

Ludovic Halevy

---

# Parisian Points of View

---

 Publio

## Parisian Points of View

Ludovic Halévy

Publio Kiadó

2013

Minden jog fenntartva!

To most American readers of fiction I fancy that M. Ludovic Halévy is known chiefly, if not solely, as the author of that most charming of modern French novels, *The Abbé Constantin*. Some of these readers may have disliked this or that novel of M. Zola's because of its bad moral, and this or that novel of M. Ohnet's because of its bad taste, and all of them were delighted to discover in M. Halévy's interesting and artistic work a story written by a French gentleman for young ladies. Here and there a scoffer might sneer at the tale of the old French priest and the young women from Canada as innocuous and saccharine; but the story of the good Abbé Constantin and of his nephew, and of the girl the nephew loved in spite of her American millions—this story had the rare good fortune of pleasing at once the broad public of indiscriminate readers of fiction and the narrower circle of real lovers of literature. Artificial the atmosphere of the tale might be, but it was with an artifice at once delicate and delicious; and the tale itself won its way into the hearts of the women of America as it had into the hearts of the women of France.

There is even a legend—although how solid a foundation it may have in fact I do not dare to discuss—there is a legend that the lady-superior of a certain convent near Paris was so fascinated by *The Abbé Constantin*, and so thoroughly convinced of the piety of its author, that she ordered all his other works, receiving in due season the lively volumes wherein are recorded the sayings and doings of Monsieur and Madame Cardinal, and of the two lovely daughters of Monsieur and Madame Cardinal. To note that these very amusing studies of certain aspects of life in a modern capital originally appeared in that extraordinary journal, *La Vie Parisienne*—now sadly degenerate—is enough to indicate that they are not precisely what the good lady-superior expected to receive. We may not say that *La Famille Cardinal* is one of the books every gentleman's library should be without; but to appreciate its value requires a far different knowledge of the world and of its wickedness than is needed to understand *The Abbé Constantin*.

Yet the picture of the good priest and the portraits of the little Cardinals are the work of the same hand, plainly enough. In both of these books, as in *Criquette* (M. Halévy's only other novel), as in *A Marriage for Love*, and the twoscore other short stories he has written during the past thirty years, there are the same artistic qualities, the same sharpness of vision, the same gentle irony, the same constructive skill, and the same dramatic touch. It is to be remembered always that the author of *L'Abbé Constantin* is also the half-author of "Froufrou" and of "Tricoche et Cacolet," as well as of the librettos of "La Belle Hélène" and of "La Grande Duchesse de Gerolstein."

In the two novels, as in the twoscore short stories and sketches—the *contes* and the *nouvelles* which are now spring-like idyls and now wintry episodes, now sombre etchings and now gayly-colored pastels—in all the works of the story-teller we see the firm grasp of the dramatist. The characters speak for themselves; each reveals himself with the swift directness of the personages of a play. They are not talked about and about, for all analysis has been done by the playwright before he rings up the curtain in the first paragraph. And the story unrolls itself, also, as rapidly as does a comedy. The movement is straightforward. There is the cleverness and the ingenuity of the accomplished dramatist, but the construction has the simplicity of the highest skill. The arrangement of incidents is so artistic that it seems inevitable; and no one is ever moved to wonder whether or not the tale might have been better told in different fashion.

Nephew of the composer of "La Juive"—an opera not now heard as often as it deserves, perhaps—and son of a playwright no one of whose productions now survives, M. Halévy grew up in the theatre. At fourteen he was on the free-list of the Opéra, the Opéra-Comique, and the Odéon. After he left school and went into the civil service his one wish was to write plays, and so to be able to afford to resign his post. In the civil service he had an inside view of French politics, which gave him a distaste for the mere game of government without in any way impairing the vigor of his patriotism; as is proved by certain of the short stories dealing with the war of 1870 and the revolt of the Paris Communists. And while he did his work faithfully, he had spare hours to give to literature. He wrote plays and stories, and they were rejected. The manager of the Odéon declared that one early play of M. Halévy's was exactly suited to the Gymnase, and the manager of the Gymnase protested that it was exactly suited to the Odéon. The editor of a daily journal said that one early tale of M. Halévy's was too brief for a novel, and the editor of a weekly paper said that it was too long for a short story.

In time, of course, his luck turned; he had plays performed and stories published; and at last he met M. Henri Meilhac, and entered on that collaboration of nearly twenty years' duration to which we owe "Froufrou" and "Tricoche et Cacolet," on the one hand, and on the other the books of Offenbach's most brilliant operas—"Barbebleue," for example, and "La Périchole." When this collaboration terminated, shortly before M. Halévy wrote *The Abbé Constantin*, he gave up writing for the stage. The training of the playwright he could not give up, if he would, nor the intimacy with the manners and customs of the people who live, move, and have

their being on the far side of the curtain.

Obviously M. Halévy is fond of the actors and the actresses with whom he spent the years of his manhood. They appear again and again in his tales; and in his treatment of them there is never anything ungentlemanly as there was in M. Jean Richepin's recent volume of theatrical sketches. M. Halévy's liking for the men and women of the stage is deep; and wide is his knowledge of their changing moods. The young Crique and the old Karikari and the aged Dancing-master—he knows them all thoroughly, and he likes them heartily, and he sympathizes with them cordially. Indeed, nowhere can one find more kindly portraits of the kindly player-folk than in the writings of this half-author of "Froufrou"; it is as though the successful dramatist felt ever grateful towards the partners of his toil, the companions of his struggles. He is not blind to their manifold weaknesses, nor is he the dupe of their easy emotionalism, but he is tolerant of their failings, and towards them, at least, his irony is never mordant.

Irony is one of M. Halévy's chief characteristics, perhaps the chiefest. It is gentle when he deals with the people of the stage—far gentler than when he is dealing with the people of Society, with fashionable folk, with the aristocracy of wealth. When he is telling us of the young loves of millionaires and of million-heiresses, his touch may seem caressing, but for all its softness the velvet paw has claws none the less. It is amusing to note how often M. Halévy has chosen to tell the tale of love among the very rich. The heroine of *The Abbé Constantin* is immensely wealthy, as we all know, and immensely wealthy are the heroines of *Princesse*, of *A Grand Marriage*, and of *In the Express*. [A] Sometimes the heroes and the heroines are not only immensely wealthy, they are also of the loftiest birth; such, for instance, are the young couple whose acquaintance we make in the pages of *Only a Waltz*.

[A] Perhaps the present writer will be forgiven if he wishes to record here that *In the Express (Par le Rapide)* was published in Paris only towards the end of 1892, while a tale not wholly unlike it, *In the Vestibule Limited*, was published in New York in the spring of 1891.

There is no trace or taint of snobbery in M. Halévy's treatment of all this magnificence; there is none of the vulgarity which marks the pages of *Lothair*, for example; there is no mean admiration of mean things. There is, on the other hand, no bitterness of scourging satire. He lets us see that all this luxury is a little cloying and perhaps not a little enervating. He suggests (although he takes care never to say it) that perhaps wealth and birth are not really the best the world can offer. The amiable egotism of the hero of *In the Express*, and the not unkindly selfishness of the heroine of that most Parisian love-story, are set before us without insistence, it is true, but with an irony so keen that even he who runs as he reads may not mistake the author's real opinion of the characters he has evoked.

To say this is to say that M. Halévy's irony is delicate and playful. There is no harshness in his manner and no hatred in his mind. We do not find in his pages any of the pessimism which is perhaps the dominant characteristic of the best French fiction of our time. To M. Halévy, as to every thinking man, life is serious, no doubt, but it need not be taken sadly, or even solemnly. To him life seems still enjoyable, as it must to most of those who have a vivid sense of humor. He is not disillusioned utterly, he is not reduced to the blankness of despair as are so many of the disciples of Flaubert, who are cast into the outer darkness, and who hopelessly revolt against the doom they have brought on themselves.

Indeed, it is Merimée that M. Halévy would hail as his master, and not Flaubert, whom most of his fellow French writers of fiction follow blindly. Now, while the author of *Salamnbo* was a romanticist turned sour, the author of *Carmen* was a sentimentalist sheathed in irony. To Gustave Flaubert the world was hideously ugly, and he wished it strangely and splendidly beautiful, and he detested it the more because of his impossible ideal. To Prosper Merimée the world was what it is, to be taken and made the best of, every man keeping himself carefully guarded. Like Merimée, M. Halévy is detached, but he is not disenchanted. His work is more joyous than Merimée's, if not so vigorous and compact, and his delight in it is less disguised. Even in the Cardinal sketches there is nothing that leaves an acrid after-taste, nothing corroding—as there is not seldom in the stronger and sterner short stories of Maupassant.

More than Maupassant or Flaubert or Merimée, is M. Halévy a Parisian. Whether or not the characters of his tale are dwellers in the capital, whether or not the scene of his story is laid in the city by the Seine, the point of view is always Parisian. The *Circus Charger* did his duty in the stately avenues of a noble country-place, and *Blacky* performed his task near a rustic water-fall; but the men who record their intelligent actions are Parisians of the strictest sect. Even in the patriotic pieces called forth by the war of 1870, in the *Insurgent* and in the *Chinese Ambassador*, it is the siege of Paris and the struggle of the Communists which seem to the author most important. His style even, his swift and limpid prose—the prose which somehow corresponds to the best *vers de société* in its brilliancy and buoyancy—is the style of one who lives at the centre of things. Cardinal Newman once said that while Livy and Tacitus and Terence and Seneca wrote Latin, Cicero wrote Roman; so while M. Zola on the one side, and M. Georges Ohnet on the other, may write French, M. Halévy writes Parisian.

BRANDER MATTHEWS.

## ONLY A WALTZ

"Aunt, dear aunt, don't believe a word of what he is going to tell you. He is preparing to fib, to fib outrageously. If I hadn't interrupted him at the beginning of his talk, he would have told you that he had made up his mind to marry me from his and my earliest childhood."

"Of course!" exclaimed Gontran.

"Of course not," replied Marceline. "He was going to tell you that he was a good little boy, having always loved his little cousin,

and that our marriage was a delightful romance of tenderness and sweetness."

"Why, yes, of course," repeated Gontran.

"Nonsense! The truth, Aunt Louise, the real truth, in short, is this, never, never should we have been married if on the 17th of May, 1890, between nine and eleven o'clock, he had not lost 34,000 points at bezique at the club, and if all the boxes had not been sold, that same night, at the Bouffes-Parisiens Theatre."

Gontran began to laugh.

"Oh, you can laugh as much as you please! You know very well that but for this—on what does fate depend?—I should now be married and a duchess, it is true; but Duchess of Courtalin, and not Duchess of Lannilis. Well, perhaps that would have been better! At any rate, I wish to give Aunt Louise the authentic history of our marriage."

"Tell away, if it amuses you," said Gontran.

"Yes, sir, it amuses me. You shall know all, Aunt Louise—all, absolutely all; and I beg you to be judge of our quarrel."

This scene was taking place eight days after Marceline de Lorlaugue, at the Church of the Madeleine, before the altar, hidden under a mountain of roses, had answered "yes," with just the right amount of nervousness and emotion (neither too much nor too little, but exactly right), when she was asked if she was willing to take for husband her cousin, Jean Leopold Mathurin Arbert Gontran, Duke of Lannilis.

This marriage had been the great marriage of the season. There had been an absolute crush under the colonnade and against the railings of the church to see the bride walk down those fearful steps of the Madeleine. What an important feat that is! Merely to be beautiful is not all that is needful; it is necessary besides to know how to be beautiful. There is an art about being pretty which requires certain preparations and study. In society, as in the theatre, success rarely comes at once. Mme. de Lannilis had the good-fortune to make her first appearance with decisive success. She was at once quite easily and boldly at home in her beauty; she had only to appear to triumph. Prince Nérins had not a moment's hesitation concerning it, and he it is, as every one knows, who, with general consent, has made himself the distributor of the patents of supreme Parisian elegance; so while the new duchess, beneath the fire of a thousand eyes and behind the ringing staffs, was taking her first steps as a young married woman with calm assurance, Nérins, struck with admiration, was giving way, under the colonnade of the Madeleine, to veritable transports of enthusiasm. He went from group to group repeating:

"She is aerial! There is no other expression for her—aerial! She does not walk, she glides! If she had the fantasy, with one little kick of her heel, she could raise herself lightly over the heads of those two tall fellows with spears, cross the Place de la Concorde, and go and place herself on the pediment of the Chamber of Deputies. Look at her well; that is true beauty, radiant beauty, blazing beauty! She is a goddess, a young goddess! she will reign long, gentlemen—as long as possible."

The young goddess, for the present, did not go farther than Lannilis, in Poitou, to her husband's home—her home—in a mansion that had seen many Duchesses of Lannilis, but never one more charming, and never, it must be said, one more absolutely in love. This little duchess of nineteen was wild about this little duke of twenty-five, who was jealously carrying her off for himself alone to a quiet and solitary retreat.

They had arrived Thursday, the 24th of June, at about two o'clock—on an exquisite night beneath a star-spangled sky—and they were suddenly astounded at receiving a letter from their Aunt Louise, dated July 1:

"Eight days' steady tête-à-tête," she wrote, "is enough, quite enough. Trust to the experience of an old countrywoman, who would be delighted to kiss her little nephew and niece. Don't eat all your love in the bud—keep a little for the future."

Thursday, the 1st of July! Eight days! They had been eight days at Lannilis! It was impossible! They tried to put some order in their reflections. What had they done Friday, Saturday, and Sunday? But all was vague, and became confused in their minds. The days and the nights, and the nights and days. What had they done? It was always the same, same thing; and the same thing had somehow never been the same thing.

They had just loved, loved, loved; and, quite given up to this very wise occupation, they had completely forgotten that near Lannilis, in the old residence of Chatellerault, there was dear old Aunt Louise, who was expecting their first bridal visit—a visit which was due her, for she had the best claim in the world, on account of her eighty-four years, her kindness, and also because of the gift of a magnificent pearl necklace to Marceline.

So it was necessary to be resigned, to leave off dreaming, and to come back to reality; and it was during this visit that, before the old aunt, much amused at the quarrel, this great dispute had abruptly burst forth between the young married couple.

Aunt Louise had accepted the position of arbitrator, and, presiding over the discussion, she had made the two contestants sit down before her in arm-chairs, at a respectful distance. Marceline, before being seated, had already taken the floor.

"Every one agreed upon this point (you know it, Aunt Louise; mamma must often have told you in her letters)—every one was agreed on this point: that there were really only two suitable matches for me—the Duke of Lannilis here present, and the Duke of Courtalin. I had the weakness to prefer him—him over there. Why? I can scarcely tell—a childish habit, doubtless. We had played together when we were no higher than that at being little husband and wife. I had remained faithful to that childhood love, whereas he—"

"Whereas I—"

"All in due season, sir, and you will lose nothing by waiting. However, there were all sorts of good reasons for preferring—the other one, who had a larger fortune and was of more ancient nobility."

"Oh, as to that—in money, maybe, but as to birth—"

"It is indisputable! You are both dukes by patent."

"We in 1663."

"And the Courtalin—"

"In 1666 only."

"Agreed."

"Well, then?"

"Oh, just wait! I am posted on the question; mamma studied it thoroughly when things looked, three months ago, as if I should be Duchess of Courtalin. One morning mamma went to the archives with an old friend of hers, a great historian, who is a member of the Institute. You date from 1663, and the Courtalin from 1666; that is correct. But Louis XIV., in 1672, by a special edict, gave the precedence to the Courtalins; and you have not, I suppose, any idea of disputing what Louis XIV. thought best to do. Now, Aunt Louise, can he?"

"Certainly not."

"But Saint Simon—"

"Oh, let us leave Saint Simon alone; he is prejudice and inaccuracy itself! I know he is on your side, but that doesn't count; but I will, to be agreeable to you, acknowledge that you are better looking and taller than M. de Courtalin—"

"But—"

"Oh, my dear, I begin to see! You are dying for me to tell you that. Well, yes, you are a fairly handsome man; but that is only a very perishable advantage, and you have too much respect for conventionalities to wish to make that equal to the decree of Louis XIV. However, I loved you—I loved you faithfully, tenderly, fondly, stupidly; yes, stupidly, for when I had come out in society, the year before, in April, 1889, at Mme. de Fresnes's ball, when I had allowed my poor, little, thin shoulders to be seen for the first time (I must have been about seventeen), I noticed that the young marriageable men in our set (they are all quoted, noted, and labelled) drew away from me with strange, respectful deference. I appeared to be of no importance or interest, in spite of my name, my dowry, and my eyes. You see, I had singed myself. I had so ridiculously advertised my passion for you that I no longer belonged to myself; I was considered as belonging to you. As soon as I had put on my first long dress, which gave me at once the right to think of marriage and speak of love, I had told all my friends that I loved, and would never love or marry any one but you—you or the convent. Yes, I had come to that! My friends had told their brothers and cousins, who had repeated it to you (just what I wanted), but it put me out of the race. Dare to say, sir, that it is not all true, strictly true!"