

Chapter IV.

CHARACTERISATION in terms of music is one of the great achievements of Wagnerian drama. In *Parsifal*, the characterisation is most vivid and vital in the cases of Amfortas, Klingsor, Parsifal and Kundry.

GURNEMANZ is a type of good-natured mediocrity who needs no telling phrase for his revelation; he stands somewhat in the attitude of the Leader of the Chorus in Greek drama or the Narrator in the Bach Passions,—a creature of wide sympathies but small originality, taking whatever colour he seems to have from the incidents he speaks of or the persons he talks with. A few superior critics tell us he is a bore. He is not the only one; but there is this difference between him and those who object to him, — without Gurnemanz the drama could not exist; without the critics it might possibly survive. Moreover, Gurnemanz has a very important negative value. Wagner's latest works, realising more thoroughly the lyrical quality of the religious mood, are sustained upon a very high level of emotion; so it happens that mere talk and declamatory passages occupy an increasingly small space. But to remain upon the high levels of lyricism during an entire work would be to bring the mountains low in the very monotony of their height. The mind of the listener would be cloyed with beauty and wearied with intens-

ity: hence the value of such mediocrities as King Mark, Gunther, and Gurnemanz. The low levels of their commonplaceness relieve the dramatic strain of the more glowing and crucial passages; and they relieve it not by taking up a new style, as in recitative, but by broken passages of emotionalised narrative, which ease the tension without disturbing the homogeneity of the work as a whole. Here again Wagner draws very near to the dramatic methods of Bach. To get rid of Gurnemanz or even to reduce his proportions (as one critic suggested) would be not only to lose the pivot of the drama—no musical critic would mind that—but it would also mean a loss of enjoyment in the more sensuous beauty of its mystic, religious and sexual emotion.

TITUREL, few though his notes, is an important character. He is a type of the simple-minded, pious person who just realises the mystery of the veil of darkness. He does not, like Parsifal, strive to achieve mastery from mystery and revelation from doubt; but stands before the veil in calm contemplation, assured that some day he will meet his God face to face. His simple faith endows him with the instinct of human fellowship. Such as he found churches and brotherhoods with honest will; but he never seeks to penetrate far into the mystic side of religion. He is chary of dogma, but is sometimes obliged to take refuge there. He must either do that or seek to lift the veil. Here is Wagner's music for him:—



It is peaceful, vague, timid, mystical music,—the soul of a man who would seek for his God in the abysses of darkness, if he dare.

AMFORTAS, Titurel's son, is a sceptic,—not a narrow-brained creature who says "There is not," but a kindly intentioned person who turns from the veil before which his father stood in such useless awe. "Leave it unrevealed," says Amfortas. "When once I tried to understand the mysteries of life and religion, I fell into depths of superstition and sensuality; therefore, let us turn away from this thing." His character is best understood if we see in him a sceptical priesthood,—a body of men professing to have charge of human love and divine revelation. but turning from both in sheer weariness of heart and imagination. The sickness and suffering which has infected more than one religion is symbolised in the pains of Amfortas :—



Amfortas is not a bad man by any means; on the contrary, he is probably a very kind-hearted person in private life, grateful to his servants and honest with his tradesmen. But he is in a false position. He is obliged to pretend to special religious revelation and superhuman love of his enemies: and he is capable of neither. So for him the whole business of his office is unhealthy make-believe; and in his moments of mental wakefulness he suffers the tortures of the damned. Even the fact that he fell into the evil of sensualism which religions so easily induce,—even that is little to him as compared with the torture of a

public office for which he is so clearly unsuited. A private man may be excused and even loved for the sins of humanity, but not a public official; and if his public position means he must play the humbug then he does actually stand in danger of losing his mind and soul. So Amfortas cries: "Was ist die Wunde, ihrer Schmerzen Wuth gegen die Noth, die Höllen-pien, zu diesem Amt verdammt zu sein!"

KLINGSOR pins his faith to materialistic science. For him, sensuality is the life-force. He has captured the spear, the sceptre of mental sovereignty, from Amfortas, as Huxley, Haeckel and Co. have captured it from the Christian church; and he thinks to benefit mankind by treating them from their physical beginnings, from the womb. Clearly, he is a Eugenist. He, too, is quite an honest man. Wagner calls him a magician, places him in a dark laboratory, and gives him a bit of melodramatic villain's music; but we may be sure that Wagner intended him to be nothing worse than a vaccinator, or at worse a vivisector. Klingsor does not fear Amfortas any more than Sir Ray Lankester fears the Bishop of London; but for some reason or other he is very much afraid of the simpleton Parsifal. However, he has a boundless belief in natural power, and no fear of supernatural power; so he fully believes that Parsifal, the simpleton, will fall as Amfortas fell and be bereft of his supernatural pretensions in the hard facts of human nature. But his legions of fact fail him, though dressed in knightly and heroic armour. And even Kundry, the life-force, fails him. Parsifal is so charged with the power of his artistry or supermanity that he is not content to find the aim of his being in a domestic career. Thus we reach the climax when the scientist must launch the spear of his authority at the artist or lose his influence. And, lo, the spear

floats into the artist's hands and we know that beyond all the hard facts of materialistic science there are mysteries which only the artist in a flash of intuition or an ecstasy of dream can reveal! And so the reign of Klingsor, that foolishlest nightmare of death, crumbles away.

KUNDRY is in every way the most wonderful creation of Wagner's brain,—the surest sign that he is the great high priest of his time, ordained by more than the laying on of hands. In Brünhilde, we have awakened womanhood,—woman aroused to fuller life by the sense of comradeship. In Isolde, we have awakened womanhood teaching her teacher. But these two are in the nature of special characters induced by unduly exalted ideas of womankind. They are pioneer suffragettes: Brünhilde burning down the halls of the gods, Isolde that gentler kind of heroine who needs but the opportunity at once to rise to spiritual equality with man. But neither of these can be said to stand for women as a whole. Despite all assertions to the contrary, the average woman fears the Brünhildes and detests the Isoldas whom she happens to come across. She fears to be roused to the ignominy of her parasitism and detests women who attain to any kind of physical and mental independence. And Kundry is the essential womanhood of our time. She is kind, ready to serve at most times, more especially for men, which shows that a sense of her sex is part of her kindness. She will try hard to relieve the sufferings of the very men who, like Amfortas, are suffering chiefly on her account. I do not take Amfortas's suffering to be primarily a sexual thing—at least, not in a physical sense—but rather the inevitable evils which men must put up with so long as they are so dependent upon

women for domestic attentions. Kundry bears Amfortas no grudge for the evil she brought upon him by her parasitism; on the contrary she would cure it if she could do so without losing the influence over him which her sex gives her. That she will not forego; and so one is not surprised to find that Wagner's portrait emphasizes her animal nature. But she is far from being the wholly sexual creature Mr. Belfort Bax would have us believe the average woman to be. That sort of person is symbolised by Wagner in the Flower-maidens. Kundry is a much subtler character. She does not expect to win a man of Parsifal's nature by her mere femininity. She is rather a type of the domestic woman. She appeals to his love for his mother. She assumes that kind but slightly patronising attitude which certain women assume towards men not likely to be drawn by mere physical charm. Many a man, unmoved by coquetry, is easily captured by an evidence of maternal feeling. It is on this side that Kundry exerts all her skill. If she cannot capture a husband by her wifeliness, she will capture him by her motherliness. If she cannot be his mate, she will try to seduce him into the prison joys of domestic life.

Kundry's problem vitally concerns the life of modern domesticity; for, although Wagner's Parsifal himself is not so original a creation, we yet find him in a new relationship. Here not only the man is concerned with remaining a sane, free individual, but the woman also is brought to consent to (or to demand) an independent physical and mental life. This is why *Parsifal* is such an important contribution to the thought of our time. In its way, it is as important a word in sociology as Olive Schreiner's *Woman and Labour* and Belfort Bax's *The Fraud of Feminism*. I am sorry that I do not know a more convincing anti-

feminist book than Mr. Bax's, which is more likely to create feminists than to abolish them. The anti-feminist case is so important that it needs to be treated in a calm and friendly spirit.

The average man's objection to feminism is foolish in his own interest, and likely to result eventually in a period of female supremacy every bit as bad for the Kundrys of the future as the present pretence of male superiority is bad for the Amfortases of our time. In all times, it will happen that certain men will be placed in positions of antagonism to certain women, and the fight will always go badly for the sex which pretends to domination.

All this sociology and politics may seem to some readers beside the mark in a study of a music-drama; so let me just pause to point out that, if we are really to understand Wagner's music, we must first understand the ideas which inspired it. Wagner was not one of those second-rate artists who make art out of sound or colour or language. He always worked from a living idea in the world of men and women,—as of course an artist is bound to do if he is not entirely sensual and precious. *Parsifal* is a great music-drama not merely because Wagner happened to be a musician instead of a politician or a draper, but much more because he needed to give reasonable and emotional expression to his ideas upon matrimony, priestcraft and divine worship. Miss Schreiner's book appeals chiefly to the reason, Mr. Bax's chiefly to the emotion. Wagner appeals in a different way to both,—working towards the reason by way of the senses and emotions.

First of all he reveals to us a simple, unaffected, healthy animal of a boy, careless and thoughtless, guided just by his instincts:—



An undeveloped nature. A creature in whom is to be found none of the qualities which give distinction to the human being. So ignorant and foolish does he seem that Gurnemanz promptly classes him with Kundry. An immense blunder of his, for behind Kundry are centuries of stored wisdom. She has been the cradle of the race and instinctively knows many things which Parsifal has to learn by bitter contact with the world. At this point we must dismiss from our minds the prevalent idea that Kundry is the Scarlet Woman of Babylon. She is a much more complicated and dangerous creature. She is just woman to Parsifal's man: intuition to witlessness. And we shall understand the meaning of this first scene better if we mentally compare the average young woman of eighteen with the average baby-boy of the same age. To him, thus far, his mother has been the only conception of womanhood,—Heart's Sorrow, the patient, all-sacrificing woman. But the time is near when she must give place in his mind to a new conception. He has now got to deal with this younger woman on terms as equal as he can get; and as a nice woman said to me the other day, he is bound to get the worst of it, because all men are babies. He feels his weakness for the coming strife, and so takes Kundry at a disadvantage by springing at her throat. It is the "physical force" argument so favoured by boyish minds. Here is its music (a transformation of Parsifal's motive):—



But it does not save him. Kundry was not degraded by using her advantage of greater wisdom, but Parsifal is degraded by using his advantage of greater strength. He sickens and faints, and at once the motherhood — the race-serving instinct — of Kundry leaps into action, and the woman serves the boy by bringing him water. For this, she is praised by pious old Gurnemanz, who imagines that she has done it on the religious principle of "returning good for evil." But Kundry repudiates that motive. She will not sink so far as to accept credit for being obedient to her sexual instincts. On the contrary, what is best in her is annoyed just with that inevitable weakness of Parsifal's. And she wearily leaves the men, feeling that the battle with Parsifal, which she may so easily win, is yet in some way to her own deep disadvantage.

Now, we pass on with Parsifal to the Hall of the Grail: for at puberty it is not only the sexual but also the religious sense that is awakened. Here he witnesses a mystic ritual and is confronted with the painful results of an intellect which has been aborted in domestic life and so rendered incapable of rising to the joys of a free spiritual life. For when Amfortas was seduced by Kundry, the evil was not that he lost his virginity, for all that is beautiful and living and true and creative is sustained by the loss of virginity. It was that the man became subservient to the woman as the average man becomes subservient to the idea of "wife and children and home." These things also are among the beautiful, creative things of

life, so long as the intellectual independence is not lost in them. But that intellectual independence Amfortas lost: his growth has been arrested; and yet he must pretend to be the great high priest of his religion! And so when Gurnemanz invites Parsifal to enter the circle of orthodoxy and take the bread and wine of religious fellowship, the boy refuses. That religion and fellowship are based upon a lie: he will not have it. Accordingly Gurnemanz, the pious, will have nothing more to do with him and sends him away, although the still small voice of instinctive religious feeling says that there is in that boy a spiritual power which the orthodox church has lost.

We have not so far properly discussed the difficult question of the "Reine Thor" element of Parsifal's character. I am not sufficient a linguist to understand what subtleties of meaning the word "Thor" may have for a German; but my German acquaintances tell me that to translate it into "fool" is merely to make a difficult point absurd. Nor are we much helped by that English gentleman who blunders into the ineffective irony of "pure simpleton." Perhaps the best way of understanding the matter may be to hear what the most notable of anti-Wagnerians has to say.

Nietzsche in his first postscript to "The Case of Wagner" writes:—

"*Parsifal* will always maintain the chief place in the art of seduction, as its *stroke of genius*.....I admire that work. I should like to have composed it myself; not having done, *I at least understand it*. Wagner was never better inspired than at the end. The exquisiteness in the alliance of beauty and disease is here carried so far that it casts, as it were, a shadow over Wagner's earlier art; it appears too bright, too

healthy. Do you understand that? Health and brightness acting as a shadow? As an *objection* almost? We are so far *pure fools* already."

And in another place Nietzsche writes :—

"What had Wagner really to do with that manly (alas, so very unmanly) 'rustic simplicity,' the poor devil and country lad, Parsifal, whom by such insidious means he finally succeeded in making a Roman Catholic?... *Parsifal* is a work of cunning, of revengefulness, of secret poison brewing, hostile to the prerequisites of life; a bad work. The preaching of chastity is an incitement to anti-naturalness. I despise everyone who does not regard *Parsifal* as an outrage on morals."

One more quotation; "Parsifal is the father of Lohengrin! How has he done that? Have we here to recollect that 'chastity works *miracles*.'"

For all Nietzsche's occasionally very apt criticism of Wagnerian ethic and æsthetic, one is tempted to apply the "Reine Thor" to him in the sense of its English translation on account of that last silly commentary. Lohengrin is Parsifal's son in the legend and in the opera of *Lohengrin*; but he has nothing to do with the opera *Parsifal*. The old man who wrote *Parsifal* was under no compulsion to be consistent with what had been written by the younger man in *Lohengrin*. But this very obvious retort is not the real argument of the discerning Wagnerian. Nietzsche made the vulgar mistake of judging *Parsifal* on realistic grounds. A drama in which we meet with a magician like Klingsor, with the supernatural associations of the Grail and with the

voice of Titurel rising from the tomb,—such a drama is to be judged by the realistic standards obtaining in Molière, Ibsen or Galsworthy! The thing is absurd. And that is the root of all Nietzsche's antipathy to Wagner. Wagner, like every other man who has felt working within him the impersonal ferment of creative genius, was bound to be a mystic. Nietzsche was a rationalist. But the mistake he made helps us to clear up the difficulty of the "Reine Thor." For the rationalist mind, Parsifal is a rustic simpleton; and we who are moved by the drama, despite its palpable irrationality, are pure fools. If, then, we ask ourselves what it is in Parsifal's character and music which most moves us, we may unlock the gate of "Reine Thor." In his relations with Gurnemanz, Parsifal is obedient, educable and open-hearted. In his first relations with Kundry he is indifferent, becoming unreasonably fierce when Kundry shows him that the time has come when he must exchange the unselfish womanhood of his mother for the passionate womanhood of herself. It is then that his senses go reeling. That is the woman's first attempt at seduction, and it succeeds as for the first time Parsifal becomes aware of his sex. By his behaviour in the Hall of the Grail, we know that the mystic side of life has been thus far unrealised. It is now borne upon him by his quite unreasonable feelings in regard to Amfortas, whose sufferings have no immediate interest for him and yet affect him so keenly.

Such a character as this, then, is "pure,"—not in a narrow, sexual application but rather in the general sense of a nature upon which has as yet been stamped no conventions by woman, priest or society. Parsifal is pure not in the sense of never having lost his temper, never having longed for the satisfaction of his appetites—he may have committed many sins from

the point of view of church and community—but he is pure in the sense of possessing a nature governed entirely by instinct, never having been made hesitant by social convention or introspective by ecclesiastical precept. Further, the whole drama means nothing at all if Parsifal is not as much a Reine Thor at the end as at the beginning; and yet it is absolutely certain that he is guilty in Act II. of Amfortas's mistake. The long lingering kiss of Kundry must mean much more than the pressure of lips, or why does Parsifal cry out that the sufferings of Amfortas have now fallen upon him? And why in Act III. does he accuse *himself* of having caused all the suffering which has fallen upon the kingdom of the Grail? But his sin is not that which is generally believed. Those who imagine with Nietzsche that the case of Parsifal is another example among the thousands of stage seductions are absolutely off the track. His crime was not that he allowed himself to love a woman with all his being: that was part of his instinctive nature, and left him as "pure" after it as before. Nor was it in following to its end one of the most powerful, natural and important desires that Amfortas came to grief; but because he allowed the woman to *domesticate* him and so degrade the most important part of his mind,—his creative individuality. From the chains of that domestication, so approved by Klingsor (the Eugenist), Amfortas never won free; but Parsifal, after much bewilderment and blundering, did.

The drama of *Parsifal* is the fight of a natural healthy being with those matrimonial conventions which deprive him of mental life; of an artist, who insists that instinct and creative power are the only forces at all likely to reveal to men the wonder and mystery and beauty symbolised by the Grail. The victory of the creative genius is also the salvation of reli-

gion and womankind. When Palestrina, Fra Angelico and Dante were heads of the Christian Church, the mysteries of life were less dark than in later times; and, as a great modern dramatist has well said, "the modern stage is the modern pulpit." And when Kundry really dies, it will not be women who vanish, leaving behind a world of monasticism: it will be the domestic woman who disappears, leaving a world less bothered by sexual problems, because realising the instinctive nature and therefore the "purity" of sex. True, on the stage Kundry's death deprives the world of its last woman. Was Wagner such an imbecile that it must be taken literally? He was a man, and necessarily and rightly wrote from a man's point of view, demanding to be freed from the domestic woman, with her tyranny, her blackmail and her meannesses. Had he been a woman he would have made the demand from the other side, and required to be set free from the vanity, brutality and grossness of the domestic man.

Chapter V.

PARSIFAL is a prophecy as well as an epitome. It not only sums up the musico-dramatic wisdom of the past—including the immediate past of Wagner's own contributions—but also points the way in a certain measure towards the inevitable future of music-drama. It is not alone in this. From the last act of *Siegfried* to the end of his labours, Wagner was possessed by a new attitude which was often at variance with his earlier practice and theory as well.