

THE GERMAN TENOR.

BY GEORGE FOSBERY.

MISS CONSTANCE ETHERIDGE sat before the looking-glass

on her toilet table while her maid dressed her hair. Richards, an old servant of the family, who remembered Constance as a baby, was wont to assume a right to speak her mind to her young lady whenever the spirit moved her.

"Dearie me, Miss Constance, whatever is the matter? You keep a-staring through and through that pink bow beside your mirror, instead of looking at yourself in the glass to see if you can tell which is the puff-curl I have just put in and which is your own hair."

"I am very angry with you, Richards. Why do you insist upon doing my coiffure with these horrid artificial things in it?"

"Don't be absurd, Miss Constance! All the young ladies wear them nowadays."

The young girl succumbed to necessity, and protested no more. She had something else in her mind. Her thoughts wandered back to an experience of the previous evening, at one of the early balls of her first season.

The incident recalled was this. Her mother had taken her to a subscription dance. The people present were what is commonly called "a mixed lot," and Miss Etheridge meant to confine her dances to two or three intimate friends. But in the crowd of strangers she could not help noticing one gentleman who appeared to her to belong to a very different level from the herd.

A tall, well-proportioned, active youth of Saxon type, he seemed to her the ideal she had formed of the sort of man to whom she would wish to give her heart. Curiously enough this same gentleman showed that a parallel sentiment was aroused in his breast by the sight of Miss Etheridge. His look and manner betrayed the fact to her in an instant. The result was a move on his part, which, according to English etiquette, was highly reprehensible. Its nature may be best described by repeating Miss Etheridge's *naïve* confession to her mother on the way home.

"By-the-bye, Constance," inquired her mother, "who was the gentleman that danced with you several times and took you down to supper?"

"I haven't the least idea, mamma."

"Constance!" gasped Mrs. Etheridge, "what do you mean? Who introduced him to you?"

"Nobody, mamma. He came up in foreign fashion and asked me to dance. It would have been silly of me to refuse, for he danced superbly."

The German Tenor.

“Constance!” again exclaimed her mother, horrified. “I am quite shocked at you. Your conduct was most unladylike. I could make allowances for mistakes in a girl of your age, but I never thought you could be capable of such a lamentable piece of ill-breeding.”

“Really, I don’t see that I have done anything wicked,” pleaded the girl.

“It was worse than wicked, Constance; you compromised yourself with a mere stranger, and he may be a low counter-jumper, or something.”

“Nonsense, mamma dear. He is nothing of the kind. I think he is German, for he spoke with a slight accent; and that might account for his apparent rudeness in asking a stranger for a dance. In other ways he was singularly gentlemanlike.”

Such was the episode. And it was of this—or rather of *him*—that Constance was brooding before her toilet-table.

Mrs. General Etheridge had an “at home” that same afternoon. Her invitations had been sent out a fortnight before. She had since taken great pains to engage some well-known singers and musicians to entertain her guests. Principal among these was Herr Bertschinger, a singer of some repute, who had lately come over to this country. She had not seen him or heard him sing, but she had heard reports about him; and great things were expected of the “new tenor.”

Another great attraction was expected (and this, in Mrs. Etheridge’s estimation, was the most important of all)—namely, an eligible young man—“a young man who would do beautifully for Constance,” thought the anxious mother. He was Lord Herbert Ching, a son of General Etheridge’s old friend and schoolfellow, the Marquis of Camberley. Lord Herbert had been educated abroad, and the Etheridges had never seen him since he was a child. He had lately returned to England, and the Marquis had written from Italy asking the General to allow his boy to call. The result was that Lord Herbert received a hearty invitation to the Etheridges’ “at home.”

The afternoon arrived, and shortly after the appointed hour guests came pouring in a continuous stream through Mrs. Etheridge’s suite of reception rooms. Those of the musicians who had arrived early were set going to pass the time; and Mrs. Etheridge waited anxiously for the appearance of the lion of her party. After a while she became troubled at his non-arrival, and sent down a message by one of the footmen to know if Herr Bertschinger was downstairs. The answer was that he had just entered the house.

In a flutter of suspense the hostess stationed herself at the head of the stairs, and awaited the great man’s approach.

Presently the butler came up and announced in stentorian tones, “Her Berchingy.”

Mrs. Etheridge held out her hand to welcome the tall, fair young man who bowed to her; and then, to her dismay, she recognised in him the very youth who had violated the proprieties on the previous

evening at the subscription ball, by asking her daughter to dance without any introduction.

She felt greatly annoyed. But quickly seeing that there was no help for it but to be properly gracious, she summoned her memories of Ollendorf to her assistance, and welcomed the stranger in German.

"So glad you are at last come. We feared you would disappoint us. Herr Bertschinger—my husband—General Etheridge." And the host and guest shook hands.

The young man, noticing that he was addressed in German, made a suitable reply in the same language, and bowed.

Mrs. Etheridge saw that it was impossible to prevent a meeting between the "impudent fellow" and her daughter, and that the best way to avoid anything in the nature of scandal was to go through the form of an introduction between them.

"Constance, my dear——"

Miss Etheridge, who was a few yards away, turned at her mother's call ; and, to her astonishment, she found that the very man was being correctly presented to her who had raised her parent's ire the previous night.

Still greater was the astonishment of the stranger, who had strolled home that morning in the small hours, bitterly reproaching himself with not having learnt the name of a certain fair partner, whose pretty face he was never likely to set eyes on again. In sheer surprise he looked from daughter to mother, and from mother to daughter, and then bowed awkwardly.

Constance flushed to the roots of her hair, and her mother noted the fact angrily. So Mrs. Etheridge turned promptly to the new-comer saying politely, in her best Ollendorf—

"Will you do us the honour of singing something ?"

Herr Bertschinger assumed a modest air of expostulation, and pretended that he felt scarcely equal to the task of performing before so distinguished and critical an audience. It may be mentioned, in passing, that the more the "artistes" (as they called themselves) tried to entertain the distinguished and critical audience, the more indefatigably the distinguished and critical audience chattered in competition.

But Herr Bertschinger's scruples were eventually overcome. Constance Etheridge watched him as he followed her mother to the piano.

"Oh! I forgot," exclaimed Mrs. Etheridge in English, "your music—have you brought it ?"

"I have brought it in my head," replied the German, smiling.

"How handsome he is!" thought Constance.

"What insufferable airs these foreigners assume!" thought her mother. "To think that my Constance—but hush!"

The musician touched the keys, being his own accompanist. After a modest prelude he broke into one of the ballads that, although

we English are not a truly musical nation, we may claim as home-made, and be proud of.

“Why doesn’t the fellow sing in German?” asked everyone of his neighbour, though not one guest in ten could put together the simplest sentence in that tongue. “Why does he sing in English?”

“Swagger!” was the general verdict.

The singer’s voice was a pure and “legitimate” tenor. To the true musicians present it was evident that he had learnt from the best masters. There was nothing in his style to suggest native vulgarity, or that assumption of superiority only too common among “lions” from over the water.

The ballad closed amid general applause; indeed the “bravos” and “bravissimos” burst out on the penultimate bar of the melody, and the singer finished for the sake of his art alone.

Only one of those who were present refrained from any outward sign of applause. Constance Etheridge, in truth, feared to show what an influence over her the singer possessed. She stood at a distance, with downcast eyes, until a gentle voice aroused her.

“You did not like my poor song, Miss Etheridge. And yet—and yet I sang more for your sake than for anyone else’s.”

She was at a loss to reply. Mrs. Etheridge came to the rescue, in the very nick of time, with an excuse for separating the pair.

Later on, the “tenor” was pressed “to oblige” a second time. He did so with evident reluctance, this time singing in German. Everybody voted that his voice was simply charming. Only a few complained that it wouldn’t fill the Albert Hall—which was true, though uncalled for.

Meantime, Mrs. Etheridge took very good care that Herr Bertschinger and Constance did not come together again.

“I told you so, Constance. The man is a professional singer, and I dare say no better than a mere adventurer.”

Oh, insular reasoning!

At length the young man who was the cause of all this maternal solicitude came to take his leave. Mrs. Etheridge complimented him, in bad German, on his delightful music, and the General accompanied him to the foot of the stairs, where he slipped an envelope nervously into the hand of the successful vocalist.

When the latter had passed out into the street, the General inquired of a servant “if anything had been seen of Lord Herbert Ching, eh?”

A visitor at that moment entering the house seemed to overhear the name. He was a short, fat, red-faced man, who might be any age.

“Dat’s me,” he said, shaking hands with the General. “I haf zo many appointments this after-mittag to geeep, zat I am a leettle late. You must eggsguse me, Cheneral Etheridge, I bray you.”

“Well!” muttered the old gentleman to himself, “I’d be hanged

if I would bring up a boy of mine abroad in this disgusting fashion. I can't think what Camberley can have been about." Then he added aloud, "Will you come upstairs?"

"Mit pleasure," assented Lord Herbert, following him.

By this time the guests were beginning to troop out again. They had heard the "new tenor," and nothing in the world would keep them there any longer.

When Lord Herbert Ching said "Ow d' you do?" to his hostess, the general exodus was in full swing, and for twenty minutes afterwards a few of the most intimate friends of the family occupied the attention of the General and his wife and daughter.

At last, in despair of ever getting a word in edgeways with such people, the latest arrival stumped again down the stair without a word of good-bye, and with some very forcible Teutonic expletives falling from his lips.

"Well, in all my born days!" he growled, as he took up his hat and went his way, "I vas in such an inzulding way neffer pefore dredet. I vill do-morrow to Chermany go back. I 'av' put myzelf to gonzideraple ingonfenience for zese ztuck-up Eenglish; but I vill ztant it no more—tamt if I do!" And away he went.

Anon, when the last guest had departed, and the General and Mrs. Etheridge stood in sole possession of their empty suite of reception rooms, the lady of the house heaved a sigh of relief, and said to her husband:

"There! Thank goodness, that's over! I think everything went off splendidly. But what a lucky escape poor dear Constance had! We won't engage Herr Bertschinger again if I can help it."

"Why, my dear? He seemed very well-behaved, I thought. What's the matter with the young man?"

"Matter!" exclaimed Mrs. Etheridge. "Everything's the matter. He's only a common musician, and he had the impudence to make friends with Constance at the ball last night, without any introduction whatever. I never heard of such a thing."

"Well, for my part," returned the General, "I thought him as nice-looking and pleasant-mannered a lad as you would wish to see; the very reverse of that awful outsider, Lord Camberley's boy."

When Miss Etheridge was once more in the hands of her maid, changing her pretty dress for dinner, the following conversation took place.

"And, if you please, Miss Constance—what did you think of the *primer donner*?—that's what they call the principal singing gentleman, isn't it?"

Constance laughed lightly. "The *prima donna*, as you call him, Richards, sang as I never heard anyone sing before."

"Oh—h—h—h!" remarked the maid, her voice travelling up and down the scale significantly. "By the way, miss, he left his music behind, on the hall table."

“His music! Why, he said that he did not bring any.”

“Leastways his name is in gold letters on the leather cover, miss.”

“What! Herr Bertschinger’s?”

“That’s it, I think, Miss Constance.”

Constance reflected for some moments, and then frightened Richards half out of her wits by jumping about and clapping her hands.

“I see it all, Richards! What an awful muddle! Oh, what fun!” And then she added more soberly: “But will he ever come here again?”

“Who, miss?” asked the maid.

“Never you mind,” answered her young mistress as she left the room hurriedly at the sound of the dinner-bell.

At the breakfast table next morning the General read aloud in amazement a letter which he had just opened. It ran thus:—

“DEAR GENERAL ETHERIDGE,—I enjoyed myself very much at your interesting ‘at home’ yesterday. It was a great honour to be asked to sing, and it gave me much pleasure to do so, but I was rather surprised on getting home and opening your envelope to find the enclosed cheque within it. As it appears to have been intended for some one else, I will not attempt further explanation. With kind regards to Mrs. and Miss Etheridge and yourself,

“Yours sincerely,

“HERBERT CHING.”

The mistake was now obvious. Lord Herbert Ching had been mistaken for Herr Bertschinger—and *vice versa*. It was not difficult to perceive how the awkward error had arisen. The slight similarity in sound between the names of Lord Herbert Ching and Herr Bertschinger, the initial blunder committed by the butler when announcing the arrival of the former, and the imperfect hearing of Lord Herbert’s name by the German in the hall, supplied the necessary clues.

Needless to say that, so far as the young nobleman was concerned, the unhappy misunderstanding soon patched itself up. “The new tenor,” however, was by no means so easily appeased; and, though it was ingeniously put to him that he had been mistaken for a real live lord, he was not satisfied until the cheque which he had not earned was delicately pressed upon his acceptance.

“You know, Herbert,” said Mrs. Etheridge some time after, “I should never have forgiven anyone else but you for dancing with Constance without an introduction.”

“I should never have forgiven myself,” replied Lord Herbert laughing, “if my little Constance hadn’t sprung to it so readily.”

“Oh, you bad boy!” exclaimed the outraged matron.

And the wedding-day was fixed accordingly.