
Wagner's Parsifal

By Charles Dudley Warner



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Wagner's Parsifal

IT is the purpose of this paper to give the impression made by the performance of Parsifal at Baireuth, last summer, in view of certain strictures upon the motive of the drama, and without any attempt at musical criticism. In order to do this, I shall have to run over the leading features of the play, already given in the newspapers. Criticism enough, and of an unfavorable sort, there has been, though I heard none of it in Baireuth, nor ever any from those who had been present at the wonderful festival. Perhaps that was because I happened to meet only disciples of Wagner. I fancy that the professional critics, who did publish depreciating comments upon the new opera, and upon Wagner's methods in general, felt more inclined to that course after they had escaped from the powerful immediate impression of the performance, from the atmosphere of Baireuth, and begun to reflect upon the responsibilities of the special critics to the world at large, and what in particular was their duty towards the whole Wagner movement, assumption, presumption, or whatever it is called, than they did while they were surrounded by the influences that Wagner had skillfully brought to bear to effect his purpose on them.

I have read two kinds of criticism. One was written by musical adepts, who had not heard the opera, but who condemned it on perusal of the score and the libretto; declaring the latter to be sacrilegious, and the author to be a false prophet among musicians and a charlatan among managers. The other critics, who also set themselves against Wagnerism, described the performance in such terms that all Europe was more and more eager to see it, but compounded for their reluctant enjoyment by finding unworthy methods in a success they could not deny. Whatever the triumph was, they said it was not a pure musical triumph, but one due to the creation of special conditions and favoring circumstances. [76] Fancy Beethoven pushing his music into popular notice by such clap-trap means!

It was a great offense, in the first place, that Wagner should build his theatre in the inaccessible Franconian city,—a city with scant accommodations for visitors, and off the regular lines of travel. It was a still greater offense that, after all, he should be able to attract to this remote and provincial place pilgrims and strangers, not only from every country in Europe, but from America, Australia, and India; and that the theatre should be filled three nights in the week for three months by persons willing to incur the expense of a long, wearisome journey, and to pay thirty marks (seven dollars and a half) for a seat, at the end of it. A success of this sort could scarcely be legitimate. It must be due to some managerial legerdemain and to a misdirected enthusiasm.

Perhaps if we knew all the circumstances, the building of the theatre at Baireuth would not appear to be a whim of arbitrariness. Years ago, the king of Bavaria desired to erect a theatre in Munich, on the hill over the Iser. He was so bitterly opposed in the location of the building by the citizens of Munich that he abandoned the purpose, and began the construction of a play-house to suit himself, elsewhere. The new theatre would have been so well adapted to Wagner's purposes that it may be doubted if Wagner would have set up his standard at Baireuth, if the Munich project had been carried out.

Yet it must be owned that the quaint little city, which owes so much of its romantic interest to Frederick's sister, the Margravine, has advantages in its very remotenesses and primitive conditions. The reason why Wagner's operas are enjoyed in Munich, and fail to please in Paris, is not that they are better presented in Munich; nor is the comparative failure in Paris due to the character of the operas, but rather to the atmosphere of Paris and the character of the audiences. Parsifal is scarcely better adapted to the meridian and the operatic traditions of Paris than is the Ober-Ammergau Passion Play.

It is Wagner's well-known theory of the opera that it should be something other than a series of airs, sung by one or two or several persons to the audience, with spaces or wastes of musical declamation between; with an orchestra merely by way of accompaniment, and a background of scenery that would indifferently fit a dozen plays, and a plot incoherent and without any special purpose. Whether Wagner is successful or not in reducing his theories to practice is still in dispute; but he attempts a production which has purpose and unity, and which excludes everything not consistent with the effects he aims at. A story is to be told, a lesson is to be taught, an impression is to be produced on the hearer and spectator; and to this impression the orchestra, the scenery, and the singing are of almost equal importance. Nothing is admitted that does not forward the general purpose, and the unity of the story is not broken by special appeals to the audience. The effort is made to impress and stimulate the imagination, and to engage the attention in the work as a whole rather than in certain lyrical and melodic details. Wagner desires to move in his audiences sentiments, fervors, aspirations, in particular directions. Why is it charlatanism in him to prepare conditions favorable to his purpose. Why is it not legitimate that he should bring his audiences into such a state of mind, before the performance begins, that they are predisposed to enjoy the entertainment he offers. We know how much the appreciation of a poem depends upon the surroundings in which we read it or hear it. If Wagner has so contrived it that his audiences, arriving at the quiet and primitive city where he is almost [77] worshiped, regard themselves as pilgrims at a special festival, and are in a receptive state of mind before they enter the theatre; if the theatre itself and all the environments heighten this impression; and if, finally, the performance itself seems to them more like a spiritual drama than an opera, where is the charlatanism, even if it can be proved that the impression is largely due to the accessories of the music? If it is said that other great composers would not have resorted to such adventitious aids, I can only think that any composer would have liked to command the best conditions for the production of his compositions. It is of course possible that the crowds at Baireuth were victims of a delusion, and of skillful contrivance. I can answer for many of them that they would like to be deluded again in just that way.

When we arrived at the station in Baireuth, it was at once apparent that the town was *en fête*, and that its sole occupation was the Wagner festival. Our train, which had waited at the last junction to bring hundreds of passengers from the east, was an hour late; it was two o'clock in the afternoon, and the performance was to begin at four. The bustle at the station, the ubiquity of committee-men and town officials, the crowd of vehicles, of all the fashions of the present and the last century, the air of expectation and the excitement were evidence of the entire absorption of the town in the great event. An agricultural fair in a New England village, or a *Fiesta de Toros* in Spain, could not more stir a community into feverish and cheerful activity. If the arriving stranger, carpet-bag in hand, had not the freedom of the city, he had all the city to wait on him, answer his inquiries, and take interest in him as an intelligent and profitable pilgrim. We had secured our tickets by telegraph, and found them ready for us at the banker's. We had also applied to the burgomeister for accommodations for the night, and we found that a committee, in permanent session at the station, had already billeted our party at private houses, to which we were promptly dispatched. Everything was so perfectly systematized that the wayfaring man, though a Wagnerite, need not err therein, and our quarters turned out to be exceedingly comfortable, and given at moderate prices. All the private houses of the place appeared to be at the disposal of the committee, and offered without extortion. If the inhabitants were not all devoted to Wagner, they were devoted to his festival, and the master pervaded the town. The musical works of Richard Wagner were everywhere in sight, and in almost all the shop windows were photographs of Wagner, engravings of Wagner, busts of Wagner, statuettes of Wagner. The other chief objects for sale in the town were photographs of the characters in Parsifal. We liked the old town, at once for

its quaintness and single-mindedness, and we admitted that there is only one Baireuth, and Wagner is its prophet.

The pilgrim to the shrine of Wagner is treated like a pilgrim. He is expected to be willing to put his devotion to a further test, after reaching the remote town ; for the theatre is set on a hill, half a mile from the city, so that a carriage is needed for the majority of visitors, especially if the weather is rainy, as it was the day of our arrival, and as it was all last summer, four days out of five, in the German land. This hill places the spiritual drama one more remove from the bustle of the sinful world, and helps to isolate the performance from ordinary life. The theatre is an ungainly brick building, erected only with reference to the interior accommodations. The great bulk of the stage rises out of it in defiance of all architectural beauty. The auditorium is surrounded by an open corridor, from which there are entrances for every [78] three rows of seats. Each ticket indicates its entrance, so that the audience assembles and seats itself without confusion, and the house can be perfectly emptied in two minutes, without any danger of a rush or jam. The interior has been so often described that I need not enter into details. There are no proscenium boxes or side seats; the rows of chairs rise from the stage, spread out like a half-open fan, and at the back of the house are a row of private boxes; above them is a shallow gallery. Every part of the stage can be perfectly seen from every seat in the house. A low barrier rises before the front row of seats, separating the auditorium from the stage by a considerable space. In this sunken space, hidden completely from the audience, is the orchestra. The house is almost bare of decoration; only a cool gray color pervades, which is grateful to the senses. All the splendor is reserved for the stage, which is of immense proportions.

At four o'clock the fifteen hundred seats were filled, and a crowd of persons, said to be several hundred, occupied the standing-room in the rear. Most of the audience were standing, and the house was in a buzz of conversation and expectation. Suddenly, at the stroke of a stick behind the scenes, the audience seated itself; the doors were closed, excluding the light; the hall and the people were discernible only in an obscure twilight; a profound silence fell upon the house, indignantly enforced by a hissing "hushzz " directed at a careless whisperer; and at another signal the prelude began. The stillness was phenomenal, and so continued through the entire performance. I had an impression at the time that the audience was in a temper to lay violent hands on any one who should break the silence by any sound.

We sat in the luminous darkness, and the prelude began by the unseen orchestra. From the first note the music was striking; it portended something. It may have been because the players were concealed, but I seemed to hear not instruments, but music. And this music had a supernatural note, an unworldly, not to say a spiritual, suggestion. It rose and fell, more importunate than strident, in pleading, in warning, in entreaty. Whether it was good music or utterly impossible music I cannot say. owing to a constitutional and cultivated ignorance of musical composition; but it affected me now and again like the wind in a vast forest of pines on a summer day. It appealed to the imagination, it excited expectation, it begat an indefinable longing; and now and then a minor strain, full of sadness or of passion, suggested a theme, like the opening of a window into another world,—a theme which was to be renewed again and again in the drama, when it came to us like a reminiscence of some former life. When the prelude had been prolonged until the audience were brought up to the highest pitch of expectation, the great curtains were drawn aside, and the domain of the Knights of the Holy Grail, a peaceful, sunny land of forest, meadow, lake, and mountain, was disclosed.

The composer has made use of one of the earlier legends of the Grail, at the time when the cup was still in possession of the knights appointed to guard it. The cup which had been drained at the Passover feast and had received the holy blood at the cross was still safe; but the sacred spear, the spear of the cross, which the heavenly messenger had also committed to the knights, had been lost. It was in possession of Klingsor, a recreant knight, who inhabited

pagan land, and had by magic transformed a waste desert into wonderful gardens, and created an enchanted castle, inhabited by women of charms infernal, who lured the knights to wicked joys and pains eternal. One of the victims was Amfortas, the king [79] of the knights, who had yielded to the temptations of Kundry, the temptress and the Magdalen of the play, a witch, who was in the power of Klingsor, and forced to do his bidding. When Amfortas fell into the wiles of this bewildering beauty, in one of his expeditions into pagan land, he was overpowered in his weakness, lost the sacred spear, and received a grievous wound in the side. Of this wound of sin he now languished. All the medicines of the world could not heal it; only in one way, by a man without sin, could he be cured. Meantime the spear was lost, and so long as this all-conquering weapon remained in the possession of the enemy, the cup itself was in danger. Klingsor vaunted his purpose to seize it. Kundry, at the opening of the drama, is a sort of impish servant and messenger of the knights, a wild, untrained nature, touched with remorse, but unable to repent or to free herself from the power of Klingsor, and full of unrest and contradictory passions.

The domain of the knights is represented by a charming scene, simulating nature so closely that the leaves are seen to quiver on the forest trees. To the audience, looking at it across an empty space and from a darkened room, it has the delusion of a tableau; but the figures in it seem the real inhabitants of some remote land of myth. Gurnemanz, an aged knight, is attended by two esquires. They are lamenting the sickness and wound of Amfortas, and the danger to the Grail from the loss of the holy spear. To them enters the wild witch Kundry, fantastically clad in a savage garb, with a snake-skin girdle, having a swarthy complexion, piercing black eyes, and black hair flowing in tangled disorder. She comes from the end of the earth, riding on the devil's mare, though, for once, not on the devil's errand. Her self-appointed mission has been to seek some balm for the wounded king, the victim of her wiles. She brings to Gurnemanz a balsam from far Arabia, though well she knows that no balsam can touch his wound. At this moment Amfortas is borne in on a litter, on the way to his bath in the sacred spring, the only alleviation of his suffering. The crystal flask containing the balsam is given to him, and Kundry is bidden to approach. But the wild maid draws away, tortured by a conscience half awakened, and struggling with the wickedness of her unsubdued, animal nature; held by the enchantment of Klingsor, and unable even to repent, but impelled by a blind notion of merit in good deeds to render service to the knights; restless, sleepless, pursued by demons, longing in her fitful despair only to sleep, and to sleep forever,—a lost soul in pitiful helplessness of human succor.

This thrilling scene, interpreted by the wailing and sympathetic orchestra, is at its height, when an interruption occurs that strikes all with new horror. A swan flutters from over a lake, strives to fly further, and sinks to the ground, dying, pierced by an arrow. It is the sacred swan. Who has committed this sacrilege? The murderer appears, a strong, rude hunter, clad in skins, his bow in hand. He is proud of his feat. He is accustomed, in the wilderness, to shoot whatever flies. This is Parsifal, the man of absolute nature, without sin and without virtue, as ignorant as he is innocent. It is with difficulty that he comprehends what he has done, and he slowly understands the woe and horror of the company. As moral sense begins to dawn in his dark mind, he is seized with violent trembling, and falls half fainting. He breaks his bow and casts it from him. Kundry, at sight of him, is as strongly moved as he. On the return of the train of the king from the bath, Gurnemanz asks Parsifal to accompany him to the holy feast. If thou art pure, he says, surely it will feed and refresh thee. What is the Grail? asks Parsifal. The guide cannot [80] say, but knowledge is not hidden to those who are bid to serve it; yet to it no earthly road leads, and no one not elected can see it. Gurnemanz lays Parsifal's arm on his own neck, and, supporting him with one arm, leads him away.

The two appear to be walking slowly through the forest to the left, pausing here and there in weariness. In fact, the scenery itself is moving to the right. The country changes its

character. The forest becomes wilder and denser. The travelers make their way painfully, up steep and amid rocks and fallen trees. The way is still more rocky and wild. Dark caverns yawn, and the trees are more fantastically savage. The music, ever graver, and ever recurring to the minor sadness, expresses toil, and the weariness of the way, and the difficulty of seeking. For moments, behind some giant rock or cluster of trees, the two are lost to view, and appear again, the red cloak of the knight glowing amid the dark green. As the travelers move on, the scene still changes. Touches of the artificial are seen. The caverns and passages in the rock have been enlarged and worked by man's hand. Here is trace of an arch, of cut stone, of a wall buttress. We are passing into the depths of the mountain, by a way in which nature has plainly been assisted. There is a faint sound of chimes; the orchestra itself is on the impatient point of disclosing the secret; there is a second in which all is obscure, and then, in a burst of light, stands revealed a mighty hall, vast as a giant cathedral. The aisles stretch away in dim perspective; the arches are supported on lofty columns of jasper, of *verde antique*, of alabaster, of all precious marbles; and above is a noble dome, blue and luminous with golden stars. From the dome streams the light; from it floats down the faint and fainter peal of the chiming bells. Beneath the dome stands a long horseshoe curved table, with the ends towards the audience, leaving the centre of the stage free. In the middle of this open background is a high table, like an altar, with steps leading up to it, and behind it is a raised couch, with a canopy. Upon the communion table are set tall silver cups.

From the far distance in the aisle the knights, clad in robes of scarlet, enter in slow and stately procession, moving with reverence and dignity, and chanting as they approach the table and take their places; from the middle height of the hall come the responsive voices of younger knights; and then down from the very summit of the dome float boys' voices. So angels might hail the supper of our Lord, leaning over the gold bars of heaven. Immediately, from the other aisle, enters a procession of equal solemnity and splendor: the bearers of Amfortas on his litter, the servitors of the holy supper, and the angelic boys who carry and sustain, under its covering, the sacred cup. But for the intense solemnity of the scene, one must note the marvelous skill with which every detail of it, in form and color, has been composed. But it is only afterwards that we vividly recall this. The bearers of the cup are less earthly than Raphael's angels, from whom they may have been copied. And it never occurs to you that they are stage angels. The whole scene, so necessarily theatrical in description, does not impress the spectator so; the art of color and grouping is too perfect, the solemnity is too real. Amfortas is borne to the couch behind the altar. The holy vessel is deposited before him. The servitors attend with baskets of bread and tall silver flagons. At one side, near the entrance of the hall, stands Parsifal, clad in sheep-skin, as rigid as a stone, a mute and awe-struck spectator of the scene.

Amfortas, stricken with disease and sin, shrinks from performing the ordinance. At length, urged by the voices [81] from heaven, by the knights, and by the command of his aged father, he feebly rises. The boys uncover the golden shrine, and take out of it the cup of the Grail, an antique crystal cup. As Amfortas bows over it in silent prayer, a gloom spreads through the room; a ray of light shoots from above upon the cup, which begins to glow with a purple lustre. When Amfortas raises it and holds it high, it burns like a ruby,—it is the Holy Grail. In the dusk the knights are kneeling and worshiping it. When he sets it down the glow fades, the boys replace the cup in the shrine, and the natural light returns to the hall. The goblets are then seen to be filled with wine, and by each is a piece of bread. At intervals in the progress of the supper alternative voices of youths and boys from the heights chant in response to the solemn chorus of the knights, and finally down from the dome comes the benediction, "Blessed believing." During the repast, of which Amfortas has not partaken, he sinks from his momentary exaltation, the wound in his side opens afresh, and he cries out in agony. Hearing the cry, Parsifal clutches his heart, and seems to share his agony, but otherwise he stands

motionless. The supper over, Amfortas and the sacred shrine are borne away. The knights rise; and as they pass out, and meet, two and two, at the ends of the table, they tenderly embrace, with the kiss of peace and reconciliation, and slowly depart in the order in which they came. To the last Parsifal gazes in wonder; and when his guide comes to speak to him, he is so dazed that Gurnemanz, losing all patience at his unresponsive stupidity, pushes him out of the door, and spurns him for a fool. The curtains sweep together, and shut us out from the world that had come to seem to us more real than our own.

For a moment we sat in absolute silence, a stillness that had been unbroken during the whole performance. There was not a note of applause, not a sound. The impression was too profound for expression. We felt that we had been in the presence of a great spiritual reality. I have spoken of this as the impression of a scene. Of course it is understood that this would have been all an empty theatrical spectacle but for the music, which raised us to such heights of imagination and vision. For a moment or two, as I say, the audience sat in silence; many of them were in tears. Then the doors were opened; the light streamed in. We all arose, with no bustle and hardly a word spoken, and went out into the pleasant sunshine. It was almost a surprise to find that there was a light of common day. We walked upon the esplanade, and looked off upon the lovely view: upon the old town; upon the Sophienberg and the Volsbach forests in the Franconian Jura; upon the peaceful meadows and the hills, over which the breaking clouds were preparing a golden sunset. We did not care to talk much. The spell was not broken. How long, I asked a lady, do you think we were in there? An hour, nearly, she thought. We had been in the theatre nearly two hours. It was then six o'clock.

On the esplanade are two large and well-appointed restaurants, adjuncts to the theatre, and in a manner necessary to it. Wagner understands how much the emotional enjoyment and the intellectual appreciation depend upon the physical condition, and he has taken pains to guard his audiences against both hunger and weariness. During the half-hour interval that elapsed between the first and the second act, the guests were perfectly refreshed by a leisurely stroll in the open air, by the charming view, by the relaxation of their intense absorption, by a cup of coffee or a drop of amber and perhaps Wagnerian beer, or by a substantial supper. When the notes of a silver [82] trumpet summoned us back to our seats, we were in a mood to enjoy the play again with all the zest of the first hour.

The second act is of the earth, earthy, and less novel than the first to opera-goers, accustomed to spectacles, ballets, and the stage seductions of the senses. It is the temptation of Parsifal, who has begun his novitiate. The temptation is wholly of the senses and the passions. The scene is the magic castle and the enchanting gardens of the magician Klingsor,—a scene of entrancing but theatrical beauty. The magician is discovered seated in the dungeon keep of his tower, surrounded by the implements of magic. In the background is the mouth of a black pit. Casting something into it, he summons Kundry. A cloud of smoke arises from the pit, growing luminous and warming into rosy color; and suddenly from the chasm rises a most beautiful female form, enveloped in a gauzy tissue, and flushed with rosy light. It is Kundry, no longer in her aspect of witch, but surpassingly lovely; and yet as unhappy as lovely, and responding to the summons of her master with a cry and look of agony. She is bidden to undertake the temptation of Parsifal, who has been seen from the ramparts approaching the castle. She refuses. Her whole nature abhors the office. But yield she must to the power of the charm. Yield she must, and exercise all her power of fascination and seduction, though she knows that it is only by the resistance of her blandishments that salvation can be hers. She knows that only by meeting and being resisted by a sinless one can her own sin be cured, and yet she is forced to put forth all her efforts to secure her own ruin and his.

With a gesture of protest and despair, she vanishes as she came. The tower and the cavern sink away, and in place appear, filling all the vast stage, a tropical garden, and the battlements

and terraces of an Arabian castle. Parsifal stands upon the wall, looking down upon the scene in astonishment. From all sides, from the garden and the palace, rush in groups of lovely damsels, arranging themselves in haste, as if waked from sleep. Each one in her dress represents some flower. They are awaiting Parsifal, and as he descends they surround him, and envelop him, and distract him with their voluptuous charms. When their blandishments fail (although the music pleads in all sensuous excitement) to arouse in the pure youth anything more than perplexity and wonder, the maidens leave him in disgust, and with the appearance of the ravishingly beautiful Kundry the dangerous temptation begins.

Gorgeous as is the scene, and opulent as are the female charms of this second act, there is yet something of the cheap and common about it,—tawdry splendors, easily seen to be the stock gorgeousness and the painted temptations of the stage. This seemed to me an ethical mistake in the drama. Such a man as Parsifal should have been approached, to his ruin, with subtler and less gross allurements than these. At least, the guileless nature of Parsifal would have appeared to the audience in more danger of being seduced from his knighthood by the appeals of beauty to his pity, to his sympathy, for an innocent and simple maiden, beset by dangers, and coming to him for aid and comfort; approaching him through his higher qualities, and flattering him into forgetfulness of his mission in the names of virtue and compassionate love. The devil of modern society appears to understand these things better than the traditional devil whom Wagner consulted for this scene. The audience feels from the first that the open solicitations of Kundry must fail, and that Parsifal is in little danger, even when she bends over him and impresses upon his lips a kiss of a duration so long that the spectator is tempted to time it with his watch, like the passage through [83] a railway tunnel. From this embrace, at any rate, Parsifal starts up in intense terror, clasping his hand to his side, as if he felt the spear-wound of Amfortas. I need not detail the struggle and the passion that follow. Failing in this first appeal, the maiden, too late in his aroused suspicion, pleads for his love, in that it alone can save her; his love alone can redeem and pardon her. He resists also this more subtle temptation. "Eternally should I be damned with thee, if for an hour I forgot my holy mission." In rage at her final failure, when Parsifal spurns her as a detestable wretch, Kundry curses him, and calls for help. The damsels rush in. Klingsor appears upon the battlement, with the holy spear in his hand; he hurls it at Parsifal; but the spear remains floating above the latter's head. Parsifal grasps it with tremulous joy, waves it, and makes with it the sign of the cross. Instantly the enchantment is broken: down tumble towers and castle walls; the garden vanishes; the leaves and branches of the trees strew the earth; the damsels lie on the ground like shriveled flowers; and Kundry falls insensible, and lies amid the ruins and the waste of the original desert.

In the background rises a path up a sunny slope to a snow mountain. Purity and nature have taken the place of the baleful enchantment. Parsifal turns from the top of the broken wall, over which he disappears, to look upon the ruin as the curtain closes.

When the act ended, the audience, still under the spell of the music, which had at the end risen out of its soft and siren strains into a burst of triumph and virile exaltation, sat, as before, silent for a moment. Then it rose *en masse*, and turned to the high box in the rear, where, concealed behind his friends, Wagner sat, and hailed him with a long tempest of applause.. The act had lasted less than an hour. It was followed by an intermission of three quarters of an hour, which gave the audience time for supper, and for the refreshment of a stroll and the soothing effects of the charming view in the fading sunlight.

In the third and last act we return to the high themes of the first; the touching minor strains of the prelude recur again and again, soothing the spirit agitated by the period of storm and stress. The conflict is over. We have passed through the regions of tumult and passion; we have escaped out of the hot-house air of temptation. Penitence is possible, and through suffering peace is dawning with forgiveness in the torn and troubled heart. The orchestra

declares it, and the scene upon which the curtain rises is the sweet and restful domain of the Grail in the spring-time of the year. On the edge of the forest, built against a rock, is a hermitage; a spring is near it, and beyond stretch flowery meadows. It is the dawn of day, the sky reddening before the coming of the sun, when Gurnemanz, now extremely aged and feeble, emerges from the hut. Attracted by moaning in the thicket, he moves aside the branches, and discovers Kundry, cold and stiff, lying in the hedge of thorns, which is little better than her grave. He drags forth the nearly lifeless form, bears her to a mound, chafes her hands and temples, calls her back to life with the news that the winter has fled and the spring has come. Slowly the maiden revives, gazes at him in wonder, and then adjusts her dress and hair, and without a word goes like a serving-maid to her work.

To Kundry has come a wonderful transformation. The wildness has gone from her mien and from her eyes; into her face has come the soft, indescribable light of penitence, and a transcendent spiritual beauty. She is no longer the fiery witch, full of disordered passion, contempt, and impish malevolence; she is no longer the houri of the enchanted garden, with the charms of the siren and the bewildering allurements of [84] Venus Aphrodite. Clad in the simple brown garb of the penitent Magdalen, subdued and humble, every movement and gesture and her sad, lovely face proclaim inward purity and longing for forgiveness. When Gurnemanz upbraids her for her silence and thanklessness for her rescue from deathly slumber, she bows her head, as she moves towards the hut, and in a broken voice murmurs, "Service, service!"—her only exclamation in all the act.

Kundry comes from the hut, and goes towards the spring with her water-pot. Looking into the wood, she sees someone approaching, and calls Gurnemanz's attention to the comer. A knight, in complete black armor, weary and worn, bruised with conflict and dusty with travel, slowly and feebly draws near, with closed helmet and lowered spear. It is Parsifal. Gurnemanz, who does not recognize him, hails him with friendly greeting. Parsifal only shakes his head. To all inquiries he is silent, and he is still speechless when Gurnemanz asks him if he does not know what holy day has dawned; that it is the hallowed Good-Friday' morn, when he should doff his armor, and trouble no more the Master who has died for us.

After an interval, in which the music of the orchestra pleads as for a lost world, Parsifal rises, thrusts his spear into the ground, places against it his great shield and sword, unbraces and removes his helmet, and then, kneeling, raises his eyes in silent prayer towards the spear's head. Gurnemanz beckons to Kundry, who had gone within the hut. Do you not know him? Kundry assents with a nod. Surely, 't is he,—the fool whom I drove in anger from the hall of the knights. In great emotion Gurnemanz recognizes the holy spear. Kundry turns away her sad and longing face. After his devotions are ended, Parsifal rises, and, gazing calmly around, recognizes Gurnemanz, and knows where he is. The murmur of this forest, falling on his tired senses, gives him hope that he has come to the end of his journey of error and suffering. He has sought the path that would lead him to the wounded Amfortas, to whose healing he believed himself ordained; but hitherto that path has been denied him, and he has wandered at random, driven by a curse, through countless distresses and battles,—wounded in every fight, since he was not fit to use the holy spear which he bore, undefiled, by his side. The ancient knight assures him that he has come to the Grail's domain, where the knightly band awaits him, with great need of the blessing he brings. Amfortas is still struggling with the tortures of his wound; the shrine of the Holy Grail has long remained shrouded; the Holy Supper is no longer celebrated; the strength of the knights is withered, for want of this holy bread; and summoned no more to holy warfare in far countries, they wander pale, dejected, and lacking a leader; and Titurel, the old commander, to whom was first committed the cup and the spear, the father of Amfortas, hopeless of ever beholding again the refulgence of the Grail, has just expired.

Parsifal hears this with intense anguish, and laments that he has brought all this woe, since

some heinous guilt must still cling to him that no atonement or expiation can banish, and that he who was selected to save men must wander undirected, and miss the path of safety. He is about to fall, when Gurnemanz supports him, and seats him on a grassy knoll. Kundry, in anxious haste, brings a basin of water; but Gurnemanz waves her off, saying that only the pilgrim's bath can wash away his stains; and they turn him about to the edge of the spring. While Gurnemanz takes off his corselet and the rest of his heavy armor, Kundry, kneeling, removes the greaves from his legs, and bathes his feet in the healing spring. The armor removed, Parsifal appears clad in a soft [85] white tunic, with a cord about the waist, and his long, light hair, in wavy masses, flows back upon his neck. There is no mistaking the likeness, in this meek and noble face and figure. Shall I straight be guided to Amfortas? asks Parsifal, wearily. Surely, says Gurnemanz, we go at once to the obsequies of the beloved chief. The Grail will be again uncovered, and the long-neglected office be performed. As the knight speaks, Parsifal observes, with wonder, Kundry humbly washing his feet, and gazes on her with a tender compassion. Taking water in the hollow of his hand, Gurnemanz sprinkles his head. Blessed be thou, pure one. Care and sin are driven from thee! Kundry, from a golden flask, pours oil upon Parsifal's feet, and dries them with the long tresses of her black hair, which she has unbound for the purpose. Then Parsifal takes from her the flask, and desires Gurnemanz to anoint his head; for he is that day to be appointed king. Gurnemanz, pouring the oil, declares him their king, and the rescuer from sin. And thus I fulfill my duty, murmurs Parsifal, as he, unperceived, scoops water from the spring, and, stooping to the kneeling and heart-broken Kundry, sprinkles her head. "Be thou baptized, and trust in the Redeemer." Kundry bows her head to the earth, and weeps uncontrollably. As Parsifal raises both hands, the fingers of one extended in blessing, we recognize the figure and very attitude of our Lord in that famous old painting, where he is seated, blessing little children. The Magdalen, shaken with penitence, and yet weeping for joy, is cast at his feet. The aged knight stands in solemn rapture. The scene is inexpressibly touching. The music is full of pathos and solemn sympathy.

How fair the fields and meadows seem to-day! exclaims Parsifal, gazing with gentle enjoyment upon the landscape. This is Good-Friday's spell, my lord! exclaims Gurnemanz. The sad, repentant tears of sinners have besprinkled field and plain with holy dew, and made them glow with beauty. As Gurnemanz discourses of the redemption of man and nature, the transformed Kundry slowly raises her head, and gazes with moist eyes and beseeching look, out of which all earthly passion has completely gone, up to Parsifal. Thou weepst. See! the landscape gloweth, he gently says, and, stooping, softly kisses her brow. Who would recognize in the pure, sweet, spiritual face of this forgiven sinner the temptress of the gardens? I know not how this whole scene may appear in the coldness of description, but I believe that there was no one who witnessed it, and heard the strains of melting music which interpreted it, who was not moved to the depths of his better nature, or for a moment thought that the drama passed the limits of propriety.

The pealing of distant bells is heard growing louder. Gurnemanz brings a coat of mail and the mantle of the Knights of the Holy Grail, with which Parsifal is invested. The landscape changes. The wood gradually disappears, as the three march on in silence; and when they are hidden behind the rocky entrances of the caverns, processions of mourning knights appear in the arched passages. The bells peal ever louder, and soon the great hall is disclosed. From one side the knights bear in the bier of Titurel, and from the other the litter of Amfortas, preceded by the attendants with the covered shrine of the Grail. The effects of color and grouping are marvelous; and to eyes familiar with the sacred paintings of the masters, almost every figure and dress is a reminiscence of some dear association. The angelic loveliness of the bearers of the shrine, however, surpasses any picture, as much as life transcends any counterfeit of it.

At the sight of the body of Titurel there is a cry of distress, in which Amfortas [86] joins;

and the knights press upon the latter, urging him to uncover the shrine and do his office. With a cry of despair he disengages himself, tears open his mantle and discloses the wound, and invokes the knights to bury their swords in his breast, and kill at one stroke the sinner and his pain. At this moment, Parsifal, who has entered, with his attendants, unperceived, starts forward, and, stretching out his spear point, touches the wounded side. Only the weapon that struck can staunch thy wounded side. Amfortas, who feels himself instantly healed, can scarcely support himself, for joyful rapture. As Parsifal raises high the spear, the shining point is red as blood, and the whole assembly, falling upon their knees, adore it. Parsifal assumes the king ship, takes his place behind the altar, and commands the cup of the Grail to be uncovered. Taking it in his hand, and raising it on high, the crystal burns again like a ruby; from the dome a white dove descends, and hovers over him ; Kundry—peace at last, stricken soul—falls dying; the knights are gazing upward in rapture; and out of the heights come down soft and hardly audible voices in a chant of benediction.

It was nine o'clock when we went out into the still lingering twilight. I, for one, did not feel that I had assisted at an opera, but rather that I had witnessed some sacred drama, perhaps a modern miracle play. There were many things in the performance that separated it by a whole world from the opera, as it is usually understood. The drama had a noble theme; there was unity of purpose throughout, and unity in the orchestra, the singing, and the scenery. There were no digressions, no personal excursions of singers, exhibiting themselves and their voices, to destroy the illusion. The orchestra was a part of the story, and not a mere accompaniment. The players never played, the singers never sang, to the audience. There was not a solo, duet, or any concerted piece "for effect." No performer came down to the foot-lights and appealed to the audience, expecting an encore. No applause was given, no encores were asked, no singer turned to the spectators. There was no connection or communication between the stage and the audience. Yet I doubt if singers in any opera ever made a more profound impression, or received more real applause. They were satisfied that they were producing the effect intended. And the composer must have been content when he saw the audience so take his design as to pay his creation the homage of rapt appreciation due to a great work of art.

Charles Dudley Warner.