

**GUERBER
HÉLÈNE
ADELINE**

STORIES OF THE WAGNER
OPERA

Hélène Guerber
Stories of the Wagner Opera

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=36363038

Stories of the Wagner Opera:

Содержание

RIENZI, THE LAST OF THE TRIBUNES	5
THE FLYING DUTCHMAN	18
TANNHÄUSER	31
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	43

H. A. Guerber

Stories of the Wagner Opera

PREFACE

These short sketches, which can be read in a few moments' time, are intended to give the reader as clear as possible an outline of the great dramatist-composer's work.

The author is deeply indebted to Professor G.T. Dippold, to Messrs. Forman, Jackman, and Corder, and to the Oliver Ditson Company, for the poetical quotations scattered throughout the text.

RIENZI, THE LAST OF THE TRIBUNES

Wagner was greatly troubled in the beginning of his career about the choice of subjects for his operas. His first famous work, 'Rienzi,' is founded upon the same historical basis as Bulwer's novel bearing the same name, and is a tragic opera in five acts. The composer wrote the poem and the first two acts of the score in 1838, during his residence at Riga, and from there carried it with him to Boulogne. There he had an interview with Meyerbeer, after his memorable sea journey. Wagner submitted his libretto and the score for the first acts to that famous composer, who is reported to have said, 'Rienzi is the best opera-book extant,' and who gave him introductions to musical directors and publishers in Paris. In spite of this encouraging verdict on Meyerbeer's part, Wagner soon discovered that there was no chance of success for 'Rienzi' in France, and, after completing the score while dwelling at Meudon, he forwarded it in 1841 to Dresden. Here the opera found friends in the tenor Tichatscheck and the chorus-master Fisher, and when it was produced in 1842 it was received with great enthusiasm. The opera, which gave ample opportunity for great scenic display, was so long, however, that the first representation lasted from six o'clock to midnight. But when Wagner would fain have

made excisions, the artists themselves strenuously opposed him, and preferred to give the opera in two successive evenings. At the third representation Wagner himself conducted with such success that 'he was the hero of the day.' This great triumph was reviewed with envy by the admirers of the Italian school of music, and some critics went so far in their partisanship as to denounce the score as 'blatant, and at times almost vulgar.' Notwithstanding these adverse criticisms, the opera continued to be played with much success at Dresden, and was produced at Berlin some years later, and at Vienna in 1871.

As Wagner's subsequent efforts have greatly surpassed this first work, 'Rienzi' is not often played, and has seldom been produced in America, I believe owing principally to its great length. The scene of 'Rienzi' is laid entirely in the streets and Capitol of Rome, in the middle of the fourteenth century, when the city was rendered unsafe by the constant dissensions and brawls among the noble families. Foremost among these conflicting elements were the rival houses of Colonna and Orsini, and, as in those days each nobleman kept an armed retinue within a fortified enclosure in town, he soon became a despot. Fearing no one, consulting only his own pleasure and convenience, he daily sallied forth to plunder, kidnap, and murder at his will. Such being the state of affairs, the streets daily flowed with blood; the merchants no longer dared open their shops and expose their wares lest they should be summarily carried away, and young and pretty women scarcely dared venture out of their houses even at

noonday, lest they should be seen and carried away by noblemen.

Terrified by the lawlessness of the barons, whom he could no longer control, the Pope left Rome and took refuge at Avignon, leaving the ancient city a helpless prey to the various political factions which were engaged in continual strife. This state of affairs was so heart-rending that Rienzi, an unusually clever man of the people and an enthusiast, resolved to try and rouse the old patriotic spirit in the breast of the degenerate Romans, and to induce them to rise up against their oppressors and shake off their hated yoke.

Naturally a scholar and a dreamer, Rienzi would probably never have seen the necessity of such a thing, or ventured to attempt it, had he not seen his own little brother wantonly slain during one of the usual frays between the Orsini and Colonna factions. The murderer, a scion of the Colonna family, considered the matter as so trivial that he never even condescended to excuse himself, or to offer any redress to the injured parties, thus filling Rienzi's heart with a bitter hatred against all the patrician race. Secretly and in silence the young enthusiast matured his revolutionary plans, winning many adherents by his irresistible eloquence, and patiently bided his time until a suitable opportunity occurred to rally his partisans, openly defy the all-powerful barons, and restore the old freedom and prosperity to Rome.

The opera opens at nightfall, with one of the scenes so common in those days, an attempt on the part of the Orsini

to carry off by force a beautiful girl from the presumably safe shelter of her own home. The street is silent and deserted, the armed band steal noiselessly along, place their scaling ladder under the fair one's casement, and the head of the Orsini, climbing up, seizes her and tries to carry her off in spite of her frantic cries and entreaties.

The noise attracts the attention of Adrian, heir of the Colonna family, and when he perceives that the would-be kidnappers wear the arms and livery of the Orsini, his hereditary foes, he seizes with joyful alacrity the opportunity to fight, and pounces upon them with all his escort. A confused street skirmish ensues, in the course of which Adrian rescues the beautiful maiden, whom he recognises as Irene, Rienzi's only sister. Attracted by the brawl, the people crowd around the combatants, cheering and deriding them with discordant cries, and becoming so excited that they refuse to disperse when the Pope's Legate appears and timidly implores them to keep the peace.

The tumult has reached a climax when Rienzi suddenly comes upon the scene, and authoritatively reminds his adherents that they have sworn to respect the law and the Church, and bids them withdraw. His words, received with enthusiastic cries of approbation by the people, are, however, scorned by the barons, who would fain continue the strife, but are forced to desist. Anxious to renew hostilities as soon as possible, and to decide the question of supremacy by the force of arms, the irate noblemen then and there appoint a time and place for a general encounter

outside the city gates on the morrow, when they reluctantly disperse.

The appointment has been overheard by Rienzi, who, urged by the Legate of the Pope and by the clamours of the people to strike a decisive blow, decides to close the gates upon the nobles on the morrow, and to allow none to re-enter the city until they have taken a solemn oath to keep the peace and respect the law. In an impassioned discourse Rienzi then urges the people to uphold him now that the decisive moment has come, and to rally promptly around him at the sound of his trumpet, which will peal forth on the morrow to proclaim the freedom of Rome.

When they have all gone in obedience to his command, the Tribune, for such is the dignity which the people have conferred upon their champion Rienzi, turns toward the girl, the innocent cause of all the uproar, and perceives for the first time that it is his own sister Irene. Adrian is bending anxiously over her fainting form; but as soon as she recovers her senses she hastens to inform her brother that he saved her from Orsini's shameful attempt, and bespeaks his fervent thanks for her young protector.

It is then only that the Tribune realises that a Colonna, one of his bitterest foes, and one of the most influential among the hated barons, has overheard his instructions to his adherents, and can defeat his most secret and long cherished plans. Suddenly, however, he remembers that in youth he and Adrian often played together, and, counting upon the young nobleman's deep sense of honour, which he had frequently tested in the past, he

passionately adjures him to show himself a true Roman and help him to save his unhappy country. Irene fervently joins in this appeal, and such is the influence of her beauty and distress that Adrian, who is very patriotic and who has long wished to see the city resume its former splendour, gladly consents to lend his aid.

This oath of allegiance received, Rienzi, whom matters of state call elsewhere, asks Adrian to remain in his house during his absence, to protect his sister against a renewal of the evening's outrage. Adrian joyfully accepts this charge, and the lovers, for they have been such from the very first glance exchanged, remain alone together and unite in a touching duet of faith and love, whose beautiful, peaceful strains contrast oddly with the preceding discordant strife. In spite of his transport at finding his affections returned, and in the very midst of his rapturous joy at embracing his beloved, Adrian, tortured by premonitory fears, warns Irene that her brother is far too sanguine of success, and that his hopes will surely be deceived. He also declares that he fears lest the proverbially fickle people may waver in their promised allegiance, and lest Rienzi may be the victim of the cruel barons whom he has now openly defied. The lovers' conversation is interrupted at sunrise by the ringing of the Capitol bell, proclaiming that the revolution has begun, and the triumphant chorus of priests and people is heard without, bidding all the Romans rejoice as their freedom is now assured. Riding ahead of the procession, Rienzi slowly passes by in the glittering armour and array of a Tribune, and from time to time pauses

to address the crowd, telling them that the ancient city is once more free, and that he, as chief magistrate, will severely punish any and every infringement of the law. At the news of this welcome proclamation the enthusiasm of the people reaches such an exalted pitch that they all loudly swear to obey their Tribune implicitly, and loyally help him to uphold the might and dignity of the Holy City:—

‘We swear to thee that great and free
Our Rome shall be as once of yore;
To protect it from tyranny
We'll shed the last drop of our gore.
Shame and destruction now we vow
To all the enemies of Rome;
A new free people are we now,
And we'll defend our hearth and home.’

The scene of the second act is laid in the Capitol, where the barons, who had been forced to take the oath of allegiance ere they were allowed to re-enter the city, are present, as well as the numerous emissaries from foreign courts. Heralds and messengers from all parts of the land crowd eagerly around the Tribune, anxious to do him homage, and to assure him that, thanks to his decrees, order and peace are now restored.

Amid the general silence the heralds make their reports, declaring that the roads are safe, all brigandage suppressed, commerce and agriculture more flourishing than ever before,

a statement which Rienzi and the people receive with every demonstration of great joy. To the barons, however, these are very unwelcome tidings, and, knowing that the people could soon be cowed were they only deprived of their powerful leader, they gather together in one corner of the hall and plot how to put Rienzi to death.

Adrian accidentally discovers this conspiracy, and indignantly remonstrates with the barons, threatening even to denounce them, since they are about to break their word and resort to such dishonourable means. But his own father, Colonna, is one of the instigators of the conspiracy, and he dares him to carry out his threat, which would only result in branding him as a parricide. Then, without waiting to hear his son's decision, the old baron, accompanied by the other conspirators, joins Rienzi on the balcony, whence he has just addressed the assembled people. They have been listening to his last proposal, that the Romans should shake off the galling yoke of the German Empire and make their city a republic once more, and now loud and enthusiastic acclamations rend the air.

The speech ended, Adrian, stealing softly behind the Tribune, bids him be on the watch as treachery is lurking near. He has scarcely ended his warning and slipped away ere the conspirators suddenly surround the Tribune, and there, in the presence of the assembled people, they simultaneously draw their daggers, and strike him repeatedly. This dastardly attempt at murder utterly fails, however, as the Tribune wears a corselet of mail beneath

the robes of state, and his guards quickly disarm and secure the conspirators while the people loudly clamour for their execution by the axe, a burly blacksmith, Cecco, acting as their principal spokesman.

Rienzi, who is principally incensed by their attack upon Roman liberties, and by their utter lack of faith, is about to yield to their demand, when Irene and Adrian suddenly fall at his feet, imploring the pardon of the condemned, and entreating him to show mercy rather than justice. Once more Rienzi addresses the people, but it requires all his persuasive eloquence to induce them, at last, to forgive the barons' attempt. Then the culprits are summoned into the Tribune's august presence, where, instead of being executed as they fully expect, they are pardoned and set free, after they have once more solemnly pledged themselves to respect the new government and its chosen representatives. This promise is wrung from them by the force of circumstances; they have no intention of keeping it, and they are no sooner released than they utter dark threats of revenge, which fill the people's hearts with ominous fear, and make them regret the clemency they have just shown.

The next act is played on one of the public squares of Rome, where the people are tumultuously assembled to discuss the secret flight of the barons. They have fled from the city during the night, and, in spite of their recently renewed oaths, are even now preparing to re-enter the city with fire and sword, and to resume their former supremacy. In frantic terror, the people call

upon Rienzi to deliver them, declaring that, had he only been firm and executed the nobles, Rome would now have no need to fear their wrath. Adrian, coming upon the spot as they march off toward the Capitol, anxiously deliberates what course he shall pursue, and bitterly reviles fate, which forces him either to bear arms against his own father and kin, or to turn traitor and slay the Tribune, the brother of his fair beloved. While he thus soliloquises in his despair, Rienzi appears on horseback, escorted by the Roman troops, all loudly chanting a battle song, of which the constant refrain is the Tribune's rallying cry, 'Santo Spirito Cavaliere!' They are on their way to the city gates, where the assembled forces of the barons await them, and Adrian, in a last frantic attempt to prevent bloodshed, throws himself in front of Rienzi's horse, imploring the Tribune to allow him to try once more to conciliate the rebel nobles. But Rienzi utterly refuses to yield again to his entreaties, and marches calmly on, accompanied by the people chanting the last verse of their solemn war-song.

The fourth act is played in front of the Lateran church. The battle has taken place. The barons have been repulsed at the cost of great slaughter. But notwithstanding their losses and the death of their leader, the elder Colonna, the nobles have not relinquished all hope of success. What they failed to secure by the force of arms, they now hope to win by intrigue, for they have artfully won not only the Pope, but the Emperor also, to uphold their cause and side with them. The people, who have just

learned that the Pope and Emperor have recalled their legates and ambassadors, are awed and frightened. Baroncelli and Cecco, two demagogues, seize this occasion to poison their fickle minds, and blame Rienzi openly for all that has occurred. Their specious reasoning that the Tribune must be very wicked indeed, since the spiritual and temporal authorities alike disapprove of him, is strengthened by the sudden appearance of Adrian, who, wild with grief at his father's death, publicly declares he has vowed to slay the Tribune. The people—who, lacking the strength to uphold their convictions, now hate their leader as vehemently as they once loved and admired him—are about to join Adrian in his passionate cry of 'Down with Rienzi!' when the cardinal and his train suddenly appear, and march into the church, where a grand 'Te Deum' is to be sung to celebrate the victory over the barons.

While the Romans are wavering, and wondering whether they have not made a mistake, and whether the Pope really disapproves of their chief magistrate, Rienzi marches toward the church, accompanied by Irene and his body guard. Adrian, at the sight of his pale beloved, has no longer the courage to execute his purpose and slay her only brother. Just as they are about to enter the church, where they expect to hear the joyful strains of thanksgiving, the cardinal appears at the church door, barring their entrance, and solemnly pronounces the Church's anathema upon the horror-struck Rienzi.

The people all start back and withdraw from him as from one

accursed, while Adrian, seizing Irene's hand, seeks to lead her away from her brother. But the brave girl resists her lover's offers and entreaties, and, clinging closely to the unhappy Tribune, she declares she will never forsake him, while he vows he will never relinquish his hope that Rome may eventually recover her wonted freedom, and again shake off the tyrant's yoke.

The fifth and last act is begun in the Capitol, where Rienzi, the enthusiast, is wrapped in prayer, and forgetting himself entirely, fervently implores Divine protection for his misguided people and unhappy city. He has scarcely ended this beautiful prayer when Irene joins him, and, when he once more beseeches her to leave him, she declares she will never forsake him, even though by clinging to him she must renounce her love,—a passion which he has never known. At this declaration, Rienzi in a passionate outburst tells how deeply he has loved and still loves his mistress, Rome, fallen and degraded though she may be. He loves her, although she has broken faith with him, has turned to listen to the blandishments of another, and basely deserted him at the time of his utmost need.

Irene, touched by his grief, bids him not give way to despair, but adjures him to make a last attempt to regain his old ascendancy over the minds of the fickle people. As he leaves her to follow her advice, Adrian enters the hall, wildly imploring her to escape while there is yet time, for the infuriated Romans are coming, not only to slay Rienzi, but to burn down the Capitol which has sheltered him.

As she utterly refuses to listen to his entreaties, he vainly seeks to drag her away. It is only when the lurid light of the devouring flames illumines the hall, and when she sinks unconscious to the floor, that he can bear her away from a place fraught with so much danger for them all. Rienzi, in the mean while, has stepped out on the balcony, whence he has made repeated but futile attempts to address the mob. Baroncelli and Cecco, fearing lest he should yet succeed in turning the tide by his marvellous eloquence, drown his voice by discordant cries, fling stones which fall all around his motionless figure like hail, and clamour for more fuel to burn down the Capitol, which they have sworn shall be his funeral pyre. Calmly now Rienzi contemplates their fury and his unavoidable death, and solemnly predicts that they will regret their precipitancy, as the Capitol falls into ruins over the noble head of the Last of the Tribunes.

THE FLYING DUTCHMAN

After leaving Riga, where he had accepted the position of Music Director, which he filled acceptably for some time, Wagner went to Pillau, where he embarked on a sailing vessel bound for London. He was accompanied by his wife and by a huge Newfoundland dog, and during this journey learned to know the sea, and became familiar with the sound of the sailors' songs, the creaking of the rigging, the whistling of the wind, and the roar and crash of the waves. This journey made a deep impression upon his imagination. He had read Heine's version of the legend of the Flying Dutchman, and questioned the sailors, who told him many similar yarns. He himself subsequently said: 'I shall never forget that voyage; it lasted three weeks and a half, and was rich in disasters. Three times we suffered from the effects of heavy storms. The passage through the Narrows made a wondrous impression on my fancy. The legend of the Flying Dutchman was confirmed by the sailors, and the circumstances gave it a distinct and characteristic colour in my mind.'

One year later, when in Paris, Wagner submitted detailed sketches for this work to the Director of the Opera, to whom Meyerbeer had introduced him. The sketches were accepted, and shortly after the Director expressed a wish to purchase them. Wagner utterly refused at first to give up his claim to the plot, which he had secured from Heine; but, finding that he could

not obtain possession of the sketches, which had already been given to Foucher for versification, he accepted the miserable sum of £20, which was all that was offered in compensation. The stolen opera was produced in Paris under the title of 'Le Vaisseau Fantôme,' in 1842, but it was never very successful, and has been entirely eclipsed by Wagner's version. Wagner had not, however, relinquished the idea of writing an opera upon this theme, and he finished the poem, which Spohr has designated as 'a little masterpiece,' as quickly as possible. The score was written at Meudon, near Paris, and completed, with the exception of the overture, in the short space of seven weeks. When offered in Munich and Leipsic the critics pronounced it 'unfit for Germany,' but, upon Meyerbeer's recommendation, it was accepted at Berlin, although no preparations were made for its immediate representation.

'The Flying Dutchman' was first brought out at Dresden in 1843, four years after the idea of this work had first suggested itself to the illustrious composer, who conducted the orchestra in person, while Madame Schröder-Devrient sang the part of Senta. The audience did not receive it very enthusiastically, and, while some of the hearers were deeply moved, the majority were simply astonished. No one at first seemed to appreciate the opera at its full value except Spohr, who in connection with it wrote: 'Der Fliegende Holländer interests me in the highest degree. The opera is imaginative, of noble invention, well written for the voices, immensely difficult, rather overdone as regards

instrumentation, but full of novel effects; at the theatre it is sure to prove clear and intelligible.... I have come to the conclusion that among composers for the stage, *pro tem.*, Wagner is the most gifted.'

The legend upon which the whole opera is based is that a Dutch captain once tried to double the Cape of Good Hope in the teeth of a gale, swearing he would accomplish his purpose even if he had to plough the main forever. This rash oath was overheard by Satan, who condemned him to sail until the Judgment Day, unless he could find a woman who would love him faithfully until death. Once in every seven years only did the Devil allow the Dutchman to land, in search of the maiden who might effect his release.

In the first act of the opera, the seven years have just ended, and Daland, a Norwegian captain, has been forced by a tempest to anchor his vessel in a sheltered bay within a few miles of his peaceful home, where Senta, his only daughter, awaits him. All on board are sleeping, and the steersman alone keeps watch over the anchored vessel, singing of the maiden he loves and of the gifts he is bringing her from foreign lands. In the midst of his song, the Flying Dutchman's black-masted vessel with its red sails enters the cove, and casts anchor beside the Norwegian ship, although no one seems aware of its approach.

The Dutchman, who has not noticed the vessel at anchor so near him, springs eagerly ashore, breathing a sigh of relief at being allowed to land once more, although he has but little hope

of finding the faithful woman who alone can release him from his frightful doom:—

‘The term is past,
And once again are ended the seven long years!
The weary sea casts me upon the land.
Ha! haughty ocean,
A little while, and thou again wilt bear me.
Though thou art changeful,
Unchanging is my doom;
Release, which on the land I seek for,
Never shall I meet with.’

The unhappy wanderer then tells how he has braved the dangers of every sea, sought death on every rock, challenged every pirate, and how vain all his efforts have been to find the death which always eludes him.

Daland, waking from his sound slumbers, suddenly perceives the anchored vessel, and chides the drowsy steersman, who has not warned him of its approach. He is about to signal to the ship to ascertain its name, when he suddenly perceives the Dutchman, whom he questions concerning his home and destination.

The Dutchman answers his questions very briefly, and, upon hearing that Daland's home is very near, eagerly offers untold wealth for permission to linger a few hours by his fireside, and to taste the joys of home.

Amazed at the sight of the treasures spread out before him,

Daland not only consents to show hospitality to this strange homeless guest, but even promises, after a little persuasion, to allow him to woo and to win, if he can, the affections of his only daughter, Senta:—

‘I give thee here my word.
I mourn thy lot. As thou art bountiful,
Thou showest me thy good and noble heart.
My son I wish thou wert;
And were thy wealth not half as great,
I would not choose another.’

Transported with joy at the mere prospect of winning the love which may compass his salvation, the Flying Dutchman proclaims in song his mingled rapture and relief, and while he sings the storm clouds break, and the sun again shines forth over the mysteriously calmed sea. The opportunity is immediately seized by the Norwegian captain, who, bidding the Dutchman follow him closely, bids the sailors raise the anchor, and sails out of the little harbour to the merry accompaniment of a nautical chorus:—

‘Through thunder and storm from distant seas,
My maiden, come I near;
Over towering waves, with southern breeze,
My maiden, am I here.
My maiden, were there no south wind,
I never could come to thee:

O fair south wind, to me be kind!
My maiden, she longs for me.
Hoho! Halloho!

The next scene represents a room in Daland's house. The rough walls are covered with maps and charts, and on the farther partition there is a striking portrait of a pale, melancholy looking man, who wears a dark beard and a foreign dress.

The air is resonant with the continual hum of the whirling spinning-wheels, for the maidens are all working diligently under the direction of Maria, the housekeeper, and soon begin their usual spinning chorus. Their hands and feet work busily while two verses of the song are sung, and all are remarkably diligent except Senta, who sits with her hands in her lap, gazing in rapt attention at the portrait of the Flying Dutchman, whose mournful fate has touched her tender heart, and whose haunting eyes have made her indulge in many a long day-dream. Roused from her abstraction by the chiding voice of Mary, and by her companions, who twit her with having fallen in love with a shadow instead of thinking only of her lover Erik, the hunter, Senta resumes her work, and to still their chatter sings them the ballad of the Flying Dutchman. When she has described his aimless wanderings and his mournful doom, which naught can change until he finds a maiden who will pledge him her entire faith, the girls mockingly interrupt her to inquire whether she would have the courage to love an outcast and to follow a spectral wooer. But when Senta

passionately declares she would do it gladly, and ends by fervently praying that he may soon appear to put her love and faith to the test, they are almost as much alarmed as Erik, who enters the room in time to hear this enthusiastic outburst.

Turning to Mary, the housekeeper, he informs her that Daland's ship has just sailed into the harbour in company with another vessel, whose captain and crew he doubtless means to entertain. At these tidings the wheels are all set aside, and the maidens hasten to help prepare the food for the customary feast. Senta alone remains seated by her wheel, and Erik, placing himself beside her, implores her not to leave him for another, but to put an end to his sorrows by promising to become his wife. His eloquent pleading has no effect upon her, however, and when he tries to deride her fancy for the pictured face, and to awaken her pity for him by describing his own sufferings, she scornfully compares them to the Dutchman's unhappy fate:—

‘Oh, vaunt it not!

What can thy sorrow be?

Know'st thou the fate of that unhappy man?

Look, canst thou feel the pain, the grief,

With which his gaze on me he bends?

Ah! when I think he has ne'er found relief,

How sharp a pang my bosom rends!’

Erik, beside himself with jealousy, finally tells her that he has had an ominous dream, in which he saw her greet the

dark stranger, embrace him tenderly, and even follow him out to sea, where she was lost. But all this pleading only makes Senta more obstinate in her refusal of his attentions, and more eager to behold the object of her romantic attachment, who at that very moment enters the house, following her father, who greets her tenderly. The sudden apparition of the stranger, whose resemblance to the portrait is very striking, robs Senta of all composure, and it is only when her father has gently reproved her for her cold behaviour that she bids him welcome.

Daland then explains to his daughter that his guest is a wanderer and an exile, although well provided with this world's goods, and asks her whether she would be willing to listen to his wooing, and would consent to ratify his conditional promise by giving the stranger her hand:—

‘Wilt thou, my child, accord our guest a friendly welcome,
And wilt thou also let him share thy kindly heart?
Give him thy hand, for bridegroom it is thine to call him,
If thou but give consent, to-morrow his thou art.’

Wholly uninfluenced by the description of the stranger's wealth which her father gives her, but entirely won by the Flying Dutchman's timidly expressed hope that she will not refuse him the blessing he has so long and so vainly sought, Senta hesitates no longer, but generously promises to become his wife, whatever fate may await her:—

‘Whoe'er thou art, where'er thy curse may lead thee,
And me, when I thy lot mine own have made,—
Whate'er the fate which I with thee may share in,
My father's will by me shall be obeyed.’

This promise at first fills the heart of the Flying Dutchman with the utmost rapture, for he is thinking only of himself, and of his release from the curse, but soon he begins to love the innocent maiden through whom alone he can find rest. Then he also remembers that, if she fail, she too will be accursed, and, instead of urging her as before, he now tries to dissuade her from becoming his wife by depicting life at his side in the most unenticing colours, and by warning her that she must die if her faith should waver. Senta, undeterred by all these statements, and eager if necessary to sacrifice herself for her beloved, again offers to follow him, and once more a rapturous thrill passes through his heart:—

‘Senta

Here is my hand! I will not rue,
But e'en to death will I be true.

The Dutchman

She gives her hand! I conquer you,
Dread powers of Hell, while she is true.'

Daland returns into the room in time to see that they have agreed to marry, and proposes that their wedding should take place immediately, and be celebrated at the same time as the feast which he generally gives all his sailors at the end of a happy journey.

The third act of this opera represents both ships riding at anchor in a rocky bay, near which rises Daland's picturesque Norwegian cottage. All is life and animation on board the Norwegian vessel, where the sailors are dancing and singing in chorus, but the black-masted ship appears deserted, and is as quiet as the tomb.

When the sailors have ended their chorus, the pretty peasant girls come trooping down to the shore, bringing food and drink for both crews, which they hail from the shore. The Norwegian sailors promptly respond to their call, and, hastening ashore, they receive their share of the feast; but the phantom vessel remains as lifeless as before. In vain the girls offer the provisions they have brought, in vain the other crew taunt the sleepers, there is no answer given. The provisions are then all bestowed upon the

Norwegians, who eat and drink most heartily ere they resume their merry chorus. Suddenly, however, the Dutch sailors rouse themselves, appear on deck, and prepare to depart, while singing about their captain, who has once more gone ashore in search of the faithful wife who alone can save him. Blue flames hover over the phantom ship, and the sound of a coming storm is borne upon the breeze. The Norwegian sailors sing louder than ever to drown this ominous sound, but they are soon too alarmed to sing, and hasten into their cabins making the sign of the cross, which evokes a burst of demoniac laughter from the phantom crew.

The storm and lights subside as quickly and mysteriously as they appeared, and all is quiet once more as Senta comes down to the shore. Erik, meeting her, implores her to listen to his wooing, which once found favour, and to forget the stranger whom her father has induced her to accept on such short notice. Senta listens patiently to his plea, which does not in the least shake her faith in her new lover, or change her resolution to live and die for him alone. But the Dutchman, appearing suddenly, mistakes her patience for regret, and, almost frantic with love and despair, he bids her a passionate farewell and rushes off toward his ship.

‘To sea! To sea till time is ended!
Thy sacred promise be forgot,
Thy sacred promise and my fate!
Farewell! I wish not to destroy thee!’

But Senta has not ceased to love him. She runs after him,

imploping him to remain with her, protesting her fidelity and renewing her vows in spite of Erik's passionate efforts to prevent her from doing so. The Flying Dutchman at first refuses to listen to her words, and rapidly gives his orders for departure. She is about to embark, when he suddenly turns toward her and declares that he is accursed, and that she has saved herself, by timely withdrawal, from the doom which awaits all those who fail to keep their troth:—

‘Now hear, and learn the fate from which thou wilt be saved:
Condemned am I to bear a frightful fortune,—
Ten times would death appear a brighter lot.
A woman's hand alone the curse can lighten,
If she will love me, and till death be true.
Still to be faithful thou hast vowed,
Yet has not God thy promise?
This rescues thee; for know, unhappy, what a fate is theirs
Who break the troth which they to me have plighted:
Endless damnation is their doom!
Victims untold have fallen 'neath this curse through me.
Yet, Senta, thou shalt escape.
Farewell! All hope is fled forevermore.’

But Senta has known from the very beginning who this dark wooer was, and is so intent upon saving him from his fate that she fears no danger for herself. Passionately she clings to him, protesting her affection, and when he looses her, and Erik would fain detain her by force, she struggles frantically to follow him.

Erik's cry brings Daland, Mary, and the Chorus to the rescue, and they too strive to restrain Senta, when they hear the stranger proclaim from the deck of his phantom ship that he is the Scourge of the Sea,—the Flying Dutchman. The vessel sails away from the harbour. Senta escapes from her friends, and rushes to a projecting cliff, whence she casts herself recklessly into the seething waves, intent only upon showing her love and saving him, and thereby proving herself faithful unto death:—

‘Praise thou thine angel for what he saith;
Here stand I, faithful, yea, till death!’

As Senta sinks beneath the waves the phantom vessel vanishes also, and as the storm abates and the rosy evening clouds appear in the west the transfigured forms of Senta and the Flying Dutchman hover for a moment over the wreck, and, rising slowly, float upward and out of sight, embracing each other, for her faithful love has indeed accomplished his salvation, and his spirit, may now be at rest.

TANNHÄUSER

In 1829, when Wagner was only sixteen years of age, he first became acquainted, through Hoffmann's novels, with the story of the mastersingers of Nürnberg, and with the mediæval legend of Tannhäuser, as versified by Ludwig Tieck. The 'mystical coquetry and frivolous catholicism' of this modern poem repelled him, and it was not until twelve years later, when he chanced upon a popular version of the same story, that he was struck by its dramatic possibilities. A chance mention of the Sängerkrieg of the Wartburg in this version made him trace the legend as far back as possible, and in doing so he came across an old poem of Lohengrin, and read Eschenbach's 'Titurel' and 'Parzival,' which were to serve as basis for two other great operas. The sketch of the opera of 'Tannhäuser' was completed in 1842, at Teplitz, during an excursion in the Bohemian mountains; but the whole score was not finished until three years later. Wagner had gone over it all so carefully that it was printed without much revision, and he had even written the piano score, which was sent to Berlin in 1845 and appeared in the same year that the opera was produced at Dresden.

Madame Schröder-Devrient, whom Wagner had in his mind in writing the part of Venus, sang that rôle, but, in spite of all her talent, the first performance was not a success. She wrote to Wagner concerning it, and said, 'You are a man of genius,

but you write such eccentric stuff it is hardly possible to sing it.' The public in general, accustomed to light operas with happy endings, was dismayed at the sad and tragical termination, and, while some of the best musical authorities of the day applauded, others criticised the work unsparingly. Schumann alone seems to have realised the force of the author's new style, for he wrote, 'On the whole, Wagner may become of great importance and significance to the stage,'—a doubtful prediction which was only triumphantly verified many years afterward. Like many of the mediæval legends, the story of Tannhäuser is connected with the ancient Teutonic religion, which declared that Holda, the Northern Venus, had set up her enchanted abode in the hollow mountain known as the Hørselberg, where she entertained her devotees with all the pleasures of love. When the missionaries came preaching Christianity, they diligently taught the people that all these heathen divinities were demons, and although Holda and her court were not forgotten, she became a type of sensual love. Tannhäuser, a minstrel of note, who has won many prizes for his songs, hearing of the wondrous underground palace and of its manifold charm, voluntarily enters the mountain, and abandons himself to the fair goddess's wiles. Here he spends a whole year in her company, surrounded by her train of loves and nymphs, yielding to all her enchantments, which at first intoxicate his poetic and beauty loving soul.

But at last the sensual pleasures in which he has been steeped begin to pall upon his jaded senses. He longs to tear himself away

from the enchantress, and to return to the mingled pleasure and pain of earth.

The first scene of the opera represents the charmed grotto where Venus gently seeks to beguile the discontented knight, while nymphs, loves, bacchantes, and lovers whirl about in the graceful mazes of the dance, or pose in charming attitudes. Seeing Tannhäuser's abstraction and evident sadness, Venus artfully questions him, and when he confesses his homesickness, and his intense longing to revisit the earth, she again tries to dazzle him, and cast a glamour over all his senses, so as to make him utterly oblivious of all but her.

Temporarily intoxicated by her charms, Tannhäuser, when called upon to tune his lyre, bursts forth into a song extolling her beauty and fascination; but even before the lay is ended the longing to depart again seizes him, and he passionately entreats her to release him from her thrall:—

‘Tis freedom I must win or die,—
For freedom I can all defy;
To strife or glory forth I go,
Come life or death, come joy or woe,
No more in bondage will I sigh!
O queen, beloved goddess, let me fly!’

Thus adjured, and seeing her power is temporarily ended, Venus haughtily dismisses her slave, warning him that he returns to earth in vain, as he has forfeited all chance of salvation by

lingering with her, and bidding him return without fear when the intolerance of man has made him weary of life upon earth.

A sudden change of scene occurs. At a sign from Venus, the grotto and its voluptuous figures disappear; the roseate light makes way for the glaring sunshine, and Tannhäuser, who has not moved, suddenly finds himself upon the hillside, near the highroad and the shrine of the Virgin, and within sight of the Wartburg castle, where he formerly dwelt and won many a prize for his beautiful songs. The summer silence is at first broken only by the soft notes of a shepherd singing a popular ballad about Holda, the Northern Venus, who issues yearly from the mountain to herald the spring, but as he ceases a band of pilgrims slowly comes into view. These holy wanderers are all clad in penitential robes, and, as they slowly wend their way down the hill and past the shrine, they chant a psalm praying for the forgiveness of their sins. The shepherd calls to them asking them to pray for him in Rome, and, as they pass out of sight, still singing, Tannhäuser, overcome with remorse for his misspent years, sinks down on his knees before the Virgin's shrine, humbly imploring forgiveness for his sins:—

‘Oh, see my heart by grief oppressed!
I faint, I sink beneath the burden!
Nor will I cease, nor will I rest,
Till heavenly mercy grants me pardon.’

While he is still kneeling there, absorbed in prayer, the

Landgrave and his minstrel knights appear in hunting costume. Their attention is attracted by the bowed figure of the knight, and when he raises his head they recognise him as their former companion. Some of the minstrels, jealous of his past triumphs, would fain regard him as their foe, but, influenced by one of their number, Wolfram von Eschenbach, they welcome him kindly and ask him where he has been. Tannhäuser, only partly roused from his half lethargic state, dreamily answers that he has long been tarrying in a land where he found neither peace nor rest, and in answer to their invitation to join them in the Wartburg declares he cannot stay, but must wander on forever. Wolfram, seeing him about to depart once more, then reminds him of Elizabeth, the fair chatelaine of the Wartburg, and when he sees that, although Tannhäuser trembles at the mere sound of the name of the maiden he once loved, he will nevertheless depart, he asks and obtains the Landgrave's permission to reveal a long kept secret.

Wolfram himself has long loved the fair Elizabeth, but such is his unselfish devotion that he would fain see her happy even with a rival. To win the light back to her eyes and the smile to her lips, he now tells Tannhäuser how she has drooped ever since he went away, and generously confesses that she took pleasure in his music only, and has persistently avoided the minstrel hall since his departure. His eloquent pleading touches Tannhäuser's reawakening heart, and he finally consents to accompany the Landgrave and his minstrels back to the Wartburg. Hither they

now make their way on foot and on horseback, singing a triumphal chorus:—

‘He doth return, no more to wander;
Our loved and lost is ours again.
All praise and thanks to those we render
Who could persuade, and not in vain.
Now let your harps indite a measure
Of all that hero's hand may dare,
Of all that poet's heart can pleasure,
Before the fairest of the fair.’

The second act is played in the great hall of the Wartburg castle, which is festively decorated, for the minstrels are again to contend for the prize of song, a laurel wreath which will again be bestowed as of yore by the fair hands of the beloved Princess Elizabeth. As the curtain rises she is alone in the hall, no longer pale and wan, but radiant with happiness, for she knows that Tannhäuser, her lover, has returned, and she momentarily expects him to appear. While she is greeting the well known hall, the scene of her lover's former triumphs, with a rapturous little outburst of song, the door suddenly opens and Wolfram appears, leading the penitent Tannhäuser, who rushes forward and falls at Elizabeth's feet, while his friend discreetly withdraws. Elizabeth would fain raise the knight, telling him it is unbecoming for him to assume so humble an attitude beneath the roof where he has triumphed over all rivals, and she tenderly asks where he has

lingered so long. Tannhäuser, ashamed of the past, and absorbed in the present, declares that he has been far away, in the land of oblivion, where he has forgotten all save her alone:—

‘Far away in strange and distant regions,
And between yesterday and to-day oblivion's veil hath fallen.
Every remembrance hath forever vanished,
Save one thing only, rising from the darkness,—
That I then dared not hope I should behold thee,
Nor ever raise mine eyes to thy perfection.’

Elizabeth is so happy to see him once more, so ready to forgive him at the very first word of repentance, that Tannhäuser cannot but see how dearly she loves him, and they soon unite in a duet of complete bliss, rejoicing openly over their reunion, and vowing to love each other forever, and never to part again.

The Landgrave appears just as their song is ended, to congratulate Elizabeth upon having at last left her seclusion and honoured the minstrels with her presence. In conclusion, he declares that, as all the contestants know she will be there to bestow the prize, the rivalry will be greater than ever. He is interrupted in this speech, however, by the entrance of knights and nobles, who file in singing a chorus in praise of the noble hall, and of Hermann, Landgrave of Thuringia, the patron of song, whom they repeatedly cheer. When they have all taken their appointed places, the Landgrave, rising in his seat, addresses them, bidding them welcome, reminding them of the high aims

of their art, and telling them that, while the theme he is about to propose for their lays is love, the princess herself will bestow as prize whatever the winner may ask:—

‘Therefore hear now the theme you all shall sing.
Say, what is love? by what signs shall we know it?
This be your theme. Whoso most nobly this can tell,
Him shall the princess give the prize.
He may demand the fairest guerdon:
I vouch that whatsoever he ask is granted.
Up, then, arouse ye! sing, O gallant minstrels!
Attune your harps to love. Great is the prize,’

At the summons of the heralds, Wolfram von Eschenbach first takes up the strain, and as for him love is an ardent desire to see the loved one happy, a longing to sacrifice himself if need be, and an attitude of worshipful devotion, he naturally sings an exalted strain. It finds favour with all his hearers,—with all except Tannhäuser, who, having tasted of the passionate joys of unholy love, cannot understand the purity of Wolfram's lay, which he stigmatises as cold and unsatisfactory.

In his turn, he now attunes his harp to love, and sings a voluptuous strain, which not only contrasts oddly with Wolfram's performance, but shows love merely as a passion, a gratification of the senses. The minstrels, jealous for their art, indignantly interrupt him, and one even challenges Tannhäuser to mortal combat:—

'To mortal combat I defy thee!
Shameless blasphemer, draw thy sword!
As brother henceforth we deny thee:
Thy words profane too long we've heard!
If I of love divine have spoken,
Its glorious spell shall be unbroken
Strength'ning in valour, sword and heart,
Altho' from life this hour I part.
For womanhood and noble honour
Through death and danger I would go;
But for the cheap delights that won thee
I scorn them as worth not one blow!'

This minstrel's sentiments are loudly echoed by all the knights present, who, having been trained in the school of chivalry, have an exalted conception of love, hold all women in high honour, and deeply resent the attempt just made to degrade them. Tannhäuser, whose once pure and noble nature has been perverted and degraded by the year spent with Venus, cannot longer understand the exalted pleasures of true love, even though he has just won the heart of a peerless and spotless maiden, and when Wolfram, hoping to allay the strife, again resumes his former strain, he impatiently interrupts him.

Recklessly now, and entirely wrapped up in the recollection of the unholy pleasures of the past, Tannhäuser exalts the goddess of Love, with whom he has revelled in bliss, and boldly reveals

the fact that he has been tarrying with her in her subterranean grove.

This confession fills the hearts of all present with nameless terror, for the priests have taught them that the heathen deities are demons disguised. The minstrels one and all fall upon Tannhäuser, who is saved from immediate death at their hands only by the prompt intervention of Elizabeth.

Broken-hearted, for now she knows the utter unworthiness of the man to whom she has given her heart, yet loving him still and hoping he may in time win forgiveness for his sin, she pleads so eloquently for him that all fall back. The Landgrave, addressing him, then solemnly bids him repent, and join the pilgrims on their way to Rome, where perchance the Pope may grant him absolution for his sin:—

‘One path alone can save thee from perdition,
From everlasting woe,—by earth abandon'd,
One way is left: that way thou now shalt know.
A band of pilgrims now assembled
From every part of my domain;
This morn the elders went before them,
The rest yet in the vale remain.
'Tis not for crimes like thine they tremble,
And leave their country, friends and home,—
Desire for heav'nly grace is o'er them:
They seek the sacred shrine at Rome.’

Urged to depart by the Landgrave, knights, nobles, and even by the pale and sorrowful Elizabeth, Tannhäuser eagerly acquiesces, for now that the sudden spell of sensuous love has departed, he ardently longs to free his soul from the burden of sin. The pilgrims' chant again falls upon his ear, and, sobered and repentant, Tannhäuser joins them to journey on foot to Rome, kneeling at every shrine by the way, and devoutly praying for the forgiveness and ultimate absolution of his sins.

When the curtain rises upon the third and last act of this opera, one whole year has slowly passed, during which no tidings of the pilgrims have been received. It is now time for their return, and they are daily expected by their friends, who have ardently been praying that they may come home, shrived and happy, to spend the remainder of their lives at home in peace. No one has prayed as fervently as the fair Elizabeth, who, forgetting her wonted splendour, has daily wended her way down the hillside, to kneel on the rude stones in front of the Virgin's wayside shrine. There she has daily prayed for Tannhäuser's happy return, and there she kneels absorbed in prayer when Wolfram comes down the path as usual. He has not forgotten his love for her, which is as deep and self-sacrificing as ever, so he too prays that her lover may soon return from Rome, entirely absolved, and wipe away her constant tears. Elizabeth is suddenly roused from her devotions by the distant chant of the returning pilgrims. They sing of sins forgiven, and of the peace won by their long, painful journey to Rome. Singing thus they slowly file past Wolfram and Elizabeth,

who eagerly scan every face in search of one whom they cannot discover.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.