

II

VERLAINE IN 1894

In the spring of 1894 I received a note in English, inviting me to "coffee and cigarettes plentifully," and signed "yours quite cheerfully, Paul Verlaine." I found him in a little room at the top of a tenement house in the Rue St. Jacques, sitting in an easy chair, with his bad leg swaddled in many bandages. He asked me, and in English, for I had explained the poverty of my French, if I knew Paris well, and added, pointing to his leg, that it had "scorched" his leg, for he knew it "well, too well," and lived in it like "a fly in a pot of marmalade;" and taking up an English dictionary, one of the very few books in his room, began searching for the name of the disease, selecting, after much labour, and with, I understand, imperfect accuracy, "erysipelas." Meanwhile, his homely and middle-aged mistress, who had been busy when I came, in dusting, or in some other housewife fashion, had found the cigarettes, and made excellent coffee. She had obviously given the room most of its character: her canary birds, of which there were several cages, kept up an intermittent tumult in the open window, and her sentimental chromolithographs scattered themselves among the nude drawings, and the caricatures of himself as a monkey, which M. Verlaine had torn out of the papers and pinned against the wall. She handed me a match to light my cigarette, with the remark, in English, "A bad match, a French match," and I saw by the way her face lighted up when my reply, "They have the best matches in England, but you have the best poets," was translated to her, that she was proud of her ungainly lover. While we were drinking our coffee she drew a box towards the fire for a singular visitor, a man, who was nicknamed Louis XI., M. Verlaine explained, because of a close resemblance, and who had not shaved for a week, and kept his trousers on with a belt of string or thin rope, and wore an opera hat, which he set upon his knee, and kept shoving up and down continually while M. Verlaine talked. M. Verlaine talked of Shakespeare, whom he admired, with the reservations of his article in the "Fortnightly"; of Maeterlinck, who was "a dear good fellow," but in his work "a little bit of a mountebank"; of Hugo, who was "a volcano of mud as well as of flame," but always, though "not good enough for the young messieurs," a supreme poet; and of Villiers de l'Isle Adam, who was "exalté," but wrote "the most excellent French," and whose "Axël" he interpreted, and somewhat narrowly, as I could but think, as meaning that love

was the only important thing in the world ; and of "In Memoriam," which he had tried to translate and could not, because "Tennyson was too noble, too *Anglais*, and when he should have been broken-hearted had many reminiscences."

No matter what he talked of, there was in his voice, in his face, or in his words, something of the "voluminous tenderness" which Mr. Bain has called, I believe, "the basis of all immorality," and of the joyous serenity and untroubled perception of those who commune with spiritual ideas. One felt always that he was a great temperament, the servant of a great daimon, and fancied, as one listened to his vehement sentences that his temperament, his daimon, had been made uncontrollable that he might live the life needful for its perfect expression in art, and yet escape the bonfire. To remember him is to understand the futility of writing and thinking, as we commonly do, as if the ideal world were the perfection of ours, a blossom rooted in our clay ; and of being content to measure those who announce its commandments and its beauty by their obedience to our laws ; and of missing the wisdom of the Hebrew saying, "He who sees Jehovah dies." The ideal world, when it opens its fountains, dissolves by its mysterious excitement in this man sanity, which is but the art of understanding the mechanical world, and in this man morality, which is but the art of living there with comfort ; and, seeing this, we grow angry and forget that the Incarnation has none the less need of our reverence because it has taken place in a manger of the dim passions, or bring perhaps our frankincense and myrrh in secret, lest a little truth madden our world.

W. B. YEATS.