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# *Wagner and Tannhäuser in Paris, 1861*

By Edward H. House



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## About this Title

### Source

*Wagner and Tannhäuser in Paris, 1861*

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*New England Magazine*

Volume 4 Issue 4

Pages 411-427

Published in 1891

Original [Page Images](#) at Cornell University Library

(<http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/cgi-bin/moa/moa-cgi?notisid=AFJ3026-0010-64>)

### Reading Information

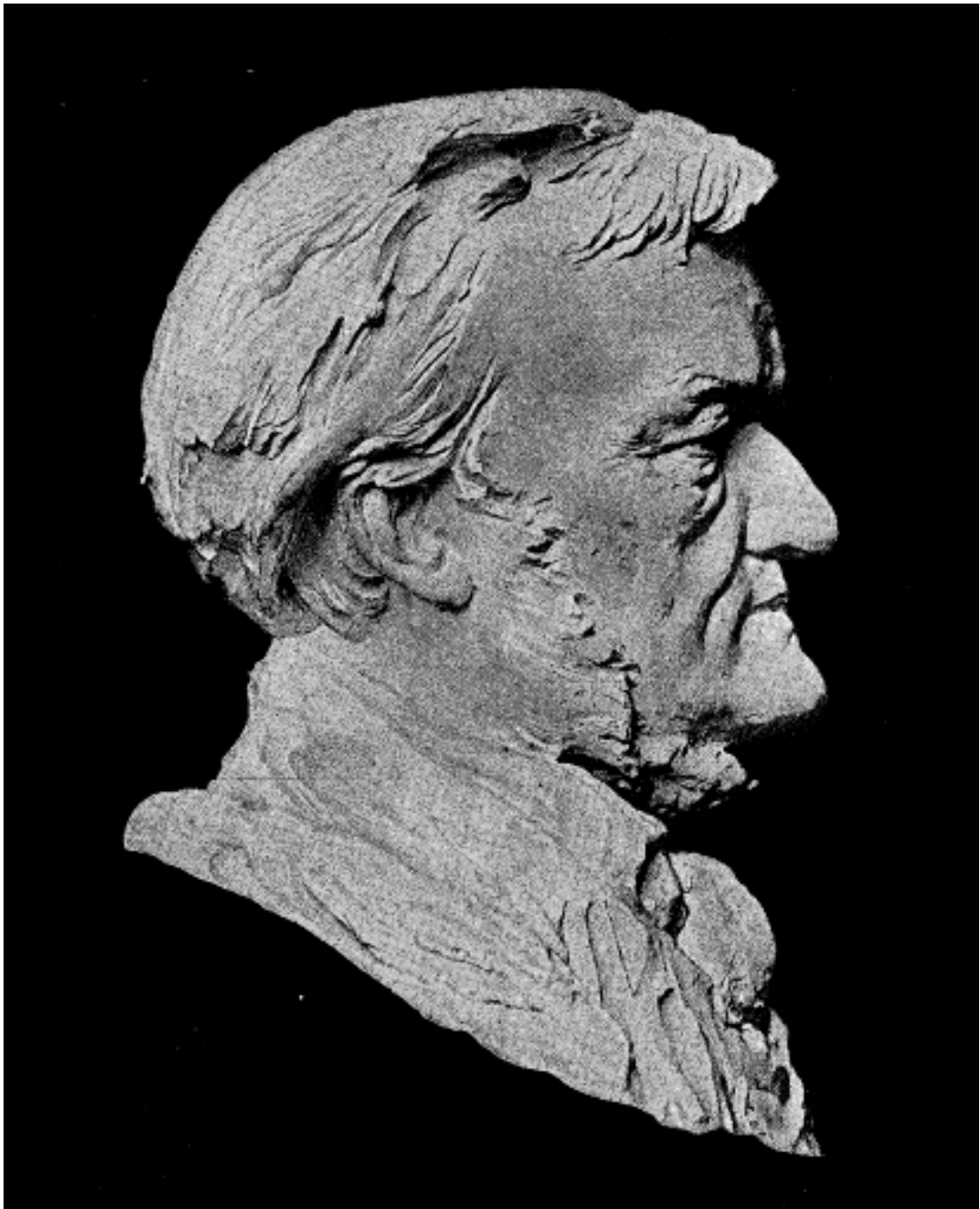
This title contains 10577 words.

Estimated reading time between 30 and 53 minutes.

Notes are indicated using parenthesis, like (1).

Page numbers of the original source are indicated using square-bracketed parentheses, like [62].

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**RICHARD WAGNER - From a bust by Lorenz Gedon, 1883.**



[411]

## Wagner and Tannhäuser in Paris, 1861

by Edward H. House



AT a time when I was studying music with a youthful ardor which threatened to place my future at the disposal of chances even more precarious than those of literature, I happened to be thrown under the powerful, and for a while irresistible, influence of Wagner. Thirty-five years ago, the finest orchestra organized in America, up to that date, had fixed its headquarters in what was then, as it still continues to be, the most thoroughly musical city of the Union. It was composed of intelligent and enthusiastic young Germans, who were prompt to avail themselves of the first opportunities for interpreting, in the new world, the remarkable creations of the ex-capellmeister of Dresden. Their performances of the "Tannhäuser" overture, alone, turned the thoughts of numerous artistic devotees into new and unexpected channels, and laid the foundation of many convictions which have steadily grown stronger with advancing years. I am ready, not only to admit that I was caught in the contagion, but to remember with gratitude that the means were thus early afforded me of investigating what seemed a marvellous problem, the gradual solution of which yielded perhaps greater delight than any similar pursuit of my life. Musicians can understand the extent to which the new master's work suggested mysteries by no means easy to unravel. The mere instrumentation, for one thing, was a field of constant surprises and discoveries to the diligent inquirer. I vividly recall the satisfaction with which, after borrowing the score of the "Tannhäuser" from that good-natured leader, Carl Bergmann, I set at work to copy every note in the crowded pages of the overture, as the only possible method of learning how its extraordinary and unprecedented effects were produced; and also my happy assurance that in executing that somewhat formidable task, I had arrived at a more thorough comprehension of orchestral capacities than a long course of previous study had given me. In this and other ways I took advantage of such occasions as presented themselves, a third of a century or more ago,—occasions far from abundant or complete, I am bound to say,—for strengthening an acquaintance [412]



**From a lithograph presented by Wagner to Mrs. B. J. Lang, of Boston, in 1870.**

[413] with the most original of modern composers, until harsher duties compelled a partial abandonment of that attractive occupation.

It was therefore with the keenest interest that, in the midst of a holiday sojourn in Paris, in

the first months of 1861, I saw an announcement promising a speedy representation of "Tannhäuser" at the now disused Opera House in the Rue Lepeletier. Nothing could have been more unexpected. That Wagner was, and had been for some time in Paris, I was well aware. That he had ventured upon producing selections from his works at a concert, not long before, I was also informed. But that he had found the means of access to the stronghold, the inner redoubt, of French lyric art, was a matter of such astonishment as to appear incredible. To begin with, it was not altogether clear why Wagner should desire to subject himself to the ordeal that would inevitably await him, if he should carry the advertised project into effect. It was in a measure explicable that, perhaps for the gratification of personal friends, he had allowed certain characteristic specimens of his music to be heard on a special occasion; but, apart from the circumstance that the reception of these detached morceaux was so extremely unflattering as to foreshadow the danger of a more definite attempt, it was difficult to believe that the composer could really wish to win the approval of a public for which he had openly and loudly proclaimed the profoundest contempt. Years before, he had, in this same Paris, passed through experiences so bitter and humiliating to a man of his disposition, that his memory of the place and its people was overcharged with acrimony, and he could hardly refer to them except in a tone of exaggerated depreciation. In addition to this, it was one of his articles of faith that the French were weighted by permanent æsthetic disabilities, and that the faculty of rising to the exalted sphere in which he moved and wrought and let loose his soul was utterly denied them by destiny. Concerning them, their audiences, their critics, their composers, he had repeatedly written in scornful mockery or fiery denunciation. It would have been vain to search for points of sympathy between the volatile and pleasure-seeking community of the gay capital, and the arrogant, unbending, and sternly conscientious master of the new school.

Granting, however, that Wagner was possessed by an unaccountable yearning to conquer this vivacious populace,—which, it presently became evident, was indeed the case, in spite of his austere affectation of indifference; granting that the reach of his ambition, or his vanity, sought to embrace all classes and degrees of men, and that he longed to stamp his imprint upon every variety of taste, the lightest as well as the severest, there remained to be considered the formidable obstacles which confronted him. To meet and overcome these, the address of a courtier, the courage of a hero, and the devotion of a martyr seemed to be required. The Parisians may not cherish long hatreds against individuals, but they are eminently capable of sudden gusts of spite, and of meeting the elaborate and systematic attacks of a censor like Wagner with a sharp guerrilla onslaught of merciless ridicule, more deadly, perhaps, than the more serious process of logical warfare. The name of the innovator was already a byword of derision. At the faintest hint of further trials of the public patience, the professional satirists took the unusual step of dropping sarcasm and persiflage, and employing angry menace. What was he to expect, even if through some superlative graciousness of fortune, the opportunity of carrying out the most daring of enterprises should be afforded him?

But, in truth, so extraordinary a result was not anticipated by anybody, excepting probably a few who lived within the inner circle of authority. Upon what could this audacious stranger found the hope of battling down the gates of the nation's academic sanctuary, doubly barred by prejudice against all but the elect, and triply barred against him by the intensest popular hostility and official opposition? When admission was impossible even to France's own children of song, except by marvels of patience and intrigue, or perhaps through devious [414] courses of corruption, how should this rude, indecorous iconoclast from Germany find his way within? Nevertheless, it came to pass. At the first, it was reckoned little less than a miracle. In fact, it could not have happened but for the accident that France was then under imperial rule. We knew all about it in course of time; how the more or less delicate diplomacy

of a feminine disciple, lofty in station and influential in secluded precincts of the Tuileries, evoked a peremptory decree in the face of which all remonstrance was silenced. *L'Empéreur le voulait*; and that was sufficient for all except those who were able to penetrate the corridors of the palace, and to satisfy their curiosity by the discovery that it was, as a matter of truth, *Madame la Princesse* who willed that His Majesty should will the accomplishment of her design. It was the oldest of old stories. A dainty and supple hand had disentangled a knot as intricate as the Phrygian king's, and swept aside impediments against which no amount of argument, eloquence, or moral force would ever have prevailed.

About the time when it became known that "Tannhäuser" would be produced at the Imperial Academy of Music, it was my frequent habit to breakfast at an establishment in the Passage de l'Opéra, well known to all who were contented with modest merit and humble variety, and who found in the moderate charges a reasonable compensation for the absence of the glitter and ceremony of the great boulevard cafes. The Passage being close to the stage entrance of the Opera House, this restaurant was a common resort of the multitude of undistinguished attachés of the great theatre. Parties of bourgeois-looking choristers would congregate in one apartment, as careless in appearance to the excitements of their calling as such useful upholders of the minor operatic illusions are apt to be, the world over. Groups of dishevelled and not always tidy ballet-girls gossiped and chattered in corners, rarely captivating to view in their normal aspect, but usually guarded by the maternal watchfulness which Halévy has typified in the person of Madame Cardinal, notwithstanding the improbability of insidious advances, welcome or unwelcome, in that unpropitious quarter. Members of the orchestra ranged themselves in smaller bodies, and made themselves, as is their wont, rather more conspicuous than their co-workers in other departments, by outspoken and vigorous discussion of topics relating to their craft. As a rule, these gatherings were most numerous at noon-day, the place being, doubtless, a convenient rendezvous for social and other gratifications, preliminary to the labors of rehearsal, next door.

As I sat alone, one morning, in this unpretending cafe, I chanced to overhear part of a lively conversation upon the subject which had then become the most prominent of all,—the forthcoming performance of the obnoxious "Tannhäuser." As was generally the case, "chaff" was predominant, and the denunciations were neither novel nor brilliant enough to attract particular attention. The party engaged in debate was not, in this instance, composed of musicians, but apparently had "leanings" that way; for, after a somewhat pronounced declaration of opinion, one of them called out to an individual seated at another table, requesting confirmation of his statement. The person appealed to glanced up with a smile, and answered: "No; excuse me, I don't agree."

This was the signal for a combined demonstration, good-humored though aggressive, in which the uninitiated majority sought to impose their view upon the single expert,—which I have observed to be not an uncommon incident of haphazard controversy. But as nothing could be drawn from the solitary adversary but a renewed assertion that he "did not agree," it occurred to one of the disputants to venture a personal thrust.

"Ah, D— must not laugh with us at present. This is a delicate business. While *ce monsieur* (the Emperor) favors M. Wagner, the artists of the Opéra must be careful with their tongues."

The tone showed that no offence was intended, though the words were not exactly delicate. The "artist," as he [415] had been termed, who was quite a young man, smiled again, then flushed a little, and answered:

"I have rehearsed in 'Tannhäuser' twice, gentlemen, and I do not feel at liberty to join in your mirth."

"Precisely," retorted his opponent. "My friends, the gloom of despair is upon him. No one concerned in this cursed *diablérie* will ever be joyous again."

All laughed, and that was the end of the colloquy.

Entering the café at an earlier hour than usual, a day or two after, I saw the gentleman who had dared to withstand the popular current, sitting alone. Few visitors had arrived, and I placed myself at the table nearest him, which was vacant. The barriers to conversation are very slight with most Frenchmen, and I found no difficulty in opening an intercourse which, though it was chiefly confined to our meetings in this one locality, became extremely agreeable, at least to me, and almost grew to intimacy before my departure from Paris.

Without much delay, I explained the interest I felt in the impending event, and referring to the dialogue I had overheard, expressed my pleasure at meeting a French artist free from the extreme prejudices then prevalent. I used the word "artist" because it had been applied to him by his friend, though I knew nothing of his position in the Opéra, or of his share in the work in hand.

"Well," he remarked, "I take things as I find them. It does not become me, a poor devil of a second violin, to make grimaces at a composition of which all I know is that every note in my part of it commands my respect."

My new acquaintance was not, then, of a rank that enabled him to speak with the highest authority, but perhaps the information falling within his limited range might be none the less valuable. In fact, I soon discovered that the post of second violin at the Imperial Academy was significant of no lack of intelligence or culture in the occupant. The orchestra of this establishment is selected and appointed under conditions likely to insure intellectual qualifications as well as technical skill on the part of all its members.

I asked if the impression produced upon him—which I need not say was due to broader considerations than the mere study of his own part, notwithstanding his first intimation—extended to others.

"I—think—so," he replied guardedly; "but there are unpleasant influences. Most of us have a great affection for Rossini, and an admiration for Meyerbeer; and Wagner is *so* indiscreet."

This was in reference to the German composer's biting sarcasms upon the two idols of Parisian musical society,—both of them aliens, by the by, but accepted as citizens of the French artistic nationality, in consequence of their approved willingness to conform to French traditions and methods. Not only had the new comer violently assailed, in his "Quatre Poèmes d'Opéra" and other *brochures*, these cherished and still living favorites, but he had injudiciously caused the essays to be republished in Paris, a few months before,—with what particular purpose, it is difficult to conjecture.

I met my orchestral sympathizer often, and took much satisfaction in discovering that he was able, with a few words, to dispose of many malicious reports which began to be freely circulated. One of these, repeated with fantastic emphasis by almost every journal in the city, related to an alleged quarrel between Wagner and Hain'l,—the latter being the thoroughly accomplished *chef d'orchestre* of the Opéra,—on account of the composer's desire to conduct the rehearsals and assume exclusive control of the entire production. The knights of the press were fierce in repelling this pretended invasion of prerogative. The custom of all recorded time, they declared, forbade interference with any of the sacred rights of the omnipotent *chef*. This was an absurdity, for the omnipotent *chef* frequently cedes his functions to masters ambitious of that especial distinction, as has more recently been apparent in the cases of Verdi and Gounod; but there are periods when well-devised absurdities have a more penetrating effect upon the French mind than the most [416] substantial facts. On this point, I was glad to make direct inquiry.

"I have not heard of any quarrel," said my informant.

"But the story is in all the newspapers."

"True, I have heard it talked about *outside*. What I meant was, that I had heard nothing of it in the Opéra."

"Indeed; perhaps, then, it is not authentic, at all."

"I should doubt it. Hain'l and Wagner do not seem over cordial, but,—well, I will tell you what I have observed. I have been ill, and did not assist at the first rehearsals; and I thought I should perhaps be excluded, throughout. As it happened, the overture had not been taken up until the day of my return,—it is now a fortnight. Well, we were all fired by it. Many grew cool again, afterward, but for the moment there was but one thought. Hain'l himself was much struck. Wagner, who, I believe, had been wandering about the parterre, came upon the stage near the end, as if expecting us to proceed with the first act. But, although the overture had gone to a marvel, Hain'l turned back and ordered us to repeat,—not a very common thing with us at a first rehearsal, when all had passed with so little need of correction. To Wagner, who stood waiting, he said simply, 'Pardon, we have plenty of time.' Wagner looked a little surprised, but also gratified. In the middle of this repetition, the chef turned, and without stopping, silently beckoned a violin from the extreme outer edge to a place nearer the centre. The equilibrium was not nice enough to Hain'l's ear. That is a sort of thing that often occurs, but Wagner noticed it, and nodded a hasty recognition. After the overture, he leaned over the *rampe*, and said something, of which I caught the words, 'Good, good; and since you perceive it, do you not think'—'Precisely,' interrupted Hain'l; 'you shall see, I will arrange it.' Wagner said no more, but at the end of the rehearsal, just before separating, the chef asked us to wait. 'We will add two to the second violins, he said, 'the first can spare them; eh, M. Wagner, will that do?' Wagner bowed. Hain'l spoke briefly in an undertone to our leader, and then, aloud,— 'So, very well. M. and M. perhaps I shall ask you to oblige me by transferring your strength to the seconds; that is, if I cannot make room for more enlargements. I need not tell you why it is desirable. May I count upon you?' 'Willingly, willingly,'—the response was immediate. And I cannot give you a better illustration of how the orchestra regard the music. It is not for every score that you will find a first violin ready to give up his own, and take what is nominally a subordinate place. (1) Moreover, it is not likely that such a thing would happen if the composer and the chef were at cross purposes. I must say, however, that Hain'l has always fixed ideas about placing his instruments, and particularly about balancing the strings."

I had looked forward with great eagerness to the prospect of being present on the opening night of "Tannhäuser," and endeavored to arrange my stay so as to include the date semi-officially announced. But the administration of the French Opéra is less constrained by its promises than, perhaps, that of any other theatre in Europe, and delay succeeded delay, until continual postponement seemed the only certain thing about the business. Of course, the newspapers had their own charming versions of the causes of these interruptions. There was internecine strife in every department of the Academy. The several leading singers, from the *prima donna* downward, excepting those brought from Germany by the composer, had despairingly thrown up *rôles* which no French artist could undertake with equanimity. [Coming straight to fact, every important vocalist in the cast was of foreign birth, if not of foreign training.] Wagner's imported tenor, we were assured, [417] had grossly insulted the regular attachés of the institution, necessitating the exchange of mortal defiance. Wagner had attempted to override the commands of the principal personage in the empire, as a consequence of which the reddest republicans about town became ludicrously loyal for a week. In the face of the common enemy it was deemed politic to unite, and to forget the gulf between democracy and despotism. It would not have been altogether surprising to hear the Marseillaise called for at the Opéra. But as a rule the enmity took the form of envenomed raillery. The singers were falling into a decline. The chorus was so reduced as to endanger the proper representation of the ordinary repertory. No strings could be kept unbroken on the violins, and the wind instruments were all twisted out of shape by the extraordinary sounds they were called upon to produce. The walls of the house were shaken and the stability of the structure imperilled by the infernal crash and clatter which daily resounded within them. It is to be hoped that the sensitive composer was left in ignorance of these malignant signs and

tokens; or that, if confronted by them, they at least served to admonish him in some degree of the wrath to come.

It was a painful disappointment to discover that my chances of witnessing the production were rapidly slipping away. The utmost hostility that Paris could concentrate would not prevent the performance from being careful and painstaking in all respects, and in many, brilliant. I could have hoped to listen and enjoy, though others might condemn. Vain expectation! I did not know of what Paris was capable. As it happened, the long postponement was wholly to my advantage. Luck never served me a better turn, for nobody heard a single scene on the first public night, whereas the expedient to which I was driven enabled me to attend not only one, but three of what I may believe to have been as thorough and excellent representations of "Tannhäuser" as any theatre has ever afforded.

The idea of consulting my friend of the orchestra as to the possibility of witnessing one of the rehearsals had occurred to me, but I dismissed it as soon as I learned from him how rigid was the discipline, and how strict the enforcement of rules in the institution where he filled an undistinguished position. What I did do was to get from him the address of Wagner; and then, as a last resort, I wrote a note to the master, frankly stating my case—saying what I wanted, why I wanted it, explaining the trifling claims I might possibly have upon his indulgence, and mentioning the manner in which I could manifest my appreciation of his courtesy, if he saw fit to accede to my request. No doubt it was a rash experiment. If I had been ten years older, I should certainly not have attempted it, but youth and the confidence of enthusiasm helped me through. I wrote in English, fearing the inferences that might be drawn from such imperfect German as I could command, and assuming that my own language would be more likely, first, to attract attention, and next, to enlist sympathy, than that which was in those days chiefly familiar to the composer as the vehicle for manifestations of virulent animosity. The instinct which thus guided me was probably a fortunate one. I do not think, however, that I had courage to reveal what I had done, even to intimate friends. In America, nothing would be more natural than such a proceeding. The application would have been quite in the ordinary course, and its success almost a foregone conclusion. But it needed only a short observation of European usages to learn that the ways of the old world were not our ways, and that what might lie fairly within the lines of order in the United States would be regarded there as a monstrous invasion of the proprieties.

Three or four days passed, and no response was given to my appeal. I began philosophically to set before myself the arguments against the likelihood that any attention would be paid to it, until I accidentally heard it stated that Wagner was not residing at the place to which my missive had been sent. Anxious to assure myself on this head, I called one afternoon at the designated number in Rue d'Aumale, simply to discover if I [418] had been at first properly advised as to the direction. A slow-witted concierge was so little inclined to supply information, vouchsafing only a half intelligible reference to the second floor, that I was compelled to enter and search for myself. Arriving at the indicated elevation, I put myself in communication with a doorkeeper of the most good-natured appearance, but who proved incapable of speaking or understanding more than half a dozen French sentences. To my inquiry if M. Wagner dwelt there, I could get no other answer than a demand for my card, which he would not vary, although I tried to explain that I did not wish to see anybody, but only to ascertain if that was M. Wagner's abode. As he would be content with nothing short of the card, I hesitatingly confided it to him, and was at once relieved and re-embarrassed when a business-like young man appeared and, happily in French, asked my errand. Once again I protested that I had no further errand than to learn if this were M. Wagner's veritable address, as I was in doubt about the delivery of a letter to him.

"This is the address," said he; "I will see if your letter has arrived."

Whereupon, in great discomfort, I reiterated my innocence of any design to intrude or to

demand a reply, desiring merely to satisfy myself that there had been no error in transmission. He nevertheless insisted, and after absenting himself a moment, returned with a companion,—a short, middle-aged man, whose countenance struck me in the dim light of the corridor as of a peculiarly mild, not to say patient and tender cast, and whose profile gave me the suddenest quaint suggestion of the famous mountain outline in Franconia, New Hampshire. He looked attentively at me,—possibly, I afterward thought, to determine whether my petition had been genuine or not, for I learned that tickets had been in great demand, and that all sorts of devices had been employed to procure them, sometimes with dishonest views. While he gazed, I made a last effort with my thrice urged disavowal of intention to intrude, but stopped, more confused than ever when the new comer began to say, in a low and gentle voice:

"You are very welcome. You will please to excuse the failure to answer you, but we have been so much occupied. so much pressed. A note (*billet*) will reach you this evening."

I uttered some vague words of acknowledgment, to which he rejoined:

"There is no reason. Only you will excuse the omission to answer before. You will certainly receive a *billet* this evening."

I went away, not much questioning that I had spoken with Wagner, yet not altogether sure, for neither his appearance nor his manner of expressing himself corresponded with the harsh and tempestuous disposition generally ascribed to him. But the promise was fulfilled. The *billet* followed me home almost immediately;—a ticket of admission to the Opera for the following Sunday evening, accompanied by the composer's card. The ticket was similar to those issued for regular performances, and the hour of commencement was marked upon it. I received it with intense gratification, and indeed it was not long before I learned it was much more of a favor than I could have reasonably expected to obtain.

On the appointed evening, as I approached the familiar edifice in Rue Lepeletier, which I expected to find enveloped in the customary obscurity of an "off" night, I was astonished to see it illuminated quite as profusely as on ordinary public occasions. Fearing that a change had been made in the arrangements, I looked around the vestibule for some hint or warning, and noticed that the operation of ticket-selling was not in progress, and that the windows for that purpose were all closed. But the formalities of admission were preserved, and the passages within were under control of the usual corps of old ladies, best known to foreigners as footstool fiends. All this was strange enough, but the culmination came when the door to the stalls was thrown open and I entered the auditorium. The house was filled in every visible part, —absolutely overflowing,—and with one of the most "showy" audiences I ever saw united there. It differed from the assemblage of an important first representation only in the [419] circumstance that it was already gathered and seated before the time of beginning. Never before had I seen the Opéra thus crowded at so early an hour. Most of the ladies in the lower tiers of boxes were in full dress. I was bewildered,—as I fancy anybody would have been, as ignorant as myself of the Parisian system of managing "private rehearsals," and accustomed to regard the preparatory labors of a theatre as surrounded by impenetrable mystery. The fact is, although I did not then realize it, that no work is considered ready for production at this thorough-going institution, unless the last dozen or so of rehearsals are sufficiently perfect to stand the test of critical scrutiny on the broadest scale; and the practice of permitting the élite of influence and position to be present on these occasions is not without advantages, in spite of certain inconveniences caused by too great an extension of the privilege. For my own part, I think there is much more to be said against than on behalf of it; but I ought to remember it leniently, for without it I should never have heard "Tannhäuser" in Paris, nor, at that period, would any other living soul.

It is not my purpose to speak too minutely of the performance. That it was finished, exact, and characterized by a degree of delicacy which I am compelled to believe could not have

been rivalled, at that period, in any German theatre, those who can recall the productions of the Opéra in those days will be willing to credit. The orchestral support was superb. I have never elsewhere heard the quick movement of the overture played with equal spirit and energy. Under the firm guidance of M. Hain'l, the unified body of fourscore musicians, each one an undisputed master of his instrument, dashed through the imagery of witchcraft, seductive magic, knightly intrepidity, the storms of passion, and the wildness of despair, like a demoniac whirlwind. And thus it swayed that vast, and presumably intelligent, mass of listeners, who, not being "on guard," as it were, and knowing themselves free to follow their true impulses, unhindered by the fear of popular odium, broke forth into acclamations which seemed the presage of an almost certain victory for the composer in the near future. Nor can I recollect an instance when the fine march,—which needs a severity of treatment without which it degenerates into a swinging laziness fatal to dignity,—has resounded with nobler or more chivalrous expression. The chorus was not always what could be desired, but even these subordinate participants, probably most liable of all to demoralization from without, appeared to have been lifted to an approximate sense of their share in a demonstration of deeper meaning and more liberal promise than any of those in which they were habitually engaged. As to the principal vocalists, the sincerity and earnestness of their co-operation seemed to defy the most censorious scrutiny. I have heard and read many accusations of alleged treachery among them on the opening night, but I distrust the accuracy of charges based upon anything that took place upon the stage on that turbulent occasion. Throughout the evening of which I am now speaking, they were all that the author's most fastidious disciple could have desired. They were not all artists of the highest rank, but there were none without just pretensions to respectability of reputation and attainment, while some were qualified for the most honorable degree in their vocation. And their loyalty and honesty of endeavor were unswerving from beginning to end.

It was with much pleasure that I discovered, in the group of vocalists, the excellent baritone, Morelli. I had known him well, for several years, in America, where he had been a valuable member of almost every opera troupe since his arrival in the country with Madame La Grange. His name had been plainly before my eyes on the Paris programmes, but I had not thought of identifying my old acquaintance of the Italian stage with this favorite exponent of the French lyric drama. Had I been aware of his presence, the difficulty of ingress to the house would never have existed; but perhaps it had fallen out for the best. At any rate, if the easier and more usual path had been opened to me, I should not have been brought into personal [420] contact with Wagner, nor would the material for this shadowy sketch of him ever have been collected.

During the intervals between the acts,—longer, even, at rehearsals than those which strain the patience on public nights, —I roamed about the building or lounged in the *foyer*, for a time indifferent to the buzz of conversation, but gradually attracted by the curious unanimity of disrespect with which the new work was alluded to. There was no necessity for listening. Every one spoke freely and unrestrainedly, and with a loudness which indicated an eagerness to intensify the general sentiment of hostility, and to bring about a species of tacit combination for offensive purposes. The spell which had, at periods, held a large proportion of the assemblage captive, was easily exorcised. Indeed, it must be admitted that it was only with exceptional parts of the opera that the auditors permitted themselves to be interested. To these few morceaux I heard no especial reference; but the condemnation was applied with a liberality as comprehensive as it was indiscriminate. Of reflecting criticism there was hardly a word. Sweeping abuse was more effective, as well as more convenient. Occasionally I passed small clusters of celebrities who had been pointed out to me, at odd times, as the monitors, or perhaps the manufacturers, of popular taste,—the autocratic feuilletonists of the press. Their tone was more subdued, but it was evident that they took delight in the manifestations of

popular temper, which, it might be, they credited themselves with having mainly provoked. Among these gentlemen I descried an acquaintance—my only one, at that date, in Paris journalism,—M. V—, then a political writer for the *Constitutionnel*; later and at present, I believe, an art reviewer for numerous publications. We exchanged salutations, and in the course of a short conversation which followed, I begged him to give me an explanation of the unvarying and apparently blind and unreasoning antagonism displayed on all sides.

"Why," he said, "this is Paris, and that (indicating the stage) is Wagner.

"This is not the whole of Paris."

"No, and 'Tannhäuser' is not the whole of Wagner, unhappily."

"I wonder if it is all alike."

"The music of Wagner? Probably. If you mean Paris, certainly, on this question."

"As these people are admitted by courtesy," I said, "I should imagine a sense of obligation would restrain them; at least, while they remain in the house."

"Oh, I assure you the obligation is the other way. Think of their complacency in sitting through four hours of this savagery."

"Ah, it sounds like complacency; listen, M. V ."

"At all events," he answered laughing, "they are harmonious, and in that they set M. Wagner a good example."

"It seems to me like the harmony of a conspiracy."

"Oh, that is too strong; we are not so bad as that."

"Yes, a safe conspiracy;—a whole city against one stranger. Tell me, M. V , is this really a foretaste of what is to happen on the first night?"

"Well, the Opéra is not in my province, now; you should ask Fiorentino."

"I do not know M. Fiorentino."

"Take it less seriously, M. H you are not a friend of M. Wagner, I presume."

"I am not sure that I ever saw him."

"Well, I will tell you the truth; what you behold here, now, is the most perfect calm, the sweetest serenity, an angelic repose, compared with what is in preparation for next month. The fact that this evening's visitors come by invitation *does* keep them within certain bounds. Moreover, it is a very superior gathering, an audience too polite to overstep good feeling. Yes, you may smile; but wait till you see how it will be when the public has bought the right to assert its opinion,— when the place is thronged with a host of merry fellows who come with something to say, and whom the devil could not stop from saying it. Oh, the performance will be on this side of the curtain, not on the other, on that night. A thousand voices, all singing the same song. Not much chance for M. Wagner's mediæval heroes, I apprehend."

[421]

"I am sorry for it. The odds are too great."

"*Mais, enfin*,—we did not ask him to come here."

The animated repartees of the journalist,—with whom I had but the slightest acquaintance,—did not charm me at the moment, and I returned to my seat, somewhat depressed. At the end of another act I sauntered forth again, this time avoiding the *foyer*, and keeping to the "lobbies." As I walked at the rear of the boxes, I saw, standing by an open door, the two persons I had met in the Rue d'Aumale. The younger moved away while I was drawing near. The elder, whom I took to be Wagner, was about to re-enter the box, when, glancing at me, he stopped, with a look of partial recognition. I could not pass without thanking him for the ticket he had sent, and warmly expressing my delight at this performance of an opera which, I told him, I had long known, but never before heard.

Stepping back into the lobby, he made some conventional remark about the pleasure of giving an opportunity to people who knew how to enjoy it, and asked if "Tannhäuser" had been produced in America. I told him it had been, but in very imperfect style, and that its

character was probably best known through private study, and through frequent repetition of its instrumental portions, which had been worthily played in numberless concerts.

"That is not the way to know Tannhäuser," he said; which of course was incontrovertible: and I was constrained to add that there was little hope of witnessing in the United States, for many years to come, such a representation as that now in progress. He candidly declared his satisfaction with all concerned, and observed that if everything went as well on its introduction to the public, he should have nothing to complain of. "I shall be content with Paris, and Paris will be content with me." After which, he bade me good evening, and went into his box.

Before he had finished speaking, I noticed M. V at a little distance. As soon as I was alone, he came to me and said, with a suspicion of sharpness, as I thought:

"I understood you did not know M. Wagner."

To which, with a certainty of sharpness, I answered:

"You understood correctly; I do not know M. Wagner."

"But you were speaking with him."

"Ah, that was M. Wagner? Well, I thought so, from a remark he made, but was not absolutely sure. No, M. V I do not know him."

"I hope you did not mention my little prediction to him," said M. V , in a more equable tone.

"I could not tell him anything of the sort, as I am not acquainted with him; I wish I could see my way clear to do so."

"Under any circumstances, I hope you would not cite me as an authority."

"Certainly not, M. V , and it is not likely that any revelation of mine will interfere with the success of your campaign of a million against one. I do not think it is in my power to break up the combination, even by telling all I know about it."

He received this with the utmost possible good nature, a fact which I am glad to record, as we afterward came nearer and much more pleasantly together. But that was all I saw of him in connection with the "Tannhäuser" episode.

The very next day, I received an envelope containing again the composer's card and another rehearsal ticket—this one admitting me to the fauteuils. I was promoted, then, and without the least expectation, or the expression of any wish on my parts. It was a kind acknowledgment of the few sincere and sympathetic words I had uttered, and it afforded me a genuine gratification. Before the designated evening, I met again my estimable second violin and my excellent friend, Morelli—the former by hazard, as usual, the latter by intention. The man of the orchestra had no hesitation in declaring the probable correctness of everything V had said. He would not be in the least surprised if the opera was hissed and hooted from the first note to the last. From what he had [422] heard there was no purpose to allow any part of it to be heard. "Conspiracy,"—well, he did not believe in an organized, widespread collusion, but everybody seemed to understand, intuitively, what was to be done, and everybody was quite agreed about the course to be pursued. "Shameful,"—of course it was. Did I suppose the orchestra would not feel it too? On inquiry, however, it appeared that the orchestra would not feel it particularly on M. Wagner's account, but as an incidental insult levelled against itself and the rest of the Opéra establishment. Indeed, a new cause of complaint was growing up against the sorrow-burthened composer, on the ground that the employés of the theatre were to be affronted and disgraced in the discharge of their duty, all along of this "wretched, rash, intruding fool." What was he, that they should all have to be hissed for him? I feared that my originally right-minded violinist had been insensibly corrupted by the unjust influences around him.

Morelli confirmed the worst. He was not unwilling, at first, to take a jocular view of the coming event, saying that his voice was fatigued, and he was glad of the prospect of a rest

during March. Which jest, being dissected, was found to mean that he had no idea of singing his part in "Tannhäuser," inasmuch as silent gesticulation, with an occasional contortion of the countenance, would be amply sufficient. And yet, he admitted with a sigh, it would have yielded him a rare satisfaction to have a fair field with one of his scenes. But he fancied all would fare alike. "You will see such things, my friend, as are not dreamed of in America." I told him I anticipated leaving France before the opera was brought out. "It is better, perhaps; surely better if you want to carry away any esteem for this public of Paris. It is not a pretty thing to see this *jeunesse*, which proclaims itself an example to the world at large, and assumes exclusive possession of the refinement, wit, delicacy, and good-breeding of the universe, sinking all manhood, and debasing itself like the beasts of the field—no, the uncleaner beasts of the sty. I know what it can do, and I know that just where high society centres itself, there you may look for the worst brutality, and hear the keynote sounded of the most disgraceful revelry. The box on the right of the stage, close to our feet, filled with the jewels of French nobility, that is the nest where all these villanies are hatched." The sturdy old baritone swelled with a magnificent indignation. I wondered if it were possible that he, like Mario, had ever been forced to undergo the insolence he now declaimed against.

"How is it," I asked, "that no one tells M. Wagner of all this? He surely ought to have a hint of what is in store."

Morelli thought that perhaps he was better informed than he wished to appear; but I could not accept that view, having in my mind the memory of the last words he had spoken in my hearing. "But if he is ignorant," added the singer, "whose place is it to enlighten him? Not mine, surely. I shall get myself into a fine scrape. If anybody is to play prophet of evil, it is the director's part. But he will not speak a word, and it would do no good if he did speak. M. Wagner must take his own chance." And so it truly appeared. The composer's enemies were all as well advised of what was to happen as were the Catholics previous to the massacre of Saint Bartholomew; while he, together with his friends, knew as little of the impending massacre as the Huguenots of 1572, in their hapless day.

Again I went to rehearsal, again I heard the mutterings of the gathering storm, and again I had opportunity of conversing with Wagner, who walked leisurely through the passages during the *entr'actes*, mostly alone, and apparently indifferent to the keen gaze of those around him. Offensive tongues were silenced at his approach, and he really seemed unconscious, as well as careless, of the prevailing ill-will. There might have been a little forced independence in the air with which he set his head back and projected his chin, but I, of course, was not sufficiently familiar with him to interpret his expression, and his attitude might have been the usual one of a short man accustomed to assert a certain elevation of bearing. His [423] manner of speaking was, as I had observed before, and as I continued to observe, invariably subdued and mild. Nothing could be more irreconcilable with the excitability and angry intolerance frequently laid to his charge. I am aware, however, that my interviews were too few and too brief to warrant any attempt at generalization of his mood or his demeanor.

There was nothing in our conversation, that evening, to place on record, excepting toward the end, when he kindly asked if I should remain in Paris long enough to attend another rehearsal, and if I thought I could endure a third hearing. As I thanked him for this second unexpected favor, the feeling came strongly upon me that if it was the deliberate plan of the Opéra administration to keep him uninformed of the projected demonstration, such treatment was base and cruel; and without reflecting upon the improbability that I, a stranger, could at this late day be the first to reveal to him what was intended, I hastily requested that, when I came again, I might have a few words with him on a serious subject, —or, if he could not listen to me during the rehearsal, I begged him to appoint a time when I might call on him elsewhere. He seemed struck by my earnestness, and, though somewhat surprised, said that he

should be in or near his box throughout the evening, and that he would be glad to see me.

The next few days brought renewed evidence of the tumult in contemplation, and I pictured to myself the folly of supposing that the scheme could have been concealed from the person most directly menaced, or that it could be reserved for me, not even an acquaintance, to unfold this ugly plot, the details of which had been discussed for weeks in all the clubs, cafes, and coulisses of Paris, and broadly hinted at, though I believe not openly threatened, in more than one newspaper. Was I about to put myself in an utterly absurd position? Was I prepared to encounter the ridicule I might provoke? It was not a comfortable dilemma, and I went at last to the Opéra with a half-formed resolution to say nothing of what was in my thoughts, and to find a way of evading the "serious subject" I had alluded to. But when I came upon the composer, in his usual place, quite alone, his placid, sad smile betokening a serenity so unsuited to the discordant atmosphere which surrounded him, and apparently gazing into remote distances, as if, the present being happily secured, his mind was free to refresh itself in the expanding future, —when I saw him, the sole individual then in view who seemed unmindful that he was about to undergo the bitterest humiliation which could be inflicted upon a man in his position, I forgot the incongruity of my own relation to the proceedings, and returned to my determination of telling all I knew, whatever might ensue. Wagner greeted me with his customary sedateness, and at once relieved me from the necessity of renewing my request for a private conversation. Opening the door of his box, he said:

"Will you speak here, or must we be entirely alone?"

Although I fancied there was a glimmer of amusement on his countenance, I nevertheless held to my purpose, and asked that we might, if convenient, be wholly secluded. For I had caught sight of two figures in the box, one of them a lady, and I shrank from being overheard. Moreover, I was not sure but that the composer might entertain his foes unawares. He said nothing, and led the way to the end of the corridor, through a door in the partition separating the auditorium from the stage, and into a small apartment furnished like a miniature drawing-room.

"Now, sir; at your service," he said, seating himself.

"M. Wagner," I responded, drawing a long and rather tremulous breath, "I am a stranger to you, but you have shown me so much kindness that I feel emboldened to take a great liberty and make a communication which ought truly to proceed from a friend."

"Indeed," he answered; "well, go on."

"I shall not ask you to take no offence, because I expect you to believe it is impossible that I should intend to give offence. M. Wagner, there is a [424] conspiracy to prevent the performance of "Tannhäuser."

"Ah, again," was his reply.

"Then you *have* heard of it." said I, not a little discomfited. "If you know all, it is useless for me to continue ; but I certainly thought it a duty—"

"Dear sir, I have heard of nothing else for a month. I have had more plots confided to me than would go to the making of a revolution."

"But I, pardon me, speak of only one plot, though a very formidable one,—a plot in which all Paris seems to be engaged."

"That is new, perhaps; but," he added with a perceptible change of tone, "I may possibly be speaking with a gentleman who can instruct me how to counteract this plot."

The satire was obvious, and disagreeable. That I could fall under any kind of suspicion was the last thing I had anticipated.

"I am not very conversant with French usages," I said, "and the intrigues of the Opéra are particularly foreign to me. I see that I have intruded, and I hope to be excused for it. I hope also, M. Wagner, that, before next month, somebody whom you can trust will undertake what I have now failed to accomplish." And I rose, more mortified and vexed than I would have

cared to show.

"Pray wait," said Wagner; "you have not intruded, and I am sorry if I pained you,—there! But, my young friend, when one has had a dozen combinations laid before him, accompanied by assurances that they can all be undermined and set at naught,—*for—a—consideration*,—one becomes—

"Suspicious, naturally," said I; "for which reason I again beg to be excused and to take my leave."

"Not before telling me what you had to say, I trust. Come, you will tell it to oblige me. I am sure it must be different from what I have heard before."

It struck me that he was by no means convinced as to the difference, and that he was in no stress of anxiety to listen; but he saw he had been inconsiderate and unjust, and was willing to make what amends he could. However, I recommenced, to the best of my ability, and endeavored to persuade him that the scheme in question did not aim at trifles like the corruption of a singer, or treachery in the orchestra, or disaffection in the chorus, which could be met and overcome, but was devised to render impossible the performance of his opera.

"But, the performance is going on, at this moment."

"Then I should say 'the production.' It is definitely determined, I am compelled to believe, that 'Tannhäuser' shall not be heard,—publicly heard—in Paris."

With all possible conciseness, I recited the testimony on which I based my conviction, omitting nothing which I thought would give weight to my conclusions, but producing, as I could not but perceive, no substantial impression upon the composer.

"You do not mean," he said, "that the director will close his doors?"

"Certainly not."

"Nor that the members of the company will absent themselves?"

"By no means."

"Nor that they will refuse to do their duty at the proper time?"

"Nothing of that kind."

"In that case, I do not yet see what shall prevent the representation."

"M. Wagner, the danger I apprehend is from without. The artists will sing, all will do their best,—at least while their courage lasts,—but still the opera will not be heard."

"And why not?"

"Because the noise of a thousand blackguards (*vauriens*) can always drown the sounds of two hundred musicians."

"You believe this will be attempted?"

"I am forced to believe it."

"It is incredible. There will be a demonstration, and a little clamor,—much clamor, perhaps. The boors will have their sport, but they will soon tire. Then they will listen, and then—"

He looked as if it was unreasonable to doubt their subjugation when once the witchery of his strains had touched their senses.

"At the worst," he continued, "they will be reduced to order by the will of [425] the majority. The intelligent will rise against the injustice of a prolonged interruption. You have seen them at these rehearsals. What attention! What appreciation! What cordiality!"

I discovered, now, that my efforts were hopeless. His pride was aroused, and it was not his sober judgment against which I was contending, but an indestructible confidence in the power and influence of his music. I was wasting his time and my own energies. But I ventured one more appeal. Would he not make inquiries, for himself—of the director, of some of the singers, whom I named?

"That would scarcely be becoming. Also, M. has said not a word to me; is it for me to introduce an element of distrust?"

Utterly disheartened, I turned away, without the strength to hide the distress I honestly felt.

"Do not be disturbed, my very good young friend," said Wagner; "believe me there is no cause for alarm. But I understand your motive *now*, and you have all my thanks for your sympathy. I wish you could be with us on the first night,—not to see your warning invalidated,—no, no; not for that,—but because I know you would rejoice in the success which I think we have a right to expect."

As he spoke, the idea of prolonging my stay in Paris so as to witness the important event, which I had already begun to think of, took a firm place in my mind. I had become more and more deeply interested, as was inevitable from the gradual increase of my knowledge of the circumstances, and my partial acquaintance with the author; and the extension of my visit for a few weeks seemed less impracticable than I had thought. But I said nothing of this to Wagner, having no inclination, in any event, to be under unnecessary obligations, and conceiving it to be very probable that he would offer me the ticket which, for this occasion, I could purchase like the rest of the public. I bade him adieu, with the declaration that nobody's wishes for a brilliant triumph could be more fervent than my own, and went my way, fretting at my utter inability to shake his ineffable confidence, and but slightly consoled by the consciousness that however startling the shock might be, it could not now take him wholly by surprise.

The production was promised at an early date in March, but was again postponed until near the middle of that month. During an interval of three weeks, I saw nothing of Wagner, and of course could not know whether he was left in ignorance to the end, or had accepted admonitions of greater weight than mine. The temper of the populace underwent no change, except in growing more uncompromising and intense. Instead of a theatrical tumult of the ordinary pattern, it was thought by many that the excitement would culminate in a riot.

I was early in my seat on the fated night, and watched attentively the gathering of the audience. It did not appear to differ in character from those I had seen at the rehearsals, though it was slower in arriving, and when the opening bars of the overture sounded, the house was only two-thirds filled. But the adverse element was undoubtedly in force from the beginning. The box habitually retained by the young furies of the Jockey Club, close upon the stage, at the left of the spectators, was crowded. In earlier years it had been known as "*la loge infernale*," and on this evening it proudly sustained the ancient character. The overture was passed by in silence, or at least with so few manifestations of disfavor as to cause no interruption. Before it was finished, the vacant spaces were all occupied, and the assemblage was ready for its work. The curtain rose, and, almost simultaneously with the first notes that followed, the assault began. Before the introductory scene was half through, the uproar had reached such a height that the actors upon the stage and the orchestra in front were alike inaudible except to those who sat nearest the proscenium. There was not even a pretence of waiting to form an opinion. The order of battle was laid out on a more destructive scale. "Tannhäuser" was not to be deliberately condemned; it was simply not to be endured. What qualities it possessed, lofty or degraded, noble [426] or vicious, the Parisians were not to learn. If any, by chance, desired to acquire that knowledge, it was the will of the majority that they should not do so. And thus the performance proceeded, or was supposed to proceed, revealing nothing but a succession of fine scenery and a mass of picturesque costume. While these passed in unintelligible show before the public eye, the public ear received only a continuous cacophony of shrieks, howls, shouts, and groans, diversified by imitations of wild beasts which would have blushed at the brutality of those who mimicked their cries, and stimulated incessantly by aristocratic ruffians in the conspicuous boxes, whose favorite instruments of offence were huge keys, by means of which they filled the air with hissing shrillness, like so many whistling devils. It was a pitiable business,—infinitely more disgraceful to those who actively participated than to any who suffered by it. Further details

would serve no good purpose. The chief incidents are recorded in French lyrical annals, but I imagine that those who once gloried in them would now be very willing to sink them in oblivion.

An interesting inquiry into the causes of the "scandal" appeared, soon after Wagner's death, in a leading American magazine, in the course of which it was intimated that the opera was so badly performed as to justify in some degree the angry violence of the audience. I do not think this charge can be seriously sustained, nor do I see, indeed, how any evidence in support of it could possibly be produced. I doubt if any individual ever was in a position to say whether "Tannhäuser" was well or ill interpreted, because not a bar of it could be heard. No living soul knew anything about it. At the rehearsals—at least those which I heard, and which were practically, though not nominally, public performances,—there was certainly no ground of complaint. And if the amateurs of the French metropolis attended in an honestly critical spirit, prepared to pronounce judgment with integrity, the question arises,—why did they carry with them those remarkably constructed door-keys, which, at that or any other period, constituted no portion of the personal adornment of the fashionable *gandin*? The truth is, that the work was foredoomed,—condemned to ignominy and outrage, because the composer was hated. The rancor was so pronounced that I believe the victim would have suffered bodily injury, as well as vicarious insult, if the wildest of the mob could have laid hands on him. I hardly ventured to look toward the box where I fancied he might be; though when I did turn in that direction, his face was not to be seen. Exactly where he passed that evening of torment I do not know, but it was my fortune to meet him once again, for the briefest moment and for the last time. After the curtain had finally fallen, I went out slowly with the crowd, and turned homeward, taking a course which led me by the large courtyard upon which the back of the theatre opened. As I waited, with a companion, to look at the brilliant toilettes of those privileged dames who were permitted to make a speedy and easy exit by this private way, I beheld the composer hastily crossing the area, toward the gate by which I stood. He opened the door of a vehicle in which a lady was already seated, but before entering, turned sharp around and held out his hand, which I took without speaking a word. Deeply agitated by indignation and compassion, I knew that my voice would fail me. He also was silent, but to my surprise, his countenance betrayed no strong emotion, nor was his expression perceptibly different from that which he had worn on the other occasions of our meeting. As well as I could observe, there was the same patient, engaging smile, with the air of partial abstraction which always conveyed the impression that his imagination was straying beyond or above the realities of the immediate hour. That was my farewell to Richard Wagner. In another moment he entered his carriage, and was driven rapidly away. How little I pretend to know of the man himself, those who have followed me in this reminiscence will understand; but as I recall his unchanging aspect and demeanor in the several interviews, the quiet graciousness and the serene composure which [427] governed his speech and action, even to the trying end, it would require stronger evidence than I have yet discovered, to persuade me that these, rather than a petulant irritability and a vainglorious intolerance, were not the most trustworthy and genuine manifestations of his real nature.





## Notes

### Note 1 on page 12

It may be proper to explain, for those unfamiliar with such details, that the music written for first violins is generally much more difficult than that assigned to the second, so that a transposition like the one alluded to might in most cases give offence. But in the overture in question, the difficulties are pretty well distributed, and the part of the second need not be considered unworthy of the best talent. Besides this, the superior importance of the first violin part commonly calls for a larger number of performers than is required for the second. The "Tannhäuser" score, however, demands a greater evenness of adjustment, all the violins having equally pronounced duties. It was this indispensable condition that the Parisian conductor had promptly recognized.