

Fame And The Poet

By Lord Dunsany

SCENE: The Poet's rooms in London. Windows in back. A high screen in a corner.

TIME: February 30th.

CHARACTERS

HARRY DE REVES.--A Poet.

(This name, though of course of French origin, has become anglicized and is pronounced DE REEVES.)

DICK PRATTLE.--A Lieutenant-Major of the Royal Horse Marines.

FAME.

(The POET is sitting at a table, writing. Enter DICK PRATTLE.)

PRATTLE. Hullo, Harry.

DE REVES. Hullo, Dick. Good Lord, where are you from?

PRATTLE (casually). The ends of the Earth.

DE REVES. Well, I'm damned!

PRATTLE. Thought I'd drop in and see how you were getting on.

DE REVES. Well, that's splendid. What are you doing in London?

PRATTLE. Well, I wanted to see if I could get one or two decent ties to wear,--you can get nothing out there,--then I thought I'd have a look and see how London was getting on.

DE REVES. Splendid! How's everybody?

PRATTLE. All going strong.

DE REVES. That's good.

PRATTLE. (*seeing paper and ink*). But what are you doing?

DE REVES. Writing.

PRATTLE. Writing? I didn't know you wrote.

DE REVES. Yes, I've taken to it rather.

PRATTLE. I say--writing's no good. What do you write?

DE REVES. Oh, poetry.

PRATTLE. Poetry? Good Lord!

DE REVES. Yes, that sort of thing, you know.

PRATTLE. Good Lord! Do you make any money by it?

DE REVES. No. Hardly any.

PRATTLE. I say--why don't you chuck it?

DE REVES. Oh, I don't know. Some people seem to like my stuff, rather. That's why I go on.

PRATTLE. I'd chuck it if there's no money in it.

DE REVES. Ah, but then it's hardly in your line, is it? You'd hardly approve of poetry if there *was* money in it.

PRATTLE. Oh, I don't say that. If I could make as much by poetry as I can by betting I don't say I wouldn't try the poetry touch, only--

DE REVES. Only what?

PRATTLE. Oh, I don't know. Only there seems more sense in betting, somehow.

DE REVES. Well, yes. I suppose it's easier to tell what an earthly horse is going to do, than to tell what Pegasus--

PRATTLE. What's Pegasus?

DE REVES. Oh, the winged horse of poets.

PRATTLE. I say! You don't believe in a winged horse, do you?

DE REVES. In our trade we believe in all fabulous things. They all represent some large truth to turn us. An emblem like Pegasus is as real a thing to a poet as a Derby winner would be to you.

PRATTLE. I say. (Give me a cigarette. Thanks.) What? Then you'd believe in nymphs and fauns, and Pan, and all those kind of birds?

DE REVES. Yes. Yes. In all of them.

PRATTLE. Good Lord!

DE REVES. You believe in the Lord Mayor of London, don't you?

PRATTLE. Yes, of course; but what has--

DE REVES. Four million people or so made him Lord Mayor, didn't they? And he represents to them the wealth and dignity and tradition of--

PRATTLE. Yes; but, I say, what has all this--

DE REVES. Well, he stands for an idea to them, and they made him Lord Mayor, and so he is one....

PRATTLE. Well, of course he is.

DE REVES. In the same way Pan has been made what he is by millions; by millions to whom he represents world-old traditions.

PRATTLE. *(rising from his chair and stepping backwards, laughing and looking at the POET in a kind of assumed wonder)*. I say.... I say.... You old heathen ... but Good Lord....

(He bumps into the high screen behind, pushing it back a little.)

DE REVES. Look out! Look out!

PRATTLE. What? What's the matter?

DE REVES. The screen!

PRATTLE. Oh, sorry, yes. I'll put it right.

(He is about to go round behind it.)

DE REVES. No, don't go round there.

PRATTLE. What? Why not?

DE REVES. Oh, you wouldn't understand.

PRATTLE. Wouldn't understand? Why, what have you got?

DE REVES. Oh, one of those things.... You wouldn't understand.

PRATTLE. Of course I'd understand. Let's have a look. (*The POET walks toward PRATTLE and the screen. He protests no further.*

PRATTLE *looks round the corner of the screen.*) An altar.

DE REVES. (*removing the screen altogether*). That is all. What do you make of it?

(*An altar of Greek design, shaped like a pedestal, is revealed. Papers litter the floor all about it.*)

PRATTLE. I say--you always were an untidy devil.

DE REVES. Well, what do you make of it?

PRATTLE. It reminds me of your room at Eton.

DE REVES. My room at Eton?

PRATTLE. Yes, you always had papers all over your floor.

DE REVES. Oh, yes--

PRATTLE. And what are these?

DE REVES. All these are poems; and this is my altar to Fame.

PRATTLE. To Fame?

DE REVES. The same that Homer knew.

PRATTLE. Good Lord!

DE REVES. Keats never saw her. Shelley died too young. She came late at the best of times, now scarcely ever.

PRATTLE. But, my dear fellow, you don't mean that you think there really is such a person?

DE REVES. I offer all my songs to her.

PRATTLE. But you don't mean you think you could actually *see* Fame?

DE REVES. We poets personify abstract things, and not poets only but sculptors and painters too. All the great things of the world are those abstract things.

PRATTLE. But what I mean is they're not really there, like you or me.

DE REVES. To us these things are more real than men, they outlive generations, they watch the passing of Kingdoms: we go by them like dust; they are still here, unmoved, unsmiling.

PRATTLE. But, but, you can't think that you could *see* Fame, you don't expect to see it.

DE REVES. Not to me. Never to me. She of the golden trumpet and Greek dress will never appear to me.... We all have our dreams.

PRATTLE. I say--what have you been doing all day?

DE REVES. I? Oh, only writing a sonnet.

PRATTLE. Is it a long one?

DE REVES. Not very.

PRATTLE. About how long is it?

DE REVES. About fourteen lines.

PRATTLE (*impressively*). I tell you what it is.

DE REVES. Yes?

PRATTLE. I tell you what. You've been overworking yourself. I once got like that on board the Sandhurst, working for the passing-out exam. I got so bad that I could have seen anything.

DE REVES. Seen anything?

PRATTLE. Lord, yes: horned pigs, snakes with wings, anything, one of your winged horses even. They gave me some stuff called bromide for it. You take a rest.

DE REVES. But my dear fellow, you don't understand at all. I merely said that abstract things are to a poet as near and real and visible as one of your bookmakers or barmaids.

PRATTLE. I know. You take a rest.

DE REVES. Well, perhaps I will. I'd come with you to that musical comedy you're going to see, only I'm a bit tired after writing this; it's a tedious job. I'll come another night.

PRATTLE. How do you know I'm going to see a musical comedy?

DE REVES. Well, where would you go? *Hamlet's* on at the Lord Chamberlain's. You're not going there.

PBATTLE. Do I look like it?

DE REVES. No.

PRATTLE. Well, you're quite right. I'm going to see "The Girl from Bedlam." So long. I must push off now. It's getting late. You take a rest. Don't add another line to that sonnet; fourteen's quite enough. You take a rest. Don't have any dinner to-night, just rest. I was like that once myself. So long.

DE REVES. So long.

(Exit PRATTLE. DE REVES returns to his table and sits down.)

Good old Dick. He's the same as ever. Lord, how time passes.

(He takes his pen and his sonnet and makes a few alterations.)

Well, that's finished. I can't do any more to it.

(He rises and goes to the screen; he draws back part of it and goes up to the altar. He is about to place his sonnet reverently at the foot of the altar amongst his other verses.)

No, I will not put it there. This one is worthy of the altar.

(He places the sonnet upon the altar itself.)

If that sonnet does not give me Fame, nothing that I have done before will give it to me, nothing that I ever will do.

(He replaces the screen and returns to his chair at the table. Twilight is coming on. He sits with his elbow on the table, his head on his hand, or however the actor pleases.)

Well, well. Fancy seeing Dick again. Well, Dick enjoys his life, so he's no fool. What was that he said? "There's no money in poetry. You'd better chuck it." Ten years' work and what have I to show for it? The admiration of men who care for poetry, and how many of *them* are there? There's a bigger demand for smoked glasses to look at eclipses of the sun. Why should Fame come to me? Haven't I given up my days for her? That is enough to keep her away. I am a poet; that is enough reason for her to slight me. Proud and aloof and cold as marble, what does Fame care for us? Yes, Dick is right. It's a poor game chasing illusions, hunting the intangible, pursuing dreams. Dreams? Why, we are ourselves dreams. *(He leans back in his chair.)*

We are such stuff As dreams are made on, and our little life Is rounded with a sleep.

(He is silent for a while. Suddenly he lifts his head)

My room at Eton, Dick said. An untidy mess.

(As he lifts his head and says these words, twilight gives place to broad daylight, merely as a hint that the author of the play may have been mistaken, and the whole thing may have been no more than a poet's dream.)

So it was, and it's an untidy mess there *(looking at screen)* too. Dick's right. I'll tidy it up. I'll burn the whole damned heap. *(He advances impetuously toward the screen)* Every damned poem that I was ever fool enough to waste my time on.

(He pushes back the screen. FAME *in a Greek dress with a long golden trumpet in her hand is seen standing motionless on the altar like a marble goddess.*)

So ... you have come!

(*For a while he stands thunderstruck. Then he approaches the altar.*)

Divine fair lady, you have come.

(He holds up his hands to her and leads her down from the altar and into the centre of the stage. At whatever moment the actor finds it most convenient, he repossesses himself of the sonnet that he had placed on the altar. He now offers it to FAME.)

This is my sonnet. Is it well done?

(FAME *takes it, reads it in silence, while the POET watches her rapturously.*)

FAME. You're a bit of all right.

DE REVES. What?

FAME. Some poet.

DE REVES. I--I--scarcely ... understand.

FAME. You're IT.

DE REVES. But ... it is not possible ... are you she that knew Homer?

FAME. Homer? Lord, yes. Blind old bat, 'e couldn't see a yard.

DE REVES. O Heavens!

(FAME walks beautifully to the window. She opens it and puts her head out.)

FAME *(in a voice with which a woman in an upper story would cry for help if the house was well alight)*. Hi! Hi! Boys! Hi! Say, folks! Hi!

(The murmur of a gathering crowd is heard. FAME blows her trumpet.)

FAME. Hi, he's a poet. *(Quickly, over her shoulder.)* What's your name?

DE REVES. De Reves.

FAME. His name's de Reves.

DE REVES. Harry de Reves.

FAME. His pals call him Harry.

THE CROWD. Hooray! Hooray! Hooray!

FAME. Say, what's your favourite color?

DE REVES. I ... I ... I don't quite understand.

FAME. Well, which do you like best, green or blue?

DE REVES. Oh--er--blue. *(She blows her trumpet out of the window.)*
No--er--I think green.

FAME. Green is his favourite colour.

THE CROWD. Hooray! Hooray! Hooray!

FAME. 'Ere, tell us something. They want to know all about yer.

DE REVES; Wouldn't you perhaps ... would they care to hear my sonnet, if you would--er....

FAME (*picking up quill*). Here, what's this?

DE REVES. Oh, that's my pen.

FAME (*after another blast on her trumpet*). He writes with a quill.
(*Cheers from THE CROWD.*)

FAME (*going to a cupboard*). Here, what have you got in here?

DE REVES. Oh ... er ... those are my breakfast things.

FAME (*finding a dirty plate*). What have yer had on this one?

DE REVES (*mournfully*). Oh, eggs and bacon.

FAME (*at the window*). He has eggs and bacon for breakfast.

THE CROWD. Hip hip hip *hooray!* Hip hip hip *hooray!* Hip hip hip *hooray!*

FAME. Hi, and what's this?

DE REVES (*miserably*). Oh, a golf stick.

FAME. He's a man's man! He's a virile man! He's a manly man!

(*Wild cheers from THE CROWD, this time only from women's voices.*)

DE REVES. Oh, this is terrible. This is terrible. This is terrible.

(FAME gives another peal on her horn. She is about to speak.)

DE REVES (*solemnly and mournfully*). One moment, one moment....

FAME. Well, out with it.

DE REVES. For ten years, divine lady, I have worshipped you, offering all my songs ... I find ... I find I am not worthy....

FAME. Oh, you're all right.

DE REVES. No, no, I am not worthy. It cannot be. It cannot possibly be. Others deserve you more. I must say it! *I cannot possibly love you.* Others are worthy. You will find others. But I, no, no, no. It cannot be. It cannot be. Oh, pardon me, but it *must* not.

(*Meanwhile FAME has been lighting one of his cigarettes. She sits in a comfortable chair, leans right back, and puts her feet right up on the table amongst the poet's papers.*)

Oh, I fear I offend you. But--it cannot be.

FAME. Oh, that's all right, old bird; no offence. I ain't going to leave you.

DE REVES. But--but--but--I do not understand.

FAME. I've come to stay, I have.

(*She blows a puff of smoke through her trumpet.*)

[CURTAIN]

