

RHAPSODIES.

(By Bryceson Trecharne.

I.

"PARSIFAL"—A PILGRIMAGE.

"It has happened and still happens to me that a work of art does not, at the first glance, please me, because I have not grown up to it. But if it seems worth it, I endeavor to get hold of it, and then the most delightful discoveries follow. I become aware of new qualities in the objects, and new capacities in myself."—Goethe.

It was in the year 1897 that my mind was set on Bayreuth. I don't know why. There was no more reason why life should seem imperfect until I had seen the famous city this particular summer than it had been for many summers before. But my leanings towards Wagnerism had been gradually becoming more and more pronounced, till now I was fain to say to myself, "I will gird up my loins and go and see what it is with my own eyes.

"A, who has been, has come home rampant and insufferable with his enthusiasm. B, who has not been, pronounces the whole thing a fraud; and C, who goes every year, won't say anything, but bears a look in his eyes as if he had seen a vision, and is as mute as Zacharias when he came out of the temple.

"It is useless for me to pretend to understand Wagner merely from having read his works—in ten mortal volumes—or from having studied his operas, and seen and heard them as they are enacted here. How can 'Tannhauser,' sung in Italian by a company who sang 'Il Trovatore' yesterday, and will sing 'Linda di Chamounix' to-morrow, and cut to suit the taste of an Italian conductor, be the 'Tannhauser' which Wagner wrote?

"I cannot reckon myself a real though humble adherent of what is called 'The Cause' till I know by experience what I am talking about. Up then! let me pack my bag and be off."

The next thing I knew was that I was on the Flushing boat, my bag comfortably registered through in the security of a cosy cabin—booked for Bayreuth.

The common-places of Continental travel have been sufficiently threshed out, and it is not my intention to use up space and the reader's patience with a chronicle of the minor adventures that occurred on the journey from London to Nurnberg—my first stopping-place.

No town in the world but Nurnberg possesses that mediæval atmosphere so necessary for the contemplation of Wagner's art. Why, here we were in the very heart of Wagner's country. Was it not here that Hans Sachs lived? Here in his house, here the very window at which he sat on that memorable night when Wälder von Stolzling so nearly turned pretty Eva's head. Here is the church in which, as you remember, these young folks behaved so shamefully during the service. Here are all the old houses just as they stood then, with their courts in which you could build a church, their winding staircases, up which you could drive a cart, and their beautiful balconies, with lovely wrought-iron railings full of the freshest flowers. You expect every moment to run full tilt against Sachs, Pogner, Vogelsang, and the rest of them on their way to the meeting of the master-singers. From the tower of the citadel you can see the Johanniswiese, where Wälder came off so creditably, and here at every turn you cross the venerable Pegnitz, which has seen all these wonderful sights, besides many others, and is running on as calmly as ever, turning the same old mill wheels which it turned in those famous days.

The evening at Nurnberg I spent in an honest beer-garden, where I heard the very worst brass band I have ever heard in my life. First, they slaughtered the overture to "Athalie," and then they put a "Pot-pourri" on "Lohengrin" to the torture, and having successfully maimed and dismembered it, and gouged its eyes out, and skinned and scalped it, they tossed the gory remains from them with one hendisa whoop. It was awful!

Next morning, after an elephantine and infernal nightmare, brought on by the echoes of those blatant blasts, I spent in restful meditation—giving a final glance to the score of "Parsifal," and at noon embarked on the train that was to bear me to the promised land.

I cannot hope to tell you what my feelings were on approaching this Mecca of all my hopes. I hung out of the window fully an hour before there was any chance of seeing anything, and risked catching a cold in one eye and a cinder in the other, rather than miss the first glimpse of Bayreuth.

And at last, there stood the House of Magic, solemn and solitary, on its pine-clad hill without the town, a nobler and more appropriate monument to Wagner's genius and inspired obstinacy than any which kings or nations may ultimately raise. I had just time to rush to Wagner's house, Wahnfried, and stare at the outside in true Cockney fashion—yet, moved, I hope, by a nobler impulse than mere curiosity—and then straight to the theatre.

I will confess at once that I entered with the gravest misgivings, and at one moment almost felt a pang of regret that I had come.

What would the result be? Was I about to see the truth, or should I be again disenchanted, and this time without hope of redemption? Should I come out of this theatre happy in having witnessed a grand manifestation of human genius, or should I have to recant, and say, as so many who had never been near Bayreuth said, that the whole thing was vanity, that there was nothing better here than in any other theatre; that it was all quackery and re-clamé?

But the gas is gradually going down, the two thousand people, who have been chatting together as if they were one great family, are settling themselves in their seats.

The hum is broken with a momentary hush, then rises again with hurried force into a wave of commentary, until pierced with a tremulous note, demanding silence.

Now from the unseen orchestra rise the first notes of the prelude, floating like a benediction into the body of the great theatre, misty in the struggle of the waning lights. It is the right light for music; one does not want a glare to dream in.

A hush falls immediately upon the audience. The expressions on the up-turned faces change rapidly, as if an angel had swept through the room, and in his flight had stolen the masks with which these "civilised" barbarians conceal the human in them.

What, this no melody? This a mere cento of detached phrases full of sound and fury, signifying nothing? At any rate, it fulfils its purpose. We are at once surrounded and pervaded by an atmosphere of wonderful and suggestive beauty, and by the time the great curtains slowly open we are conquered and subdued to the very mood the master needs for appreciating his work. After the first five minutes there was no room for doubt, there was no further questioning or cavilling; the oceans of ink and miles of paper which had been used in criticism, in explanation, and condemnation, might have been turned to far better account for testimonials to Coddle's pills or Pears' Soap, as far as I was concerned, and I resigned myself to pure enjoyment, the purest and most elevated enjoyment I have ever derived from a theatre.

There is nothing I hate more than the cant and fustian which is written about and around music. There is nothing I more despise than the ravings which so-called Wagnerians indulge in; yet it becomes a task almost impossible for me to convey to my readers the effect produced upon my mind by this astonishing work, and its marvellous performance, without seeming to fall into the very sin I so much abhor.

One must spell art with a capital A when one is speaking of this, for it is surely the highest example of pure art in all its branches that this generation, or, indeed, any other generation, has ever seen. You come to the festival playhouse pretty much in the mood in which you come to any other play-house, and in a quarter of an hour you are overwhelmed with a feeling of awe and reverence such as you have experienced nowhere else, excepting, perhaps, in some vast cathedral during the performance of high mass.

We forget the orchestra, the actors, the scenery, even the composer; we forget that this is the work of a man's hand; "Parsifal" becomes real to us, and it is we who are the creatures of imagination; "Parsifal" is throbbing life and the audience a mere dream.

It is only long afterwards, when the dream which we call life has taken possession of us again, that we begin to realise what a wonderful product of art we have seen. Then only do we appreciate the merits of this astonishing orchestra, and the skill of its still more astonishing conductor; the unselfish devotion of all these artists, many of whom, after playing leading parts in the first theatres of Germany, are willing to come here and take secondary characters, with, perhaps, hardly six words

to say. Then only do we recall the beauty of the various scenes which have passed before our eyes, and the masterly coloring and grouping which called them into being. Every movement of each character seems to bring some new picture into existence, which, transferred to canvas, would live for ever. It is the art of Raphael placed on the stage.

What of the music? (Edipus himself might be puzzled to answer so Sphinx-like a query.

It grows like a flower to the sun, and it closes like a flower to the night, and with the same organic orderliness; its motion is perfectly measured, it never gibbers, or stares, or halts, it goes "right on" with the inspired inevitableness of a planet.

The worshippers of the sun adored because they thought the beauty of the sun contained a great deal which it does not contain; now that we no longer worship the sun, we, nevertheless admire that beauty and accord to it our full tributes, knowing its measure and the glory of its continent.

Therefore, it is that since I do not profess to be a worshipper at the shrine of any musical superstition, I find it all the more necessary to account for the faith which is in me, and to give some reasons, however personal they may be, for my admiration of and unbounded delight in "Parsifal," not as a sun-worshipper, but, let us say, as an astronomer. It is useless to notice extreme or "opportunist" opinions; to contend against people who denounce the opera, like Carlyle's "Teufelsdröck," as so much "clotted nonsense," or, on the other hand, to accept without some qualification enthusiastic assertions of absolute perfection.

One word as to the charges which have been specifically hurled against "Parsifal"—blasphemy and obscenity.

As to blasphemy, I have already said more than enough to show what sort of effect is produced on the mind by this work. If to elevate and sanctify the imagination, filling it with exquisite pictures, so that men brought up in this age of materialism leave the theatre with hushed reverence, perchance with tears in their eyes; if this be blasphemy, where is the fitness of words?

As to the second charge, it is an insult to the memory of Wagner.

His religion is undying, self-sacrificing love, in which he finds the quintessence of all religious belief. He, himself, says:—"As the sublimest feature of religion reveals itself in simple, trusting faith, so the essential signification of faith is dogma. The Christian religion manifests its lofty mission by its priceless worth to the individual. The wondrous and perfect incomparability of religious dogma consists in setting forth in positive form the result of reflection, which in ordinary speculative thought is negative. The misrepresentation of the fundamental being of religion commences only there, where it is tested by the causality of a common understanding. The common brain endeavors to test religious belief by the standard of everyday life, and that which does not readily accord with such prosaic tests is rejected as unreal and imaginative. But has religion ceased for all that? It lives, and will live, but only there whence is its original source, i.e., in the pure innermost recesses of the human heart. . . . But the church is lowered in the strenuous efforts of zealots to maintain it as a State institution, for though under such protection it may prove its usefulness, it is short of its Divine character."

Conversations concerning these Rhapsodies will be found at pages 162, 164, 165 in this book.