When I am King

By Henry Harland

"*Qu'y faire, mon Dieu, qu'y faire?*"

I HAD wandered into a tangle of slummy streets, and began to think it time to inquire my way back to the hotel; then, turning a corner, I came out upon the quays. At one hand there was the open night, with the dim forms of many ships, and stars hanging in a web of masts and cordage; at the other, the garish illumination of a row of public-houses: *Au Bonheur du Matelot*, *Café de la Marine*, *Brasserie des Quatre Vents*, and so forth; rowdy-looking shops enough, designed for the entertainment of the forecastle. But they seemed to promise something in the nature of local colour; and I entered the *Brasserie des Quatre Vents*.

It proved to be a *brasserie-à-femmes;* you were waited upon by ladies, lavishly rouged and in regardless toilets, who would sit with you and chat, and partake of refreshments at your expense. The front part of the room was filled up with tables, where half a hundred customers, talking at the top of their voices, raised a horrid din—sailors, soldiers, a few who might be clerks or tradesmen, and an occasional workman in his blouse. Beyond, there was a cleared space, reserved for dancing, occupied by a dozen couples,

couples, clumsily toeing it; and on a platform, at the far end, a man pounded a piano. All this in an atmosphere hot as a furnace-blast, and poisonous with the fumes of gas, the smells of bad tobacco, of musk, alcohol, and humanity.

The musician faced away from the company, so that only his shoulders and the back of his grey head were visible, bent over his keyboard. It was sad to see a grey head in that situation; and one wondered what had brought it there, what story of vice or weakness or evil fortune. Though his instrument was harsh, and he had to bang it violently to be heard above the roar of conversation, the man played with a kind of cleverness, and with certain fugitive suggestions of good style. He had once studied an art, and had hopes and aspirations, who now, in his age, was come to serve the revels of a set of drunken sailors, in a disreputable tavern, where they danced with prostitutes. I don't know why, but from the first he drew my attention; and I left my handmaid to count her charms neglected, while I sat and watched him, speculating about him in a melancholy way, with a sort of vicarious shame.

But presently something happened to make me forget him—something of his own doing. A dance had ended, and after a breathing spell he began to play an interlude. It was an instance of how tunes, like perfumes, have the power to wake sleeping memories. The tune he was playing now, simple and dreamy like a lullaby, and strangely at variance with the surroundings, whisked me off in a twinkling, far from the actual—ten, fifteen years backwards—to my student life in Paris, and set me to thinking, as I had not thought for many a long day, of my hero, friend, and comrade, Edmund Pair; for it was a tune of Pair's composition, a melody he had written to a nursery rhyme, and used to sing a good deal, half in fun, half in earnest, to his lady-love, Godelinette:

"Lavender's blue, diddle-diddle,
Lavender's green ;
When I am king, diddle-diddle,
You shall be queen."

It is certain he meant very seriously that if he ever came into his kingdom Godelinette should be queen. The song had been printed, but, so far as I knew, had never had much vogue ; and it seemed an odd chance that this evening, in a French seaport town where I was passing a single night, I should stray by hazard into a sailors' pothouse and hear it again.

Edmund Pair lived in the Latin Quarter when I did, but he was no longer a mere student. He had published a good many songs ; articles had been written about them in the newspapers ; and at his rooms you would meet the men who had "arrived"—actors, painters, musicians, authors, and now and then a politician—who thus recognised him as more or less one of themselves. Everybody liked him ; everybody said, "He is splendidly gifted ; he will go far." A few of us already addressed him, half-playfully perhaps, as *cher maître*.

He was three or four years older than I—eight or nine and twenty to my twenty-five—and I was still in the schools ; but for all that we were great chums. Quite apart from his special talent, he was a remarkable man—amusing in talk, good-looking, generous, affectionate. He had read ; he had travelled ; he had hob-and-nobbed with all sorts and conditions of people. He had wit, imagination, humour, and a voice that made whatever he said a cordial to the ear. For myself I admired him, enjoyed him, loved him, with equal fervour ; he had all of my hero-worship and the lion's share of my friendship ; perhaps I was vain as well as glad to be distinguished by his intimacy. We used to spend two or three

three evenings a week together, at his place or at mine, or over the table of a café, talking till the small hours—Elysian sessions, at which we smoked more cigarettes and emptied more *bocks* than I should care to count. On Sundays and holidays we would take long walks arm-in-arm in the Bois, or, accompanied by Godelinette, go to Viroflay or Fontainebleau, lunch in the open, bedeck our hats with wildflowers, and romp like children. He was tall and slender, with dark waving hair, a delicate aquiline profile, a clear brown skin, and grey eyes, alert, intelligent, kindly. I fancy the Boulevard St. Michel, flooded with sunshine, broken here and there by long crisp shadows ; trams and omnibuses toiling up the hill, tooting their horns ; students and *étudiantes* sauntering gaily backwards and forwards on the *trottoir ;* an odour of asphalte, of caporal tobacco ; myself one of the multitude on the terrace of a café ; and Edmund and Godelinette coming to join me—he with his swinging stride, a gesture of salutation, a laughing face ; she in the freshest of bright-coloured spring toilets : I fancy this, and it seems an adventure of the golden age. Then we would drink our *apéritifs*, our Turin bitter, perhaps our absinthe, and go off to dine together in the garden at Lavenue's.

Godelinette was a child of the people, but Pair had done wonders by way of civilising her. She had learned English, and prattled it with an accent so quaint and sprightly as to give point to her otherwise perhaps somewhat commonplace observations. She was fond of reading ; she could play a little ; she was an excellent housewife, and generally a very good-natured and quite presentable little person. She was Parisian and adaptable. To meet her, you would never have suspected her origin ; you would have found it hard to believe that she had been the wife of a drunken tailor, who used to beat her. One January night, four or five years before, Pair had surprised this gentleman publicly

pummelling

pummelling her in the Rue Gay-Lussac. He hastened to remonstrate ; and the husband went off, hiccoughing of his outraged rights, and calling the universe to witness that he would have the law of the meddling stranger. Pair picked the girl up (she was scarcely eighteen then, and had only been married a sixmonth), he picked her up from where she had fallen, half fainting, on the pavement, carried her to his lodgings, which were at hand, and sent for a doctor. In his manuscript-littered study for rather more than nine weeks she lay on a bed of fever, the consequence of blows, exhaustion, and exposure. When she got well there was no talk of her leaving. Pair couldn't let her go back to her tailor ; he couldn't turn her into the streets. Besides, during the months that he had nursed her, he had somehow conceived a great tenderness for her ; it made his heart burn with grief and anger to think of what she had suffered in the past, and he yearned to sustain and protect and comfort her for the future. This perhaps was no more than natural ; but, what rather upset the calculations of his friends, she, towards whom he had established himself in the relation of a benefactor, bore him, instead of a grudge therefor, a passionate gratitude and affection. So, Pair said, they were only waiting till her tailor should drink himself to death, to get married; and meanwhile, he exacted for her all the respect that would have been due to his wife ; and everybody called her by his name. She was a pretty little thing, very daintily formed, with tiny hands and feet, and big gipsyish brown eyes ; and very delicate, very fragile—she looked as if anything might carry her off. Her name, Godeleine, seeming much too grand and mediæval for so small and actual a person, Pair had turned it into Godelinette.

We all said, "He is splendidly gifted ; he will do great things." He had studied at Cambridge and at Leipsic before coming to Paris. He was learned, enlightened, and extremely modern ; he was

was a hard worker. We said he would do great things ; but I thought in those days, and indeed I still think—and, what is more to the purpose, men who were themselves musicians and composers, men whose names are known, were before me in thinking—that he had already done great things, that the songs he had already published were achievements. They seemed to us original in conception, accomplished and felicitous in treatment ; they were full of melody and movement, full of harmonic surprises ; they had style and they had "go." One would have imagined they must please at once the cultivated and the general public. I could never understand why they weren't popular. They would be printed ; they would be praised at length, and under distinguished signatures, in the reviews ; they would enjoy an unusual success of approbation ; but—they wouldn't *sell*, and they wouldn't get themselves sung at concerts. If they had been too good, if they had been over the heads of people—but they weren't. Plenty of work quite as good, quite as modern, yet no whit more tuneful or interesting, was making its authors rich. We couldn't understand it, we had to conclude it was a fluke, a question of chance, of accident. Pair was still a very young man ; he must go on knocking, and some day—to-morrow, next week, next year, but some day certainly—the door of public favour would be opened to him. Meanwhile his position was by no means an unenviable one, goodness knows. To have your orbit in the art world of Paris, and to be recognised there as a star ; to be written about in the *Revue des Deux-Mondes ;* to possess the friendship of the masters, to know that they believe in you, to hear them prophesy, "He will do great things"—all that is something, even if your wares don't "take on" in the market-place.

"It's a good job, though, that I haven't got to live by them," Pair said ; and there indeed he touched a salient point. His

people

people were dead; his father had been a younger son; he had no money of his own. But his father's elder brother, a squire in Hampshire, made him rather a liberal allowance, something like six hundred a year, I believe, which was opulence in the Latin Quarter. Now, the squire had been aware of Pair's relation with Godelinette from its inception, and had not disapproved. On his visits to Paris he had dined with them, given them dinners, and treated her with the utmost complaisance. But when, one fine morning, her tailor died, and my quixotic friend announced his intention of marrying her, *dans les délais légaux*, the squire protested. I think I read the whole correspondence, and I remember that in the beginning the elder man took the tone of paradox and banter. "Behave dishonourably, my dear fellow. I have winked at your mistress heretofore, because boys will be boys; but it is the *man* who marries. And, anyhow, a woman is so much more interesting in a false position." But he soon became serious, presently furious, and, when the marriage was an accomplished fact, cut off the funds.

"Never mind, my dear," said Pair. "We will go to London and seek our fortune. We will write the songs of the people, and let who will make the laws. We will grow rich and famous, and

'When I am king, diddle-diddle,
You shall be queen!'"

So they went to London to seek their fortune, and—that was the last I ever saw of them, nearly the last I heard. I had two letters from Pair, written within a month of their hegira—gossipy, light-hearted letters, describing the people they were meeting, reporting Godelinette's quaint observations upon England and English things, explaining his hopes, his intentions, all very

confidently—and then I had no more. I wrote again, and still again, till, getting no answer, of course I ceased to write. I was hurt and puzzled; but in the spring we should meet in London, and could have it out. When the spring came, however, my plans were altered: I had to go to America. I went by way of Havre, expecting to stay six weeks, and was gone six years.

On my return to England I said to people, "You have a brilliant young composer named Pair. Can you put me in the way of procuring his address?" The fortune he had come to seek he would surely have found; he would be a known man. But people looked blank, and declared they had never heard of him. I applied to music-publishers—with the same result. I wrote to his uncle in Hampshire; the squire did not reply. When I reached Paris I inquired of our friends there; they were as ignorant as I. "He must be dead," I concluded. "If he had lived, it is impossible we should not have heard of him." And I wondered what had become of Godelinette.

Then another eight or ten years passed, and now, in a water-side public at Bordeaux, an obscure old pianist was playing Pair's setting of "Lavender's blue," and stirring a hundred bitter-sweet far-away memories of my friend. It was as if fifteen years were erased from my life. The face of Godelinette was palpable before me—pale, with its sad little smile, its bright appealing eyes. Edmund might have been smoking across the table—I could hear his voice, I could have put out my hand and touched him. And all round me were the streets, the lights, the smells, the busy youthful *va-et-vient* of the Latin Quarter; and in my heart the yearning, half joy and all despair and anguish, with which we think of the old days when we were young, of how real and dear they were, of how irrecoverable they are.

And then the music stopped, the Brasserie des Quatre Vents became

became a glaring reality, and the painted female sipping *eau-de-vie* at my elbow remarked plaintively, "Tu n'es pas rigolo, toi. Vieux-tu faire une valse?"

"I must speak to your musician," I said. "Excuse me."

He had played a bit of Pair's music. It was one chance in a thousand, but I wanted to ask him whether he could tell me anything about the composer. So I penetrated to the bottom of the shop, and approached his platform. He was bending over some sheets of music—making his next selection, doubtless.

"I beg your pardon——" I began.

He turned towards me. You will not be surprised—I was looking into Pair's own face.

You will not be surprised, but you will imagine what it was for me. Oh, yes, I recognised him instantly; there could be no mistake. And he recognised me, for he flushed, and winced, and started back.

I suppose for a little while we were both of us speechless, speechless and motionless, while our hearts stopped beating. By-and-by I think I said—something had to be said to break the situation—I think I said, "It's you, Edmund?" I remember he fumbled with a sheet of music, and kept his eyes bent on it, and muttered something inarticulate. Then there was another speechless, helpless suspension. He continued to fumble his music, without looking up. At last I remember saying, through a sort of sickness and giddiness, "Let us get out of here—where we can talk."

"I can't leave yet. I've got another dance," he answered.

"Well, I'll wait," said I.

I sat down near him and waited, trying to create some kind of order

order out of the chaos in my mind, and half automatically watching and considering him as he played his dance—Edmund Pair playing a dance for prostitutes and drunken sailors. He was not greatly changed. There were the same grey eyes, deep-set and wide apart, under the same broad forehead; the same fine nose and chin, the same sensitive mouth. The whole face was pretty much the same, only thinner perhaps, and with a look of apathy, of inanimation, that was foreign to my recollection of it. His hair had turned quite white, but otherwise he appeared no older than his years. His figure, tall, slender, well-knit, retained its vigour and its distinction. Though he wore a shabby brown Norfolk jacket, and his beard was two days old, you could in no circumstances have taken him for anything but a gentleman. I waited anxiously for the time when we should be alone—anxiously, yet with a sort of terror. I was burning to understand, and yet I shrunk from doing so. If to conjecture even vaguely what experiences could have brought him to this, what dark things suffered or done, had been melancholy when he was a nameless old musician, now it was appalling, and I dreaded the explanation that I longed to hear.

At last he struck his final chord, and rose from the piano. Then he turned to me and said, composedly enough, "Well, I'm ready." He, apparently, had in some measure pulled himself together. In the street he took my arm. "Let's walk in this direction," he said, leading off, "towards the Christian quarter of the town." And in a moment he went on: "This has been an odd meeting. What brings you to Bordeaux?"

I explained that I was on my way to Biarritz, stopping for the night between two trains.

"Then it's all the more surprising that you should have stumbled into the Brasserie des Quatre Vents. You've altered

very

very slightly. The world wags well with you? You look prosperous."

I cried out some incoherent protest. Afterwards I said, "You know what I want to hear. What does this mean?"

He laughed nervously. "Oh, the meaning's clear enough. It speaks for itself."

"I don't understand," said I.

"I'm pianist to the Brasserie des Quatre Vents. You saw me in the discharge of my duties."

"I don't understand," I repeated helplessly.

"And yet the inference is plain. What could have brought a man to such a pass save drink or evil courses?"

"Oh, don't trifle," I implored him.

"I'm not trifling. That's the worst of it. For I don't drink, and I'm not conscious of having pursued any especially evil courses."

"Well?" I questioned. "Well?"

"The fact of the matter simply is that I'm what they call a failure. I never came off."

"I don't understand," I repeated for a third time.

"No more do I, if you come to that. It's the will of Heaven, I suppose. Anyhow, it can't puzzle you more than it puzzles me. It seems contrary to the whole logic of circumstances, but it's the fact."

Thus far he had spoken listlessly, with a sort of bitter levity, an affectation of indifference; but after a little silence his mood appeared to change. His hand upon my arm tightened its grasp, and he began to speak rapidly, feelingly.

"Do you realise that it is nearly fifteen years since we have seen each other? The history of those fifteen years, so far as I am concerned, has been the history of a single uninterrupted *déveine*—one continuous run of ill-luck, against every probability of

of the game, against every effort I could make to play my cards effectively. When I started out, one might have thought, I had the best of chances. I had studied hard; I worked hard. I surely had as much general intelligence, as much special knowledge, as much apparent talent, as my competitors. And the stuff I produced seemed good to you, to my friends, and not wholly bad to me. It was musicianly, it was melodious, it was sincere; the critics all praised it; but—it never took on! The public wouldn't have it. What did it lack? I don't know. At last I couldn't even get it published—invisible ink! And I had a wife to support."

He paused for a minute; then: "You see," he said, "we made the mistake, when we were young, of believing, against wise authority, that it *was* in mortals to command success, that he could command it who deserved it. We believed that the race would be to the swift, the battle to the strong; that a man was responsible for his own destiny, that he'd get what he merited. We believed that honest labour couldn't go unrewarded. An immense mistake. Success is an affair of temperament, like faith, like love, like the colour of your hair. Oh, the old story about industry, resolution, and no vices! I was industrious, I was resolute, and I had no more than the common share of vices. But I had the unsuccessful temperament; and here I am. If my motives had been ignoble—but I can't see that they were. I wanted to earn a decent living; I wanted to justify my existence by doing something worthy of the world's acceptance. But the stars in their courses fought against me. I have tried hard to convince myself that the music I wrote was rubbish. It had its faults, no doubt. It wasn't great, it wasn't epoch-making. But, as music goes nowadays, it was jolly good. It was a jolly sight better than the average."

"Oh,

"Oh, that is certain, that is certain," I exclaimed, as he paused again.

"Well, anyhow, it didn't sell, and at last I couldn't even get it published. So then I tried to find other work. I tried everything. I tried to teach—harmony and the theory of composition. I couldn't get pupils. So few people want to study that sort of thing, and there were good masters already in the place. If I had known how to play, indeed! But I was never better than a fifth-rate executant; I had never gone in for that; my 'lay' was composition. I couldn't give piano lessons, I couldn't play in public—unless in a *gargotte* like the hole we have just left. Oh, I tried everything. I tried to get musical criticism to do for the newspapers. Surely I was competent to do musical criticism. But no—they wouldn't employ me. I had ill luck, ill luck, ill luck—nothing but ill luck, defeat, disappointment. Was it the will of Heaven? I wondered what unforgiveable sin I had committed to be punished so. Do you know what it is like to work and pray and wait, day after day, and watch day after day come and go and bring you nothing? Oh, I tasted the whole heart-sickness of hope deferred; Giant Despair was my constant bed-fellow."

"But—with your connections——" I began.

"Oh, my connections!" he cried. "There was the rub, London is the cruellest town in Europe. For sheer cold blood and heartlessness give Londoners the palm. I had connections enough for the first month or so, and then people found out things that didn't concern them. They found out some things that were true, and they imagined other things that were false. They wouldn't have my wife; they told the most infamous lies about her; and I wouldn't have *them.* Could I be civil to people who insulted and slandered *her?* I had no connections in London, except with the underworld. I got down to copying parts for theatrical

theatrical orchestras ; and working twelve hours a day, earned about thirty shillings a week."

"You might have come back to Paris."

"And fared worse. I couldn't have earned thirty pence in Paris. Mind you, the only trade I had learned was that of a musical composer ; and I couldn't compose music that people would buy. I should have starved as a copyist in Paris, where copyists are more numerous and worse paid. Teach there ? But to one competent master of harmony in London there are ten in Paris. No ; it was a hopeless case."

"It is incomprehensible—incomprehensible," said I.

"But wait—wait till you've heard the end. One would think I had had enough—not so ? One would think my cup of bitterness was full. No fear ! There was a stronger cup still a-brewing for me. When Fortune takes a grudge against a man, she never lets up. She exacts the uttermost farthing. I was pretty badly off, but I had one treasure left—I had Godelinette. I used to think that she was my compensation. I would say to myself, 'A fellow can't have all blessings. How can you expect others, when you've got her ?' And I would accuse myself of ingratitude for complaining of my unsuccess. Then she fell ill. My God, how I watched over, prayed over her ! It seemed impossible—I could not believe—that she would be taken from me. Yet, Harry, do you know what that poor child was thinking ? Do you know what her dying thoughts were—her wishes ? Throughout her long painful illness she was thinking that she was an obstacle in my way, a weight upon me ; that if it weren't for her, I should get on, have friends, a position ; that it would be a good thing for me if she should die ; and she was hoping in her poor little heart that she wouldn't get well ! Oh, I know it, I knew it—and you see me here alive. She let herself die for my sake—as if I could

care

care for anything without her! That's what brought us here, to France, to Bordeaux—her illness. The doctors said she must pass the spring out of England, away from the March winds, in the South; and I begged and borrowed money enough to take her. And we were on our way to Arcachon; but when we reached Bordeaux she was too ill to continue the journey, and—she died here."

We walked on for some distance in silence, then he added: "That was four years ago. You wonder why I live to tell you of it, why I haven't cut my throat. I don't know whether it's cowardice or conscientious scruples. It seems rather inconsequent to say that I believe in a God, doesn't it?—that I believe one's life is not one's own to make an end of? Anyhow, here I am, keeping body and soul together as musician to a *brasserie-à-femmes*. I can't go back to England, I can't leave Bordeaux—she's buried here. I've hunted high and low for work, and found it nowhere save in the *brasserie-à-femmes*. With that, and a little copying now and then, I manage to pay my way."

"But your uncle?" I asked.

"Do you think I would touch a penny of his money?" Pair retorted, almost fiercely. "It was he who began it. My wife let herself die. It was virtual suicide. It was he who created the situation that drove her to it."

"You are his heir, though, aren't you?"

"No, the estates are not entailed."

We had arrived at the door of my hotel. "Well, good-night and *bon voyage*," he said.

"You needn't wish me *bon voyage*," I answered. "Of course I'm not leaving Bordeaux for the present."

"Oh, yes, you are. You're going on to Biarritz to-morrow morning, as you intended."

And

And herewith began a long and most painful struggle. I could persuade him to accept no help of any sort from me. "What I can't do for myself," he declared, "I'll do without. My dear fellow, all that you propose is contrary to the laws of Nature. One man can't keep another—it's an impossible relation. And I won't be kept ; I won't be a burden. Besides, to tell you the truth, I've got past caring. The situation you find me in seems terrible to you ; to me it's no worse than another. You see, I'm hardened ; I've got past caring."

"At any rate," I insisted, "I shan't go on to Biarritz. I'll spend my holiday here, and we can see each other every day. What time shall we meet to-morrow ? "

"No, no, I can't meet you again. Don't ask me to ; you mean it kindly, I know, but you're mistaken. It's done me good to talk it all out to you, but I can't meet you again. I've got no heart for friendship, and—you remind me too keenly of many things."

"But if I come to the *brasserie* to-morrow night ? "

"Oh, if you do that, you'll oblige me to throw up my employment there, and hide from you. You must promise not to come again—you must respect my wishes."

"You're cruel, you know."

"Perhaps, perhaps. But I think I'm only reasonable. Anyhow, good-bye."

He shook my hand hurriedly, and moved off. What could I do ? I stood looking after him till he had vanished in the night, with a miserable baffled recognition of my helplessness to help him.