THE DRAMA IN PARIS DURING THE SIEGE.

A correspondent of the London Athenaum gives the following highly interesting description of the manner in which the besieged Parisians contrived to gratify their tastes for

The most striking indication of the superiority which French actors possess over their British brethren is observable in their indifference to stage paraphernalia. No nation is so scrupulous in correctness of detail as our Gallic neighbors; and yet when circumstances arise which preclude a pursuit of realistic truth, there are really no actors but the Parisians who can take a stand on the excellence of their elecution, and charm the spectator to tears or laughter independent of the trammels of theatrical illusion. This fact has long since been clearly set before us by the members of the Comedie Française, who have been until a year ago in the habit of playing short pieces in private salons with no adjunct beyond a pair of folding screens; and lately in besieged Paris the excellence of that admirable company has been put still

more severely to the test. After the disasters of Sedan the natural bilarity of the capital met with a sudden check; Paris sank into such a depth of despair as to forget its theatres; Mad'lle Desclee smiled to empty benches, and the bewitching Pierson shrugged her fascinating shoulders in vain. Such a state of things was unprecedented in the annals of the stage. One or two theatres struggled on, endeavoring bravely to weather the storm, until one morning there appeared a Government placard on the walls, which settled the question at once. "La Patrie" was declared to be in such deep mourning that all signs of gayety were an insult to her grief. Every species of popular entertainment was peremptorily ordered to cease forthwith; scenery and properties were to be carefully stowed away out of reach of shot or shell, and the precious lounging-places, crowded to excess but a few short weeks before with throngs of holidaymakers, were to be prepared immediately for the reception of the wounded. The pursuit of pleasure came to an end for the time being, but after a lapse of a month rumors began to be affoat that bills with the wellknown names attached were about to be distributed, and that we were no longer to be condemned to wile away the evening hours with dominoes or ecarte. The opening of a theatre in the face of the Government proclamation was a dangerous experiment, but the members of the Comedie threw themselves into the breach, and announced a series of Thursday recitations; while the director of the opera brought up the rear with a promise of Sunday selections of popular music. There were many little compromises, however, with the ruffled feelings of sternly patriotic Belleville. Performances were to take place in the day time only; the music at the opera was to be as severely disagreeable as possible -recitations were to be unaccompanied by scenery or orchestra, and were to be as dull as they could be made; add to this an icy-cold house (for fuel was to be employed in a better cause) and no more light than was absolutely necessary (gas having been placed on the retired list, with milk and butter and other luxuries), and it is unnecessary to state that we were not likely to become uproariously and aggressively gay, or to shock the feelings of the Brutuses by a display of unseemly dissipation. But poor Paris hankered after a change of ideas, and longed to drown, if only for a moment, the memory of ever-present sorrow. The theatre once opened was besieged: pale rhapsodies of Corneille or Racine were applauded to the echo; the audience, usually so fastidious and intolerant of trifling defects, sat patiently through endless "stage-waits," and buried its nose in its furs without a murmur; it hailed the bombastic emptiness of the 'Cid' with acclamation, and laughed and wept by turns over the lugubrious strophes of the 'Chatiments.' The theatres chosen for these lenten entertainments was the lively little Bouffes. where whilome Chaumont winked and Schneider sang. What a strange sight it was! A heavy odor of petroleum filled the air; in the lurid light and through the murky atmosphere scarce anything but uniforms could be distinguished-uniforms and ever uniforms, and ladies dressed in black. There was a low hum and buzz of voices as each man discussed with his neighbor the price of bread or the latest reports of Chanzy or Faidherbe. Suddenly there came three taps: Favart entered, dressed in crape, and incontinently began to declaim—'Stella' it was, by Victor Hugo-first monotonous and slow, with soft white hands clasped one upon another, and then warming by degrees with exquisite modulation until at length she flung her arms above her head and proclaimed herself with flashing eyes and dilated nostrils the Angel of Liberty and Goddess of Truth. The effect was startling—one serpentine movement glided into another—the transition was so gradual from an absolute repose of dreamy narrative to a great burst, as she cried "Awake, awake! ye that are sleeping! Arise, sentinels, to your posts! Awakearise!" that one was completely carried away, and forgot for a moment the windiness of Hugo's lines. Her consummate art as an actress concealed the flimsiness of the author; her energy and strength gave to the verses a backbone which they did not otherwise pos-sess. The bright look of fervor faded from her face as she smilingly bowed and retired: to be followed by Coquelin, who recited quietly a string of stanzas suggestive of military glory, in his ordinary dress of a National Guard. Then came Marie Laurent of 'Jack Sheppard' notoriety, who related to us an endless story, alse from Victor Hugo, of a fisherman's misfortunes-a dreary account that dragged its length along, and finally left us as indifferent as at the commencement, in consequence of the overpiling of the agony. Yet the people distened calmly, seemingly indeed with interest, applauded judiciously on the whole, and were evidently quite prepared to have their minds improved. When shall we find in England an actor or an actress capable of doing likewise? Is the audience yet grown up, or in course of growing up, that will allow members of the dramatic profession to stand in plain clothes and deliver long passages of Milton or of Shakespeare, and enjoy, or even tolerate, the process? Are the managers yet in being amongst us who are prepared to run the risk of putting the matter fairly to the test? One hears it declared that a one-act play of serious interest must fail at home because its proportions do not impose upon the crowd; but the fact is, that an Englishman goes to the theatre to laugh, and not to think, and repudiates a performance which is purely an intellectual entertainment. Of course there are a select few who rejoice in readings, but they belong for the most part to the class that really likes the stage without daring to admit it; whereas in Paris it is the crowd—those pits and galleries who laugh over the eccentricities of the Grand-Duchess and General Boom—that sit down content-

edly and listen for hours to simple declama-

After a few trials the opera broke through the rule of "afternoons," boldly resumed the evening hours of representation, and these remained in force until the end. The house was lit entirely with candles, a soft and pleasant light enough, but one which helped but little to chase away the graveyard chill of all those bitter cubic inches. Every instrument seemed to have a frozen echo, and a perfect cloud of steam issued from the mouths of the chorus as they rose and commenced to sing. I do not know when I ever saw so sad a spectacle as that vast house presented, packed to the roof with uniforms and sable dresses, the only bits of color in the mass being the galloons of the officers, their caps and facings; on the stage a crowd of ladies like a rustling band of crows; at either end a group of citizens "coupe-choux" on thigh, the ensigns of war upon their breasts.

The ice being thus fairly broken, the "Francais" took the bull by the horns, and opened its doors with a promise of a regular play. Beaumarchais' comedy of 'Figaro's Marriage' was accordingly given, with Got the inimitable in his original character, supported by Mesdames Brohan, Ponsin, and Dubois. Fancy Cherubino, archest of pages, played by a demure young lady in a black silk gown!-fancy the trial scene of the third act with puzzled bigwigs and grand seigneurs all clad alike in the monotonous black and red of the National Guard uniform-the lively Barber in white gloves with a blue great coat, ill-fitting black trousers, and military boots and spurs! It was as though the garrison of a country town had joined the widows in a general "spree," and had undertaken to combine a funeral with private theatricals. The incongruity was great for a few moments after the rising of the curtain; but a short space of time sufficed to cause the spectator to forget such details in admiration of the marvellous power of concentration which these artists possess. Afternoon performances took place thenceforth with tolerable regularity every Thursday and Sunday. Moliere and Marivaux prepared the way for Scribe—"Tartuffe' and the 'Misanthrope' gave way to 'Ladies' Battle;' but this was too much for the outraged feelings of the Brutuses, and 'Andromanche' was hastily substituted. By degrees, even they became more tolerant, and allowed stage-dresses be donned once more. The bembardment commenced in course of time-homes were shelled and children slaughtered in the streets; still the curtain rose to crowded houses, and people calmly read their papers during the entracts to the sullen booming of distant guns. On the day of the final struggle of dying Paris, when her sons went out and fought for the first and only time-while mothers and wives and sisters were crowding anxiously about the gates, waiting with sickening heart and pallid lips for news of their dear ones who had gone out that morning never to return, the "Francais" played 'Le Medicin malgre Lui,' Got. outshone himself; never was he more brilliant: the public was entranced, and recalled him again and again. The dreary cannon roared far away-too far away to be exciting, and yet close by-but two miles off, under the walls of the great city: presently there was a stir and whispering — a commotion in the corridor, as a brancard was carried by, bearing a shapeless mass covered with a bloody cloak: it was all that remained of poor Seveste, a promising young actor at-tached to the theatre. He had played his part in a great tragedy, and had gone forth that day to offer himself up for his country's weal: the sacrifice had been accepted: he was carried into the Foyer des Artistes with a mortal wound, and disappeared in the shadow of Talma's statue, behind the towering marble of the great Rachel. "Poor Seveste! so young—so full of promise! Ah, well, it's very sad!"—and the buzzing ceased, and every man settled himself in his seat and rubbed his glasses with his handkerchief, as the prompter gave three raps and the curtain rose for the last act.

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