

Tirala-tirala . . .

By Henry Harland

I WONDER what the secret of it is—why that little fragment of a musical phrase has always had this instant, irresistible power to move me. The tune of which it formed a part I have never heard; whether it was a merry tune or a sad tune, a pretty tune or a stupid one, I have no means of guessing. A sequence of six notes, like six words taken from the middle of a sentence, it stands quite by itself, detached, fortuitous. If I were to pick it out for you on the piano, you would scoff at it; you would tell me that it is altogether pointless and unsuggestive—that any six notes, struck at haphazard, would signify as much. And I certainly could not, with the least show of reason, maintain the contrary. I could only wonder the more why it has always had, for me, this very singular charm. As when I was a child, so now, after all these years, it is a sort of talisman in my hands, a thing to conjure with. I have but to breathe it never so softly to myself, and (if I choose) the actual world melts away, and I am journeying on wings in dreamland. Whether I choose or not, it always thrills my heart with responsive echoes, it always wakes a sad, sweet emotion.

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I remember quite clearly the day when I first heard it; quite
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clearly, though it was more—oh, more than five-and-twenty years ago, and the days that went before and came after it have entirely lost their outlines, and merged into a vague golden blur. That day, too, as I look backwards, glows in the distance with a golden light ; and if I were to speak upon my impulse, I should vow it was a smiling day of June, clothed in sunshine and crowned with roses. But then, if I were to speak upon my impulse, I should vow that it was June at Saint-Graal the whole year round. When I stop to think, I remember that it was a rainy day, and that the ground was sprinkled with dead leaves. I remember standing at a window in my grandmother's room, and gazing out with rueful eyes. It rained doggedly, relentlessly—even, it seemed to me, defiantly, spitefully, as if it took a malicious pleasure in penning me up within doors. The mountains, the Pyrenees, a few miles to the south, were completely hidden by the veil of waters. The sodden leaves, brown patches on the lawn and in the pathways, struggled convulsively, like wounded birds, to fly from the gusts of wind, but fell back fluttering heavily. One could almost have touched the clouds, they hung so low, big ragged tufts of sad-coloured cotton-wool, blown rapidly through the air, just above the writhing tree-tops. Everywhere in the house there was a faint fragrance of burning wood : fires had been lighted to keep the dampness out.

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Indeed, if it had been a fair day, my adventure could scarcely have befallen. I should have been abroad, in the garden or the forest, playing with André, our farmer's son ; angling, with a bit of red worsted as bait, for frogs in the pond ; trying to catch lizards on the terrace ; lying under a tree with *Don Quixote* or *Le Capitaine Fracasse* ; visiting Manuela in her cottage ; or perhaps,
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best of all, spending the afternoon with H el ene, at Granjolaye. It was because the rain interdicted these methods of amusement that I betook myself for solace to *Constantinople*.

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I don't know why—I don't think any one knew why—that part of our house was called Constantinople ; but it had been called so from time immemorial, and we all accepted it as a matter of course. It was the topmost story of the East Wing—three rooms : one little room, by way of ante-chamber, into which you entered from a corkscrew staircase ; then another little room, at your left ; and then a big room, a long dim room, with only two windows, one at either end. And these rooms served as a sort of Hades for departed household gods. They were crowded, crowded to overflowing, with such wonderful old things ! Old furniture—old straight-backed chairs, old card-tables, with green cloth tops, and brass claws for feet, old desks and cabinets, the dismembered relics of old four-post bedsteads ; old clothes—old hats, boots, cloaks—green silk calashes, like bonnets meant for the ladies of Brobdingnag—and old hoop-petticoats, the skeletons of dead toilets ; old books, newspapers, pictures ; old lamps and candlesticks, clocks, fire-irons, vases ; an old sedan-chair ; old spurs, old swords, old guns and pistols : generations upon generations of superannuated utilities and vanities, slumbering in one another's shadows, under a common sheet of dust, and giving off a thin, penetrating, ancient smell.

When it rained, Constantinople was my ever-present refuge. It was a land of penumbra and mystery, a realm of perpetual wonderment, a mine of inexhaustible surprises. I never visited it without finding something new, without getting a sensation. One day, when Andr e was there with me, we both saw a ghost—
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yes, as plainly as at this moment I see the paper I'm writing on ; but I won't turn aside now to speak of that. And as for my finds, on two or three occasions, at least, they had more than a subjective metaphysical importance. The first was a chest filled with jewellery and trinkets, an iron chest, studded with nails, in size and shape like a small trunk, with a rounded lid. I dragged it out of a dark corner, from amidst a quantity of rubbish, and (it wasn't even locked !) fancy the eyes I made when I beheld its contents : half-a-dozen elaborately carved, high-backed tortoise-shell combs, ranged in a morocco case ; a beautiful old-fashioned watch, in the form of a miniature guitar ; an enamelled snuff-box ; and then no end of rings, brooches, buckles, seals, and watch-keys, set with precious stones—not *very* precious stones, perhaps—only garnets, amethysts, carnelians ; but mercy, how they glittered ! I ran off in great excitement to call my grandmother ; and she called my uncle Edmond ; and he, alas, applied the laws of seignioriness to the transaction, and I saw my trover appropriated. My other important finds were appropriated also, but about them I did not care so much—they were only papers. One was a certificate, dated in the Year III, and attesting that my grandfather's father had taken the oath of allegiance to the Republic. As I was a fierce Legitimist, this document afforded me but moderate satisfaction. The other was a Map of the World, covering a sheet of cardboard nearly a yard square, executed in pen-and-ink, but with such a complexity of hair-lines, delicate shading, and ornate lettering, that, until you had examined it closely, you would have thought it a carefully finished steel-engraving. It was signed " Herminie de Pontacq, 1814 " ; that is to say, by my grandmother herself, who in 1814 had been twelve years old ; dear me, only twelve years old ! It was delightful and marvellous to think that my own grandmother, in 1814, had been so industrious, and painstaking,
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and accomplished a little girl. I assure you, I felt almost as proud as if I had done it myself.

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The small room at the left of the ante-chamber was consecrated to the *roba* of an uncle of my grandfather's, who had been a sugar-planter in the province of New Orleans, in the reign of Louis XVI. He had also been a Colonel, and so the room was called the Colonel's room. Here were numberless mementoes of the South: great palm-leaf fans, conch-shells, and branches of coral, broad-brimmed hats of straw, monstrous white umbrellas, and, in a corner, a collection of long slender wands, ending in thick plumes of red and yellow feathers. These, I was informed, the sugar-planter's slaves, standing behind his chair, would flourish about his head, to warn off the importunate winged insects that abound *là-bas*. He had died at Paris in 1793, and of nothing more romantic than a malignant fever, foolish person, when he might so easily have been guillotined! (It was a matter of permanent regret with me that *none* of our family had been guillotined.) But his widow had survived him for more than forty years, and her my grandmother remembered perfectly. A fat old Spanish Créole lady, fat and very lazy—oh, but very lazy indeed. At any rate, she used to demand the queecest services of the negress who was in constant attendance upon her. “Nanette, Nanette, tourne tête à moi. Veux”—summon your fortitude—“veux cracher!” Ah, well, we are told, they made less case of such details in those robust old times. How would she have fared, poor soul, had she fallen amongst us squeamish decadents?

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It was into the Colonel's room that I turned to-day. There
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was a cupboard in its wall that I had never thoroughly examined. The lower shelves, indeed, I knew by heart ; they held, for the most part, empty medicine bottles. But the upper ones ?

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I pause for a moment, and the flavour of that far-away afternoon comes back fresher in my memory than yesterday's. I am perched on a chair, in the dim light of Constantinople, at Saint-Graal ; my nostrils are full of a musty, ancient smell ; I can hear the rain pat-pattering on the roof, the wind whistling at the window, and, faintly, in a distant quarter of the house, my cousin Elodie playing her exercises monotonously on the piano. I am balancing myself on tip-toe, craning my neck, with only one care, one pre-occupation, in the world—to get a survey of the top shelf of the closet in the Colonel's room. The next to the top, and the next below that, I already command ; they are vacant of everything save dust. But the top one is still above my head, and how to reach it seems a terribly vexed problem, of which, for a little while, motionless, with bent brows, I am rapt in meditation. And then, suddenly, I have an inspiration—I see my way.

It was not for nothing that my great-aunt Radigonde—(think of having had a great-aunt named Radigonde, and yet never having seen her ! She died before I was born—isn't Fate unkind ?)—it was not for nothing that my great-aunt Radigonde, from 1820 till its extinction in 1838, had subscribed to the *Revue Rose—La Revue Rose ; Echo du Bon Ton ; Miroir de la Mode ; paraissant tous les mois ; dirigée par une Dame du Monde* ; nor was it in vain, either, that my great-aunt Radigonde had had the annual volumes of this fashionable intelligencer bound. Three or four of them now, piled one above the other on my chair, lent me the altitude I needed ; and the top shelf yielded up its secret.

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It was an abominably dusty secret, and it was quite a business to wipe it off. Then I perceived that it was a box, a square box, about eighteen inches long and half as deep, made of polished mahogany, inlaid with scrolls and flourishes of satin-wood. Opened, it proved to be a dressing-case. It was lined with pink velvet and white brocaded silk. There was a looking-glass, in a pink velvet frame, with an edge of gold lace, that swung up on a hinged support of tarnished ormolu ; a sere and yellow looking-glass, that gave back a reluctant, filmy image of my face. There were half-a-dozen pear-shaped bottles, of wine-coloured glass, with tarnished gilt tops. There was a thing that looked like the paw of a small animal, the fur of which, at one end, was reddened, as if it had been rubbed in some red powder. The velvet straps that had once presumably held combs and brushes, had been despoiled by an earlier hand than mine ; but of two pockets in the lid the treasures were intact : a tortoise-shell housewife, containing a pair of scissors, a thimble, and a bodkin, and a tortoise-shell purse, each prettily incrustated with silver and lined with thin pink silk.

In front, between two of the gilt-topped bottles, an oval of pink velvet, with a tiny bird in ormolu perched upon it, was evidently movable—a cover to something. When I had lifted it, I saw, first, a little pane of glass, and then, through that, the brass cylinder and long steel comb of a musical box. Wasn't it an amiable conceit, whereby my lady should be entertained with tinkling harmonies the while her eyes and fingers were busied in the composition of her face ? Was it a frequent one in old dressing-cases ?

Oh, yes, the key was there—a gilt key, coquettishly decorated with a bow of pink ribbon ; and when I had wound the mechanism up, the cylinder, to my great relief, began to turn—to my relief, for I had feared that the spring might be broken, or something : springs are so apt to be broken in this disappointing world. The
cylinder

cylinder began to turn—but, alas, in silence, or almost in silence, emitting only a faintly audible, rusty gr-r-r-r, a sort of guttural grumble ; until, all at once, when I was least expecting it—tirala-tirala—it trilled out clearly, crisply, six silvery notes, and then relapsed into its rusty gr-r-r-r.

So it would go on and on until it ran down. A minute or two of creaking and croaking, hemming-and-hawing, as it were, whilst it cleared its old asthmatic throat, then a sudden silvery tirala-tirala, then a catch, a cough, and mutter-mutter-mutter. Or was it more like an old woman maundering in her sleep, who should suddenly quaver out a snatch from a ditty of her girlhood, and afterwards mumble incoherently again ?

I suppose the pin-points on the cylinder, all save just those six, were worn away ; or, possibly, those teeth of the steel comb were the only ones that retained elasticity enough to vibrate.

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A sequence of six notes, as inconclusive as six words plucked at random from the middle of a sentence ; as void of musical value as six such words would be of literary value. I wonder why it has always had this instant, irresistible power to move me. It has always been a talisman in my hands, a thing to conjure with. As when I was a child, so now, after twenty years, I have but to breathe it to myself, and, if I will, the actual world melts away, and I am journeying in dreamland. Whether I will or not, it always stirs a sad, sweet emotion in my heart. I wonder why. Tirala-tirala—I dare say, for another, any six notes, struck at haphazard, would signify as much. But for me—ah, if I could seize the sentiment it has for me, and translate it into English words, I should have achieved a sort of miracle. For me, it is the voice of a spirit, sighing something unutterable. It is an elixir, distilled
of

of unearthly things, six lucent drops ; I drink them, and I am transported into another atmosphere, and I see visions. It is Aladdin's lamp ; I touch it, and cloud-capped towers and gorgeous palaces are mine in the twinkling of an eye. It is my wishing-cap, my magic-carpet, my key to the Castle of Enchantment.

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The Castle of Enchantment. . . .

When I was a child the Castle of Enchantment meant—the Future ; the great mysterious Future, away, away there, beneath the uttermost horizon, where the sky is luminous with tints of rose and pearl ; the ineffable Future, when I should be grown-up, when I should be a Man, and when the world would be my garden, the world and life, and all their riches, mine to explore, to adventure in, to do as I pleased with ! The Future and the World, the real World, the World that lay beyond our village, beyond the Forest of Granjolaye, farther than Bayonne, farther even than Pau ; the World one read of and heard strange legends of : Paris, and Bagdad, and England, and Peru. Oh, how I longed to see it ; how hard it was to wait ; how desperately hard to think of the immense number of long years that must be worn through somehow, before it could come true.

But—tiralá-tiralá !—my little broken bar of music was a touchstone. At the sound of it, at the thought of it, the Present was spirited away ; Saint-Graal and all our countryside were left a thousand miles behind ; and the Future and the World opened their portals to me, and I wandered in them where I would. In a sort of trance, with wide eyes and bated breath, I wandered in them, through enraptured hours. Believe me, it was a Future, it was a World, of quite unstinted magnificence. My many-pinnacled Castle of Enchantment was built of gold and silver, ivory, alabaster,

baster, and mother-of-pearl ; the fountains in its courts ran with perfumed waters ; and its pleasure was an orchard of pomegranates—one had no need to spare one's colours. I dare say, too, that it was rather vague, wrapped in a good deal of roseate haze, and of an architecture that could scarcely have been reduced to ground-plans and elevations ; but what of that ? And oh, the people, the people by whom the World and the Future were inhabited, the cavalcading knights, the beautiful princesses ! And their virtues, and their graces, and their talents ! There were no ugly people, of course, no stupid people, no disagreeable people ; everybody was young and handsome, gallant, generous, and splendidly dressed. And everybody was astonishingly nice to me, and it never seemed to occur to anybody that I wasn't to have my own way in everything. And I had it. Love and wealth, glory, and all manner of romance—I had them for the wishing. The stars left their courses to fight for me. And the winds of heaven vied with each other to prosper my galleons.

To be sure, it was nothing more nor other than the day-dream of every child. But it happened that that little accidental fragment of a phrase of music had a quite peculiar power to send me off dreaming it.

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I suppose it must be that we pass the Castle of Enchantment while we are asleep. For surely, at first, it is before us—we are moving towards it ; we can see it shining in the distance ; we shall reach it to-morrow, next week, next year. And then—and then, one morning, we wake up, and lo ! it is behind us. We have passed it—we are sailing away from it—we can't turn back. We have passed the Castle of Enchantment ! And yet, it was only to reach it that we made our weary voyage, toiling through hardships
and

and perils and discouragements, forcing our impatient hearts to wait ; it was only the hope, the certain hope, of reaching it at last, that made our toiling and our waiting possible. And now—we have passed it. We are sailing away from it. We can't turn back. We can only *look* back—with the bitterness that every heart knows. If we look forward, what is there to see, save grey waters, and then a darkness that we fear to enter ?

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When I was a child, it was the great world and the future into which my talisman carried me, dreaming desirous dreams ; the great world, all gold and marble, peopled by beautiful princesses and cavalading knights ; the future, when I should be grown-up, when I should be a Man.

Well, I am grown-up now, and I have seen something of the great world—something of its gold and marble, its cavalading knights and beautiful princesses. But if I care to dream desirous dreams, I touch my talisman, and wish myself back in the little world of my childhood. Tiralá-tiralá—I breathe it softly, softly ; and the sentiment of my childhood comes and fills my room like a fragrance. I am at Saint-Graal again ; and my grandmother is seated at her window, knitting ; and André is bringing up the milk from the farm ; and my cousin Elodie is playing her exercises on the piano ; and Héléne and I are walking in the garden—Héléne in her short white frock, with a red sash, and her black hair loose down her back. All round us grow innumerable flowers, and innumerable birds are singing in the air, and the frogs are croaking, croaking in our pond. And farther off, the sun shines tranquilly on the chestnut trees of the Forest of Granjolaye ; and farther still, the Pyrenees gloom purple. . . . It is not much,
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perhaps it is not very wonderful ; but oh, how my heart yearns to recover it, how it aches to realise that it never can.

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In the Morning (says Paraschkine) the Eastern Rim of the Earth was piled high with Emeralds and Rubies, as if the Gods had massed their Riches there ; but he—ingenuous Pilgrim—who set forth to reach this Treasure-board, and to make the Gods' Riches his, seemed presently to have lost his Way ; he could no longer discern the faintest Glint of the Gems that had tempted him : until, in the Afternoon, chancing to turn his Head, he saw a bewildering Sight—the Emeralds and Rubies were behind him, immeasurably far behind, piled up in the West.

Where is the Castle of Enchantment ? *When* do we pass it ? Ah, well, thank goodness, we all have talismans (like my little broken bit of a forgotten tune) whereby we are enabled sometimes to visit it in spirit, and to lose ourselves during enraptured moments among its glistening, labyrinthine halls.