

SCRIBE AND LEGOUVÉ'S

Bataille de Dames

WELLS



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EUGÈNE SCRIBE.

Heath's Modern Language Series

BATAILLE DE DAMES

PAR SCRIBE ET LEGOUVÉ

WITH INTRODUCTION, NOTES, AND
VOCABULARY

BY

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INTRODUCTION

"BATAILLE DE DAMES" bears on its title-page the names of two authors, Scribe and Legouvé; and as we can determine the nature of their collaboration from internal evidence alone, it is necessary to examine somewhat the works and characteristics of each.

Eugène Scribe¹ was the most prolific, probably the most popular, and proportionally the most wealthy, playwright of French literary history. He was born on Christmas Eve, 1791, and died on the 20th of February, 1861. He lost both parents in early years, and for a time pretended to study law in Paris; but before he was twenty his dramatic vocation had declared itself unmistakably, though his first comedy, "Les Dervis" (1811), and indeed the dozen that followed it, were unmistakable failures. His mind seemed to flow naturally into all the lighter forms of drama, and at last, after five years, success crowned his perseverance in "L'Auberge;" and "Une Nuit de la garde nationale" gave him notoriety and even a sort of fame, just as the Restoration inaugurated that period of social lassitude so favorable to the recognition of

¹ Criticism of Scribe may be found in Brunetière's "Époques du théâtre français;" Weiss, "Le Théâtre et les mœurs;" Matthews, "French Dramatists," p. 78; Wells, "Modern French Literature," p. 353. Lanson, "Littérature française," p. 966, is perhaps unduly harsh. For contemporary criticism of Scribe see Sainte-Beuve, "Portraits contemporains," ii., 91 and 589.

his peculiar talent; for during his whole career he was an amuser far more than an instructor. He took the vaudeville,¹ as it had been developed during the eighteenth century by Le Sage, Regnard, Piron, Marmontel, and even J.-J. Rousseau, and gave it a body and a living interest, till it became the *comédie-vaudeville*, and then, discarding even the little snatches of song, the *couplets* that still marked its origin, spread its butterfly wings as the modern comedy of intrigue.

Scribe's course was now an uninterrupted triumph. During the whole Bourbon and Orleanist period he was first, with no second, in light comedy. Beginning at the humble Théâtre du Vaudeville and the Variétés, he passed in 1820 to the newly founded Gymnase, for which he wrote one hundred and fifty little pieces, of which the most significant are "La Demoiselle à marier," "La Chanoinesse," "Le Colonel," "Zoé, ou l'amant prêté," and "Le Plus beau jour de ma vie," the last two familiar to us as "The Loan of a Lover" and "The Happiest Day of My Life." Most of these pieces were written in collaboration with various dramatists, of whom the least forgotten are Saintine, Bayard, and Saint-Georges, men of whom it is quite pardonable to be ignorant. It is, therefore, reasonable to infer that the essential dramatic element in them is due to Scribe alone; and indeed one sees that, while all are slight in conception, they are all ingenious and amusing in intrigue.

In his more ambitious comedies Scribe at first preferred to work alone, and here, too, he learned success by failure.²

¹ It originated in Italy as a pantomime with songs, which in seventeenth-century France became what we now call "topical." It is of this that Boileau says, "*Le français, né malin, forma le vaudeville.*" Later the pantomime yielded gradually to dialogue, and the vaudeville was tending to farcical opera when Scribe gave it a new direction.

² "Valérie" (1822) and "Le Mariage d'argent" (1827), both at the Théâtre Français.

The new conditions, social and political, that followed the Revolution of 1830, helped him also; for new liberties admitted, and the new bourgeois plutocracy invited, the good-humored persiflage in which he was an easy master. On the other hand, he was hardly touched by the accompanying Romantic movement in literature that was then convulsing the theatre-going public with "Hernani" and "Antony." He cared much less for the critics than for the box-office, and now transferred his work almost wholly to the national Théâtre Français. Here were produced during the eighteen years that separate "Bertrand et Raton" from "Bataille de dames" (1833-1851) almost all his pieces that still hold the stage, notable among them "La Camaraderie," the most popular of his political comedies, "Une Chaîne," "Le Verre d'eau," "Adrienne Lecouvreur," and "Les Contes de la reine de Navarre." The last two, the present comedy, and the somewhat later "Doigts de fée" (1858), were written in collaboration with Legouvé; and as these are certainly his best plays, we may expect to find an element in them that Scribe alone, or with other collaborators, could not supply. But of this presently.

During all these years his inexhaustible fertility was pouring out a stream of novels,¹ tales, farces, and librettos.² Everything that he touched seemed to turn to gold in his hands. No dramatist, hardly any writer of our time, has accumulated such wealth. His annual income from copyrights often reached \$30,000, and he died worth nearly half a million. He might well take for his crest a pen and pan-

¹ For the serial publication of one of these, "Piquillo Alliago," he received from *Le Siècle* \$12,000.

² Among them "La Juive," "Fra diavolo," "Robert le diable," "Les Huguenots," "Le Prophète."

pipes, and the motto "*Inde fortuna et libertas*," for he passed the latter years of his life in wealth and ease in the palatial country-seat of Sérincourt, over whose door he inscribed the characteristic lines:—

Le théâtre a payé cet asile champêtre
 Vous qui passez, merci! Je vous le dois peut-être.

But as he had gained easily he spent liberally, and many stories tell of his ingenious and delicate generosity.

Scribe's popularity has become a tradition, and his works have proved a veritable bonanza to the dramatic magpies of every nation in Europe; but among the French critics of the past generation he has found a very grudging recognition. It was with a tone of aristocratic superiority that Villemain welcomed him to the French Academy with the words: "The secret of your dramatic prosperity is that you have happily seized the spirit of your age and produced the kind of comedy to which it best adapts itself, and which most resembles it." In the same tone Lanson says that Scribe "offers to the middle class exactly the pleasure and the ideal that it demands. It recognizes itself in his pieces, where nothing taxes the intellect." Dumas *fils* goes even further, and compares him to the sleight-of-hand performer with his trick-cups and thimble-rings, in whose performance one finds "neither an idea nor a reflection, nor an enthusiasm, nor a hope, nor a remorse, nor disgust, nor pleasure. One looked, listened, was puzzled, laughed, wept, passed the evening, was amused. That was much, but one learned nothing at all."

These critics, and others too, fail to find in Scribe more than an ingenious artisan, a purveyor to the public taste, and sometimes a panderer to it. He has indeed no trace of the lofty purpose that permeates the whole dramatic work of

Dumas *fils* and Augier, and little careful study either of character or of manners. His style, too, though almost always light and lively, is often slovenly and incorrect. His mastery lies elsewhere, in his perfect command of the resources of the stage, which he managed as no dramatist before or since has done, except perhaps his spiritual child, Sardou, and also in his marvellously dexterous handling of intrigue. All this is admirably shown in "Bataille de dames;" but there is something more and better here, and that something is due to Legouvé, whose unaided talent sufficed to produce no work of enduring quality.

Ernest Legouvé was born in February, 1807, and died in 1903 as the *doyen*, or senior member, of the French Academy. Except for the plays that have been named, he owed his success less to his novels, dramas, or poems, than to his patriotic activity and to journalistic work, aided by most amiable social qualities, and a delicate, almost feminine psychological observation,¹ with which he inspired the lively but unspiritualized creations of Scribe. In the marriage of true minds that produced the "Bataille de dames" and those other plays, his was the feminine part. The working up of the dramatic conception, the contrast of political and social antagonisms, the "characters," if we may call them so, of Henri and Montrichard, the farcical caricature of De Grignon, these are all Scribe's, and they make up the skeleton, perhaps even the flesh and blood, of the comedy: but its spirit, its soul, lies in the delicate touches that give a sympathetic charm to the conquest of De Grignon's timidity by his love; it lies in the gracious magnanimity of the countess, who has read her niece's heart long before Léonie knows her own, who follows with a generous jealousy every

¹ Manifested most clearly in his "Histoire morale des femmes."

phase of her passion, and yet guards her own loyalty to her niece in the true spirit of *noblesse oblige*, even while she sees that that loyalty is costing her own happiness. But most of all the soul of this little play is in that triumph of simple girlish *naïveté*, Léonie, so true, so artless, disarming all rivalry, and winning every spectator's heart, as she all but loses and then gains her lover's. These traits are Legouvé's. They are not qualities that will stand on the stage alone. They need the setting of Scribe's stage-craft, the facile ingenuity of his intrigue, to give them corporeal reality. Hence Legouvé's other dramas were unsuccessful, while the four in which he joined with Scribe are among the best of their generation. Each author gave to the common stock what the other lacked and needed. The one gave fertile invention, lively wit, and technical skill, the other gave delicacy, instinct, and charm. Each was the better for the other's partnership; and perhaps no child of their communion is more fascinating to gentle hearts, or will bear better to be read and re-read, seen and seen again, than this "Bataille de dames."

BENJ. W. WELLS.

BATAILLE DE DAMES
OU
UN DUEL EN AMOUR.

COMÉDIE EN TROIS ACTES

PAR

SCRIBE ET LEGOUVÉ.

First represented at the Théâtre Français in 1851.