

THREE TIMES.

By the Author of "Lady Audley's Secret," Etc.

CHAPTER I.

THE FIRST TIME.

"POSITIVELY the last night of Herr Rudolph Prusinowski and the performing lions! Positively the last night! For the benefit of Herr Rudolph Prusinowski. Under the distinguished patronage of Their Majesties Queen Victoria, the Emperor of China, the Cham of Tartary, His Serene Highness the Grand Duke of Baden, Simeon Muddlebrain, Esq., M. P., the Mayor and Corporation of Spindlecum, and other august personages too numerous to mention. Come early. Positively the last time. Come and see the lions. Herr Rudolph Prusinowski, the favourite of crowned heads and the *élite* of Europe. Take notice! The great Prusinowski has had the honour of performing before the Mikado of Japan. The world-renowned Prusinowski has been decorated with the Order of Rouge et Noir by the Grand Duchess of Selzerwasserburg. Don't miss the lions!"

The above sentences, and many others of the same character—in which a picturesque fancy, aided by the experience of a public career, trifled with the sobrieties of fact and tripped lightly across the borderland of fiction—appeared in gigantic black letters upon a yellow poster on the side wall of the Queen's Theatre, Spindlecum, and in the streets and market-place, upon the quays, and in the back slums of the same town. Spindlecum was a large manufacturing town—a town that did a good deal of business in the export way, and had much commerce by land and sea, and Spindlecum could boast of two theatres: the Royal, an elegantly-appointed edifice in a side-street off the quay, with a stone portico surmounted by a bust of Shakespeare; a house about which elderly inhabitants of Spindlecum cherished traditions of Edmund Kean, and where Macready and Harley were remembered as stock actors, but a house which had never paid a manager within the memory of man: and the Queen's, a vast barn-like building, with a lofty roof supported by iron girders, three tiers of boxes, and Alpine heights in the way of galleries, which, contemplated from the broad valley of the pit, seemed inaccessible to the foot of man. The Queen's was making a fortune for its managers. There was a sixpenny pit, and there was a threepenny gallery, whereby the house was never empty, and on Mondays and Saturdays overflowed with noisy human life. The audience at the Queen's was critical, but on the whole good-natured; requiring plenty of life and movement in the pieces, and what may be called showy action in the performers. The Queen's liked stars, and was tolerably universal in its appreciation of these luminaries: this week clamorous in their applause of some stalwart Othello or loud-voiced Hamlet, next week gaping entranced upon the contortions of a family of acrobats; now crowding to see Mr. Reginald Montmorency and his celebrated mare Black Bess in the grand spectacular drama of "Dick Turpin, or the Ride to York," anon rushing to behold Signor Poloni and his striped Zebra of the Prairie.

A man with a pale sallow face, blue chin, and close-cut hair sat in a lounging attitude upon a low wall opposite the stage-door of the Queen's, smoking a meditative pipe, and contemplating the big yellow poster with a dreamy fondness. He had a little group of satellites about him, also close-cropped, blue-chinned, and tobacco-consuming; minor lights in the dramatic heaven, the stock company of the Queen's, who were thrown a little into the background by the lions, shuffling through a preliminary melo-drama nightly, before an audience, who beheld them with impatience, and heard them sometimes with derision, eager for the grand business of the evening.

"I think that ought to hit 'em up," said the Herr thoughtfully (he spoke excellent English for a foreigner, but seemed scarcely to have acquired the language in the most aristocratic or æsthetic circles). "The Mikado looks well, doesn't he?"

"First rate," replied Mr. de la Zouche, the walking gentleman. "Was he a nice kind of chap, the Mikado?"

Herr Prusinowski turned his contemplative eyes upon the inquirer with a look of placid scorn.

"You ain't so jolly green as to suppose I ever set eyes upon him," he said, knocking the ashes out of his pipe. "I was never in Japan in my life; never nearer than a japan candlestick. The Mikado is a safe card, he is; who's to ask any questions about him? And so's the Cham of Tartary; I always bring out them two for the last night. Queen Victoria's legitimate business. I did perform once before the royal servants, and got a siver from the royal secretary. That is immediate patronage."

"I expect you'll have a clipping house, cully," remarked Mr. Tiddikins, the low comedian, a small man with a falsetto voice.

"I look forward to it, Tiddikins; and if it goes over eighty, I'll stand a supper, mind that."

There was a subdued murmur of applause.

"Hot or cold?" replied Mr. de la Zouche.

"Hot," replied the lion-tamer. "None of your cold fowls and 'am, your pastry and rubbish, for me. A sirloin of beef at top, and a prime goose at bottom, a veal pie and a stewed steak at the sides, and plenty of smoking hot vegetables; a prime old stilton and a bowl of salad to wind up with, and as much champagne as you can swallow, with brandy-and-water to settle it on your stomachs. That's what I'll do, at the Lion and Lamb, if the house goes over eighty when the half price to the boxes is in."

This time the applause was louder.

"I always said you were a jolly good fellow, Bill," said Mr. Tiddikins, "and I don't mind how often I say it again."

It is to be observed that Mr. Tiddikins addressed the distinguished Rudolph by the simpler cognomen Bill, one of the playful licenses of friendship, no doubt.

"How did it happen, old fellow?" asked Mr. Tiddikins.

Herr Prusinowski stopped to fill his pipe before answering the question. It was four o'clock upon a blazing July afternoon, rehearsal was over, Her Majesty's servants of the Queen's Theatre, Spindlecum, had dined in the intervals of the day's work at their several lodgings, and had nothing particular to do with themselves until tea-time. An actor of this class has generally a rooted aversion to going home.

"Well, you see," the lion-tamer began in a leisurely way, stopping to take a few preliminary whiffs after those three words of prelude, "I was at Manchester nigh five years ago, and it was my last night and my 'ben,' as it might be to-night." A pause and a few more puffs. "We was doing first-rate business, fizzing, and I don't think I was ever in such high spirits in my life. My pockets were stuffed with money that I'd been taking about the town for tickles,

"For I had a half share clear of expenses, same as here. Lizzie—that's my wife, you know—was proud to think I was going to have such a good box audience, for it isn't every box audience as will take to wild beasts. You may get schools and pious people, that object to the drama, but consider a man putting his head into a lion's mouth improving—there's quite a run upon lions in the Scriptures—but as a rule, your boxes are shady. So my Liz was proud of my dress-circle that night."

"I wonder whether it's the mayor and his family," she said, speculating about that big private box.

"No," I told her, "it's a gentleman and a stranger, no name."

"Well, the night came, a sweltering hot summer evening, such as it will be to-night. The performance began with one of your talkee-talkie pentecost comedies, and was so full and noisy the actors couldn't hear themselves speak. They got through it somehow, there was a short overture, and the curtain went up for my performance. The three lions discovered in a forest, to slow music, which gets a round for them, and gives me my entrance and reception."

"You know the beasts, they were the same three I've got now—Brown, Jones, and Robinson. Old Brown's a harmless old chap enough, not a sound tooth in his head, and no more harm in him than in an elderly jackass; Jones is a deep old dodger, but there isn't much harm in him; but Robinson's a nasty-tempered beast, a brute you never can be sure of, an animal that will lick your hand one minute, and be ready to snap your head off the next."

"Well, I got a first-rate reception; I thought the gallery would have never left off applauding; and the sight of the house, crammed to the ceiling, made me almost giddy. Perhaps it was the heat of the place, which was like an oven; perhaps, as I'd been standing treat or being stood for off and on pretty well all day. I may have taken a little more than was good for me; anyhow, I felt the house spinning round me, just as if I'd been some dufer of a novice, instead of the old stager I am."

"I looked at the family box O. P., curious to see who'd taken it. There was only one gentleman there, a man of fifty or thereabouts, with a cadaverous lantern-jawed face, and light reddish hair, very straight, combed neatly on each side of his forehead. He was dressed in black, regular evening dress, white choker and all complete, and, do you know, the instant I set eyes upon that man, he gave me a turn."

"That was a queer fancy," said Mr. de la Zouche, helping himself to tobacco from the Herr's gutta-percha pouch, which lay open on the wall.

"Perhaps it was; but if that night was to come over again, I should have the fancy over again," replied Prusinowski. "I was partly his own looks, I think, partly the way he looked at me; not like the rest of the audience, all good nature, expecting to be amused, but with a steadfast ravenous kind of look, that made my blood run cold. 'That's a man who'd like to see something happen to me,' I said to myself."

"I didn't give way to the fancy all at once. I began the performance; but I stole a glance at my sandy-haired, pale-faced gentleman now and then, and always found him looking at me in the same way. He had large, light-grey eyes, very light, and very prominent. I can see them now, and they followed every move I made, like a cat's following a mouse. He never moved his eyes from me, he never applauded; he sat in a half-crouching attitude, leaning over the front of the box, watching me, and he made me feel as if I had a ton weight tied to each of my legs. Everything went well for some time, though I felt I'd never done things worse. Brown and Jones behaved beautifully; but just towards the last, when I had to put my head into Robinson's mouth to bring down the curtain, I saw that the brute was in one of his nasty tempers. I suppose the heat had put him out—I know the perspiration was pouring down my face—or perhaps he didn't like the look of that cadaverous gentleman in the private box. Anyhow, he turned nasty, and when I wanted to collar him, he bounced away from me."

"The house turned as still as death all in a moment, and I could see the audience was frightened. I gave a look at my gentleman in the box. He was leaning a little farther over the cushion, with something like a smile on his face. Such a smile; I could fancy any one going to see a man hung smiling like that."

"Bray to not be vrighened, laties and shentlemens," I said in my broken English (old Sauerkraut, the ophecleid at the Lane, taught me that dodge) "id is nozing. Te peasant vill to all I veesh;" and then I gave Robinson a pretty smart cuff, and began to drag his jaws open.

"The brute snarled, turned upon me, and in the next instant would have had his teeth in my shoulder, if I hadn't given the signal for the curtain. Half a dozen carpenters rushed upon the stage and helped me to tackle him. We had him safe in less than a minute; but just at that one moment, before the curtain dropped, it was as near as a toucher."

"There was a good deal of applause; not that I'd done anything to deserve it, for the business of putting my head in the brute's



HE WAS LEANING A LITTLE FARTHER OVER THE CUSHION, WITH SOMETHING LIKE A SMILE ON HIS FACE.

"It's wonderful how those animals draw," said Mr. de la Zouche thoughtfully, as if he were contemplating the feasibility of setting-up on his own account as a lion-tamer. "You've been here three seasons, Prusinowski, and, egad, the people ain't tired of 'em yet. They seem as eager as ever. One would suppose they like to see a poor beggar hazard his life every night."

"There's something in that," replied the Herr. "If it wasn't for the danger, the wild-beast business would be as flat as ditch-water."

"Were you ever frightened?" asked the walking gentleman. "I know what a plucky fellow you are, and that you handle those three brutes as if they were so many tabby cats; but still sometimes, you know, a man's nerve must fail. Come, now, Prusinowski, were you never frightened?"

"Never but once," answered the lion-tamer, and then I thought it was all over with me."

He grew suddenly grave, gloomy even, at the mere recollection waked by the walking gentleman's inquiry.

"Never but once," he repeated, "and God grant I never may be so again! When a man in my trade loses his head, it's all up with him."

and I hadn't a place to let in my dress-circle.

"Why, Bill," says my little woman, when I kept running in and out of our lodgings between whiles at rehearsal—we was close again the slum—taking her in a handful of money every time, 'you seem as if you was bewitched; I don't like to see you like that. I had a Scotch friend once as said it was a bad sign—a sign of something going to happen."

"Lord love your little foolish heart," I answered, "it's a sign of nothing except that I'm going to have a screaming house to-night. I don't suppose there'll be a corner you can screw yourself into if you want to see me. For she's a rare one for going in front of a night, you know, is the missus."

Mr. de la Zouche and Mr. Tiddikins murmured their acquaintance with this domestic fact. Herr Prusinowski smoked his pipe for a minute or so, and then went on:

"Why, there's the family box," she said. "That's a large private box on the opposite prompt, that don't often let, unless there's Italian Opera, or Charles Mathews, or something out of the common."

"No, there ain't," I answered, laughing.

"What!" cried the missus, "is that let too?"

"Let this morning," said I, "and there's the money—three pound three—thirty-one-and-six of which comes to us."