of "The Butcher".

The affair of the Navarre burglary had been hanging over Villon's head for six years. It was his one grave crime, and had made of him an outcast perpetually menaced by discovery. He must have lived in dread of just such an unlucky accident, and now—just as it must have happened in many a nightmare—he was summoned before the Governor and confronted with the evidence secured so long ago from the talkative Guy Tabarie. Poor Villon, who had despised Tabarie for his weakness and mocked at him so ironically in the "Great Testament", followed his example by breaking down under the examination, admitting the truth of all Tabarie's statements and his own part in the affair.

Once the confession had been obtained, as the burglary was obviously the concern of the ecclesiastical authorities, the Grand Beadle of the Faculty of Theology was dispatched to negotiate on the important matter of recovering all or part of the missing money.

Maitre Laurent Poutrel had a personal interest in the matter, since sixty *ecus* belonging to himself had been among the five hundred missing from the coffer, and he had also been appointed executor of the late Dean. He therefore entered enthusiastically into negotiations, with the final result that Villon was released on his undertaking to pay the sum of one hundred and twenty *ecus*, over a period of three years, at the rate of forty *ecus* a year. If he failed in his payments, he was to be rearrested and committed for judgment.

It will be remembered that Guy Tabarie had been released under the same sort of arrangement, under the guarantee of his mother, and that a part of the missing money had already been recovered in this way. Villon, on the other hand, had no personal fortune, yet one may be sure that Maitre Poutrel, shrewd enough to be entrusted with the fortune of a great and celebrated college, would not have been put off without a very solid reason for believing that the payments would be made. It is not hard to guess that poor old Guillaume Villon, who was nearing the end of his life and might reasonably have expected to be left in peace to enjoy the reputation and fortune which he had built up for himself, had been obliged to come to the rescue again.

Villon was free once more, but the ill-luck of which he complained so bitterly in his verse really seems to have had him in its grip. Perhaps he was right in believing that he had been born under the notoriously evil influence of the planet Saturn. At all events, barely a month had passed before he found himself back in the Chatelet, delivered once more to the tender mercies of Pierre de la Dehors.

This time, he was really guiltless of any offence at all. After his release he had found himself penniless and sustained himself—no doubt not for the first time in his life—by cadging meals from his friends. He had become friendly with a certain Robin Dogis, who lived at the Sign of the Chariot in the rue des Parchementiers, a narrow street on the Mont Ste. Genevieve, inhabited by sellers of parchment, scribes and public writers. One evening, after he had probably spent a hungry and profitless day, Villon decided to visit his friend and invite himself to stay for supper. This he did, and

found that two of Dogis' friends had already arrived with the same idea. One of them was Hutin de la Moutier, a sergeant from the Chatelet, and one of those equivocal characters, half-policeman and half-criminal, who, like casin Cholet and j e a n le Loup, Were law-breakers one day and law-enforcers the next. The other was a certain Roger Pichart, a clerk who was well known and generally avoided because of his violent and quarrelsome character.

After a pleasant supper-party, at which there had probably been rather too much to drink, the three friends decided to return with Villon to the latter's room at St. Benoit. Perhaps he had promised to read them his latest poem, which was something of an event, as he was already celebrated among the clerks and students of Paris, most of whom knew the "Little Testament" by heart. They set off, probably arm in arm, slightly unsteady and singing cheerfully, and soon reached the rue St. Jacques, leading to the cloisters of St. Benoit. In this street a worthy and almost celebrated citizen of Paris had his offices and was in the habit of working until late into the night. This person was Maitre Francois Ferrebouc, a rich, elderly man and one of the notaries who had helped to draw up the documents for the process of the rehabilitation of Joan of Arc. Through the brightly lighted window of his office, the revellers could see a roomful of sedate young clerks, still earnestly copying manuscripts. The sight of so much industry at such an unsuitable hour of the night evidently annoyed the peppery Roger Pichart, for he stopped and began, without the slightest provocation, to mock and jeer at the clerks and then to amuse himself by spitting into the room through the open window.

The clerks, after bearing this behaviour for a few minutes, could stand it no longer and surged out into the road, ready for a fight. Hutin de la Moutier, who had been doing nothing especial, got the worst of the struggle which followed and was dragged into the house, crying lustily and screaming, "Murder!" "They are killing me!" and finally, "I am dead!"

At the sound of his screams, Francois Ferrebouc, who had been in an inner room, came rushing out of the house, furious at the noise,

and ordered away the disturbers of his peace. In his indignation he pushed Robin Dogis and knocked him over, whereupon Dogis sprang up again and struck Ferrebouc with his dagger, wounding him slightly. Then he fled to join Villon and Pichart, who had taken refuge behind the church of St. Benoit, at almost the very place where the incident with Philippe le Sermoise had opened the long series of poor Villon's misfortunes.

It is difficult to see how he could have been held responsible, either for Pichart's bad manners or for Dogis' violence. Yet Pichart and Dogis seem to have got away scot-free while Villon and Hutin de la Moutier—who had also been an innocent spectator—were arrested the next day and dragged off to the Chatelet.

Pierre de la Dehors cared little for the fact that his prisoner had been no more than a witness to the wounding of Maitre Ferrebouc. It was enough for him that he was both a clerk and an incorrigible recidivist. Villon was put to the Question by water, and being— if we are to believe Rabelais—somewhat lacking in physical courage, he immediately confessed to far more than he was really guilty of, and was thereupon sentenced to be strangled and hung at Montfaucon.

He had already had at least three narrow escapes from death, and this time it looked as though nothing could save him from the hands of Maitre Henri Cousin, the Paris executioner. Once more the mind of the poet was filled with images of that terrible gibbet, which had once been the site of the pleasant picnics and wild escapades of his youth. It was now in such constant use that two supplementary gibbets had lately been constructed on the nearby plain to receive the overflow. It stood quite near the site of the present *Gare de l Est*, its base being a flat oblong mound, about fifteen feet high, thirty feet wide and forty feet long. At even intervals around three sides stood sixteen square pillars of rough stone, each about thirty-two feet high, crossed at their summit by heavy beams from which dangled ropes and chains. In the centre of this platform was an enormous pit, covered by a grating, into which the bodies of the hanged were eventually thrown.

Villon, who like most of his contemporaries was morbidly attracted by the spectacle of death, had often followed the condemned men on their last journey out to the gibbet. This journey, indeed, was always a picturesque procession and something of a holiday spectacle to the sensation-loving Parisians. They would assemble before the prison from which the prisoners used to set out, roped in carts and accompanied by the Provost and his bodyguard of twelve mounted sergeants of the Chatelet, and attended by the executioner and his assistants. At the gate of St. Denis the procession would make a brief halt at the Convent of the Filles-Dieu. These good nuns, who were mostly ladies of easy virtue who had repented and taken religious vows in order to devote themselves to penance and charity, did what they could to comfort the prisoners, bringing them bread and wine and cheering them with kindly words. Villon, in less regenerate days, had mocked at these good souls and suggested that, for professed religious, they were a little too fond of good food and wine, and even of the Carmelites in the neighbouring monastery—but that was before he had reason to believe that he himself might one day receive from them the last kindness he was ever to know.

After this short interval, the procession would pass through the gate and out into the country. A mob had usually gathered by this time, and the sergeants would have to force a passage, generally trampling a few unfortunates under their horses' hooves in the process. At last the Provost, splendid in his scarlet, fur-trimmed robes, was able to take up his position near the gibbet. The carts halted at the edge of the platform, and Maitre Henri set his assistants to adjusting the ropes and pulleys. The nooses were fitted round the necks of the prisoners, a friar recited the prayers for the dying, then, at a signal from Maitre Henri, the carts moved off and the prisoners swung out into space.

Villon was completely familiar with the scene and could picture all too clearly his own end. Perhaps, indeed, familiarity with the idea had bred contempt, or perhaps he was thoroughly revolted by the

injustice of his condemnation. At Meung he had been resigned to the verdict of the law, and had only complained of the personal harshness of the Bishop. Now he was showing himself full of fight, ready to snatch at any chance of saving himself, however slight that chance might be.

A prisoner in Paris could appeal to Parliament against the verdict that had condemned him, but few ever took advantage of this right, since Parliament almost invariably confirmed the sentence and added a considerable fine. Villon, however, was determined to try his luck, and presented his appeal, setting out the true facts of the case and protesting his innocence. It was a last chance, made just a little less remote by the fact that Maitre Guillaume Villon was able to exercise a good deal of influence on his behalf. The old man had been friendly for many years with Jacques Sequin, the venerable prior of St. Martin-des-Champs, and had constantly frequented the high officials of the Chatelet who were to be met at his abundant table. He had certainly made the acquaintance in this way of the facetious Martin Bellefaye; "Butcher" Pierre de la Dehors was probably too much of a rustic and smelt too much of his old profession to be welcome in these polite circles, but there were other officers and men of influence who would be able to say a good word in the right ear.

So Maitre Guillaume sped around, explaining, glossing over his ward's faults, putting his wildness down to the account of his youth (an excuse which was really wearing rather thin), and pleading his ill-luck and poetic talent. Villon, meanwhile, seems to have resigned himself to the failure of his petition. The injustice of the whole affair revolted him, but cold, hunger and torture could not get the better of his spirit. He remained, at this zero hour, the indomitable joker he had always been. When he heard that he was to be hanged, his first reaction was to write the most sublimely realistic comment that has ever been made on such a painful situation:

*Je suis Franeoy, dont ce me poise,
Ne de Paris, empres Pontoise.
Or d'une corde d'une toise,
Saura mon col que mon cul poise.*

However, he was not destined to make this unpleasant discovery. Either because of Maitre Guillaume's tireless efforts, or because some high official knew and loved his poetry, or simply because the complete injustice of the verdict became apparent on further examination, Parliament decided for once to be merciful and to commute the sentence.

He was not to escape the consequences of his past, however. Neither his own nature nor external circumstances had ever permitted him to live in peace, and that same curious destiny which seemed to intervene so often to save him at the last minute from death also seemed determined that he should have no other life but that of a homeless wanderer. Parliament granted his petition, spared him the sinister journey to Montfaucon, but decreed that in view of his "evil life" and previous condemnations he be sentenced to ten years banishment from Paris.

For Villon, who had such a violent will to live and such a vivid appreciation of the mere fact of being alive, the commutation of the death sentence came as a shock of pure joy. To remain alive, and to be delivered from the icy dungeon of the Chatelet, must have seemed at that moment all that he could desire. Yet, on reflection, he must have felt a chill of horror at the thought of the alternative which was imposed on him. It was unlikely that he would ever see Paris again, and almost certain that he would never again set eyes on the little old mother whom he still loved and who had suffered so much for his misdeeds; or on good old Maitre Guillaume who had never forsaken him since that first day when, as a small child, shy and overawed at the strange new surroundings, he had been brought to the cloisters of St. Benoit. These two were probably—

* I am Francois, and I don't care a damn for it—Bora in Paris, near Pontoise—From the end of a six-foot rope—My neck will soon know what my buttocks weigh.

with the unworthy Katharine de Vauceiles—the only human beings for whom he had ever really cared. As for Paris, it was more than a home. He loved the town as poets all down the centuries have loved her identifying himself with her, shivering with excitement at the smell of her air and the sound of her streets, impregnated with her magic. Like so many of his kind who have come after, he knew that he was incomplete away from her.

The sentence of banishment was to take effect immediately and it would cost him his life to linger in the Parisian region. Thus, before he left the Chatelet, Villon wrote a rhymed request to Parliament, expressing all his joy and gratitude for his deliverance from death. It was in the form of a ballad, and Villon's ballads are like the proverbial woman's letter, in that the most important part is usually contained in the postscript, or rather in the four- or five-line *envoi* which terminates the old ballad form. In this case it took the form of a request to be allowed three days grace in which to collect a little money and to say goodbye to his family.

Presumably Parliament granted this request, and if this is so, Villon must have left Paris for the last time on January 8th, 1463,. On that date he disappears from history and enters into the domain of legend.

CHAPTER X

HERE WE LOSE sight of Francois Villon. If at the end of his ten years of exile he returned to Paris, there is no record of the fact and it seems more likely that he died obscurely in some distant province. Rumour and tags of literary gossip bring up his name from time to time in unexpected contexts. Rabelais says that he went to England and joined the court of Edward IV, but this hardly seems probable in view of the low opinion in which Villon—as a loyalist and a product of St. Benoit—held the English. Then Rabelais mentions him again, saying that he retired in his old age to St. Maixent, in Poitou, where he found a protector in the local priest. There, it seems, he wrote a "Mystery of the Passion" in Poitevin dialect (that dialect which he had learnt from the two pretty girls of St. Generou, during his wanderings as a young man), training local actors to play it for the instruction and amusement of the mayor and people of the district. According to Rabelais' story, a certain clerk and secretary of the local guild of shoemakers refused Villon's request to lend a stole and cope with which he intended to dress up an old peasant to represent God the Father, and the tale is concerned with Villon's revenge on the unco-operative Tappecoue. These are the only two definite indications of his whereabouts, although he is frequently mentioned by authors during the early part of the sixteenth century.

Maitre Guillaume Villon died in 1468, at the age of seventy, probably during the epidemic of plague which broke out in that year. The old mother must have died some time earlier, although

she seems to have been living at the time of Villon's banishment, and it was probably of her that he was thinking when he begged from Parliament the grace of three days in which to bid goodbye to his family. As for Villon himself, most of the early commentators believe that he died about the year 1484, at which date he would have been fifty-three years old. Nothing is known of his end. He may have finished miserably on some gibbet in the countryside, after one of those wretched little thefts to which the poor and homeless were so fatally driven and which in those days were punished so implacably; or he may have died honourably in the household of one of those rich and generous protectors of whom he had always dreamed. Rabelais, in his purely legendary account of Villon at the English Court, says that Edward IV would do nothing without consulting him—so there was evidently a contemporary tradition of him living in high places and in good repute. Yet there is something inconsistent in this too-reassuring image. Villon had always spoilt his own chances and there is no reason to suppose that advancing years had made him any wiser. Certain characters, by persistently turning away from their own advantage, reach a point at which misfortune seems to become an active agent and to take complete charge of their lives. From that point, however much they may struggle, they are whirled away in the current of their own misery. I think it must have been so with Villon, and that he died alone and miserably, but—surely—still with a last joke on his lips and in the hope born of an unshakable confidence in God's ability to distinguish between results and intentions.

Villon left detailed and largely facetious instructions as to his own burial in the "Great Testament", in which he also includes his own epitaph, desiring that it should be written on his tomb in charcoal, without cutting into the plaster, so that he should remain in men's memory as *un bonfoldtre*—a mad, witty, gay companion:

*Cy gist et dort, en ce sollier,
Qu' amour occit de son raillon,
Ung povre petit escollier,
Qui fut nomme Francois Villon.*

*Oncques de terre n'cut sillon,
Il donna tout, chascun le scet:
Table, treteaux et corbillon.
Pour Dieu, dictes en ce verseL*

So far as the memory he left behind him is concerned, he got his wish, as we have seen. For centuries the tradition of the *bon folatre* obscured the real Villon—as he meant that it should. One suspects that the elaborate facade of acid buffoonery was set up because he knew more about himself than he cared to admit and because he shared to a great extent the St. Benoit point of view, according to which he had made a terrible failure of his life. He understood very well that he had never grown up properly, in the sense of accepting an adult view of the responsibilities of life. At the age of thirty he speaks of himself as a poor little student, which is exactly what he remained all his life—or at least as far through his life as we are able to follow him.

Undeveloped character has been a common phenomenon in every century and usually results in the futile whimsy which culminated in Peter Pan. In Villon, however, this dangerous childishness was combined with an extraordinarily perspicacious mind which enabled him to contemplate himself with extreme clarity. He knew that, like a child, he responded to whatever influence was temporarily strongest in his life. He was as malleable a material in the hands of Maitre Guillaume as of Regnier de Montigny. Like a child he could jump from one idea to another and pass without transition from one emotion to another. He knew this perfectly well, and understood his own fundamental irresponsibility. *fe ris en pleurz*, he says of himself, and indeed the whole "Testament" is a constant passage between tears and laughter, changing and rechanging under the influence of the moment, of an idea, of an image, of a recollection.

*** Here lies and sleeps, under these boards—He whom love has slain with its dart—A poor little student—Who was named Francois Villon—He never owned a furrow of earth—He gave away ail he had, as everyone knows—His table, benches and little basket—For God's sake recite this verse.**

It is easy to imagine what Villon might have been. When Clement Marot produced the second edition of his works for the pleasure of Francois I, he expresses his regret in the preface that the poet "was not brought up in the courts of kings and princes, where judgment is rendered more exact and language more polished". Marot is right according to his own lights. If Villon had lived among comfortable, refined people; if he had been spared the physical misery and the mental anguish induced by the equivocal situation of a *declassé* intellectual in which he found himself—he would probably have written the polite, formal verse which was the mode of his time. He would have written for aristocrats, in the language of aristocrats. His poetry would have been transcribed in the libraries of rich amateurs and repeated at the tables of the great, but would not have been shouted by ribald students in the streets and taken up as a refrain by the hungry and tax-burdened little people of Paris. It would not have been scattered with the crude and obscene words and allusions which make it almost impossible to produce a complete translation of any value which a modern printer would consent to print. Villon's genius was too great to have been smothered by any convention, and his poetry would surely have been fine poetry: but it would have been cast in a conventional form which would have welded it into its own period, to be read today as a curiosity, in the way in which we read the poems of Charles d'Orleans. It is because Villon was a failure, unprincipled, poor and weak, that he belongs to the twentieth century just as much as to the fifteenth, and that he will go on belonging to contemporary life as long as poetry has any place in man's existence.

1

Et meure Paris ou Helaine,
 Quiconques meurt, rneurt a douleur
 Telle qu'il pert vent et alaine;
 Son fiel se creve sur son cuer,
 Puis sue, Dieu scet quelle sueur!
 Et n'est qui de ses maux I alege:
 Car enfant n'a, frere ne seur,
 Qui lors vouldist estre son plege.

La mort le fait fremir, paliir,
 Le nez courber, les vaines tendre,
 Le col enfler, la chair mollir,
 Jointes et nerfs croistre et estendre.
 Corps femenin, qui tant es tendre,
 Poly, souef, si precieux,
 Te fauldra il ces maux attendre?
 Oy, ou tout vif aller es cieulx.

FRAGMENT ON DEATH

*And Paris be it or Helen dying
 Who dies soever, dies with pain.
 He that lacks breath and wind for sighing,
 His gall bursts on his heart/ and then
 He sweats, God knows what sweat/—again,
 No man may ease him of his grief;
 Child, brother, sister, none were fain
 To hail him thence for his relief*

*Death makes him shudder, swoon, wax pale,
 Nose bend, veins stretch, and breath surrender,
 Neck swell, flesh soften, joints that fail
 Crack their strained nerves and arteries slender.
 O woman's body found so tender,
 Smooth, sweet, so precious in men's eyes,
 Must thou too bear such count to render?
 Yes, or pass quick into the skies.*

ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE

BALLADE DES DAMES DU TEMPS JADIS

Dictes moy ou, *n'en* quel pays,
 Est Flora la belle Rommaine,
 Archipiades, ne Thais,
 Qui fut sa cousine germaine,
 Echo parlant quant bruyt on maine
 Dessus riviere ou sus estan,
 Qui beaulte ot trop plus qu'humaine.
Mais ou sont les neiges antan?

Ou est la tres sage Hellois,
 Pour qui fut chastre et puis moyne
 Pierre Esbaillart a Saint Denis?
 Pour son amour ot ceste essoyne.
 Semblablement, ou est la royne
 Qui commanda que Buridan
 Fust gete en ung sac en Saine?
Mais ou sont les neiges d'antan?

La royne Blanche comme lis
 Qui chantoit a voix de seraine,
 Berte au grant pie, Bietris, Alis,
 Haremburgis qui tint le Mainé,
 Et jehanne la bonne Lorraine
 Qu'Englois brulerent a Rouan;
 On sont ilz, ou, Vierge souveraine?
Mais ou sont les neiges d'antan?

Prince, n'enquerez de sepmaine
 Ou elles sont, ne de cest an,
 Que ce reffrain ne vous remaine:
Mais ou sont les neiges d'antan?

THE BALLAD OF DEAD LADIES

*Tell me now in what hidden way is
 Lady Flora the lovely Roman?
 Where's Hipparchia, and where is Thais,
 Neither of them the fairer woman?
 Where is Echo, beheld of no man,
 Only heard on river and mere—
 She whose beauty was more than human? . . .
 But where are the snows of yester-year?*

*Where's Heloise the learned nun,
 For whose sake Abeillard, I ween,
 Lost manhood and put priesthood on?
 (From Love he won such dule and teen!)
 And where, I pray you, is the Queen
 Who willed that Buridan should steer
 Sewed in a sack's mouth down the Seine? . . .
 But where are the snows of yester-year?*

*White Queen Blanche, like a queen of lilies,
 With a voice like any mermaid—
 Bertha Broadfoot, Beatrice, Alice,
 And Ermengarde the lady of Maine,
 And that good Joan whom Englishmen
 At Rouen doomed and burned her there—
 Mother of God, where are they then? . . .
 But where are the snows of yester-year?*

*Nay, never ask this week, fair lord,
 Where they are gone, nor yet this year,
 Save with this much for an overword—
 But where are the snows of yester-year?*

DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI

II

BALLADE DES DAMES DU TEMPS JADIS

Dictes moy ou, n'en quel pays,
Est Flora la belle Rommaine,
Archipiades, ne Thais,
Qui fut sa cousine germaine,
Echo parlant quant bruyt on maine
Dessus riviere ou sus estan,
Qui beaulte ot trop plus qu'humame.
Mais ou sont les neiges d'antan?

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Pour qui fut chastre et puis moyne
Pierre Esbaillart a Saint Denis?
Pour son amour ot ceste essoyne.
Semblablement, ou est la royne
Qui commanda que Buridan
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Qu'Englois brulerent a Rouan;
On sont ilz, ou, Vierge souveraine?
Mais ou sont les neiges d'antan?

Prince, n'enquerez de sepmaine
Ou elles sont, ne de cest an,
Que ce reffrain ne vous remaine:
Mais ou sont les neiges d'antan?

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 Where's Hipparchia, and where is Thais,
 Neither of them the fairer woman?
 Where is Echo, beheld of no man,
 Only heard on river and mere—
 She whose beauty was more than human? . . .
 But where are the snows of yester-year?*

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 For whose sake Abeillard, I ween,
 Lost manhood and put priesthood on?
 {From Love he won such dule and teen!}
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 Where they are gone, nor yet this year,
 Save with this much for an overword—
 But where are the snows of yester-year?*

DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI

DOUBLE BALLADE

Pour ce, amez tant que vouldrez,
 Suyvez assemblees et festes,
 En la fin ja mieulx n'en vauldrez
 Et si n'y romprez que vos testes;
 Folles amours font les gens bestes:
 Salmon en ydolatria,
 Samson en perdit ses lunettes.
Bien est eureux qui ricns n'y a!

Orpheus, le doux menestrier,
 Jouant de fleustes et musetes,
 En fut en dangicr d'un murtrier
 Chien Cerberus a quatre testes;
 Et Narcisus, le bel honnestes,
 En ung parfont puis se noya
 Pour l'amour de ses amouretes.
Bien est eureux qui riens n'y a!

Sardana, le preux chevalier,
 Qui conquist le regne de Cretes,
 En voulut devenier moullier
 Et filler entre puceiletes;
 David le roy, sage prophetes,
 Crainte de Dieu en oublia,
 Voyant laver cuisses bien faites.
Bien est eureux qui riens n'y a!

Amon en vouldst deshonnourer,
 Faignant de menger tarteletes,
 Sa seur Thamar et desflourer,
 Qui fut inceste deshonnestes;
 Herodes, pas ne sont sornetes,
 Saint jehan Baptiste en decola
 Pour dances, saulx et chansonnetes.
Bien est eureux qui riens n'y a!

De moy, povre, je vueil parler:
 J'en fus batu comme a ru toiles,
 Tout nu, ja ne le quier celer.

DOUBLE BALLADE OF THE DEGEITFULNESS OF LOVE

*Follow Love's pageants as you will,
His feasts of triumph and delight,
It is a sport that prospers ill,
And brings you into mournful plight;
Such pranks, of wisdom's growth the blight;
Made Solomon his faith to flee,
And plunged strong Samson's eyes in night:
Happy his lot that's fancy-free!*

*Orpheus, whose minstrelsy was heard
By rocks and trees, so sweet he played,
Three-headed Cerberus must beard,
For which with life he might have paid;
Narcissus, lovely youth, betrayed
By his own loveliness, we see
Dead in a fountain's bosom laid:
Happy his lot that's fancy-free I*

*Sardana, prince of chivalry,
A conqueror mid battle's din,
Must stoop to fashions womanly,
And with the maidens weave and spin:
David, sage prophet, thought to win,
The fear of God forgetting, he,
A bathing girl to act of sin:
Happy his lot that's fancy-free!*

*Amnon conceived desire to move
(Feigning a love of pastry fine)
His sister fair in terms of love:
Desire most foully libertine;
Herod, between his cups of wine,
Must John the Baptist's doom decree,
For her whose jigs he deemed divine:
Happy his lot that's fancy-free!*

*As for poor love-struck me, that I
Like clothes awash was beaten well,
All naked, I will not deny.*

Qui mc feist maschier ces groselcs,
Fors Katharine de Vaucelles?
Noel le tiers est, qui fut la.
Mitaines a ces nopces telles.
Bien est eureux qui riens n'y a!

Mais que ce jeune bachelier
Laissast ces jeunes bacheletes?
Non! et le deust on vif brusler
Comme ung chevaucheur d'escouvetes.
Plus doulces luy sont que civetes;
Mais toutesfoys fol s'y fya:
Soient blanches, soient brunetes,
Bien est eureux qui riens n'y a!

*Who set that trap in which I fell?
Why, who but Katharine de Vaucelles?
Noel was there and shared with me
That drubbing, as his boms can tell:
Happy his lot that's fancy-free!*

*But think you our young bachelor
Will leave his amorous traffic? No!
Not though 'twere sin you burnt him for;
Like broom-borne witch: it flatters so,
The siren call that brings him woe
When folly claims at last its fee.
Thus dearest friend turns dearest foe:
Happy his lot that's fancy-free!*

PAUL HOOKHAM

BALLADE POUR PRIER NOTRE DAME

Dame du ciel, regente terrienne,
 Emperiere des infernaux palus,,
 Recevez moy, vostre humble chrestienne,
 Que comprinse soye entre vos esleus,
 Ce non obstant qu'oncques rien ne valus.
 Les biens de vous, Ma Dame et Ma Maistresse,
 Sont trop plus grans que ne suis pecheresse,
 Sans lesquelz biens ame ne peut merir
 N'avoir les cieulx. fe n'en suis jangleresse:
En ceste foy je vueil vivre et mourir.

A vostre Filz dictes que je suis sienne;
 De luy soyent mes pechiez abolus;
 Pardonne moy comme a l'Egipcienne,
 Ou comme il feist au clerc Theophilus,
 Lequel par vous fut quitte et absolus,
 Combien qu'il eust au deable fait promesse.
 Preservez moy de faire jamais ce,
 Vierge portant, sans rompure encourir,
 La sacrement qu'on celebre a la messe.
En ceste foy je vueil vivre et mourir.

Femme je suis povrette et ancienne,
 Qui riens ne scay; oncques lettre ne leus.
 Au moustier voy dont suis paroissienne
 Paradis paint, ou sont harpes et lus,
 Et ung enfer ou dampnez sont boullus:
 L'ung me fait paour, Pautre joye et liesse.
 La joye avoir me fay, haulte Deese,
 A qui pecheurs doivent tous recourir,
 Comblez de foy, sans fainte ne paresse.
En ceste foy je vueil vivre et mourir.

Vous portastes, digne Vierge, princesse,
 Iesus regnant qui n'a ne fin ne cesse.
 Le Tout Puissant, prenant nostre foiblesse,
 Laissa les cieulx et nous vint secourir,
 Offrit a mort sa tres chiere jeunesse;
 Nostre Seigneur tel est, tel le confesse.
En ceste Joy je vueil vivre et mourir.

IV

**BALLADE, WHICH VILLON MADE AT THE REQUEST
HIS MOTHER: "POUR PRIER NOTRE DAME"**

*Celestial Regent, Qyeen who rulest here,
guardian supreme o'er all the powers of Hell,
Make me, thy Christian, humble howsoever,
Among thy chosen evermore to dwell
Though merit have I done, I know full well.
The goodness, Lady, Mistress, that is thine
Is greater far than sin that can be mine.
Without that goodness never soul can fly
To Heaven, unworthy save by grace divine.
'Tis in that faith that I would live and die.*

*Say to thy Son that I am His through thee,
That so through Him my sins may be forgiven.
As thou didst succour Mary, succour me,
Or that Theophilus who, vowed to Heaven
But sunk in foul apostasy, was shriven,
When that his pact with Satan he forswore.
Let no such Spirit tempt me, I implore,
Virgin intact who carried'st stainlessly
The sacramental Host whom we adore.
'Tis in that faith that I would live and die.*

*I am a woman poor and weak and old,
And ignorant: no letter can I read',
My church my teacher: there do I behold
Paradise painted, with its gracious meed
Of harp and lute, and Hell where is decreed
Sin's doom: the one I fear; the other Jills
My soul with joy and all its being thrills.
Be mine that bliss, sure Refuge, Goddess high,
Sweet Remedy, through faith, of mortal ills.
'Tis in that faith that I would live and die.*

*Thou gavest birth, Immaculate Princess,
To fesus, Him whose reign is limitless.
All-Powerful, He endured our powerlessness;
For us, disclaiming might and majesty,
He suffered death that we should life possess.
Such is Our Lord, and such I do confess.
'Tis in that faith that I would live and die. PAUL*

L'EPITAPHE VILLON

Freres humains qui apres nous vivez,
 N'ayez les cuers contre nous endurcis,
 Car, se pitie de nous povres avez,
 Dieu en aura plus tost de vous mercis.
 Vous nous voiez cy attachez cinq, six:
 Quant de la chair, que trop avons nourrie,
 Elle est pieca devoree et pourrie,
 Et nous, les os, devenons cendre et pouldre.
 De nostre mal personne ne s'en rie;
Mais priez Dieu que tous nous vueille absouldre!

Se vous clamons freres, pas n'en devez
 Avoir desdaing, quoy que fusmes occis
 Par justice. Toutesfois, vous scavez
 Que tous hommes n'ont pas bons sens rassis;
 Excusez nous, puis que sommes transsis,
 Envers le fils de la Vierge Marie,
 Que sa grace ne soit pour nous tarie,
 Nous preservant de l'infernale fouldre.
 Nous sommes mors, ame ne nous harie;
Mais priez Dieu que tous nous vueille absouldre!

La pluye nous a debuez et lavez,
 Et le soleil dessechiez et noircis;
 Pies, corbeaulx, nous ont les yeux cavez,
 Et arrachie la barbe et les sourcis.
 Jamais nul temps nous ne sommes assis;
 Puis ca, puis la, comme le vent varie,
 A son plaisir sans cesser nous charie,
 Plus becquetez d'oiseaulx que dez a couldre.
 Ne soiez done de nostre confrairie;
Mais priez Dieu que tous nous vueille absouldre!

Prince Jhesus, qui sur tous a maistrie,
 Garde qu'Enfer n'ait de nous seigneurie;
 A luy n'ayons que faire ne que souldre.
 Hommes, icy n'a point de mocquerie;
Mais priez Dieu que tous nous vueille absouldre!

V

THE EPITAPH IN FORM OF A BALLADE

which Villon made for himself and his companions while waiting to be hanged with them. (Commonly known as *The Ballade of the Hanged*.)

*You who still live, though night has dimmed our day,
Do not make hard your hearts to us who die;
For if with grieving hearts you hear this lay
The sooner will God's anger pass you by;
Five or six comrades dangling in the sky,
How flaps the flesh we fed so tenderly,
Bestripped and rotten for all men to see!
This our sad fate doth loud for pity call.
So let none mock {our bones will powered be!}
But ever pray that God will pardon all.*

*Brothers we claim you, by our side then stay,
Do not despise us, though we hang so high
By justice slain; for some must foolish stray.
All cannot tread the paths which straight do lie.
pray for us, brothers, to the Christ on high.
Dear Virgin-born, all may come near to Thee;
Keep us secure from Hell's dread agony
That from Thy grace we may not hopeless fall.
Trouble us not, for dead, yes, dead are we!
But ever pray that God will pardon all.*

*Dried by the sun are we, black from its ray;
Washed clean and spotless, for the rains come nigh.
Close hang the ravens and the vultures grey,
To feast upon and hollow out each eye.
Even for beard and eyebrow they will sigh.
No rest for us who, spinning ceaselessly,
Obey the wind and pay the law's last fee,
More pecked of birds than fruit on garden wall.
Therefore, in mercy, look not scornfully,
But ever pray that God will pardon all.*

ENVOY

*Prince fesus, Lord, heed now our misery,
Preserve us all from Hells dread seigneury,
We do not crave so harsh a ruler's call.
Friends, I implore you, banish cruelty,
But ever pray that God will pardon all.*

LEWIS WHARTON

NOTES

The lyrics of Francois Villon present a problem that might well act as a stimulus to the translator: the mood varies from grave to gay, from cynicism to reverence, and the poet's language veers from student's slang to preciousness and then to direct simplicity. Yet in form the Ballade must consist of three stanzas, the last line of Which forms the refrain; the same rhyme scheme is used throughout, and each stanza should contain as many lines as the line has syllables. The poem culminates in an *Envoi*, or address to the *Prince du Puy* (the Judge of the competitions for which the form was developed) modelled on the second half of the stanza. Small wonder, then, that many poets of the 19th and 20th centuries should have been attracted by the problem, and if their versions sometimes lack the apparent spontaneity of the original, is it to be wondered at? It will be noted that some of the translators depart from the strict Ballade form, keeping only the refrain rhyme throughout. Even the question of title, whether to render the French *Ballade* by the English "Ballad" with its different connotation, is variously treated in our examples.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

The first complete translation was made by John Payne: *The Poems of Master Francois Villon of Paris*, now first done into English verse in the original forms. London 1881 (another edition, New York 1918). It was followed by that of H. de Vere Stacpoole, of John Heron Lepper (1924), of Lewis Wharton (1935) prose translations by Geoffrey Atkinson (1930) and Edward F. Chaney (1940). Ballades of Villon have been translated by Edward Marion Cox, Paul Hookham, William Stirling, Richard Aldington and others. A selection from the translations, with the originals, has recently been published by Andre Deutsch and Mervyn Savili (1946) •

The text of Villon is that given by A. Longnon and L. Foulet (*Classiques francais du Moyen Age*).

- I. These stanzas (lines 313-28 of Villon's *Testament*) illustrate Villon's metrical pattern and something of his manner and constant preoccupation. The translation is by Swinburne: *Poems and Ballads*. Second Series.
- II *Testament* lines 329-56. Villon evokes the memory of the heroines of legend (including the enigmatic Archidiada, rendered Hipparchia in the translation, but who may, indeed, be a corruption of Alcibiades, mistaken for a woman by the sleepy scholar) and adds to them a more recent figure, Joan of Arc, who had been put to death some thirty years previously. Swinburne calls

this poem "Villon's masterpiece, the matchless *Ballad of the Ladies of Old Time* so incomparably rendered in the marvellous version of D. G. Rossetti". It is this translation we have given, from his *Collected Works*.

- III. *DoubleBallade* from the *Testament* lines 625-72. Here we have an enumeration of the heroes of antiquity—Biblical or classical—deceived by Love, ending in a personal allusion. The *Double Ballade* has six stanzas and no final *envoy*; in the fifteenth century the slight variation in the first rhymes would be less obvious than in modern pronunciation. The translation is that of Paul Hookham, *Ballades of Francois Villon interpreted into English Verse*, 1918.
- Chien Cerberus*. Villon endows Cerberus with an extra head, but his translator prefers to remain faithful to classical tradition.
- Qui me feist maschier ces groseilles?* Literally "made me chew those gooseberries" or, to change the metaphor slightly, "swallow that bitter pill".
- IV. From the *Testament*; lines 873-909, Villon's legacy to his mother. Since the prayer is put into her mouth, the subject is feminine throughout. It will be noted that the *Envoi* is lengthened to enable the name V I L L O N to appear in acrostic in the initial letters of the lines. The translation is that by Paul Hookham. (Note, in the original the first refrain reads "should live", probably by a slip.)

One of the *Poesies Diverses* (XIV) whose date is uncertain: Villon was more than once condemned to be hanged, and two of the friends of his student days had early suffered the death penalty. From *The Poems of Francois Villon* translated by Lewis Wharton (1935). In the third stanza the image "more pitted than a thimble" has been evaded by the translator.

