THE OPERA OF "PATIENCE"
AND
"THE AESTHETIC MOVEMENT."

A QUARTER-CENTURY since, the Gilbert-Sullivan Operas were at the height of their barrel-organ fame. But it was impossible then to decide upon their permanent value. Now, at the present distance of time, these lively satires upon political abuses, art movements and social vagaries possess a distinct value as historical documents. The generation which has arisen since they were composed, gains through them a more rapid and vital understanding of the times which they satirize than it were possible to do through the medium of histories and biographies alone. For to these, by reason of their dramatic form, they stand in the relation of people to books. From this point of view, the most valuable of them all is "Patience," the overcharged picture of the aesthetic movement of 1870-1880. In this case, as always, the very exaggeration of the caricature betrays the power of the thing caricatured. Bunthorne and Archibald are ridiculous and grotesque only because they represent the perversion of qualities, culture and grace which might, but for the bias of the individual, have been very real and very forceful. The "aesthetic maidens," whose rhythmic movements and utterances are followed by such spontaneous laughter from the auditory, may be classified with literary parodies and travesties which are successful in the degree that they offer a sharp contrast with the beauty of the original work.

The key-note of the aesthetic movement was sincerity. The foible held up to ridicule in "Patience" is affectation:

"My mediaevalism is not real,"

confesses in a burst of confidence the arch-pretender who momentarily is freed from his devotees.
“I love you with a fourteenth-century Florentine frenzy” is another declaration whose alliterative catchiness conceals a deeper meaning than is suspected by the many who applaud it. With an “airy word” dropped here and there, “Patience” vitalizes the history of the revolution effected in the externals of English middle-class life by Ruskin, Pre-Raphaelitism and all that this term implies.

The aesthetic movement was far from being superficial; nor was it even confined to a single branch of interest. It arose from roots hidden deeply in English thought and life. It was perhaps Walter Scott who, in his romances, first displayed a real mediaevalism, when he dared, in the face of an effete classic art to assert and glorify the majestic beauty of Gothic architecture. Next came the Anglo-Catholic movement at Oxford, which although culminating in 1845 with the secession of John Newman to the Roman Church, continued long afterward to be a prodigious force; restoring to English churches and church services some part of their original beauty and symbolism, and thence carrying into secular life a love of the Fine Arts, which were regarded in the Middle Ages as the handmaidens of religion. Another source of the aesthetic movement is found in the writings of Ruskin, which became for the Pre-Raphaelites a new gospel and a fixed creed. Finally, the direct cause of the art movement must be recognized in the powerful and self-centered personality of Gabriel Rossetti, who drew after him and, for a time, molded as he willed, the two younger men, Morris and Burne-Jones, the real and effective workers in the Pre-Raphaelite, or aesthetic movement. These three friends, together with Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais and Madox Brown, laid the foundations for the present eminence of English art, pictorial and decorative.

In 1821, John Constable predicted that within thirty years the art of his nation would
have ceased to exist. Later, in the forties, Ruskin recorded that the Royal Academy Exhibitions repeated again and again: “The same foolish faces in simper, the same brown cows in ditches, the same white sails in squalls and the same slices of lemons in saucers.” Art had become a fashion, style had degenerated into mannerism, and mannerism had fallen into pettiness.

The Pre-Raphaelites revolted against classicism as a foreign element introduced into England by Sir Joshua Reynolds and his contemporaries, for whom the later Italian schools represented all that is beautiful and desirable in art. They turned for aid and inspiration to mediaevalism, as to the rightful and common inheritance of the modern nations. They rejected the facility fatal to ideas, the artistic subterfuges and conventions of the followers of “the grand style;” seeking their guides and models in artists who lived in a time when human thought teemed, although it struggled with an imperfect medium of expression;—sometimes even to the point of childishness. Thus in the old Italians and old Flemings they found their masters, whom they did not servilely imitate, but to whom they were attracted as to the founders of a national and popular art.

The mediaevalism of Rossetti, William Morris and Burne-Jones was real. It was due to natural impulse, fostered by judicious study, and revealed in sincere and beautiful forms, whether through the medium of pictorial, decorative, or poetic art, and whether derived from Italian, French, or Icelandic sources. In common with the men of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the English Pre-Raphaelite poets and artists were restless, passionate and imaginative. Like them, too, they began their work imperfectly trained in technique. But all that was ingenuous and pardonable to the critic, in the early masters, became, in the modern Englishmen, open to the reproach of affectation, indolence and even degeneracy. Again, the subjects and titles
chosen by the reformers and innovators were as new to the English ear, as were the forms and colors by which they expressed themselves in painting and decoration, strange to the English eye. These facts therefore became a lively cause for ridicule, which was further strengthened by a following gained for the Pre-Raphaelites among people of would-be refinement and little originality, to whom all that was singular in the new movement appealed, but who were, by nature, blind and deaf as to its true meaning and aims. So, as it is cleverly put in the opera of “Patience:” “My mediaevalism is not real,” must have been the heart,—if not the lip-confession of many a poseur of the eighteen seventies and eighties. At that time there were doubtless numerous replicas of Bunthorne, the “crushed” esthete, and of Archibald, who after his long wanderings in realms of faery and poesy, loyally returned to his milkmaid love.

A second declaration above quoted from “Patience,” calls for special comment: “I love you with a fourteenth century Florentine frenzy.” And as before intimated, this is no fortuitous alliterative combination of words. It is wit of the subtlest and keenest kind. It betrays a perfect appreciation of the thing caricatured, beside amusing the ear of the listener, just as the speaker of the sentence amuses his eye by a nameless touch of over “intensity.” For the pictorial explanation of the phrase one has only to glance at certain of the pagan subjects of Botticelli,—notably the famous “Spring,”—wherein the great decorative artist so admired by the English Pre-Raphaelites, has drawn together in a moving, dancing group the exuberant life, youth and strength typical of the Italian Revival of Letters.

In “Patience,” Rossetti, William Morris and Burne-Jones receive each a share of lively good-natured pleasantry. Rossetti is a target for wit as the founder and master of the “Fleshly School of Poetry;” the reviver of obsolete forms of metre; the
deviser of refrains in which sound overpowers sense, so
t hat, as Bunthorne is made to say of his own verses:
“They mean nothing.”

The parody upon William
Morris appeals to the eye rather than to the ear. Bun-
thorne and the maidens are clothed in what may be
called the transitional colors of the Morris firm of
decorators. The pale olive garb of the Aesthete, the
peacock blues and pomegranate tones seen in the robes
of the chorus, were offered by Morris as the first protest
of art against the aniline dyes of commerce, which he
denounced as “hideous, crude, livid and cheap.” Also,
the sunflower, which is affected by Bunthorne and which
grows dearer to him in proportion as he is “crushed,”
until in the last tableau he uses it as a solace and
shield—this too is a hidden recognition of the art-influence
of Morris. He, as a decorator, criticised the double
sunflower as “a coarse and dull plant,” while he praised
the single bloom of the same species as “both interesting
and beautiful, with its sharply chiselled yellow florets
relieved by the quaintly patterned sad-colored centre
clogged with bees and butterflies.” The preference of
the artist, and his decorative use of a despised plant
raised the single sunflower to such high favor that it
spread from the British Isles to the aristocratic gardens of
America, where it still blooms as a survival of the
“Aesthetic Craze” of the early eighteen eighties.

But piquant and mirth-provok-
ing as are the sarcasms in “Patience” against Rossetti
and Morris, they yield in point of subtlety to those
directed toward Burne-Jones. Every frequenter of picture-
shops can recognize the originals of the “stained glass
attitudes” of the funny dragoons, as they twist themselves
into almost impossible contortions to gaze “soulfully” at
their lilies. Nor are the gestures of the chorus less
familiar, as the long, slender “devitalized” arms are
extended in helpless adoration, or the sinuous bodies
wave and writhe in an extasy of love and poetry: they are each and all to be found in the Burne-Jones book of studies, and recur again and again in such masterpieces as the "Mirror of Venus," "Laus Veneris," "Le Chant d'Amour," and "Love Among the Ruins."

Altogether, in view of the interest already noted and because of many subtleties untouched upon in the present slight criticism, the opera of "Patience" should be preserved as a "little classic," containing the rapidly drawn sketches of three most important figures in the art-life of the nineteenth century.