PAUL VERLAINE

I

A FIRST SIGHT OF VERLAINE

THREE years ago my thoughts were a good deal occupied by the theories and experiments which a section of the younger French poets were engaged upon. In this country, the Symbolists and Decadents of Paris had been laughed at and parodied, but, with the exception of Mr. Arthur Symons, no English critic had given their *tentatives* any serious attention. I became much interested—not wholly converted, certainly, but considerably impressed—as I studied, not what was said about them by their enemies, but what they wrote themselves. Among them all, there was but one, M. Mallarmé, whom I knew personally; him I had met, more than twenty years before, carrying the vast folio of his Manet-Poe through the length and breadth of London, disappointed but not discouraged. I learned that there were certain haunts where these later Decadents might be observed in large numbers, drawn together by the gregarious attraction of verse. I determined to haunt that neighbourhood with a butterfly-net, and see what delicate creatures with powdery wings I could catch. And, above all, was it not understood that that vaster lepidopter, that giant hawk-moth, Paul Verlaine, uncoiled his proboscis in the same absinthe-corollas?

Timidity, doubtless, would have brought the scheme to naught, if, unfolding it to Mr. Henry Harland, who knows his Paris like the palm of his hand, he had not, with enthusiastic kindness, offered to become my cicerone. He was far from sharing my interest in the Symbolo-decadent movement, and the ideas of the "poètes abscons comme la lune" left him a little cold, yet he entered at once into the sport of the idea. To race up and down the Boulevard St. Michel, catching live poets in shoals, what a charming game! So, with a beating heart and under this gallant guidance, I started on a beautiful April morning to try my luck as an entomologist. This is not the occasion to speak of the butterflies which we successfully captured during this and the following days and nights; the expedition was a great success.

But, all the time, the hope of capturing that really substantial moth, Verlaine, was uppermost, and this is how it was realized.

As everyone knows, the broad Boulevard St. Michel runs almost due south from the Palais de Justice to the Gardens of the Luxembourg. Through the greater part of its course, it is principally (so it strikes one) composed of restaurants and brasseries, rather dull in the day-time, excessively blazing and gay at night. To the critical entomologist the eastern side of this street is known as the chief, indeed almost the only habitat of *poeta symbolans*, which, however, occurs here in vast numbers. Each of the leaders of a school has his particular café, where he is to be found at an hour and in a chair known to the *habitués* of the place. So Dryden sat at Will's and Addison at Button's, when chocolate and ratafia, I suppose, took the place of absinthe. M. Jean Moréas sits in great circumstance at the Restaurant d'Harcourt—or he did three years ago—and there I enjoyed much surprising and stimulating conversation. But Verlaine—where was he? At his café, the François-Premier, we were told that he had not been seen for four days. "There is a letter for him—he must be ill," said Madame; and we felt what the tiger-hunter feels when the tiger has gone to visit a friend in another valley. But to persist is to succeed.

The last of three days devoted to this fascinating sport had arrived. I had seen Symbolists and Decadents to my heart's content. I had learned that Victor Hugo was not a poet at all, and that M. Vielé-Griffin was a splendid bard; I had discovered that neither Victor Hugo nor M. Vielé-Griffin had a spark of talent, but that M. Charles Morice was the real Simon Pure. I had heard a great many conflicting opinions stated without hesitation and with a delightful violence; I had heard a great many verses recited which I did not understand because I was a foreigner, and could not have understood if I had been a Frenchman. I had quaffed a number of highly indigestible drinks, and had enjoyed myself very much. But I had not seen Verlaine, and poor Mr. Harland was in despair. We invited some of the poets to dine with us that night (this is the etiquette of the "Boul' Mich'") at the Restaurant d'Harcourt, and a very entertaining meal we had. M. Moréas was in the chair, and a poetess with a charming name decorated us all with sprays of the *narcissus poeticus*. I suppose that the company was what is called "a little mixed," but I am sure it was very lyrical. I had the honour of giving my arm to a most amiable lady, the Queen of Golconda, whose precise rank among the crowned heads of Europe is, I am afraid, but vaguely determined. The dinner was simple, but distinctly good; the chairman was in magnificent form, *un vrai chef d'école*, and between each of the courses somebody intoned

his own verses at the top of his voice. The windows were wide open on to the Boulevard, but there was no public expression of surprise.

It was all excessively amusing, but deep down in my consciousness, tolling like a little bell, there continued to sound the words, "We haven't seen Verlaine." I confessed as much at last to the sovereign of Golconda, and she was graciously pleased to say that she would make a great effort. She was kind enough, I believe, to send out a sort of search-party. Meanwhile, we adjourned to another café, to drink other things, and our company grew like a rolling snowball. I was losing all hope, and we were descending the Boulevard, our faces set for home; the Queen of Golconda was hanging heavily on my arm, and having formed a flattering misconception as to my age, was warning me against the temptations of Paris, when two more poets, a male and a female, most amiably hurried to meet us with the intoxicating news that Verlaine had been seen to dart into a little place called the Café Soleil d'Or. Thither we accordingly hied, buoyed up by hope, and our party, now containing a dozen persons (all poets), rushed into an almost empty drinking-shop. But no Verlaine was to be seen. M. Moréas then collected us round a table, and fresh grenadines were ordered.

Where I sat, by the elbow of M. Moréas, I was opposite an open door, absolutely dark, leading down, by oblique stairs, to a cellar. As I idly watched this square of blackness I suddenly saw some ghostly shape fluttering at the bottom of it. It took the form of a strange bald head, bobbing close to the ground. Although it was so dim and vague, an idea crossed my mind. Not daring to speak, I touched M. Moréas, and so drew his attention to it. "Pas un mot, pas un geste, Monsieur!" he whispered, and then, instructed in the guile of his race, *insidias Danaûm*, the eminent author of "Les Cantilènes" rose, making a vague detour towards the street, and then plunged at the cellar door. There was a prolonged scuffle and a rolling down stairs; then M. Moréas re-appeared, triumphant; behind him something flopped up out of the darkness like an owl,—a timid shambling figure in a soft black hat, with jerking hands, and it peeped with intention to disappear again. But there were cries of "Venez donc, Maître," and by-and-by Verlaine was persuaded to emerge definitely and to sit by me.

I had been prepared for strange eccentricities of garb, but he was very decently dressed; he referred at once to the fact, and explained that this was the suit which had been bought for him to lecture in, in Belgium. He was particularly proud of a real white shirt; "C'est ma chemise de conférence," he said, and shot out the cuffs of it with pardonable pride. He was full of his

experiences of Belgium, and in particular he said some very pretty things about Bruges and its *béguinages*, and how much he should like to spend the rest of his life there. Yet it seemed less the mediæval buildings which had attracted him than a museum of old lace. He spoke with a veiled utterance, difficult for me to follow. Not for an instant would he take off his hat, so that I could not see the Socratic dome of forehead which figures in all the caricatures. I thought his countenance very Chinese, and I may perhaps say here that when he was in London in 1894 I called him a Chinese philosopher. He replied: "Chinois—comme vous voulez, mais philosophe—non pas!"

On this first occasion (April 2, 1893), recitations were called for, and Verlaine repeated his "Clair de Lune":

"Votre âme est un paysage choisi
Que vont charmant masques et bergamasques
Jouant du luth et dansant et quasi
Tristes sous leurs déguisements fantasques."

He recited in a low voice, without gesticulation, very delicately. Then M. Moréas, in exactly the opposite manner, with roarings of a bull and with modulated sawings of the air with his hand, intoned an eclogue addressed by himself to Verlaine as "Tityre." And so the exciting evening closed, the passionate shepherd in question presently disappearing again down those mysterious stairs. And we, out into the soft April night and the budding smell of the trees.

EDMUND GOSSE.