

OUR CAPTIOUS CRITIC.

"THE STRUGGLE FOR LIFE."

La Lutte pour la vie was not very warmly welcomed either at the Gymnase or the French plays here. After this double warning it might well have been left alone, or have been so altered in adaptation as to give it a chance of success. Mons. Daudet intended a lecture. His object was to show the evils which may come of a determination to get on in the world, no matter what stands in the way. Very laudable of Mons. Daudet; but unfortunately playgoers do not care to be lectured except by suggestion; to be effective at the theatre the moral must come after the play. Messrs. Buchanan and Horner have copied the French author in his main mistake; they have given us the homily too literally. Once more it is all sermon and nothing but sermon, although a very slight alteration here and there might have imparted the needed dramatic sympathy and interest. They had not the excuse which Mons. Daudet



MISS KATE PHILLIPS
AS
LA MARÉCHALE DE SÉLENY

had, who, writing the sequel of a novel, might plead that he was bound to continue the personages on the stage from the points where they left off in the book. The majority of people in London have not read the novel, and those who have would certainly forgive Messrs. Buchanan and Horner for treating a book by Daudet as they would be allowed—none demurring—to treat a book by Fielding. They should have made the wronged wife a young woman. Nothing is gained, while almost everything is lost, by reproducing the Duchess as an elderly lady, ancient enough to be the wicked husband's mother. She has married him, aware that he cared only for her money. He spends her money, deceives her, urges her to divorce him that he may marry more money. It is very wrong; but she is so advanced in years, and he so juvenile, that, while admitting the husband a scoundrel, one feels that the wife has been an old fool. For this reason there is no dramatic excitement whatever in the vicissitudes of the Duchess's part; it



MR KERR
AS
CAUSSADE

needed a wife more nearly of the husband's age to lift the story of his disregard and her sacrifice above that level of utter hopelessness for the victim in which there cannot possibly be any emotion at all. After the central figures the rest is mere melodrama, in which, however, the characters and situations alike are better intended than they produce strong effect. This seemed to me to be partly from the want of strength of the performers, and partly from the loose method of the authors. But whatever the cause, the defect in the accessories is the same as in the main. *The Struggle for Life*—I was almost writing *The Struggle for Life*—although generally it can be followed with patience, takes no grip of the audience from first to last. The story has been told until it must be pretty familiar. Paul Astier, a young man, has married and beggared the Duchess Padovani, an elderly woman. He now wishes his wife to

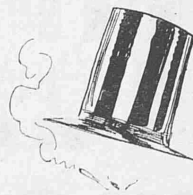


MISS
ALMA
STANLEY
ESTHER DE SÉLENY

divorce him that he may recruit his fortunes by a second wealthy marriage, the lady this time being Esther de Séleny, a Jewess. The Duchess refuses the divorce—she will not give him the right to make another woman miserable. Paul has betrayed and deserted Lydie Vaillant, the too ambitious daughter of a village postmaster—there is no affection here either. She attempts to poison herself. Her false lover snatches the phial from her lips and puts it in his pocket. While dressing for a reception in the evening, he recollects the little bottle, and the idea comes to him that it might help him to get rid of his wife. The Duchess entering from the back, sees the poison in his hand, and retires, saying nothing. During



the reception, leaving her guests, she feels faint—or says so—and asks for water. The husband offers to bring some, and during his short absence sophisticates a tumbler with the fatal dose. His wife, suspecting, raises the glass to her lips as though to drink; but at the critical moment her husband, frightened by his conscience or by the lady's eye upon him, intervenes. She upbraids; he implores



MR CHEVALIER
AS
CHEMINEAU

pardon; and then the Duchess, in order not to give him an excuse for murder—he would be more hardened next time, she tells him—consents to the divorce. He falls upon his knees in admiration or thankfulness, and accepts the divorce. In the last act he is about to marry the Jewess, who after an explanation forgives him for his *liaison* with Lydie, when he is shot in cold blood by Caussade, the betrothed of the ruined girl. It will be seen that, except by its defects, which I have touched upon, *The Struggle for Life* does not get far away after all from the conventional track. The dressing-room scene—where Paul, in his shirt and trousers to begin with,



MR GEORGE
ALEXANDER
IN THE GREAT
DRESSING-ROOM
ACT.

completes his toilet—is, I should say, the most out of the common. The poison scene is the most effective; and the scene in Vaillant's cottage, where Lydie learns from Esther de Séleny, a kind of patroness of hers, the full truth of Astier's villainy towards herself, is, I think, written the most dramatically. With regard to the acting there is, in my opinion, too much of the repressed force manner both in the Paul of Mr. Alexander and in the Duchess of Miss Ward. To my mind the gentleman did not convey to the full the seductiveness or the audacity of the character. I thought him too quiet, and despite the finish of the by-play, too much in one colour. I did not want Mr. Alexander to rant or Miss Ward either, but the quiet tone of both made me wish sometimes to be roused even at the cost of overacting. Miss Ward plays with dignity and resource; but, in part for the reason which I have given, her character leaves no very deep impression. Very disappointing indeed was the Chemineau, the confidant of Astier and his emissary to the Duchess, as rendered by Mr. Chevalier, who is so good a character actor as a rule that he is the last man whom I should have expected to leave me in doubt of the precise sort of creation he was driving at. The Vaillant of Mr. Nutcomb



MR NUTCOMBE GOULD
AS
VAILLANT

Gould—the deceived Lydie's good father—was useful; and although Mr. Kerr's Caussade looked more like a British shop assistant than a French analytical chemist, and was more hindered than helped by the nervous stammer which has been thought necessary, the actor showed his meaning. Mr. Ben Webster looks well in his uniform as an Italian *attaché*, but has little else to do, and some of that little is rather silly. Mr. George Capel plays with emphasis the part of Heurtebize, the Duchess's old retainer. Miss Laura Graves is the Lydie, who is better in the sad scene than in the others; at first she is very demonstrative indeed. The part of the widow whom everything reminds of her late husband, and reminding makes her weep loudly, is played by Miss Kate Phillips. It is a foolish part, but Miss Phillips makes the audience laugh at times. Miss Alma Stanley is the Esther de Séleny, the Duchess's rival, and gets through her work very well, though with more to do she could do better. Enforcing his lecture and losing sight of dramatic requirements, the author made it impossible for Esther or for Lydie, any more than the Duchess, to be sympathetic. Both the younger women know that Paul is a married man, and both count upon having his name when the Duchess divorces him. If they suffer, Lydie in the plot and Esther by the *dénouement*, it is—the case of the elderly wife again—for their own weakness. On the whole I do not see in a moral sense that Mons. Daudet's lecture proves much when it is finished. I cannot say whom we ought to imitate to satisfy the author's ideal, the villain or the victims; the play suggests no course between. The mounting of the piece as regards dresses and scenery is remarkably good.