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THE DUKE'S DILEMMA.

A CHRONICLE OF NIESENSTEIN.

The close of the theatrical year, which in France occurs in early spring, annually brings to Paris a throng of actors and actresses, the disorganized elements of provincial companies, who repair to the capital to contract engagements for the new season. Paris is the grand centre to which all dramatic stars converge—the great bazaar where managers recruit their troops for the summer campaign. In bad weather the mart for this human merchandise is at an obscure coffee-house near the Rue St. Honore; when the sun shines, the place of meeting is in the Palais Royal. There, pacing to and fro beneath the lime-trees, the high contracting parties pursue their negotiations and make their bargains. It is the theatrical exchange, the histrionic Bourse.—There the conversation and the company are alike curious. Many are the strange discussions and original anecdotes that there are heard;—many the odd figures there paraded. Tragedians, comedians, singers, men and women, young and old, flock thither in quest of fortune and a good engagement. The threadbare coats of some say little in favor of recent success or present prosperity; but only hear them speak, and you are at once convinced that they have no need of broadcloth who are so amply covered with laurels. It is delightful to hear them talk of their triumphs, of the storms of applause, the rapturous bravos, the boundless enthusiasm, of the audiences they lately delighted. Their brows are oppressed with the weight of their bays.—The south mourns their loss; if they go west, the north will be envious and inconsolable. As to themselves—north, south, east or west—they care little to which point of the compass the breeze of their destiny may waft them. Thorough gossips in their habits, accustomed to make the best of the passing hour, and to take small care for the future so long as the present is provided for, like soldiers, they heed not the name of the town so long as the quarters be good.

It was a fine morning in April. The sun shone brightly, and, amongst the numerous loungers in the garden of the Palais Royal were several groups of actors. The season was already far advanced; all the companies were formed, and those players who had not secured an engagement had but a poor chance of finding one. Their anxiety was legible on their countenances. A man of about fifty years of age walked to and fro, a newspaper in his hand, and to him, when he passed near them, the actors bowed—respectfully and hopefully. A quick glance was his acknowledgment of their salutation, and then his eyes reverted to his paper, as if it deeply interested him. When he was out of hearing, the actors, who had assumed their most picturesque attitudes to attract his attention, and who beheld their labor lost, vented their ill-humor.

"Balthasar is mighty proud," said one; "he has not a word to say to us."

"Perhaps he does not want anybody," remarked another; "I think he has no theatre this year."

"That would be odd. They say he is a clever manager."

"He may best prove his cleverness by keeping aloof. It is so difficult nowadays to do good in the provinces. The public is so fastidious!—the authorities are so shabby, so unwilling to put their hands in their pockets. Ah, my dear fellow, our art is sadly fallen!"

Whilst the discontented actors bemoaned themselves, Balthasar eagerly accosted a young man who just then entered the garden by the passage of the Perron. The coffee-house keepers had already begun to put out tables under the tender foliage. The two men sat down at one of them.

"Well, Florival," said the manager, "does my offer suit you? Will you make one of us? I was glad to hear you had broken off with Ricardin. With your qualifications you ought to have an engagement in Paris, or at least in a first-rate provincial theatre. But you are young, and, as you know, managers prefer actors of greater experience and established reputation.—Your parts are generally taken by youths of five-and-forty, with wrinkles and grey hairs, but well versed in the traditions of the stage—with damaged voices but an excellent style. My brother managers are greedy of great names; yours still has to become known; as yet, you have but your talent to recommend you. I will content myself with that; content yourself with what I offer you. Times are bad, the season is advanced, engagements are hard to find. Many of your comrades have gone to try their luck beyond seas. We have not so far to go: we shall scarcely overstep the boundaries of our ungrateful country. Germany invites us; it is a pleasant land, and Rhine wine is not to be disdained. I will tell you how the thing came about. For many years past I have managed theatres in the eastern departments, in Alsatia and Lorraine.

"Last summer, having a little leisure, I made an excursion to Baden-Baden. As usual, it was crowded with fashionables. One rubbed shoulders with princes, and trod upon highnesses' toes; one could not walk twenty yards without meeting a sovereign. All these crowned heads, kings, grand dukes, electors, mingled easily and affably with the throng of visitors. Etiquette is banished from the baths of Baden, where, without laying aside their titles, great personages enjoy the liberty and advantages of an incognito. At the time of my visit, a company of very indifferent German actors were playing, two or three times a week, in the little theatre. They played to empty benches, and must have starved but for the assistance afforded them by the directors of the gambling tables. I often went to their performances, and, amongst the scanty spectators, I soon remarked one who was as assiduous as myself—a gentleman, very plainly dressed, but of agreeable countenance and aristocratic appearance, invariably occupied the same stall, and seemed to enjoy the performances, which proved that he was easily pleased. One night he addressed to me some remark with respect to the play then acting; we got into conversation on the subject of dramatic art; he saw that I was specially competent on that topic, and after the theatre he asked me to take refreshment with him. I accepted. At midnight we parted, and, as I was going home, I met a gambler whom I slightly knew. 'I congratulate you,' he said; 'you have friends in high places!' He alluded to the gentleman with whom I had passed the evening, and whom I now learned was no less a personage than his Serene Highness Prince Leopold, sovereign ruler of the Grand Duchy of Niesenstein. I had had the honor of passing a whole evening in familiar intercourse with a crowned head. Next day, walking in the park, I met his highness. I made a low bow, and kept at a respectful distance, but the Grand Duke came up to me and asked me to walk with him. Before accepting, I thought it right to inform him who I was. 'I guessed as much,' said the Prince. 'From one or two things that last night escaped you, I made no doubt you were a theatrical manager.' And by a gesture he renewed his invitation to accompany him. In a long conversation he informed me of his intention to establish a French theatre in his capital, for the performance of comedy, drama, vauville and comic operas. He was then building a large theatre, which would be ready by the end of the winter, and he offered me the management on very advantageous terms. I had no plans in France for the present year, and the offer was too good to be refused. The Grand Duke guaranteed my expenses and a gratuity, and there was a chance of very large profits. I hesitated not a moment; we exchanged promises, and the affair was concluded.

According to our agreement, I am to be at Karlstadt, the capital of the Grand Duchy of Niesenstein, in the first week in May. There is no time to lose. My company is almost complete, but there are still some important gaps to fill. Amongst others, I want a lover, a light comedian, and a first singer. I reckon upon you to fill these important posts."

"I am quite willing," replied the actor, "but there is an obstacle. You must know, my dear Balthasar, that I am deeply in love—seriously, this time—and I broke off with Ricardin solely because he would not engage her to whom I am attached."

"Oho! she is an actress?"

"Two years upon the stage: a lovely girl, full of grace and talent, and with a charming voice. The Opera Comique has not a singer to compare with her."

"And she is disengaged?"

"Yes, my dear fellow; strange though it seems, and by a combination of circumstances which it were tedious to detail, the fascinating Delia is still without an engagement. And I give you notice that henceforward I attach myself to her steps; where she goes, I go; I will perform upon no boards which she does not tread. I am determined to win her heart, and make her my wife."

"Very good!" cried Balthasar, rising from his seat; "tell me the address of this prodigy; I run, I fly, I make every sacrifice; and we will start to-morrow."

People were quite right in saying that Balthasar was a clever manager. None better knew how to deal with actors, often capricious and difficult to guide. He possessed skill, taste and tact. One hour after the conversation in the garden of the Palais Royal, he had obtained the signatures of Delia and Florival, two excellent acquisitions, destined to do him infinite honor in Germany. That night his little company was complete, and the next day, after a good dinner, it started for Strasburg. It was composed as follows: Balthasar, manager, was to play the old men, and take the heavy business. Florival was the leading man, the lover, and the first singer. Rigolet was the low comedian, and took the parts usually played by Arnal and Bouffe.

Similar was to perform the valets in Moltere's comedies, and eccentric low comedy characters. Anselme was the walking gentleman.

Lebel led the band. Miss Delia was to display her charms and talents as prima donna, and in genteel comedy.

Miss Foligny was the singing chambermaid. Miss Alice was the walking lady, and made herself generally useful.

Finally, Madame Pastorale, the duenna of the company, was to perform the old women, and look after the young ones.

Although so few, the company trusted to atone by zeal and industry for numerical deficiency.—It would be easy to find, in the capital of the Grand Duchy, persons capable of filling mute parts, and, in most plays, a few unimportant characters might be suppressed.

The travellers reached Strasburg without adventure worthy of note. There Balthasar allowed them six-and-thirty hours' repose, and took advantage of the halt to write to the Grand Duke Leopold, and inform him of his approaching arrival; then they again started, crossed the Rhine at Kehl, and in thirty days, after traversing several small German States, reached the frontier of the Grand Duchy of Niesenstein, and stopped at a little village called Krusthal. From this village to the capital the distance was only four leagues, but means of conveyance were wanting. There was but a single stage-coach on that line of road; it would not leave Krusthal for two days, and it held but six persons.—No other vehicles were to be had; it was necessary to wait, and the necessity was anything but pleasant. The actors made wry faces at the prospect of passing forty-eight hours in a wretched village. The only persons who easily made up their minds to the wearisome delay were Delia and Florival. The first singer was desperately in love, and the prima donna was tenderly insensible to his delicate attentions and tender discourse.

Balthasar, the most impatient and persevering of all, went out to explore the village. In an hour's time he returned in triumph to his friends, in a light cart drawn by a strong horse. Unfortunately the cart held but two persons.

"I will set out alone," said Balthasar. "On reaching Karlstadt, I will go to the Grand Duke, explain our position, and I have no doubt he will immediately send carriages to convey you to his capital."

These consolatory words were received with loud cheers by the actors. The driver, a peasant lad, cracked his whip, and the stout Mecklenburg horse set out at a small trot. Upon the way, Balthasar questioned his guide as to the extent, resources, and prosperity of the Grand Duchy, but could obtain no satisfactory reply; the young peasant was profoundly ignorant upon all these subjects. The four leagues were got over in something less than three hours, which is rather rapid travelling for Germany. It was nearly dark when Balthasar entered Karlstadt. The shops were shut, and there were few persons in the streets; people are early in their habits in the happy lands on the Rhine's right bank. Presently the cart stopped before a good-sized house.

"You told me to take you to our prince's palace," said the driver, "and here it is." Balthasar alighted and entered the dwelling, unchallenged and unimpeded by the sentry who passed lazily up and down in its front. In the entrance hall the manager met a porter, who bowed gravely to him as he passed; he walked on and passed through an empty anteroom. In the first apartment, appropriated to gentlemen-in-waiting, aides-de-camp, equerries, and other dignitaries of various degree, he found nobody; in a second saloon, lighted by a dim and smoky lamp, was an old gentleman, dressed in black, with powdered hair, who rose slowly at his entrance, looked at him with surprise, and inquired his pleasure.

"I wish to see his Serene Highness, the Grand Duke Leopold," replied Balthasar.

"The Prince does not grant audiences at this hour," the old gentleman drily answered.

"His Highness expects me," was the confident reply of Balthasar.

"That is another thing. I will inquire if it be his Highness's pleasure to receive you.—Whom shall I announce?"

"The manager of the Court theatre."

The gentleman bowed, and left Balthasar alone. The pertinacious manager already began to doubt the success of his audacity, when he heard the Grand Duke's voice, saying, 'Show him in.'

He entered. The sovereign of Niesenstein was alone, seated in a large arm-chair, at a table covered with a green cloth, upon which were a confused medley of letters and newspapers, an ink-stand, a tobacco bag, two wax-lights, a sugar-basin, a sword, a plate, gloves, a bottle, books, and a goblet of Bohemian glass artistically engraved. His Highness was engrossed in a thoroughly national occupation—he was smoking one of those long pipes which Germans rarely lay aside, except to eat or sleep.

The manager of the Court theatre bowed thrice, as if he had been advancing to the foot lights to address the public; then he stood still and silent, awaiting the prince's pleasure. But, although he said nothing, his countenance was so expressive that the Grand Duke answered him.

"Yes," he said, "here you are. I recollect you perfectly, and I have not forgotten our agreement. But you come at a very unfortunate moment, my dear sir!"

"I crave your Highness's pardon, if I have chosen an improper hour to seek an audience," replied Balthasar with another bow.

"It is not the hour that I am thinking of," answered the prince quickly. "Would that were all! See, here is your letter; I was just now reading it, and regretting that, instead of writing to me only three days ago, when you were half way here, you had not done so two or three weeks before starting."

"I did wrong."

"More so than you think, for, had you sooner warned me, I would have spared you a useless journey."

"Useless!" exclaimed Balthazar aghast.—"Has your Highness changed your mind?"

"Nothing at all; I am still passionately fond of the drama, and should be delighted to have a French theatre here. As far as that goes, my ideas and tastes are in no way altered since last summer; but, unfortunately, I am unable to satisfy them. Look here," continued the prince, rising from his arm chair. He took Balthazar's arm and led him to a window: "I told you, last year, that I was building a magnificent theatre in my capital."

"Your Highness did tell me so."

"Well, look yonder, on the other side of the square; there the theatre is!"

"Your Highness, I see nothing but an open space; a building commenced, and, as yet, scarcely risen above the foundation."

"Precisely so; that is the theatre."

"Your Highness told me it would be completed before the end of winter."

"I did not then foresee that I should have to stop the works for want of cash to pay the workmen. Such is my present position. If I have no theatre ready to receive you, and if I cannot take you and your company into my pay, it is because I have not the means. The coffers of the state and my privy purse are alike empty.—You are astounded! Adversity respects nobody—not even grand dukes. But I support its assaults with philosophy; try to follow my example; and, by the way of a beginning, take a chair and a pipe, fill yourself a glass of wine, and drink to the return of my prosperity. Since you suffer for my misfortunes, I owe you an explanation. Although I never had much order in my expenditure, I had every reason, at the time I first met with you, to believe my finances in a flourishing condition. It was not until the commencement of the present year that I found the contrary to be the case. Last year was a bad one; had ruined our crops, and money was hard to get in. The salaries of my household were in arrear, and my officers murmured. For the first time I ordered a statement of my affairs to be laid before me, and I found that ever since my accession I had been exceeding my revenue. My first act of sovereignty had been a considerable diminution of the taxes paid to my predecessors. Hence the evil which had annually augmented, and now I am ruined, loaded with debts, and without means of repairing the disaster.—My privy counsellors certainly proposed a way: it was to double the taxes, raise extraordinary contributions, to squeeze my subjects, in short. A fine plan, indeed! to make the poor pay for my improvidence and disorder! Such things may occur in other states, but they shall not occur in mine. Justice before everything. I prefer enduring my difficulties to making my subjects suffer."

"Excellent prince!" exclaimed Balthazar, touched by the generous sentiments. The Grand Duke smiled.

"Do you turn flatterer?" he said. "Beware! it is an arduous post, and you will have none to help you. I have no longer wherewith to pay flatterers; my courtiers have fled. You have seen the emptiness of my anterooms; you met neither chamberlain nor equerry upon your entrance. All those gentlemen have given in their resignations. The civil and military officers of my home, secretaries, aides-de-camp, and others, left me, because I could no longer pay them their wages. I am alone; a few faithful and patient servants are all that remain, and the most important personage of my court is now honest Sigismund, my old valet-de-chambre."

These last words were spoken in a melancholy tone, which pained Balthasar. The eyes of the honest manager glistened. The Grand Duke detected his sympathy.

The cheerful frankness of the Grand Duke's manner forbade doubt of his sincerity. Balthazar congratulated him on his courage.

"I need it more than you think!" replied Leopold, "and I cannot answer for having enough to support the blows that threaten me. The desertion of my courtiers would be nothing, did I owe it only to the bad state of my finances; as soon as I found myself in funds again I could buy others or take back the old ones, and amuse myself by putting my foot upon their servile necks. Then they would be as humble as now they are insolent. But their desertion is an omen of other dangers. As the diplomatists say, clouds are at the political horizon. Poverty alone would not have sufficed to clear my palace of men who are as greedy of honors as they are of money; they would have waited for better days; their vanity would have consoled their avarice. If they fled, it was because they felt the ground shake beneath their feet, and because they are in league with my enemies. I cannot shut my eyes to impending dangers. I am on bad terms with Austria; Metternich looks askance at me; at Vienna I am considered too liberal, too popular; they say that I set a bad example; they reproach me with cheap government, and with not making my subjects sufficiently feel the yoke.—Thus do they accumulate pretexts for playing me a scurvy trick. One of my cousins, a colonel in the Austrian service, covets my Grand Duchy. Although I say grand, it is but ten leagues long and eight leagues broad; but, such as it is, it suits me; I am accustomed to it, I have the habit of ruling it, and I should miss it were I deprived of it. My cousin has the audacity to dispute my incontestible rights; this is a mere pretext for litigation, but he has carried the case before the Aulic Council, and notwithstanding the excellence of my right, I still may lose my cause, for I have no money wherewith to enlighten my judges. My enemies are powerful, treason surrounds me; they try to take advantage of my financial embarrassments, first to make me bankrupt and then to depose me. In this critical conjuncture, I should be only too delighted to have a company of players to divert my thoughts from my troubles—but I have neither theatre nor money. So it is impossible for me to keep you, my dear manager, and, believe me, I am as grieved at it as you can be. All I can do is to give you, out of the little I have left, a small indemnity to cover your travelling expenses and take you back to France. Come and see me to-morrow morning; we will settle this matter, and you shall take your leave."

Balthasar's attention and sympathy had been so completely engrossed by the Grand Duke's misfortunes, and by his revelations of his political and financial difficulties, that his own troubles had quite gone out of his thoughts. When he quitted the palace they came back upon him like a thunder cloud. How was he to satisfy the actors, whom he had brought two hundred leagues away from Paris? What could he say to them, how appease them! The unhappy manager passed a miserable night. At daybreak he rose and went out into the open air to calm his agitation and seek a mode of extrication from his difficulties. During a two hours' walk he had abundant time to visit every corner of Karlstadt, and to admire the beauties of that celebrated capital. He found it an elegant town, with wide straight streets cutting completely across it, so that he could see through it at a glance.—The houses were pretty and uniform, and the windows were provided with small indiscreet mirrors, which reflected the passers-by and transported the street into the drawing-room, so that the worthy Karlstadters could satisfy their curiosity without quitting their easy chairs—an innocent recreation much affected by German burghers. As regarded trade and manufacture, the capital of the Grand Duchy of Niesenstein did not seem to be very much occupied with either. It was anything but a bustling city; luxury had made but little progress there; and its prosperity was due chiefly to the moderate desires and phlegmatic philosophy of its inhabitants.

In such a country a company of actors had no chance of a livelihood. There is nothing for it but to return to France, thought Balthazar, after making the circuit of the city; then he looked at his watch, and deeming the hour suitable, he took the road to the palace, which he entered with as little ceremony as upon the preceding evening. The faithful Sigismund doing duty as gentleman-in-waiting, received him as an old acquaintance, and forthwith ushered him into the Grand Duke's presence. His Highness seemed more depressed than upon the previous day. He was pacing the room with long strides, his eyes cast down, his arms folded. In his hand he held papers, whose perusal it apparently was that had thus discomposed him. For some moments he said nothing; then he suddenly stopped before Balthazar.

"You find me less calm," he said, "than I was last night. I have just received unpleasant news. I am heartily sick of these perpetual vex-