PAUL VERLAINE

BY ARTHUR SYMONS

It was on the 29th of April, 1890, that I first met Verlaine. I remember the hot night, the café on the Boulevard Saint-Michel where Havelock Ellis and I had been dining with Charles Morice and a young painter, a friend of his, whose name I forget. Morice was then the titular apostle of Verlaine; he had written a book about him which still remains better than anything which has been written since; and in his other, not less admirable book, *La Littérature de Tout à l'Heure*, he had planned out, almost prophetically, the course that literature was to take just then in France. Morice had promised to introduce me to Verlaine, and when dinner was over he turned to me in his gentle and urbane way, bending his great blond head a little, and proposed that we should go on to the Café François, where Verlaine was generally to be found. Morice went on talking, as we strolled in the slow French way up the boulevard, through all the noisy, hasty gaiety of the hour; he talked as he always did, in his fluent, ecstatic, rather mad way, full of charm and surprise. I remember nothing that he said; I don't think I knew at the time. I was awaiting, with delight and almost terror, my first sight of the extraordinary creature whom I vaguely expected to find somewhat in the likeness of his caricature in the *Hommes d'Aujourd'hui*—cloven-footed and ending in a green tail. We passed café after café, every *terrasse* and the whole pavement filled with students and women. Higher up the crowd dwindled, and at last we came to the corner of the Rue Gay-Lussac. I saw the name, Morice pushed open the door, we followed.

And there, in the midst of a noisy, laughing company of young men, all drinking, I saw Verlaine, like Pan, I thought, among reveling worshipers. He was smiling benevolently; a large gray hat pushed back on his head, a white scarf around his neck, no collar, the shabbiest of clothes. And my first thought, after a moment's disgust at the company in which he sat, was,

What a gentleman! I never saw simpler or more beautiful manners. He got up as Morice introduced us, and sat at our table, and began to talk. The face, with its spiritual forehead, animal jaw, and shifting faun's eye, was unlike that of any portrait I had seen: no wise criminal, but genial, manly, with dignity under a really startling movement of the features. The eyes, eyelids, and eyebrows were in constant oblique gesture: there is no other word for it. But the whole body was gesture, and of a sudden, violent, overwhelming kind, not French gesture at all. The whole body, genial and ferocious, seemed to translate every thought or sensation, with that animal-prompt sincerity which is one of the qualities of his work. There was no pose, no deliberate extravagance; the extravagance, when it came, was momentary and on the spur of the moment—the type of every action of his life.

I saw in that first sight of Verlaine, when he sat there in the café and talked to me about himself, about England, and about English poetry, only a part, no doubt, of what I came to distinguish or interpret afterward. If I think now, I see the great sleepy and gray head as he lies back in his corner at that café, with his eyes half shut; he drags on my arm as we go up the boulevard together; he shows me his Bible in the little room up the back stairs; he climbs the many steps painfully in Four tain Court; he nods his nightcap over a greasy picture-book as he sits up in bed at the hospital. But almost everything that I ever saw in that face has been concentrated into the portrait which Carrière did at Morice's instigation, some years after I first met him. A rough rendering of it is within every one's reach in the *Choix de Poésies*. Morice has told the story of one of the most marvelous portraits of our time, in which, as he justly says, Carrière

a vu et fixé pour toujours la douleur de ce grand sacrifié, de ce crucifié. Le poète, malade, était à l'hôpital, à l'autre extremité de la ville. Tout avait été preparé, Carrière l'attendait. Mais la traversée ne s'accomplit point sans peine, malgré plusieurs voitures et à cause de l'exaltation du congé d'un jour.—Pas un instant Verlaine ne posa. Durant toute cette unique séance de quelques heures il ne cessa d'arpenter l'atelier, en parlant haut, avec cette effervescente verve, la sienne, folle et belle, qui roulait les pensées, les anecdotes, les images, les poèmes, se reposait en riant et rebondissait dans un sanglot: le capricieux monologue, insoucieux des écoutants, les supposait informés du thème—la vie du poète—et tout au plus les initiait, par des suggestions rapides, aux points essentiels, pour aussitôt s'échapper en divagations d'ironie douloureuse. Je lui donnais parfois la réplique afin de l'arrêter dans un geste en lumière ou d'attirer

son regard et son visage vers le chevalet. Pas un instant Carrière ne cessa de travailler. Verlaine partit, je crois bien, sans l'avoir aperçu.

And as I read over this narrative, by the man who first took me to see Verlaine, the scenes come back to me, in Paris and London, and I see Verlaine again. That is just how he talked, "regardless of listeners," or accepting a listener as necessarily a friend and a diviner. I remember how he would sit on my sofa in Fountain Court, and for hours together never cease talking, in a kind of feverish and broken monologue, with pauses, interruptions, outbursts of gaiety, and clamors of rage at something remembered and lived over again; sometimes with half-shut eyes and in an indistinct murmur; sometimes in shouts and with eager gestures; sometimes dropping into English, with some point of humorous emphasis. His face was a tragic mask, grotesque and flexible, through which he seemed to speak as if always in action; something never at rest peered out of the wild crannies of the eyes and out of the weak, exorbitant mouth and out of the bare and rock-like head. I have seen all the deadly sins march in order over his face, and leave it washed and empty for the virtues. When he talked he lived with the same subtle and uneasy vitality with which he lived when he wrote, but without concentration, for it was only in his verse that he could command himself. It was all a confession, and it remembered and repeated everything, with infinite self-pity, yet not without a consciousness of the justice of things. He forgot none of his own sins, nor of the sins of others against him; and he told them over as if only these intimate things mattered. A gross gaiety would come in at times and set him chuckling ignobly; and then an old enthusiasm would possess him, or an old pity lull him into gravity. He would talk of Rimbaud, of his wife, of his son; of the women, neither young nor comely, for whom he wrote the *Odes en son Honneur* and the *Chansons pour Elle*, in which we seem to hear Villon. He lamented with fierce lamentations his poverty and his bodily sickness; he could never forget them nor accustom himself to them: "*Doucement farouche, émergeant de l'ombre d'un invisible et réel Calvaire.*" Morice sees his head in Carrière's great picture; and so I saw it in my little room in the Temple, and in cafés and garrets and hospitals in Paris, and can see it now whenever I think of it.

Daily I come to think him greater: a greater poet, a more wonderful man. I see now how what seemed trivial in him, or uncouth, or ignoble, was a part of that simple and sincere nature to which choice among moods, or conviction after

experience, were equally impossible. All that was gentle and brutal in him had its place in the one poet of our day who has given equally exact expression to flesh and spirit, to what we gratuitously call the worse and better side of ourselves. He had vices, because he included everything that sensation can become, vice as well as virtue. He was abnormal, but that was because he included what was abnormal as well as what was normal. He was human "without prejudice," and set no bounds to any passion, not even to love. And out of disorder, disturbance, a life that seemed to be jangled hopelessly out of tune, it was not only in his poetry that he made a final harmony, but even in his sleepy and savage face, in which none of the lines had beauty. There is a passage in Balzac (Balzac has said everything) which seems to sum up, and even elucidate, the matter. He says:

Si vous observez avec soin les belles figures des philosophes antiques, vous y apercevrez toujours les déviations du type parfait de la figure humaine auxquelles chaque physionomie doit son originalité, rectifiée par l'habitude de la méditation, par le calme constant nécessaire aux travaux intellectuels. Les visages les plus tourmentés, comme celui de Socrate, deviennent à la longue d'une sérénité presque divine.

Only a few people ever saw (Carrière saw it) that almost divine serenity in the face of Verlaine.

I remember little of what Verlaine said on the night I first met him in the café. He realized at once that I wanted to know exactly what he was, and in the interval of general talk about books and poets (in which Moréas, who was there, asked me what was the longest verse in English: "I have written verses of twenty syllables! Verlaine has stopped at—" I forget the number) Verlaine would tell over the incidents in his life to me, as if he were repeating curious things which had happened to other people and which might interest one. He told me about Rimbaud, about his quarrel with him, and his imprisonment, in a kind of good-humored and impersonal way. He was eager to show his knowledge of England, and told me of when he had been in London, in Bournemouth, in Leamington, in Stickney, where he had taught English, he said, to small boys. He said, jovially, "*Je suis un Roman Catholique,*" but praised the London Sunday and the services of the English Church. The French Sunday, he said, was "*assommant,*" but the English, though "*triste,*" was so religious, and he seemed to pull an imaginary bell-rope. Sometimes he would use English words, words of gross slang, which he chuckled to have remembered.

He asked me to come and see him the next night, and he wrote his name and address very carefully in pencil on the back of one of my cards: "Paul Verlaine, Hôtel des Mines, 125, Bd. St.-Michel, Chambre No. 4." He named an hour, and when I got there, not too long after it, and asked the concierge if No. 4 was at home, she looked at me grimly, jerked her head away, and said, "*Non, Monsieur, il n'est pas ici.*" I turned and walked slowly down the boulevard, and had not got far before I saw him coming slowly up, leaning on the arm of an honest-looking, little, shabby man who seemed to be always looking after him. I lifted my hat. He bowed, and began to talk to me quite at random, not remembering who I was or what I wanted. He would say the same thing over and over again with increasing emphasis, an emphasis that became terrible when he had been drinking too long. Suddenly he remembered, and asked me to come in. The little man got the key and candle and led the way. We crossed a court and began to climb a narrow staircase. Verlaine mounted step by step, haltingly; and he would stop on the stairs to apologize for keeping us so long on the way. The room was small and mean, but quite decent; the few things in it were in disorder. There were a few books on the chest of drawers—a Bible and a few of his own books—and on the wall over it were several pencil and chalk sketches of himself. The little man lit two more candles, and Verlaine confided to me, in a deep whisper, that he had just been getting some money. "I have got money. I will have pleasure, pleasure, pleasure," he repeated, slowly, in his difficult, accentuated English, every word a hoarse jerk. He took out his purse and opened it; there was very little in it. There was a knock at the door, and a young man came in, incredibly tall and thin and youthful, with a tired gray look in his eyes; he was an artist, Fernand Langlois, whom I had seen at the café. He sat down on the bed. The little man perched himself on the chest of drawers. Verlaine gave me a chair and began to walk up and down the room. He said he must have some rum: he thought it was an English drink and that I should like it, and he counted out some of the money in his purse to the little man, who came back presently with a bottle of rum and some glasses. Langlois curled himself upon the bed, and said that he must have his rum neat, as he had the toothache. Verlaine grumbled, but at last gave in. At last he sat down and began to talk, while we all sipped rum and smoked cigarettes. He drank very slowly, often raising the glass half-way to his lips and holding it there until he had

finished a sentence or a string of them, and sometimes he forgot to drink it and put it down untasted. I suppose he drank somewhat consecutively: I never saw him drink very much at one sitting. His talk dropped every now and then into English, and I can recall the droll accent with which he quoted "To be or not to be." He spoke, as he had the night before, of his admiration of Tennyson, and he showed me his Bible (the only Bible I ever saw in Paris) with a sort of maudlin admiration, patting it, turning it over, pointing out the name of the translator, assuring me that it was an excellent book, and that he was himself a religious man. "*Je suis Catholique*," he repeated over and over again; "*mais—Catholique du moyen-âge.*"

His talk all through the evening was argumentative and explosive; he was restless, vague, and his face worked frantically. At last there was another knock at the door, and more young men came in. Then Verlaine said he must go out—he had some business; he was going to see a debtor, he said. I said good-by; there were all manner of compliments on both sides, and the little man lighted me down the dark stairs with a candle.

From that time I used to see Verlaine at intervals year by year in streets, cafés, and hospitals, and finally in London; and the better I knew him the easier it was for me to think of him apart from all the sordid trouble of his daily life, as he was in a heart and soul that were as rare and honest as the heart and soul of any great man of our time. His last years were spent in a vagabondage not altogether that of his own choice: he had other instincts than those of the vagabond, but the circumstances of his life, acting on the weakness of a will at the mercy of every circumstance, left him no choice. I did not like many of the people in whose company I met him, but to see them about him was to realize all the difference between him and them. And, among many who were worthless, were there not others who were the enthusiasts of ideas, and did not their follies bubble up out of a drunkenness at least as much spiritual as material?

Few of the idealists I have known have been virtuous—that is to say, they have chosen their virtues after a somewhat haphazard plan of their own; some of them have loved absinthe, others dirt, all idleness; but why expect everything at once? Have we, who lack ideas and ideals, enough of the solid virtues to put into the balance against these weighty abstractions? I only ask the question; but I persist in thinking that we have still a great deal to learn from Paris, and especially on matters of the higher morality.

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