

So he prays, and writes poems. I decide that I would like to know him better, then wonder—would I?

IN THIS palace atmosphere, favorites come and go, and Rao probably has his enemies. One can only guess at the legerdemain, the skillful balancing of one force against another, by which a man, once in the saddle, succeeds in staying there. And in parenthesis I ask myself how to explain Rao's liking for me. I recall Usha's remark: "Our Indian men think it great feather in cap to be seen with white women!" I feel there is something more complex and profound, something of which I have become increasingly conscious since my return to the country. I feel in these Indians a kind of emotional starvation which cannot be due to a mere lack of sexual opportunity. One suspects that it springs from a frustration due to the social inequality of the sexes, from a distortion of the human equation and a consequent chronic ennui.

Dinner over, we say good-night to Nair, and Rao drives me home to Usha's flat. He is suddenly, inexplicably gay, even mischievous. "Tell me," he asks, "you think I am very wicked, isn't it?"

"I know you are," I answer, and he gives a delighted laugh. "Yes, I am very wicked and very pro-woman."

We sit for a moment in the parked car beside the curb. The shop windows along the arcade are shut and the iron grilles drawn against their windows. A solitary tonga rattles past us in the rain and the bull that had blocked my path earlier in the evening suddenly appears and strolls majestically across the street into the shelter of the farther arcade.

ISAY good-night to Rao, then climb the stairs to the flat and turn the key in that cumbersome lock and let myself in with a great sense of relief. As I expected, there is Usha curled up on the sofa, a tumbled bundle of muslin and brown peeping feet. "I was worried," she tells me, and stretches, jingling her bangles. "I am always worried when it is late and you or Lekha do not come home."

(This is the first of a series of articles on India by Miss Weston.)

Mr. Bing And the 'Ring'

PAUL HENRY LANG

WHEN Rudolf Bing took over in 1950 as top executive at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, a manager of rather unusual qualities took the helm of America's premier lyric theater. He was neither a stony-faced autocrat like Giulio Gatti-Casazza, who ran a court opera for millionaires, nor a singer turned opera director like Edward Johnson—who gently steered the establishment by relying on its momentum. Mr. Bing is an amiable and culti-



vated Viennese gentleman who likes music and the theater and eventually joined the business.

This does not imply amateurism; Mr. Bing acquired a good deal of experience in responsible managerial posts in Europe. It does, however, imply a certain idealism and personal taste not commonly found in managers. Since he is a great devotee of Italian opera in general and of Verdi in particular, it was not surprising that heavy German fare like Wagner was not to his liking, and he has never made any bones about the fact.

Economics, Logistics, Heft

Nor was Mr. Bing's dislike of Wagner merely the caprice of a fastidious Viennese; for the past couple of generations the world has been tiring of the German musical messiah. It took

a Flagstad to fill the Met with paying customers for *The Ring of the Nibelung*.

Wagner is an expensive composer. The orchestra of the *Ring* is enormous, necessitating extra musicians. To mention a few examples, eight French horns are called for instead of the usual four, and even the harp is doubled. And because in these phenomenal scores the orchestra is heavily engaged from beginning to end, they call for more rehearsals than other works.

Wagnerian singers themselves are a special breed, and as a rule they sing little else. Most of them must be imported, sometimes for just a couple of appearances—a very costly form of operatic logistics. Sets, costumes, and everything else being on a heroic scale, there is no end to expense. Take the arsenal, for instance. In other operas there are plenty of military figures to be equipped, but in Wagner the women likewise must be provided with weapons.

HOWEVER, economic and other reasons aside, it appeared that today's public could not find rapport with this utterly Germanic musical theater. For instance, it was always taken for granted that both men and women performers had to be large and hefty in order to withstand the fury of the eloquent Wagnerian orchestra for five hours per performance. When lovers meet in, say, *Tristan und Isolde*, the bench on which they sit in the second-act duet sags and groans. We no longer like to see such heavyweights on the stage, no matter how well they sing. But above all, it was the Wagnerian arrangement of the northern saga and its deadly tempo that became dated.

The *Ring* is a story compared to which Balzac's family chronicles are mere curtain raisers. It takes nearly twenty hours to bring the

Ring to its conclusion, and all the while the listener must put up with the most involved symbolism, a dramaturgy that is almost painfully naïve yet ponderous, and a language that would break the jaw of anybody but a specially trained German singer. No one in the Wagnerian drama acts like a natural human being (except, of course, in *Die Meistersinger*, which is a special case and for that reason has never lost its appeal).

Dramatic conflict is brought about by love potions and other artificial means. Siegfried, the hero, is incorruptible. Therefore, in order to turn his head, the covetous Gutrune slips him a spiked drink which works so well that the couple immediately retire to Gutrune's chambers. Later on, this treachery has to be undone—otherwise the story would get stuck. Nothing simpler: Siegfried takes another draught laced with a reverse-action herb, and now Gutrune becomes a wallflower while the noble German youth hotfoots it after Brünnhilde.

Arrowproof Girdles, Ugly Gods

The women are really dangerous. Aside from their penchant for drugging their beloveds, they are armed and know how to use their weapons. In fact, if any one wants to make love to them, first the lances, shields, and helmets must be taken away from them, their chargers tied up, and their arrowproof girdles loosened. Even so, as a rule they don't want to do anything so silly. By and by the operagoer discovers that the Wagnerian maidens—and not only the armored ones—just like to burn in a sort of long-distance ecstasy. None of them gets her man (always excepting Eva in *Die Meistersinger*), and none of the men ever gets past first base.

The gods stationed in Valhalla are just as incredible. They are the worst characters in mythology, constantly on the lookout for some profitable double crossing. Their relationship to each other and to the semiterrestrial creatures with whom they get involved is very nebulous. This is, of course, standard operating procedure in mythology, but in the genuine article it usually assumes a poetic touch. Wagner's quarreling gods are mean, ugly, and rapacious. Even the chief of Valhalla, Wotan, is anything but celestial, and the nobility he may assume depends on the artistry of his interpreters.

Back in Fashion?

A generation or two ago, Wagner was a cult. His librettos were discussed as belonging to the highest spheres of German literature, not only in German universities but at Columbia University and the Sorbonne. A corollary to this worship was the severe downgrading of "ordinary" opera. Italian opera was for barbers and governesses, Mozart for juveniles. On Good Friday, *Parsifal* took precedence over the Passion according to St. Matthew. All this has now changed. Wagner as the dramatic poet and philosopher is no longer taken very seriously, while Mozart and Verdi are recognized as incomparable masters of opera.

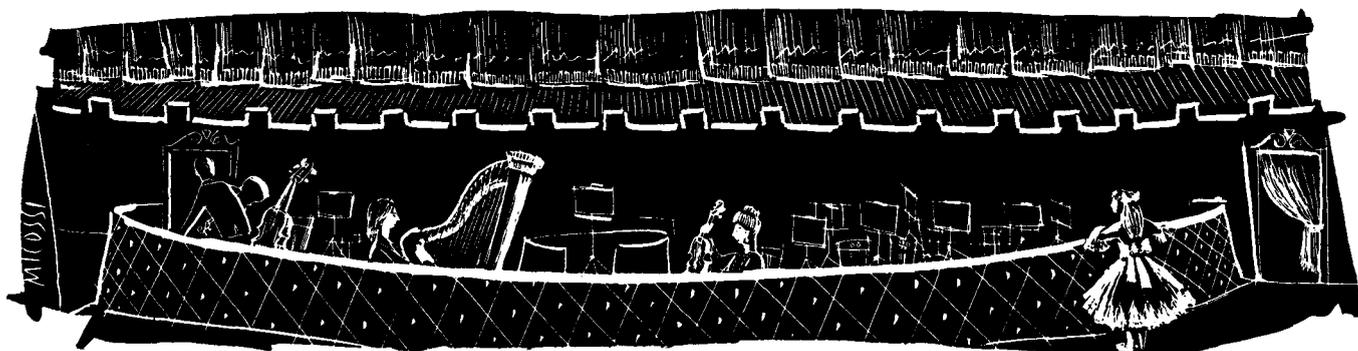
Now comes Mr. Bing with a *Ring* cycle, in fact with two, usually the maximum number in previous seasons at the Met. What prompted him to present the *Ring* after a pause of six years, and in the face of proven coolness to the music dramas when occasionally presented singly, I do not know, but since he is an intelligent and knowledgeable man he must have realized that a

first-class opera house cannot afford to ignore the Wagnerian operas altogether, whatever may be the customers' attitude toward them.

AND WHAT happened? The eight performances were sold out, and another four—a third cycle is being added—are rapidly being sold out too. Although the performing artists are visibly less ponderous in point of shape and size, in all other respects the cycle is presented in the old romantic production and with the old familiar stage sets. Could it be that the critics of Wagner were wrong after all and that the defenders of the faith are as numerous as ever?

The explanation is not hard to find. It is, of course, the music. We may criticize the silly, dramatized mythology, the unlovable maidens, and the ungodly gods; we may loathe the man who stole his best friend's wife and corrupted an insane king. But we cannot brush off the musician. Even the inanities on the stage are endurable once the overpowering music begins to pour out of the pit. The mammoth score of the *Ring* may sag here and there—and it does more than once—but when Wagner recovers his creative powers the torrent carries us along with it.

A thing like the third act of *Götterdämmerung*, the finale of the tetralogy, will never fade. One is simply dumfounded at Wagner's ability to sustain the flow of music at a point where one would expect that sheer exhaustion would claim a victim. The overwhelming force of this act, which comes after eighteen hours of manipulating the same musical motives, testifies to an artistic might and integrity in a wretched human character that is unparalleled in the entire history of art.



The Voyages Of Captain Korzeniowski

ALBERT J. GUERARD

THE SEA DREAMER: A DEFINITIVE BIOGRAPHY OF JOSEPH CONRAD, by Gérard [sic] Jean-Aubry. Translated by Helen Sebba. Doubleday. \$4.50.

It is the current literary orthodoxy to disregard the lives of great writers as irrelevant, and to attend only to the serious unromantic business of reading their texts. And it is better so. On the whole, this severe new orthodoxy is more rewarding than the gossipy old one that cared more for the inspired man's breakfast and sleeping habits than for his work.

Such an older academic attitude might cherish above all the odd fact, for instance, of a Polish ship captain (ergo a "simple" man) turned British novelist. Two generations of Joseph Conrad's readers, bemused by the initial oddity, failed to recognize the exceptional complexity of his work. And at times they mistook certain originalities of style—it is one of the great English styles—for a foreigner's clumsiness. The biographical facts misdirected attention.

And yet we must have Conrad's "life." We cannot disregard it, for the simple reason that Conrad was one of the most subjective and most personal of novelists. And the "work" was, more than is usual, a prolonged effort to justify self and come to terms with conflicts and fears by dramatizing them. So it is well to have some of the material facts, and to know that these symbolic ships and symbolic inward journeys had their basis in material reality. And it is well (since his was the great pioneer effort) to have the late Jean-Aubry's affectionate, humane, unpretentious, painstaking biographical record in its final form.

The Sea Dreamer cannot, for several reasons, be the "definitive biography" that its publishers claim it to be. It largely fails to take into account what others have written and discovered in the last thirty years, and it too often uses "autobiographical fiction" as a means of

establishing biographical fact. But it represents, with the *Life and Letters* of 1927 and the French translation of Conrad's works, a noble dedication. Surely G. Jean-Aubry (the "G." stands for nothing, but is accepted to stand for "Georges") deserved more care from his American publisher of long standing than the attribution of a nonexistent first name: Gérard. The original name (since this might as well be cleared up) was Jean Aubry. The hyphen and the "G." were assumed to distinguish him from another writer.

A Hidden Fire Below

The Sea Dreamer combines much research and much love, and permits us to weigh the strange life against the tormented work. It has the virtue of being unimagined. For the ways of symbolic action, the ways in which an introspective yet evasive novelist may "use" his own life, are devious and obscure. The most directly autobiographical fictions of Conrad are by no means his best. The long story *Youth* is a feat of memory and fine nostalgic rendering of a voyage on the absurdly ill-fated *Palestine* in 1881, 1882, and 1883. Yet *Youth*, compared with say *The Secret Sharer*, is a very slight work. In *The Arrow of Gold* Conrad again followed experience very closely; tried to dramatize, more than forty years after the event, his youthful Marseilles romance—the gunrunning for the Carlists, the affair with the mysterious Rita de Laostola who attracted even Don Carlos's attention, the duel in which he was wounded. Certain names are taken directly from life; and in fact this late novel has the curious disorder and even the flatness and often the irrelevance of literal conversational recall.

The great *Heart of Darkness*, to be sure, follows fairly closely the facts of Conrad's terrible journey up the Congo in 1890. But it is also evident that Conrad gives us much

more than a Congo diary. (Jean-Aubry edited such a diary long ago.) A Georges-Antoine Klein did in fact die on board the *Roi des Belges* on which Conrad served. But the Kurtz of the symbolic novelette is rather the goal of a long introspective journey and perilous descent into the preconscious mind. Marlow and Kurtz are in a way facets of the same temperament, and *Heart of Darkness* dramatizes a testing confrontation of a primitive, outlaw self. The facts of a journey made in 1890 (which Conrad said transformed him from a mere animal) are the materials for, in 1898, one of the great exploratory dreams and great pessimistic meditations in literature.

THIS is the mode and method of Conrad's great subjective short novels, perhaps the first works of their kind in English fiction: to make minutely rendered physical experience symbolic. *The Nigger of the Narcissus* is based on an actual voyage Conrad made in 1884. It is a tribute to this particular ship (whose solid details of size and workmanship are recorded in *Lloyd's Register*) and a tribute to the men who sailed on such ships. It does successfully seize a "passing phase of life from the remorseless rush of time." But it is also as symbolic as the Book of Jonah and *The Ancient Mariner*, both of which it distinctly recalls.

The curious story *A Smile of Fortune* is of a seaman landlocked and corrupted by the land. It is a very special case. The story would appear to be about voyeuristic attraction to a slovenly young girl. The narrator-captain experiences, on suddenly being accepted, a sudden lonely collapse of desire. But *The Sea Dreamer*—in one of its few important additions to the earlier work—offers some evidence that Conrad asked for the hand of a Mlle. Eugénie, only to learn that she was already engaged. The evidence offered by Aubry (as usual tantalizingly precise in the bibliography, extremely vague in the text) suggests that she was by no means the slovenly creature Conrad's story presents.

Master of the Otago

A Smile of Fortune derives, in any event, from Conrad's two-month stay in Mauritius while captain of