"HERE ARE LADIES" IN PARIS

By Joseph Gollomb

ON the stone rim of one of the two fountains that play where the Avenue de l'Opéra runs into the square in front of the Comédie Française, sat the chef's diminutive apprentice in his white turban, apron, and trousers, reading a book and looking unconsciously like a little joke on his master. The breeze wafted some of the spray over him and whisked showers of dry russet leaves about him from the maples overhead. But the boy was too deep in his book. His absorption in that square so full of life was a beautiful tribute to the serenity that Paris breathes through those who are of it. Then around the rim of the fountain sidled a midinette bent on mischief to the apprentice.

How often from my seat at one of the little round marble tables in front of the well beloved Café de la Régence I have seen her do just that thing. Today I knew exactly what she would do even before she herself knew. For, from my seat I could see which book it was the boy was reading, while as yet she could not. Had the cover shown the black and red of a witch's head I should have known that the boy had had a dream the night before and that in the book he was trying to find the key to it. In that case, too, the midinette would make a sudden dash at him, slap the book shut and pretend that she meant to duck the boy in the fountain. Whereupon he would lean far backward until he really made her believe that he was in danger of falling in. Then she would clutch him by the shoulders and struggle to save him and there would be a great commotion of scolding and laughter.

But today I saw that it was the other book he was reading, his master's notable work on the art of *pâtisserie* baking with special emphasis on sculpturing in whipped cream. As I happened to know, the boy was ambitious and considered his master also the world's master pastry artist; which I think perhaps he is, for on gala occasions I have appreciated his art. The girl also knew of the boy's ambition and she acted accordingly. When, bending forward to see, she noted what book he was reading, her expression changed and she too sat down on the rim of the fountain, to wait till he should have finished his study, meanwhile giving herself over to the Parisian delight in "regarding the world".

I had counted on the boy's being there, almost on the girl. I had even counted that at this, the sunset hour of the apéritif, there would be about us at the little tables in front of the Régence a plentiful gathering of actors and actresses from the Comédie Française and from other near by theatres, chatting of their day's life. I had not set the stage, of course, but what I had done was to introduce into this setting James Stephens, the author of "Here Are Ladies". He had been living in Paris five years and more and I wanted him, under the gentle urge of this setting, to chat and add to that delightful gallery of inimitable and whimsical feminine portraits.

At first I thought luck was with me. As we sat well in the midst of the little tables we heard the animated account of that day's sensational happening in the theatrical world rendered effectively by the heroine herself, a brunette with flashing eyes and a determined air. It seemed that her manager was a man altogether a tyrant and a stupid one besides. For, in her playing he insisted that she, who had taken second prize at the Conservatoire and played a whole season with the Comédie Française, should follow in her every gesture, look, and tone, to the last little nuance, *his* conception of how a young girl of gentle breeding at the delicate dawn of her first love would act. Insupportable, was it not? Well, that day she knew the time had come when matters must end and the manager must learn his lesson. So at the matinée performance, when she made her entrance for the great scene in which the girl in a long and dramatic speech denounces her fiancé for his treachery, the actress recited her first line, followed it up immediately with her last line, and walked calmly off the stage and out of the theatre, leaving an astounded world behind her. *Et, voilà!*

I looked at James Stephens, for I thought that like myself he had been listening. But you can never tell what this man's reaction will be by looking at him; and I do believe that if you guessed right he would see to it that he proved you wrong. A friend of his impatiently called him a gnome, because when the friend wanted him to be impish and sparkle Stephens promptly turned heavy and solemn. He is short and round shouldered, with a high worried forehead and a scrubby little incidental mustache. He wears his clothes as though if you suddenly asked him to describe them he couldn't do it. That morning he had evidently begun tying his bow tie but had been whisked off by some thought and had forgotten to finish the operation; so he let it be. His clear brown eyes come to life unexpectedly and as suddenly go away to follow heaven knows what impulse. There is also a good brogue in his Irishman's speech; a cruelly bitten and burned stubby pipe; and a stick with a leather thong.

"The degree of power accorded to the bard in Ireland in the eleventh century before the Christian era —", he began solemnly.

"Oh, come back to Paris", I insisted. "Here are ladies. Listen!"

At the table beside ours an ingénue player was talking. She spoke with a discernible lisp and that lisp was the great problem of her career. She was worried about it at that very moment.

"I know it will yet drive me mad", she was saying to her friends. "The managers of the boulevard theatres tell me, 'Suzanne, cultivate that lisp. The public likes it in an ingénue.' Then my teacher at the Conservatoire says, 'Mademoiselle, you have an imperfection in your speech. You must work hard and eliminate it. If you wish ever to play in the Comédie Française your rôles will be classic and a lisp will not be tolerated. When you have become great and the public speaks of you as *the* Suzanne, the critics will find that lisp charming. But you are not yet *the* Suzanne and the longer you retain your lisp the longer you will have to wait.' *Bon!* So I do exercises — oh, how they are *ennuyants!* — to get rid of the *th*. And a little I succeed. *Et puis alors*, I go to my English teacher, *chez* Berlitz, to learn my English. He is in despair. 'Miss Suzanne', he says. 'Do not dream that you will ever be able to play in English until you learn how to pronounce this sentence correctly and not as you pronounce it, "Zis simble is

sick!" Every day you should practise at least a quarter of an hour to pronounce correctly the sound of the *th!' Oolala!"*

And she fiercely powdered her nose.

Stephens heard her, of course. Also he knew now just what I had planned for him to talk about — and he promptly started in the direction of the bards of Ireland again. But I dragged him back.

"You must be constantly coming across vignettes in Paris such as you have drawn in 'Here Are Ladies'", I persisted. "Tell me about some of them."

He looked speculatively at me.

"I don't remember things that way", he said. "When I come across bits of character my mind generalizes from them and forgets particulars."

"Then who wrote your best book?" I demanded.

"It's not my best. 'The Crock of Gold' is. The sort of thing you mean I build up out of abstractions, generalizations."

Deliberately the man was heavy; but I pulled.

"Well, what are your generalizations about the French woman?"

"What does the French writer himself think about her?" he retorted. "He hasn't a good word to say for her. Light, without character, a female monkey."

"You know very well you don't believe any such stuff!" I said.

He had the grace to admit it.

"Well, maybe not", he said. "But where there is so much smoke, maybe —"

"Oh, all right", I answered. "What about the degree of power accorded to the bard in Ireland in the eleventh century before the Christian era?"

A twinkle lit in his eyes.

"You won't believe it", he said. "Picture to yourself the poet laureate of England today — what's his name, by the way? — dictating to the premier on matters of state."

"What's the use?" I asked.

"To get an idea of the bard's power in Ireland at that time. He had first place. In public assembly the ruler of Ireland couldn't open his mouth till the bard gave him permission. All the laws were in the bard's keeping. Writing wasn't permitted —"

"Why?"

"Why does your doctor today write his prescription in Latin under a big R with a pin stuck through its tail?" he replied. "To keep you from knowing too much, to preserve the mystery about himself. It was the bards that preserved the law in their memories. When a law was enacted it was cast into rhyme so that it couldn't be changed — by those who weren't bards. If they had written out the laws, don't you see? The bard was thus in addition to his other jobs as magician, artist, entertainer, and prophet, also a lawyer and judge — interpreter of the laws. A bard could go to any householder, humble or rich, and demand as his right the best hospitality the house could accord."

"I'm surprised the field wasn't overcrowded."

"You couldn't become a bard until you had learned by heart three hundred long stories and six hundred shorter ones. In return for hospitality any householder had the right to call on the bard to tell him any story the householder named. If he couldn't the bard was deprived of his rank and privileges. The bard was allowed to wear eight colors, the kings of Ireland nine. Well, in time the bards became so exorbitant in their demands that the kings rebelled. One of the kings finally plotted to overthrow their great influence. So

he set some scholars to find out the name of some tale that had become lost and was forgotten by the bards. They brought him the name 'Tainbo Cuilgny', as a tale in which Conor MacNessa, King of Ulster, was the central figure, and which had not been current for centuries. Thereupon the king invited Shanahan Torpeist, the chief bard, to come to court. Shanahan had a suspicion as to what was in the wind, so he brought his retinue of five hundred minor bards with him and they ate the king out of house and home.

"But that didn't save the bards. The king demanded to be told the story of 'Tainbo Cuilgny'. Then there *was* trouble in the bard camp. Shanahan asked for time. Then he called a council of all the bards in Ireland and they performed a magical ceremony. It seems that they went to the tomb of the ancient bard, Fergus MacRoi, and raised him from the dead. For three days and nights he told them the missing tale. It was a fine tale. Even the king had to acknowledge that. Wait till you read it!"

"Where?"

"I am writing it — in five volumes."

Then I understood why I had been dragged from the Paris of today to the Ireland of three thousand years before.

"Fiction?" I asked. "Fantasy?"

I had the satisfaction of seeing signs of wrath in his eyes.

"It's every bit of it as authenticated by records and documents as the Treaty of Versailles — and it's a great deal more human", he replied. "Don't you know that there are records still preserved of that ancient time that would put to shame your modern census for minuteness and exactness? The story I am writing from what amounts to a synopsis which has been translated from the original by Professor Dunne of Chicago. And I am rigidly adhering to facts in my version."

"It's to be a contribution to scholarship largely, I gather", I remarked politely.

His two handed clutch on his stick became firm.

"It's to be no mere dry-as-dust", he said wrothly. "It's going to be as modern as tomorrow's paper, because it's that human. It will be as important an event in literature as the translation of the 'Arabian Nights' was. As an epic it will knock the Iliad and the Odyssey into a cocked hat. It's about time the dominance of those Greek stories went. Just as history of man is the history of his tyrannies, so the history of culture is the history of the tyranny of artistic successes. Well, it's about time the dominance of those Greek yarns went. And my retelling of that lost story of Irish bards will help. Oh, I know I'm bragging like the divvil. But in the first place if I didn't I couldn't get up enough heart to do anything at all. In the second place, or maybe in the first *and* second place, it's not of myself I'm bragging but of the material I am tapping. Why, man, there's enough rich matter in those ancient records to hand to keep one hundred first rate novelists busy for fifty years!"

"And its authenticity was vouched for by a dead man brought to life by magical ceremonies?" I asked.

"I'm not saying that Shanahan didn't send a couple of hundred of his bards scouring all Ireland for the old story and that they didn't maybe prompt Fergus MacRoi as he was telling the story in his tomb. I don't know. Because only bards were present at the telling. But if you think that it's free and easy stuff I'm writing I'll tell you that every week my manuscript is gone over for slips in fact by

Osborn Bergin, professor of Irish at the Dublin University. A few weeks ago, for instance, he found that I had a donkey in Ireland in the year 1100 B.C. Well, he took that donkey away from me pretty fast. Said I couldn't have him for another twenty two hundred years, because they didn't make their appearance in Ireland till 1100 A.D."

As he talked I was astonished to see a monocle go into his left eye. I followed his gaze and it led to Camille sunning herself on a little mat in front of the Régence. Camille is one of three cats of the Régence and has been so named because she is as robust as a horse. What attracted Stephens's attention was a poodle puppy who was clamoring and pleading with Camille to play with him. The pup had learned a sad lesson one day when he assumed with the ignorance of youth that any dog can chevy any cat with impunity. Now his whole ambition in life was to get Camille to notice him even if with disdain. Stephens studied the superb indifference, the utter oblivion to the pup's existence that Camille showed.

"There", he said, pointing his stick at her, "lies the whole lesson for woman if she wants to rule the world — a lesson which, praises be! she doesn't know enough to follow."

That encouraged me to try to get him back to where I wanted him. But this time I tried it gradually.

"What about the Ireland of today?" I asked.

Then I saw how that stubby pipe came to be so cruelly bitten. It has to bear the brunt of the man's suppressed wraths. His grip on the stick at that moment, too, tightened until I thought of it as a shillelah. His words were the only thing mild in his manner as he replied:

"I get my bread and butter as Registrar of the National Academy of Ireland. So I mustn't talk politics. But I will say this —", he began, his voice rising but not going any further. "No, I won't!" he concluded. "Not till my book is ready."

He poured some of his currant juice and seltzer into the saucer on which the price of the drink in French cafés is painted, and offered it to the pup as consolation for Camille's neglect. The pup gratefully licked the gift.

"How do you know what effect the liquor will have on him?" I asked. "You may be debauching him."

"I *don't* know", he said. "That's why I am trying. It may have as curious an effect as whisky has on me. It makes my left leg drunk and leaves the right as sober as a judge."

The autobus, which would take him back to the Left Bank where he lived, hove in sight.

"By the way", he said, as he prepared to leave. "I saw a queer little illustration yesterday at the Café Napolitain, that showed me how unimportant is language after all. A dear old Englishman — yes, there can be such! — was eating his coffee ice and feeling so all alone and bored that he took out his Métro map and scanned it. At the next table sat a French girl and her mother, unmistakably from the country. The old chap had such trouble locating his route that the old lady leaned forward and asked him in Midi French if she could help him. Of course, he didn't understand a syllable. But he brightened up at the sound of someone talking to him and rattled off in Yorkshire English his complaint of how complicated a way it was to get to his hotel in the Quai de la Loire. The women didn't understand more than just one word.

"'Ah!' they cried in one breath. 'The Loire! Why, we come from the

province Loire! It is the good grape harvest this year that enables us to make this trip to Paris. If the monsieur knows the Loire he knows what good grapes can grow there', etc., etc., for two closely printed pages, mother and daughter. The old chap beamed, just as though he understood them, until he heard them mention Carcassonne. Then *he* started off. It seems that his youngest daughter had just gone there on her honeymoon and was writing him the most enthusiastic letters of the charm of that old south of France and he meant to stop off there on his way to Arles. 'Ah, Arles!' exclaimed the daughter, whose half sister owned a *blanchisserie* there. And so they went on, chatting like old friends, neither of them knowing a word of what the other was saying, but all having a charming time of it."

"Then it seems you do remember particulars sometimes", I protested.

He swung onto the bus end.

"Oh, is that the sort of thing you meant?" he called from his fast receding perch, regarding me quizzically. "Oh, yes indeed, I remember lots of that kind of stuff!"