

ERNEST. Elected by my fellow-conspirators to be Grand Duke of Pfennig Halbpennig as soon as the contemptible little occupant of the historical throne is deposed—here is promotion indeed! Why,\* instead of playing Troilus of Troy for a month, I shall play Grand Duke of Pfennig Halbpennig for a lifetime! Yet, am I happy? No—far from happy! The lovely English *comédienne*—the beautiful Julia, whose dramatic ability is so overwhelming that our audiences forgive even her strong English accent—that rare and radiant being treats my respectful advances with disdain unutterable! And yet, who knows? She is haughty and ambitious, and it may be that the splendid change in my fortunes may work a corresponding change in her feelings towards me!

Enter JULIA JELLICOE.

JULIA. Herr Dummkopf, a word with you, if you please.

ERNEST. Beautiful English maiden—

JULIA. No compliments, I beg. I desire to speak with you on a purely professional matter, so we will, if you please, dispense with allusions to my personal appearance, which can only tend to widen the breach which already exists between us.

ERNEST (*aside*). My only hope shattered! The haughty Londoner still despises me! (*Aloud.*) It shall be as you will.

JULIA. I understand that the conspiracy in which we are all concerned is to develop tomorrow, and that the company is likely to elect you to the throne on the understanding that the posts about the Court are to be filled by members of your theatrical troupe, according to their professional importance.

ERNEST. That is so.

JULIA. Then all I can say is that it places me in an extremely awkward position.

ERNEST (*very depressed*). I don't see how it concerns you.

JULIA. Why, bless my heart, don't you see that, as your leading lady, I am bound under a serious penalty to play the leading part in all your productions?

ERNEST. Well?

JULIA. Why, of course, the leading part in this production will be the Grand Duchess!

ERNEST. My wife?

JULIA. That is another way of expressing the same idea.

ERNEST (*aside—delighted*). I scarcely dared even to hope for this!

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\* The original libretto has "Why, that instead. . . ." The extra word appears to be an error, and has been suppressed.

JULIA. Of course, as your leading lady, you'll be mean enough to hold me to the terms of my agreement. Oh, that's so like a man! Well, I suppose there's no help for it—I shall have to do it.

ERNEST (*aside*). She's mine! (*Aloud.*) But—do you really think you would care to play that part? (*Taking her hand.*)

JULIA (*withdrawing it*). Care to play it? Certainly not—but what am I to do? Business is business, and I am bound by the terms of my agreement.

ERNEST. It's for a long run, mind—a run that may last many, many years—no understudy—and once embarked upon there's no throwing it up.

JULIA. Oh, we're used to these long runs in England: they are the curse of the stage—but, you see, I've no option.

ERNEST. You think the part of the Grand Duchess will be good enough for you?

JULIA. Oh, I think so. It's a very good part in Gerolstein, and oughtn't to be a bad one in Pfennig Halbpennig. Why, what did you suppose I was going to play?

ERNEST (*keeping up a show of reluctance*). But, considering your strong personal dislike to me and your persistent rejection of my repeated offers, won't you find it difficult to throw yourself into the part with all the impassioned enthusiasm that the character seems to demand? Remember, it's a strongly emotional part, involving long and repeated scenes of rapture, tenderness, adoration, devotion—all in luxuriant excess, and all of the most demonstrative description.

JULIA. My good sir, throughout my career I have made it a rule never to allow private feeling to interfere with my professional duties. You may be quite sure that (however distasteful the part may be) if I undertake it, I shall consider myself professionally bound to throw myself into it with all the ardour at my command.

ERNEST (*aside—with effusion*). I'm the happiest fellow alive! (*Aloud.*) Now—would you have any objection—to—to give me some idea—if it's only a mere sketch—as to how you would play it? It would be really interesting—to me—to know your conception of—of—the part of my wife.

JULIA. How would I play it? Now, let me see—let me see. (*Considering.*) Ah, I have it!