

The "Swiss Count"

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THE "SWISS COUNT"

John James Heidegger

1666—1749

Extract from a speech by the Swiss Ambassador, Monsieur B. de Fischer at City Swiss Club Annual Banquet and Ball, 18th November 1966.

This is the portrait of an extraordinary Swiss gentleman who, through his love of the refined life, of ballets, of balls, of masquerades, of music and opera, became in his time one of the best-known characters in London. He was the so-called "Swiss Count", John James Heidegger, of Zurich, who made a name as George the Second's "Master of the Revels" or, as he was sometimes humorously styled, "Le surintendant des plaisirs d'Angleterre". Later, he was for many years General Manager of the famous King's Theatre in Haymarket, and lastly the close and faithful friend and supporter of George Frederick Handel, the celebrated composer of "The Messiah". He was not only the subject of many verses by Fielding and Alexander Pope, as well as of paintings by William Hogarth, Zoffani and Vanloo, but also the object of more than one violent attack by Richard Steele in his much-read "Spectator", where he was described as a bit too licentious and dangerous for society. At the same time, he was reputed to be the ugliest man ever seen, but graced with wit, generosity, ingenuity and helpfulness.

This man was born exactly 300 years ago and was famous for knowing how to enjoy a pleasant evening in a friendly atmosphere with music and dancing.

John James Heidegger was, curiously enough, the son of a Puritan theologian in Zurich and was born in 1666. Nobody known exactly why and when he came to London, but it seems that he was lured here by dilettanti of music and ballets, probably by Lord Burlington himself, who thought that, with his skill and good taste, he might add something to the artistic life of London.

Very quickly after his arrival, Heidegger offered to translate and to compose libretti for the opera, to obtain Italian singers and dancers and to organise the stage and the lighting, at which he later proved to be a real wizard. He soon had so much success that, when the opera ran into difficulties, he was invited to take over the management, which he did, strongly supported by the art-loving Queen Caroline.

But the favour he enjoyed was not only due to his feeling for singing talent, for good music and fine operas. It was also a result of his extraordinary gifts as organiser, or impresario, of the then so popular masquerades, a type of entertainment already known in London but to which he added a special new note with regard to size and artistic touch. They were parties at which people of all ranks and classes could indulge themselves by appearing, and living for a few hours, in the disguise of a personality they secretly wished to be, and could, in this form, mix indiscriminately. These entertainments, highly esteemed at Court too, were mostly given in the so-called Long Room of the Royal Opera House. There were sometimes more than 2,000 participants who normally did not know one another and perhaps never did, the sole confidant of them all being Heidegger himself, who enormously enjoyed this amusing mixing of people, where there was complete freedom of talk. Needless to say, on those occasions the cunning Heidegger took good care to satisfy his own and his friends' desire for good wine and food, luxury, magnificent décor and fantastic costumes. Heidegger retained

an interest in these masquerades until the last years of his life, and they were, as the chroniclers said, the rage of the town. It was stated that many a lady left her butcher unpaid so that she could afford the subscription fee.

But one day he became the victim of his own game. When he appeared at one of these galas, without any disguise as usual, a new visitor asked another guest why he — it was Heidegger — had chosen such a horrible mask on such a gay occasion. "Well", was the humorous reply, "I wish it were a mask, but unfortunately this is all nature granted me".

However, his face did not strike everyone in this unfavourable way. A friend of his, for instance, described him thus:

*"With a hundred deep wrinkles impressed on his front,
As a map with a great many rivers upon't."*

Another time, the Duke of Montagu is said to have made him the target of one of his practical jokes. As Heidegger had taken a little too much wine, so the legend goes, the Duke was able to have a wax mask made from his face. He then asked a man who resembled Heidegger to wear it at a soirée where King George II was expected and where Heidegger was to conduct the orchestra. When the King arrived, the real Heidegger told the musicians to play "God Save the King", and then approached His Majesty to pay his respects. At that moment, the false Heidegger turned up and ordered the same orchestra to play the well-known song of the Jacobites, the enemies of the Hanoverians: "Come boat me over to Charlie". The poor real Heidegger, terribly confused, had to apologise, and the King who knew all about it, had one of the best laughs of his life.

Heidegger's third merit was his friendship with George Frederick Handel and the support he gave him both at Court and in the opera. The old man immediately appreciated the unique genius of the famous, but not always easy, young composer and helped him wherever he could. At one time they were joint managers of the Theatre in the Haymarket.

With all this, Heidegger was not ignorant of the art of making money, and he needed a great deal of it. But he was so generous that he spent it immediately. So when he died in 1749, at the age of 83, he did not leave enough to carry out completely the bequests in his last will which provided for many gifts to his home-town and his artist friends. In fact, throughout his whole life, he spent a great deal of money on artistic pleasures. His house at Richmond, in Maids of Honour Row, which still stands today and is occupied by a distinguished connoisseur, was full of works of art, some of which can still be seen. At another house, in Barnes Elms, he entertained the Prince and Princess of Wales, as well as London high society. These premises were the scene of many of Heidegger's proofs of his ability in the art of lighting, the so-called "Light out of the Dark" evenings.

Heidegger liked to joke about the way he treated money. Once, when he was asked who, in his opinion, was the better tradesman, the Scot or the Swiss, he answered immediately: "The people of Zurich, of course. Look at me: I was born a Swiss and came over to England without a cent in my pocket. But I soon succeeded in making £5,000 a year, and in spending it again. I invite all my Scots friends to go to Switzerland and do the same."

* * *

That is the story of the "Surintendant des plaisirs d'Angleterre" and the Gentleman of the Privy Chamber, John James Heidegger.