

Originally published in the October 1928 issue of *Harper's* and collected in *The Angel That Troubled the Waters and Other Plays* (1928).

Mozart and the Gray Steward

THORNTON WILDER

MOZART *is seated at a table in a mean room in Vienna orchestrating the "Magic Flute." Leaves of ruled paper are strewn about the floor. His wife enters in great excitement.*

CONSTANZE: There's someone come to see you, someone important. Pray God, it's a commission from Court.

MOZART: (*Unmoved.*) Not while Salieri's alive.

CONSTANZE: Put on your slippers, dear. It's some one dressed all in gray, with a gray mask over his eyes, and he's come in a great coach with its coat of arms all covered up with gray cloth. Pray God, it's a commission from Court for a *Te Deum* or something. (*She tidies up the room in six gestures.*)

MOZART: Not while Salieri's alive.

CONSTANZE: But, now, do be nice, 'Gangl, please. We must have some money, my treasure. Just listen to him and say "yes" and "thank you" and then you and I'll talk it over after he's gone. (*She holds his coat.*) Come, put this on. Step into your slippers.

MOZART: (*Sighing.*) I'm not well. I'm at home. I'm at work. There's not a single visitor in the whole world that could interest me. Bring him in.

CONSTANZE: (*Adjusting his stock.*) Now don't be proud. Just accept.

(She hurries out and presently reënters preceding the visitor. The visitor is dressed from head to foot in gray silk. His bright eyes look out through the holes in a narrow gray silk mask. He holds to his nose a gray perfumed handkerchief. One would say: an elegant undertaker.)

THE GRAY STEWARD: Kappelmeister Mozart, *servus*. Gracious lady, *servus*.

MOZART: *Servus*.

THE GRAY STEWARD: Revered and noble master, wherever music reigns, wherever genius is valued, the name of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart is . . .

MOZART: Sir, I have always been confused by compliments and

beg you to spare me that mortification by proceeding at once to the cause of your visit . . . the . . . the honor of your visit.

THE GRAY STEWARD: Revered master, before I lay my business before you, may I receive your promise that—whether you accept my commission or not—you both will . . .

MOZART: I promise you our secrecy, unless our silence would prove dishonorable to me or injurious to some one else. Pray continue.

THE GRAY STEWARD: Know then, gracious and revered genius, that I come from a prince who combines all the qualities of birth, station, generosity and wisdom.

MOZART: Ha! a European secret.

THE GRAY STEWARD: His Excellency moreover has just sustained a bitter misfortune. He has lately lost his wife and consort, a lady who was the admiration of her court and the sole light of her bereaved husband's life. Therefore, his Excellency, my master, commissions you to compose a Requiem Mass in honor of this lady. He asks you to pour into it the height of your invention and that wealth of melody and harmony that have made you the glory of our era. And for this music he asks leave to pay you the sum of four hundred crowns,—two hundred now, and the second two hundred crowns when you deliver the first four numbers.

MOZART: Well, Constanze, I must not be proud.

THE GRAY STEWARD: There is but one proviso.

MOZART: Yes, I heard it. The work must represent the height of my invention.

THE GRAY STEWARD: That was an easy assumption, master. The proviso is this: You shall let his Excellency have this music as an anonymous work, and you shall never by any sign, by so much as the nod of your head, acknowledge that the work is yours.

MOZART: And his Excellency is not aware that the pages I may compose at the height of my invention may be their own sufficient signature?

THE GRAY STEWARD: That may be. Naturally my master will see to it that no other composer will ever be able to claim the work as his.

MOZART: Quick, give me your paper and I will sign it. Leave your two hundred crowns with my wife at the foot of the stairs. Come back in August and you will have the first four numbers. *Servus. Servus.*

THE GRAY STEWARD: (*Backing out.*) *Servus*, master. *Servus*, madame.

(CONSTANZE returns in a moment and looks anxiously towards her husband.)

CONSTANZE: A visit from Heaven, 'Gangl. Now you can go into the country. Now you can drink all the Bohemian water in the world.

MOZART: (*Bitterly.*) Good. And just at a time when I was contemplating a Requiem Mass. But for *myself*. However, I must not be proud.

CONSTANZE: (*Trying to divert him.*) Who can these people be? Try and think.

MOZART: Oh, there's no mystery about that. It's the Count von Walsegg. He composes himself. But for the most part he buys string quartets from us; he erases the signatures and has them played in his castle. The courtiers flatter him and pretend that they have guessed him to be the composer. He does not deny it. He tries to appear confused. And now he has succeeded in composing a Requiem. But that will reduce my pride.

CONSTANZE: You know he will only be laughed at. The music will speak for itself. Heaven wanted to give us four hundred crowns—

MOZART: And Heaven went about it humorously.

CONSTANZE: What was his wife like?

MOZART: Her impudences smelt to Heaven. She dressed like a page and called herself Cherubin. Her red cheeks and her black teeth and her sixty years are in my mind now.

CONSTANZE: (*After a pause.*) We'll give back the money. You can write the music, without writing it for them.

MOZART: No, I like this game. I like it for its very falseness. What does it matter who signs such music or to whom it is addressed? (*He flings himself upon the sofa and turns his face to the wall.*) For whom do we write music?—for musicians?

Salieri!—for patrons? Von Walsegg!—for the public? The Countess von Walsegg! I shall write this Requiem, but it shall be for myself, since I am dying.

CONSTANZE: My beloved, don't talk so! Go to sleep. (*She spreads a shawl over his body.*) How can you say such things? Imagine even thinking such a thing! You will live many years and write countless beautiful pages. We will return the money and refuse the commission. Then the matter will be closed. Now go to sleep, my treasure.

(*She goes out, quietly closing the door behind her. MOZART, at the mercy of his youth, his illness and his genius, is shaken by a violent fit of weeping. The sobs gradually subside and he falls asleep. In his dream THE GRAY STEWARD returns.*)

THE GRAY STEWARD: Mozart! Turn and look at me. You know who I am.

MOZART: (*Not turning.*) You are the steward of the Count von Walsegg. Go tell him to write his own music. I will not stain my pen to celebrate his lady, so let the foul bury the foul.

THE GRAY STEWARD: Lie then against the wall, and learn that it is Death itself that commissions. . . .

MOZART: Death is not so fastidious. Death carries no perfumed handkerchief.

THE GRAY STEWARD: Lie then against the wall. Know first that all the combinations of circumstance can suffer two interpretations, the apparent and the real.

MOZART: Then speak, sycophant, I know the apparent one. What other reading can this humiliation bear?

THE GRAY STEWARD: It is Death itself that commands you this Requiem. You are to give a voice to all those millions sleeping, who have no one but you to speak for them. There lie the captains and the thieves, the queens and the drudges, while the evening of their earthly remembrance shuts in, and from that great field rises an eternal *miserere nobis*. Only through the intercession of great love, and of great art which is love, can that despairing cry be eased. Was that not sufficient cause for this commission to be anonymous?

MOZART: (*Drops trembling on one knee beside the couch.*) Forgive me.

THE GRAY STEWARD: And it was for this that the pretext and

mover was chosen from among the weakest and vainest of humans. Death has her now, and all her folly has passed into the dignity and grandeur of her state. Where is your pride now? Here are her slippers and her trinkets. Press them against your lips. Again! Again! Know henceforth that only he who has kissed the leper can enter the kingdom of art.

MOZART: I have sinned, yet grant me one thing. Grant that I may live to finish the Requiem.

THE GRAY STEWARD: No! No!

(And it remains unfinished.)